

# Colt Model 1860 Army Revolver Inspection Marks

by Charles Pate



*The cylinder inspection marks on Model 1860 Army serial number 90163 are somewhat unusual in that they are oriented the same. Normally the D in the area of the cylinder scene would be turned 90 degrees clockwise in this photo. (Photo courtesy Peter Blatter)*

**T**he Colt Model 1860 Army revolver was easily the most popular army revolver on both sides of the conflict during the American Civil War. Approximately 130,000 of these revolvers were purchased for use by Union forces and several of the Confederate states had obtained a few thousand before the start of the war as well.<sup>1</sup> But in spite of its popularity and the large number used, nothing has been published that explains the U.S. Army inspection marks that are found on these very common, but highly collectable firearms. The purpose of this article is to briefly describe the purpose and placement of those markings and illustrate some of the variations found by the author in researching the Model 1860 Army for an upcoming book.

While earlier purchases totaling 1300 pistols were made, the first order for Colt's Model 1860 Army pistol that was subject to detailed inspection was placed on the 12th of June 1861 when General Ripley, the Chief of Ordnance, wrote Sam Colt ordering "5000 pistols of the latest pattern, to undergo inspection..."<sup>2</sup> As one can imagine, the earliest days of the Civil War were chaotic for the badly understaffed Ordnance Department and it was not always possible to follow prescribed procedures. But with this order, the Ordnance Department began the

normal, detailed inspection that included markings signifying that the revolvers, and their major individual component parts, met an established standard and were acceptable as service weapons.<sup>3</sup>

To understand the markings on these pistols, one needs to first understand the personnel involved in inspecting and receiving them for the Army and the procedures used in their inspection. The following from the 1861 Army Regulations give a basic overview of both subjects.

Paragraph 1409: *Directions in detail for the inspection and proof of all ordnance and ordnance stores shall be issued by the chief of ordnance, with the approbation of the Secretary of War. Ordnance and ordnance stores procured by contract or open purchase<sup>4</sup> are required to pass the same inspection and proof as if fabricated at the arsenals. (See Ordnance Manual.)*

Paragraph 1414: *The inspectors of small arms will procure necessary assistants from the national armories. No assistant shall inspect oftener than twice in succession the arms made at the same private establishment.<sup>5</sup> The inspector will have the accepted arms boxed and sealed in his presence.*

As we will discuss later in this article, some aspects of the above directions were not strictly followed, due to the scope of the war effort. But the spirit of the regulations was certainly followed and, in spite of the difficult situation, the Ordnance Department was surprisingly successful in conducting inspection of contract arms during the conflict. In Ordnance Department procurement and inspection of contract small arms the terms "inspection" and "receipt" (later called "acceptance") had specific meanings that the reader should understand since the conduct of these activities accounted for the markings that signify a collectable revolver's military heritage and provided the few surviving documents that enlighten us about them. While there was flexibility in some specifics, there was also considerable rigor and discipline imposed during these processes. But before explaining the two terms, we will first discuss further the military personnel involved in the processes and their roles.

## Inspecting Officers and Sub-Inspectors

The Inspecting Officer was a commissioned officer charged with the inspection of arms produced under contract. The following extract from Ordnance Circular #2, Series of 1864, Ordnance Office, *Concerning the Enforcement of the Terms of Contracts* dated January 1, 1864, details his responsibilities.

### *Duties of the Inspecting Officer*

*The Inspecting Officer is charged with the duty of guarding the interests of the government, and representing the Department in his transactions with the contractor.*

*He should make himself fully acquainted with the exact terms of every order and contract, the duty of supervising which has been assigned to him; and he is authorized to provide all necessary means for carrying out the obligations by which the government is bound.*

*He is to select as sub-inspectors men who, by their trade or business, are fully qualified for the duty, and who have no relationship of any kind either to himself or the contractor.*

*He will see that the sub-inspectors are so compensated that their interest will be identical with that of the government they serve.*

*He should be careful to provide such a number of sub-inspectors that there will be no delay in inspecting stores as fast as presented to him; and he is expected to base his estimate of the number required on the total amount of deliveries specified in the contracts, the inspecting duty connected with which is placed under his charge.*

