

AMERICA'S **Civil War**

**BEYOND
GETTYSBURG**

GEORGE MEADE'S *Complex Legacy*

COPYCAT KILLERS
Confederate Revolvers

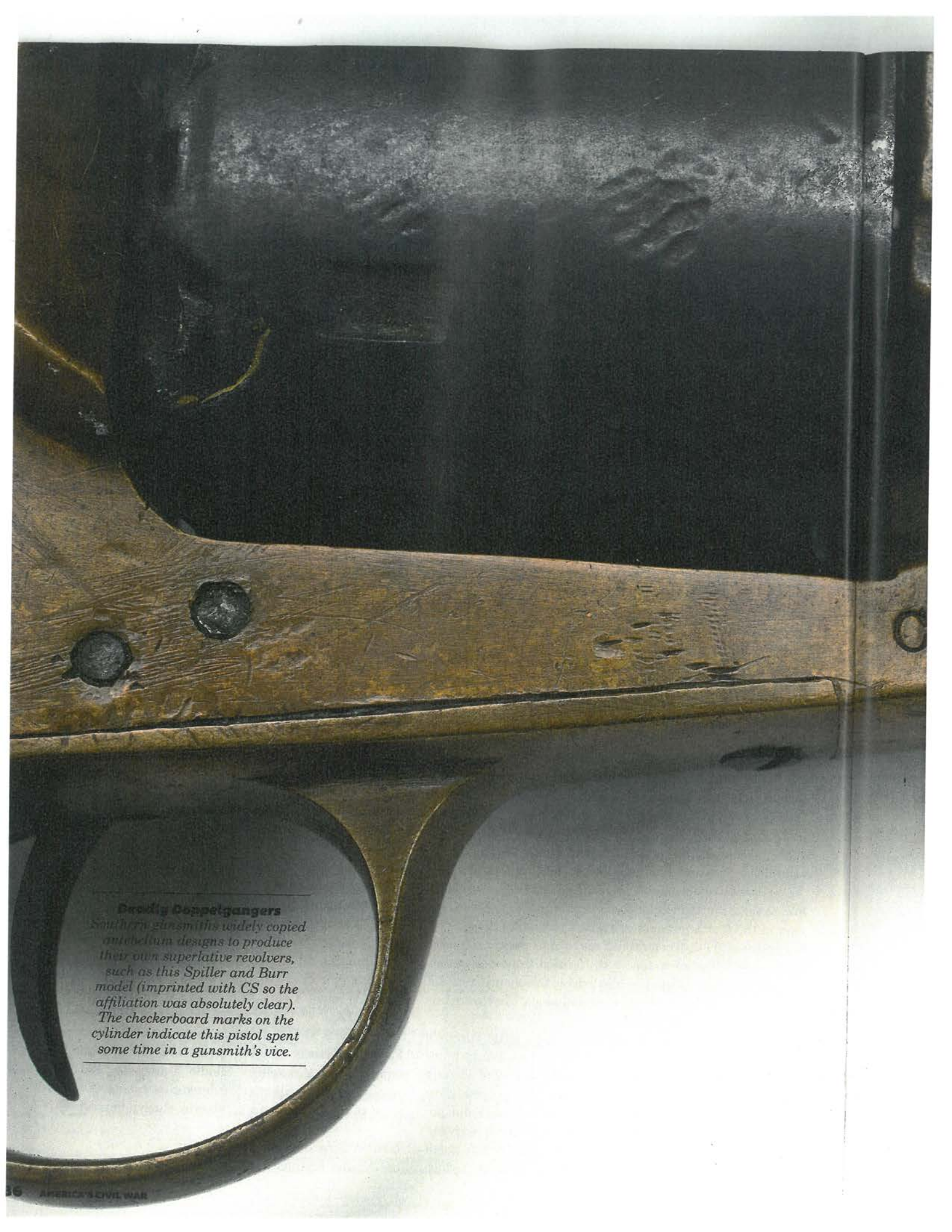
TUPELO TUSSLE
Federals Stop Forrest

HISTORYNET.COM

MAY 2017

HISTORYNET US/CAN \$6.99





Broadly Copied

Southern gunsmiths widely copied antebellum designs to produce their own superlative revolvers, such as this Spiller and Burr model (imprinted with CS so the affiliation was absolutely clear). The checkerboard marks on the cylinder indicate this pistol spent some time in a gunsmith's vice.



