



Official State Historical Center of the Texas
Rangers law enforcement agency.

**The Following Article was Originally Published in the
*Texas Ranger Dispatch Magazine***

The *Texas Ranger Dispatch* was published by the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum from 2000 to 2011. It has been superseded by this online archive of Texas Ranger history.

Managing Editors

Robert Nieman 2000-2009; (b.1947-d.2009)

Byron A. Johnson 2009-2011

Publisher & Website Administrator

Byron A. Johnson 2000-2011

Director, Texas Ranger Hall of Fame

Technical Editor, Layout, and Design

Pam S. Baird



Funded in part by grants from
the Texas Ranger Association Foundation

Copyright 2017, Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum, Waco, TX. All rights reserved. Non-profit personal and educational use only; commercial reprinting, redistribution, reposting or charge-for-access is prohibited. For further information contact: Director, Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum, PO Box 2570, Waco TX 76702-2570.


[Rangers Today](#)
[Visitor Info](#)
[History](#)
[Research Center](#)
[Hall of Fame](#)
[Student Help](#)
[Family History](#)
[News](#)

★ [Click Here for
A Complete Index
to All Back Issues](#)

★ [Dispatch Home](#)

★ [Visit our nonprofit
Museum Store!](#)

★ [Contact the Editor](#)



The converted Whitney Navy Revolver. ©2005, David Stroud.
All Rights Reserved

Guns of the Texas Rangers

Converted, Nickel-Plated, Whitney Navy

By David V. Stroud

As mentioned in a previous Dispatch article, I began collecting Civil War Colt revolvers while attending Stephen F. Austin State University in 1968. In those long-ago days, a nice '60 Army or '51 Navy could be had for less than \$200. By saving change from my \$178 monthly G.I. Bill check, I was able to travel to Houston to meet my gun-wise cousin Robert Ashby, who volunteered to escort me on my first buying trip.

We parked at the largest sporting goods store that this Henderson native had ever seen. I exactingly opened the car door, beat Robert inside, and then walked quickly past hundreds of sporting rifles to the pistol case filled with modern revolvers and automatics. There was one old, nickel-plated revolver placed at the far end of the display as if the owner did not want it anywhere near his contemporary firearms.

“May I look at that real old one?” I asked, pointing at the “ugly duckling.”

“It’s a conversion,” the sales clerk explained, handing the revolver to me. He continued, “Black powder, post-Civil War. Nobody wants these things.”



Conversion number 49 on underside of barrel, and serial # 19422

on original loading gate. ©2005, David Stroud. All Rights Reserved

I asked permission to cock the gun, and then did so. The Texas Navy's battle scene of the Mexican fleet had been worn completely away, but the old cylinder turned perfectly as the hammer locked in firing position. I tried to hide my excitement while carefully lowering the hammer. Turning the revolver on its left side, I used my sleeve as its rest while I held the wood grip in my right hand. I saw a small nicked R and a worn groove where an S once fit.

"How much y'all want for this one?" I asked. Without smiling, and trying not to look interested, I added, "... seeing that nobody wants it."

"A hundred," the sales clerk answered. "We take cheeks and credit cards."

I looked at Robert. "What you think?"

"Buy it," he said. "That may have belonged to Rhett Butler Stroud."

I did. When I got home, I grabbed the only Colt book I had and searched the pictures until I found one just ... like ... mine! [1] It was a Richards Conversion, one of the nine thousand 1860 Armies altered from percussion firing to metallic cartridge between 1873 and 1878.



The Whitney on pages 428-429 with its photographs above, below and upper right. ©2005, David Stroud. All Rights Reserved

So I thought.

A few years after trading in the hundred-dollar Colt for \$100 to offset the \$1,000 that the Jackson Arms antique dealer's shop wanted for a First Model Colt Dragoon, I found the old Colt of "Rhett Butler Stroud" pictured in an American Rifleman magazine. It was a conversion, all right, but a "mystery conversion," one of eight known at the time of the article. [2]

Every collector has these stories to tell about gun-store counters and tables filled with pre-1898 weapons. I have even more tales, including the time I sold my First and Second Model Colt Dragoons for the same price I had given for them just so I could acquire my newest collection interest.