*He will pass no stores that are not equal to the prescribed standard in every particular, and when disputes arise between sub-inspectors and contractors on this*

*point, his decision will be final.*

*Appeals to this office should only be made in extraordinary cases.*

*Any contractor, who tampers with, or either directly or indirectly offers a sub-inspector any compensation, will at once be reported to this office, and all deliveries under his contract suspended until further orders.*

*Any sub-inspector found violating his oath of office, or accepting any consideration of whatever nature from a contractor, will at once be dismissed and his name and offence reported to this office, and to all other Inspecting Officers in the Department...*

Ordnance Department Circular #57, series of 1863, dated November 12, 1863, provides similar direction regarding the men, civilian employees, who were to do the actual work of inspecting contract arms.

*The attention of all officers of this Department, who are charged with the inspection of any Ordnance Stores, is called to the great importance of selecting for the position of Sub-inspector not only men skillful in the particular trade or art – a perfect knowledge of which is indispensable to the proper discharge of the duties of that office – but those whose business or social relations are such that by no possibility can an imputation of injustice, in the execution of the duty assigned them, or favoritism on account of family ties, rest upon either the Sub-inspector himself, the Inspecting Officer who employs him, or the Department, which is indirectly responsible for his acts.*

*The men selected for this responsibility must be above reproach, and each officer is expected to make the attainment of this object his first endeavor...*



Colt Model 1860 serial number 90163. (Photo courtesy Peter Blatter)



The inspector marks on the left side of this revolver include the "H" on the left rear barrel, the "H" in the non-rebated portion of the cylinder and the "E" in the rebated portion of the cylinder. The marks on the cylinder are usually oriented as shown. (Smithsonian Institution collection)

As noted, more than one sub-inspector might be, and most often were, required to inspect the arms obtained through a contract. In such cases, one of the men, usually the most senior and highly skilled, would be designated as the “Principal Assistant” or more commonly the “Principal Sub-Inspector.” This individual would be in day-to-day charge of the inspection. During the Civil War, the volume of inspection work was so great that the Inspecting Officer might be present only for final inspection if he was present even for that phase. Contrary to what was the norm both before and after the War, as the reader will see below, in the great majority of cases during the Civil War, arms were not marked by the Inspecting Officer at all and instead bear only the marks of the Principal Sub-Inspector and other sub-inspectors.

For the first contract, for 5,000 pistols that received detailed inspection, two sub-inspectors were initially assigned to Colt: A. D. King and G. G. Saunders. A third, Benjamin Hannis, was soon added. O. W. Ainsworth, the well-known Principal Sub-inspector for the Colt Single Action Army revolver in 1873, was assigned to Colt by September.<sup>6</sup> Given the pressing need for revolvers and Colt’s unique ability to produce them in quantity, by October of 1861, there were ten sub-inspectors employed at the Colt factory.

Prior to the Civil War, then-Captain William A. Thornton was the Commanding Officer of the New York Arsenal and had the added duty of inspecting small arms obtained through contracts. Thornton was promoted to Major and reassigned to command Watervliet Arsenal in May 1861. Captain Robert H. K. Whiteley, who had

previously also acted as Inspecting Officer of contract small arms, replaced him. But Whiteley’s duties as arsenal commander soon became so demanding that the Chief of Ordnance assigned inspection duty to other officers. For a brief period, Captain Peter V. Hagner had charge of inspection at Colt, but he was soon replaced in this capacity by Captain George Balch. As the scope and possible duration of the war became clear, the Chief of Ordnance found it necessary to establish an inspection service outside the normal support of the arsenals and an Office of Inspector of Contract Arms was established in May of 1862. Major Thornton was initially assigned to head the service but he considered it a demotion and objected to being reassigned to inspection duty. Consequently, newly promoted Major Hagner soon replaced Thornton as Inspecting Officer of Contract Arms and it was he who oversaw the inspection of Colt revolvers until the last contract pistols were delivered in November 1863.

In spite of this organizational move, the press of business meant that the Inspecting Officer had quite limited involvement with the actual inspection of arms and, at least in the case of Colt revolvers, the supervisory responsibility was turned over to a trusted civilian sub-inspector<sup>7</sup> and the Inspecting Officer limited himself to managing the overall effort, working issues and problems, and “receiving” arms (certifying they had been properly inspected and delivered) on behalf of the government.