C.S.

COPYCAT KILLERS

PROVEN UNION PISTOL DESIGNS
INSPIRED "MADE IN CSA" DUPLICATES

By T. Logan Metesh

A

s the Confederacy scrambled to put together a government at the beginning of the war, it had to find a way to suitably arm its new military forces. From pikes and pistols to rifles and cannons, the seceded Southern states were in dire need of weapons of all types. It was somewhat ironic when Confederate President Jefferson Davis warned in February 1861 that those who opposed the South would “feel southern steel,” since there was a significant shortage of such material in both raw and finished forms in states below the Mason-Dixon Line. ¶ As such, many Southern soldiers ended up carrying into battle firearms previously issued by the U.S. government or imported from England. Some did wield guns that were actually made in the Confederacy, though, interestingly, those bore an uncanny resemblance to their Northern predecessors. With no desire (or time) to reinvent the wheel, Southern gunmakers realized it was pointless to devise completely new designs when proven models already existed and could be easily copied. ¶ The obvious first choices were designs based on the successful guns created by industry leader Samuel Colt. At first glance the Southern replicas look much like Colt Model 1851 Navy or Dragoon revolvers, as well as the Whitney Arms Company’s Whitney Navy revolver. Features that make each “duplicate” distinctly Southern are apparent upon closer examination. ¶ By the end of the war, eight companies were principally involved in producing revolvers for the South.

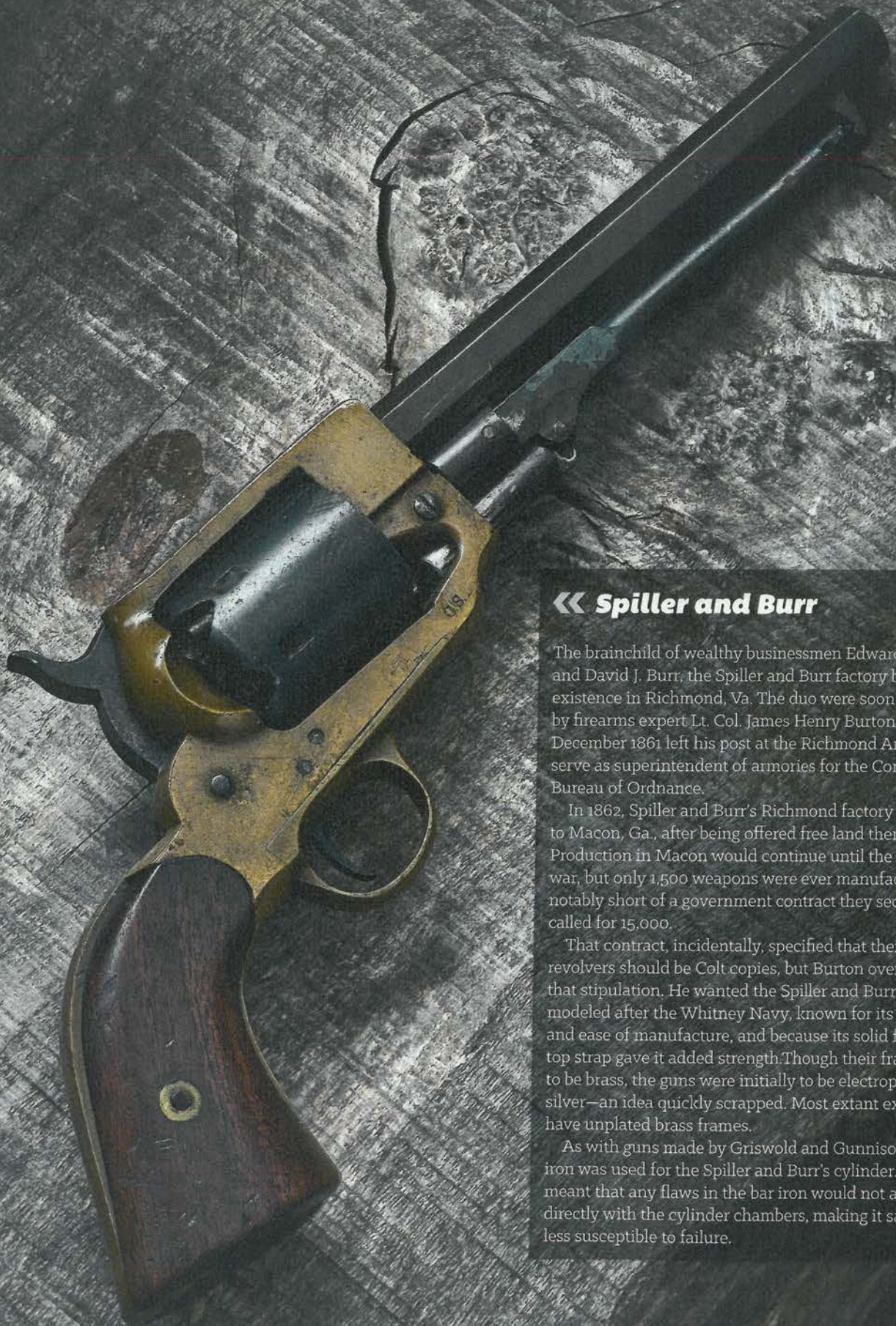
Here’s a closer look:



➤ **Griswold and Gunnison**

Business was so good before the war for cotton-gin manufacturer Samuel Griswold that he purchased 4,000 acres outside Macon, Ga., and established the town of Griswoldville. With Southern weaponry in short supply, Griswold entered the arms business in February 1862, joining forces with trusted employee Arvin Gunnison to manufacture pikes in response to a plea by Georgia Governor Joseph E. Brown.

The Griswold and Gunnison .36-caliber revolver is noted for its brass frame, the slight upward angle of its butt, and the cylinder’s twist lines (caused by its manufacture from twisted iron instead of steel). About 3,700 of the six-shooters—based on the Colt Model 1851 Navy revolver but with a barrel assembly that resembled the slightly smaller Colt Dragoon—were produced beginning in 1862. The run ended abruptly when Griswoldville was burned during Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman’s March to the Sea.



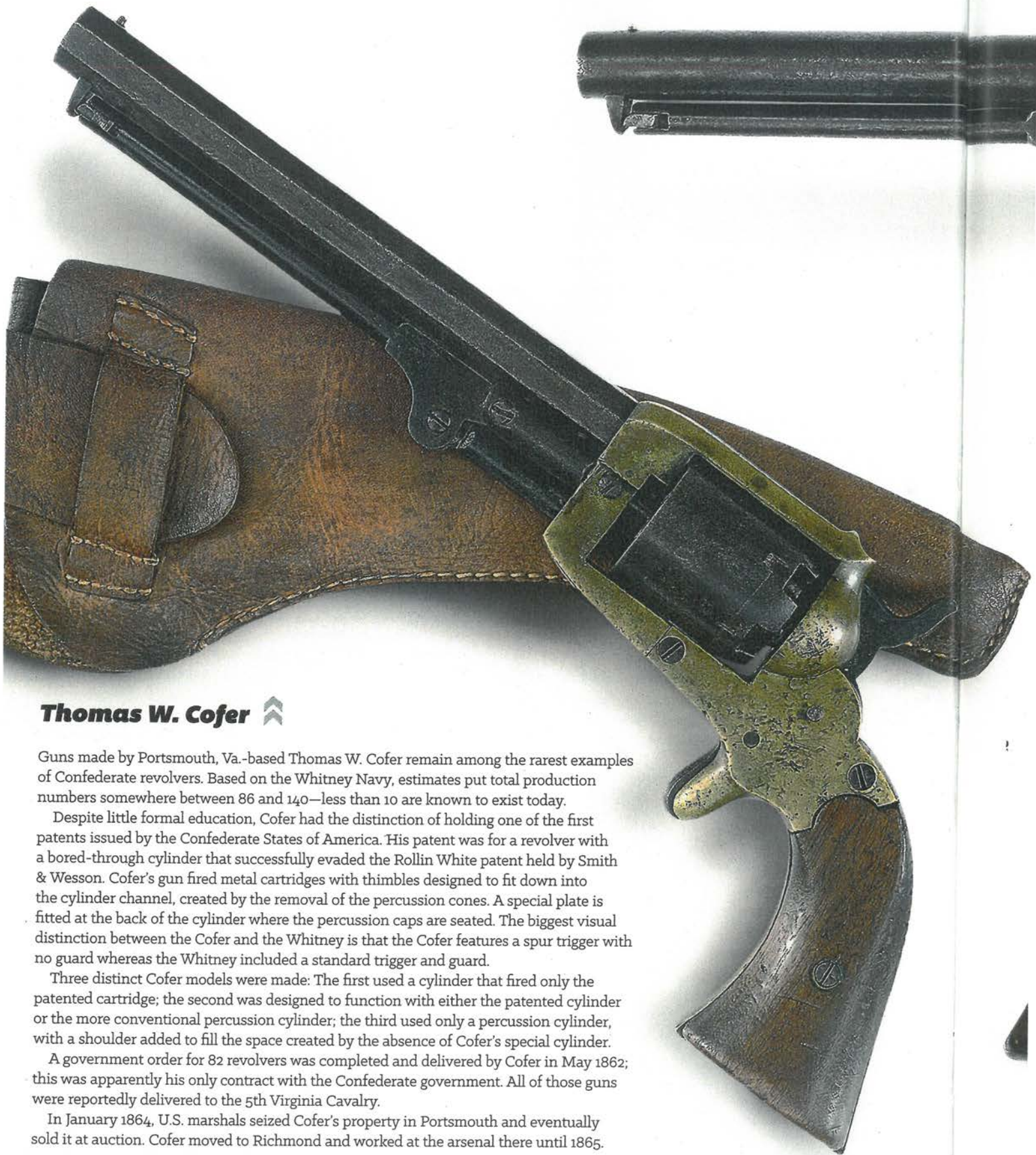
« Spiller and Burr

The brainchild of wealthy businessmen Edward N. Spiller and David J. Burr, the Spiller and Burr factory began its existence in Richmond, Va. The duo were soon joined by firearms expert Lt. Col. James Henry Burton, who in December 1861 left his post at the Richmond Armory to serve as superintendent of armories for the Confederacy's Bureau of Ordnance.

In 1862, Spiller and Burr's Richmond factory relocated to Macon, Ga., after being offered free land there. Production in Macon would continue until the end of the war, but only 1,500 weapons were ever manufactured—notably short of a government contract they secured that called for 15,000.

That contract, incidentally, specified that their revolvers should be Colt copies, but Burton overruled that stipulation. He wanted the Spiller and Burr revolver modeled after the Whitney Navy, known for its reliability and ease of manufacture, and because its solid frame and top strap gave it added strength. Though their frames were to be brass, the guns were initially to be electroplated in silver—an idea quickly scrapped. Most extant examples have unplated brass frames.

As with guns made by Griswold and Gunnison, twisted iron was used for the Spiller and Burr's cylinder. That meant that any flaws in the bar iron would not align directly with the cylinder chambers, making it safer and less susceptible to failure.