### Proving, Preliminary/Component Inspection and Final Inspection

As noted, the guidance and procedures applicable for contract arms inspection and acceptance was the Ordnance Manual.<sup>8</sup> While the directions therein read as though they were written for government production of arms, the document states that the rules for inspection applied to all government arms, whether made at the national armories or by contract at private establishments. These rules describe proving of barrels and two basic phases for the inspection, component inspection and final inspection of the assembled arm.

The Ordnance Manual procedures called for proof firing of barrels, and marking them to show passage of the test, prior to submitting them to component inspection. According to a July 1861 letter from Major Hagner to the Chief of Ordnance, the proof charge for the Colt Model 1860 revolver was approximately double the service charge. Another letter, from sub-inspector A. D. King, stated approximately 37 grains of powder was used for proving. In a July 1862 letter to one of his inspectors who was to oversee inspection of Whitney revolvers, then-Colonel Thornton wrote: “Each and every pistol must be carefully proven by firing two rounds entire [12 shots]



Left: The back strap inspector mark on serial number 90163. (Photos courtesy Peter Blatter)

Right: The inspector mark on the bottom of the grip is most often worn away or unreadable due to abuse to the wood. Serial number 90163 is stamped with a “W.”



*Knowing the usual orientation of the inspector mark can sometimes help determine what the letter is. Otherwise a "W" can be taken to be an "M," etc. (Photo courtesy Peter Blatter)*



*For an unknown reason inspector marks are occasionally double letters as on serial number 119194's cylinder. To date such marks have been noted by the author only on barrels and cylinders. (Photo courtesy Rock Island Auctions)*



*The condemnation mark was nearly twice the size of the inspector mark and was not placed in the same locations as inspector marks. This example is on the rear cylinder of a Remington New Model Army revolver while Inspector marks were placed on the side of the cylinder. (Photo courtesy Don Ware)*

from the pistols assembled, as in the case of proof of Colt's pistols. The charge is the service ball and the chamber filled with powder when pressed home." Obviously, it would be inadequate to proof only the barrel of a revolver and impractical as well and this latter letter makes it clear that the proving was done with a completed and assembled (though not finished) revolver.

Once a revolver passed the proof test the barrel and cylinder were marked to show passage of the test. While the Ordnance Manual called for arms to be marked with a "P" to show the proof test had been conducted successfully, no contract revolvers are known to have been marked this way. Instead, a die with the initial of the sub-inspector's last name was used.

The revolvers were then disassembled and the parts inspected in detail for quality of material and workmanship. The form and dimensions of the parts were verified by the means of standard gauges and against the "standard model" of the arm, a sample of the arm submitted to and approved by the Chief of Ordnance before the inspection began.

Upon passage, the major components were marked with the initials of the sub-inspector. A mark that appears to be an "O" with a diagonal line through it is actually a script "D" and was probably designed to avoid confusion with another sub-inspector whose name started with that letter. Another curiosity is that on occasion the inspector mark is doubled, for example "HH" instead of the usual "H." Multiple inspector initials have been observed doubled in this manner and in a few cases, there are two different letters present. The author believes these are instances where parts were re-inspected after first having passed inspection and later having been found to require some repair.

Specific placement of neither the proof mark nor the inspector's mark is documented anywhere, to the author's knowledge. There are two sets of marks on Colt Army revolver barrels and cylinders and which set is for proof and which for inspection is open to speculation. The author believes that the mark on the right side of the barrel and the rear-most mark on the cylinder (closest to the cones), both of which are typically oriented with their vertical axis aligned with the bore, are the proof marks. Both sets of marks, as well as the inspection marks placed on trigger guards, back straps and stocks are illustrated in the accompanying photos. Note that these 1/16 inch military sub-inspector marks are visible externally, without taking the arm apart. Colt's own inspector and assembly marks were generally made with smaller dies and are not so obvious.<sup>9</sup> Note also that the frames or receivers of the Model 1860 revolvers do not bear readily visible sub-inspector marks. These parts were certainly inspected. It appears that the frames had already undergone case hardening by the time of the proof testing and inspection and for this reason were not marked.<sup>10</sup>

Parts that failed inspection were to be marked with a "C," according to the Ordnance Manual, and kept apart from those passing inspection. However, Ordnance Department correspondence from March 1862 shows that this mark was not being used on Colt revolvers up to that time. Instead, a punch mark was made on the

left side of the frame (in the shoulder stock cut in the recoil shield) when a revolver was rejected. When the Chief of Ordnance heard of this, he directed the “C” be used in accordance with the Ordnance Manual. This mark of condemnation was approximately twice the size of the inspector mark and apparently was also placed differently from the inspector initials. After the inspection was completed and the revolvers delivered, condemned parts were turned over to the contractor since they were not government property. Colt later used a number of condemned parts for Single Action Army revolvers sold on the commercial market, but to date, only one Model 1860 revolver has been noted with the large “C” marking while several Remington revolvers have been found with it.

After passing component inspection, the weapon received its final polishing and finish and was reassembled for final inspection. The final inspection was done in the presence of the Principal Sub-Inspector and was of the completed revolver, although correspondence shows that some representative sample of the lot was taken apart and examined in detail. Those that passed this final inspection were marked on the side of the grip with a cartouche containing the initials of the Principal Sub-Inspector’s name. Prior to the war and again starting in 1876, the Inspecting Officer’s cartouche was stamped on one side of the grip and the Principal Sub-Inspector’s on the other. Given the competition for the Inspecting Officer’s time during the Civil War and the resulting delegation of responsibility to the Principal Sub-Inspector, only civilian inspectors’ cartouches appear on Colt Model 1860 Army revolvers.<sup>11</sup> Observed early revolvers have only one cartouche present and it is on the left side of the stock. By October 1861, Mr. John Taylor<sup>12</sup> had been assigned as the Principal Sub-Inspector at Colt and in April of 1862 he was also placed in charge of inspections at the Sharps Rifle Company. Consequently, another sub-inspector handled the day-to-day supervision of the Colt inspections and at the final inspection his cartouche was also placed on the stock, on the left side, while Taylor’s “JT” cartouche was placed on the right. It appears this was the point at which two cartouches were first placed on the Model 1860, for with one exception no pistols have been recorded by the author with a cartouche on the right of the grip before the 42000 serial number range. There are a few cases where the same cartouche is on both sides of the grips.

When Captain Balch assigned Taylor to take charge of inspection at the Sharps Rifle Company, he directed Taylor to take with him as many experienced inspectors as he needed to expedite the inspection. The arms to be inspected were the Berdan Sharpshooter rifles, which

were urgently needed. Immediately prior to this date only two sub-inspectors had been assigned to the Sharps factory while there were approximately ten at Colt. In his instructions to Taylor, Captain Balch informed the latter that five other men would be assigned to Colt to replace those sent to Sharps. This continued as standard practice within the Inspection Service with some of the most experienced inspectors at one facility being used to expedite or begin the inspection at other contractors, often as the Principal Sub-Inspectors, and being replaced by less experienced personnel. Due to the high volume of production at Colt and the large number of sub-inspectors employed there, the factory undoubtedly served as the training facility for several inspectors ultimately used elsewhere.

### **Receipt/Acceptance**

The act of “receiving” contract arms could only be done by an officer charged with the responsibility, typically the Inspecting Officer of Contract Arms. This constituted a formal acceptance of the arms as government property and included his certifying that the arms had been inspected, met all the requirements of the contract and had been delivered to the government, even though that delivery might have been within the contractor’s facility.<sup>13</sup>

Paragraph 1380 of the Army Regulations required the Inspecting Officer to prepare (sign) the inspection certificate and give a copy to the contractor and the officers assigned this responsibility fulfilled it even though, in most cases, they did not personally witness the inspection and delivery. The Principal Sub-inspector forwarded the inspection papers to the officer in these cases. The key aspect of this part of the process is that it completed contractual requirements and allowed the contractor to be paid for the arms delivered. Copies of the Inspecting Officer’s certificate, together with the inspection certificate (each signed by the Inspecting Officer and Principal Sub-Inspector, but sometimes also signed by other sub-inspectors), statements as to where the arms were shipped and evidence of the shipment, were given to the contractor and submitted to the Chief of Ordnance. The Chief of Ordnance reviewed the documents and certified to the Treasury Department auditor that the arms were purchased in accordance with a specific Congressional appropriation (in other words, the purchase was lawful and funds had been provided for it). Once the auditor completed his review, he forwarded his recommendation to the Comptroller for the contractor to be paid. All of this documentation was bound together by government “red tape” as an account and filed among the auditor records. Some of these accounts still exist in Treasury Department files at the National Archives. Unfortunately, the only Civil War accounts that survived are for 1861 and 1864.