Thomas W. Cofer

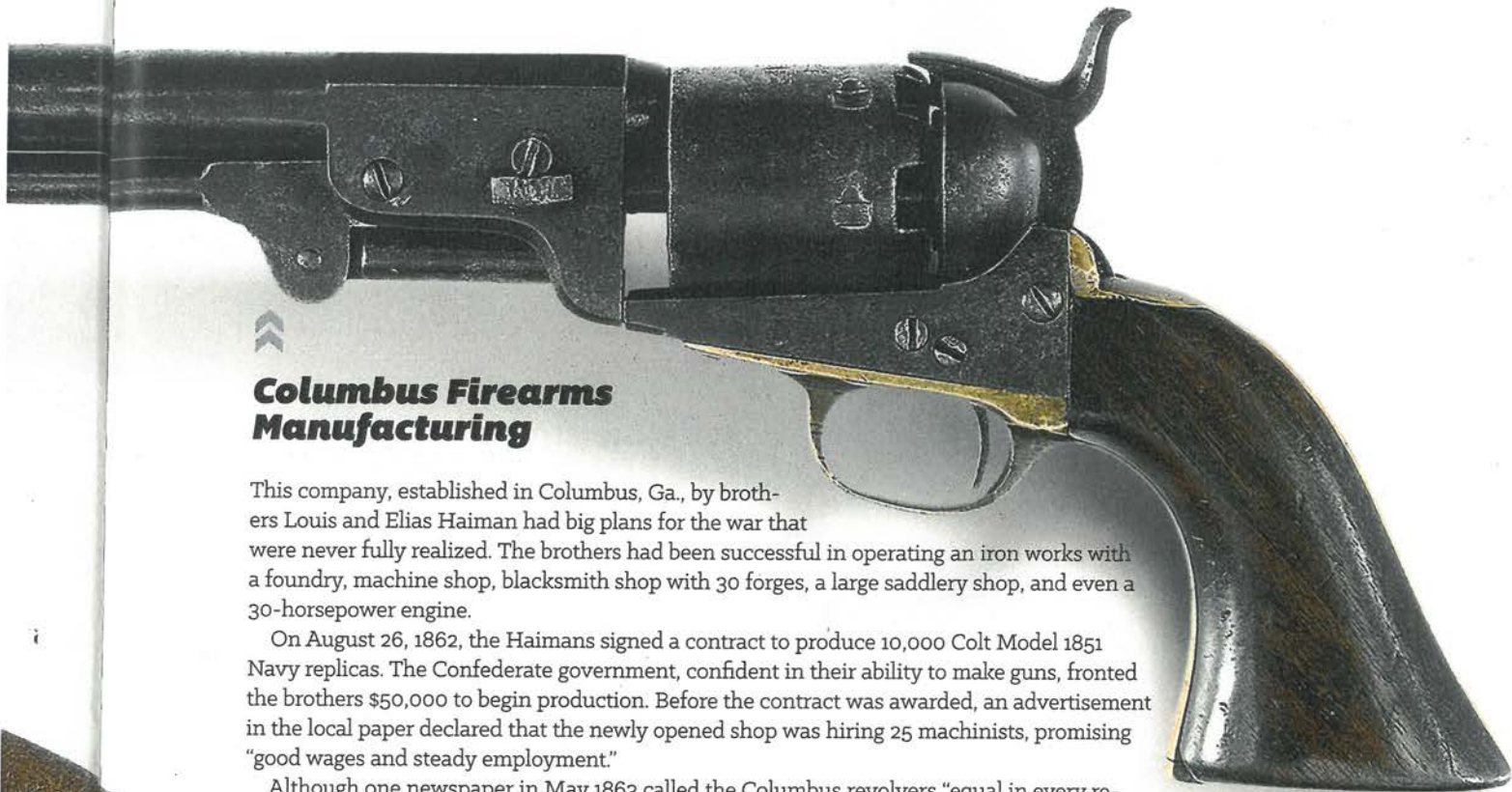
Guns made by Portsmouth, Va.-based Thomas W. Cofer remain among the rarest examples of Confederate revolvers. Based on the Whitney Navy, estimates put total production numbers somewhere between 86 and 140—less than 10 are known to exist today.

Despite little formal education, Cofer had the distinction of holding one of the first patents issued by the Confederate States of America. His patent was for a revolver with a bored-through cylinder that successfully evaded the Rollin White patent held by Smith & Wesson. Cofer's gun fired metal cartridges with thimbles designed to fit down into the cylinder channel, created by the removal of the percussion cones. A special plate is fitted at the back of the cylinder where the percussion caps are seated. The biggest visual distinction between the Cofer and the Whitney is that the Cofer features a spur trigger with no guard whereas the Whitney included a standard trigger and guard.

Three distinct Cofer models were made: The first used a cylinder that fired only the patented cartridge; the second was designed to function with either the patented cylinder or the more conventional percussion cylinder; the third used only a percussion cylinder, with a shoulder added to fill the space created by the absence of Cofer's special cylinder.

A government order for 82 revolvers was completed and delivered by Cofer in May 1862; this was apparently his only contract with the Confederate government. All of those guns were reportedly delivered to the 5th Virginia Cavalry.

In January 1864, U.S. marshals seized Cofer's property in Portsmouth and eventually sold it at auction. Cofer moved to Richmond and worked at the arsenal there until 1865.



▶▶ **Columbus Firearms Manufacturing**

This company, established in Columbus, Ga., by brothers Louis and Elias Haiman had big plans for the war that were never fully realized. The brothers had been successful in operating an iron works with a foundry, machine shop, blacksmith shop with 30 forges, a large saddlery shop, and even a 30-horsepower engine.