This study is far from complete and the subject will be addressed in considerably greater detail in a book on the Model 1860 Army that is now being prepared. This article is intended to be an interim report and also a request for data from readers on revolvers in their collections. To that end, a description of the information the author is collecting is listed below. A large number of people have already contributed to this work, and to each the author is most grateful. At the risk of neglecting some who should be mentioned, I would like to specifically recognize David Miller (Smithsonian Institution), Peter Blatter, Paul Davies, Paul Johnson, Phil Boulton, Ty Moore, Don Ware, Jeff Anderson, Dr. Vance Haynes, James Kattner, Max Gunthert, Jon Hanna, Rock Island Auction Company, James D. Julia Auction Company and Greg Martin Auctions.

### End Notes

- 1 While the U.S. Navy also purchased several hundred Model 1860 revolvers, it appears they were not typically marked with inspector markings. In any event, this article covers only those purchased and inspected in detail by the U.S. Army Ordnance Department.
- 2 Data on surviving examples from the earlier orders are limited, but it appears that these revolvers didn't receive the normal detailed contract inspection that is the subject of this article. It appears they were treated essentially as open market purchases with only a summary inspection by an officer.
- 3 A significant number of Model 1860 Army revolvers were also bought on the open market and, while they were "inspected," they were not subjected to the detailed inspection given contract arms and typically were not marked in any way to show they were accepted as military arms.
- 4 None of the revolvers the author has identified as open market purchases has any military inspector markings.
- 5 While there were some attempts to move inspectors from one contractor to another, it is clear that this regulation was not strictly followed.
- 6 The latest Colt Model 1860 revolvers with Ainsworth's cartouche noted by the author to date were shipped in August 1862. However, he was not at Colt throughout the September 1861 – August 1862 period since regulations required inspectors be moved from one contractor to another periodically. Ainsworth is known to have inspected Remington New Model Army revolvers after his service at Colt.
- 7 As stated in Paragraph 1414 of the 1861 Regulation, prior to and in the early days of the Civil War sub-inspectors were typically highly experienced men temporarily detailed from the national armories, Springfield Armory and Harper's Ferry. With the great expansion of contract procurement this ad hoc arrangement was changed and sub-inspectors were specifically hired by the Inspector of Contract Arms.
- 8 "*The Ordnance Manual for the Use of the Officers of the United States Army.*"
- 9 Early civilian Model 1860 revolvers often have a small letter or number on the left rear trigger guard and some very early pistols also have a mark on the left lower barrel, just forward of the frame-barrel joint.
- 10 In a 6 September 1873 letter from General Franklin of Colt to Capt. Edie of Springfield Armory, General Franklin said, "Our habit has been in doing pistol work for the Government to turn the pistols over to the inspectors for proof with the stock unfinished, and the barrels and cylinders unpolished. Then after proof they are polished and finished." This letter was, of course, regarding the Colt Single Action Army (SAA) contract pistols of 1873 but General Franklin was referring to Colt's long time practice, which was used during the Civil War. Note he does not say the frame was unfinished. It should also be noted that the frames of the early Colt SAA military revolvers, like those of the U.S. military Model 1860 revolvers, were case hardened and were not marked with inspector initials.
- 11 As noted in the table of cartouche serial number ranges, serial number 8868 has been reported to have Capt. Whiteley's cartouche on the right grip; however, the author has not confirmed this and it is the only such example reported to date. Capt. Whiteley did personally inspect some Starr revolvers in mid 1861 and early 1862, and those revolvers bear his cartouche.
- 12 Ordnance Department letters show Mr. Taylor was very highly regarded by the Ordnance officers responsible for inspection of contract arms. The tremendous amount of inspection work being done and the small number of Ordnance officers available meant such civilians were badly needed.
- 13 In some cases the arms were temporarily stored at the contractor's factory, in sealed boxes, for shipment at a later date.

# *Colt Model 1860 Example Data Collection Form*

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Use “?” if the mark is known to be present but is unreadable. Inspector marks on the barrel and cylinder are usually one letter but may be two that are close together. A mark consisting of an “Ø” has also been observed.

## **DESCRIPTION AND CODES TO USE**

(in parentheses below)

Serial number:

U.S. inspector mark, left rear barrel, one or two characters:

U.S. inspector mark, right rear barrel, one or two characters:

U.S. inspector mark, non-rebated area near start of rebated portion, one or two characters, read looking at the left side of the pistol:

U.S. inspector mark, near nipples, one or two characters, read as you look down the barrel:

U.S. inspector mark, behind bow, one character:

U.S. inspector mark, behind hammer, one character:

U.S. inspector mark, bottom of grip, one character:

U.S. inspector cartouche, right grip:

U.S. inspector cartouche, left grip:

Frame type: 3 screw (3), 4 screw (4), 4 screw with stock studs (4S), 3 screw not cut for stock (3N):

Original owner identified (y, n) [Detail in Notes.]:

Presentation inscription (y, n) [Put details in Notes.]:

Special Colt factory mark at serial numbers of the frame, barrel, trigger guard, and/or the backstrap: (DOT, E, I, EI, 0, 2):

Engraved (y, n):

Fluted cylinder (F), round cylinder (R):

7 1/2 inch barrel (7), 8 inch (8), other (x):

Navy size grips (N), Army grip (A):

Cylinder patent date -

If fluted cylinder, is patent date in flute (y, n):

For the 9/10/50 patent date mark on round cylinders: If marked “PAT,” use “S” for this short version. If marked “PATENTED” use “L.” If there is no patent date mark use “N” for none:

Capping groove present (y, n):

Barrel address: New York (NY) or Hartford (H):

Marks on left trigger guard web (2, G, 44 CAL, etc.):

Mismatched (y, n) [Details in Notes.]:

If known, date of shipment from factory (mm/dd/yyyy) [Put any special details in Notes.]:

Factory shipping destination information:

Number in factory shipment:

Notes [Misc. notes, especially regarding any special features or markings, Colt inspector/assembler markings, etc.]

**Note: This data collection form is also available via email, from the author at the address above.**

## Colt Model 1860 Cartouche Serial Number Ranges

Cartouche	Inspector	Serial Number Range
GGs	George G. Saunders	6398 – 8810
ADK	Andrew D. King	8340 – 8489
OWA	Oliver W. Ainsworth	8487 – 62738
RHKW	Capt. Robert H. K. Whiteley, USA	8868
JH	Joseph Hannis	0262 - 49437
JT	John Taylor	11654 - 143846
BH	Benjamin Hannis	12099 - 14160
PB	Pomeroy Booth	18007 - 58424
CSL	C. S. Leonard (believed to be “Samuel” Leonard)	43694 - 105928
CHM (possibly CAM)	Unknown	45349 - 50772
EF	Edward Flather	45349 - 50772
GDS	G. D. Shattuck	49436 - 95775
WHR	William H. Russell	76949 - 120222
HSL	Homer S. Lathe	80944 - 138074
EMC	E. M. Camp	106447 - 111934
ABB	Probably A. B. Bullock (possibly A. B. Burdick or A. B. Blackington.)	111353 - 114117
HWW	Henry W. Wilcox	103932 - 127716
JSD	John S. Duston	63880 (15234) - 143760
JLC	Joseph L. Cottle	125648 - 126902
HBT	Unknown (possibly HBJ - H. B. Johnson)	135590 - 145352
MH	(possibly “MK”) Unknown. Possibly Michael Hayes.	117695 - 143691



**Left:** John Taylor's late style "JT" cartouche. The letters in the stamp he used earlier leaned to the left. (Smithsonian Collection) **Center:** The HWW cartouche on Colt 1860 # 119194. (Photo courtesy Rock Island Auction Company)

**Right:** The CSL cartouche on Colt Army # 90163. (Photo courtesy Peter Blatter)