On August 26, 1862, the Haimans signed a contract to produce 10,000 Colt Model 1851 Navy replicas. The Confederate government, confident in their ability to make guns, fronted the brothers \$50,000 to begin production. Before the contract was awarded, an advertisement in the local paper declared that the newly opened shop was hiring 25 machinists, promising "good wages and steady employment."

Although one newspaper in May 1863 called the Columbus revolvers "equal in every respect to the celebrated Colt pistols," there is still little known about them. No more than 100 were ever produced, with 94 being the highest known serial number. In 1864, correspondence among Rebel officers indicated that the brothers had sold the company, now valued at \$80,000, to the Confederate government that spring. As in other industries, shortages of raw materials and equipment plagued the manufacturing process. Production never took off under the government's control, and only a small batch of an unknown quantity was completed by late March 1865—just weeks before Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox Court House.



▶▶ **Augusta Machine Works**

Only about 100 of the Colt Model 1851 Navy duplicate revolvers were produced at this facility in Augusta, Ga., between 1861 and 1864. Two varieties exist, one with six stop-slots on the cylinder and one with 12 stop-slots. Both feature one-piece wooden grips and a browned finish on all parts of the metal, except for the brass grip straps and trigger guard. The guns with 12 stop-slots are more rare than those with six. Serial numbers, though well marked in many places on known examples, are unusual in that both letters and numbers (e.g., 7, 48, J, O, U) were used for an unknown reason.



Leech and Rigdon/ (Memphis) Novelty Works

Thomas Leech initially established himself as a cotton broker in Memphis, Tenn., shortly before the war. On August 29, 1861, he took out an advertisement in the *Memphis Appeal* seeking 10,000 pounds of zinc, copper, and brass “for military purposes.” Less than three weeks later, he ran another ad stating he would be taking orders for swords, sabers, cutlasses, knives, bayonets, bullet molds, and much more.

By May 1862, Leech had teamed up with Charles H. Rigdon, maker of pharmacy scales, to open the Memphis Novelty Works. Once the company officially relocated to Columbus, Miss., later that year, “Memphis” was dropped from the name. It is at this time the partners branched out and began making revolvers.

When Union forces threatened Columbus in late 1862, Leech and Rigdon moved on to Greensboro, Ga., purchased the Greensboro Steam Factory, and resumed operation. After securing a Confederate contract on March 6, 1863, Leech and Rigdon built copies of the Colt Model 1851 Navy for only a short period before their partnership dissolved on December 13, 1863.



Rigdon, Ansley & Co

Charles Rigdon wasted little time finding new partners, forming Rigdon, Ansley & Co with Jesse Ansley, Andrew Smith, and Charles Keen, and kept producing Colt duplicates in continuation of the Leech and Rigdon contract. After parting with Leech, Rigdon kept all the machinery, most workers, and reopened the factory as the Georgia Iron Works.

Serial numbers on the surviving examples indicate that the new partnership finished out the contract, which originally called for 1,500 revolvers. The main distinction between revolvers made by the different partnerships is the names marked on the guns. Both production variations featured one-piece walnut grips, blued barrels and cylinders, case-hardened frames, and brass trigger guards and backstraps.

T. Logan Metesh, a firearms specialist at the NRA National Firearms Museum in Fairfax, Va., writes from Berryville, Va.



« **J.H. Dance & Brothers**

Revolvers produced by James Henry Dance and his brothers were some of the most distinctive ever created in the South. Though they were copied from the Colt Dragoon, their appearance is markedly different. Dance revolvers, made in .36 and .44 caliber, lack the Dragoon's recoil shields on both sides of the gun directly behind the cylinder, giving their frame a very flat look.

Not long before the Civil War, James left his home in Alabama and headed to Texas, to be joined a year later by his three brothers and two sisters. They purchased 900 acres and opened a large-scale blacksmith shop in East Columbia. Production on revolvers began in 1862 after Texas Governor Francis R. Lubbock received a letter signed by 26 of the city's most prominent citizens. Because revolvers were in such high demand, Lubbock exempted Dance factory workers from military service. He felt they served a greater purpose in making guns than in fighting. The revolvers quickly gained a reputation as "superior to Colt's best."

By 1863, Union forces, now very aware of its importance, began targeting the Dance factory, chiefly with gunboats firing from the Brazos River. For safety, the factory was moved a few miles inland, but for various reasons production never resumed from where it had left off.