The first cartridge patent was granted by France to inventor Jean Samuel Pauly for a “self-contained, self-primed center fire metallic cartridge” in 1812. Then, in 1854, fellow Frenchman Eugene Lefauchaux obtained French and English patents for his pistol, which fired a self-contained, pin-fire, metallic cartridge. In 1861, Colonel George Schuyler bought 10,000 of the 12mm pin-fires for Lincoln’s army. When the war ended, Union soldiers were allowed to take them home as souvenirs. [3]

As noted in a previous *Dispatch*, Smith & Wesson received the first U.S. patent for a revolver cylinder bored through from end to end, which allowed metallic cartridges to be inserted from the rear. Once the Rollin White patent expired in 1868, most American revolver producers jumped onto the metallic bandwagon. When designing new handguns and long arms, they converted cap-and-ball revolvers to fire metallic cartridges in order to keep costs down.

Eli Whitney, Jr. was no exception. The cotton gin inventor’s son received U.S. Patent No. 51,985 on January 9, 1866, for a metallic-cartridge revolver incorporating a cylinder cap that also acted as a cartridge extractor by gripping the metallic cartridge flanges. Amazingly, Whitney never produced such a revolver. Instead, the Whitneyville plant made a few Navies using the Remington New Model Army conversion method.



Remington New Model Army Conversion. ©2005, David Stroud.
All Rights Reserved.

Such is the case of the Fourth Type Whitney pictured in this article. [4] This Whitney-converted Fourth Type has a 7 ½ inch, octagonal barrel and is a .36 caliber with a six-round cylinder. The top of the barrel is marked, “E. Whitney/ New Haven.” The cylinder engraving is of an eagle, lion, and naval engagement. The shield-barring rib is marked “WHITNEYVILLE” and is completely worn away. [5] This conversion exhibits two post-Civil War characteristics:

1. The most obvious is the nickel plating. Although Europeans experimented with nickel plating as early as 1842, one of the first U.S. patents was granted to an American named Adams in 1869 for a solution of nickel ammonium chloride. Later, several patents were granted for various types of baths until O. P Watts developed a rapid nickel-plating bath in 1916 that is still in use. [6]

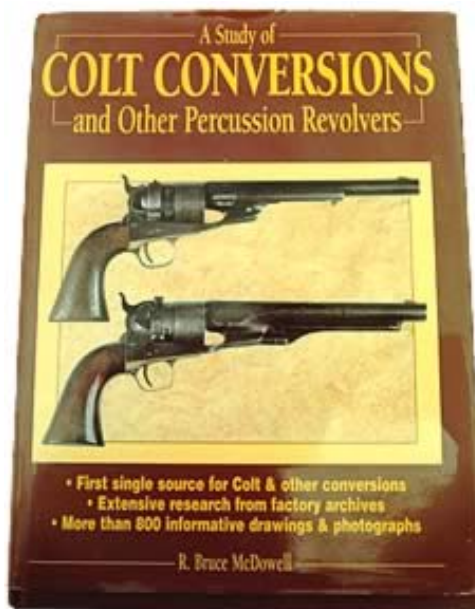
2. The second characteristic is that this model is a cartridge-firing, Remington-type conversion. The Whitney has matching serial numbers throughout as well as the conversion number of 49. The method of converting was to machine the cylinder so it would fire .38 accept-rim fire cartridges rather than the .38 ball, to add a cylinder extension, and to cut the frame to accept a backing plate. A loading chamber was milled through the right-hand recoil

shield and the nose is slightly reshaped. [7]

As with most western firearms, those “unwanted” guns of the past are eagerly sought today, and conversions are some of the rarest. Although converted Whitneys are extremely scare, I feel sure a few were carried in the holsters of Rangers, lawmen, and outlaws of the Old West.

NOTES

1. James E. Serven, *Colt Firearms from 1836* (La Habra, California: The Foundation Press, 1954). This was the first Colt book I bought in 1968. I do not have it anymore and have long since forgotten the page number. It was reprinted in 1992.
2. *The American Rifleman* magazine was discarded years ago because I no longer owned my old “Rhett Butler Stroud” Conversion. Issue, date, and page number are long forgotten, but the number 8 sticks in my mind. More information on the mystery conversions is in McDowell’s study (below).



The late R. Bruce McDowell's outstanding book on conversions.

3. John D. McAulay, *Civil War Pistols: A Survey of the Handguns of the American Civil War* (Lincoln, RI: Andrew Mowbray, Inc., 1992), 51-53.
4. R. Bruce McDowell, *A Study of Colt Conversions and Other Percussion Revolver*, (Iola, WI: Krause Publications, 1997), 427-429.
5. Norm Flayderman, *Flayderman's Guide to Antique American Arms...and their values*, (Iola WI: Krause Publications, 2001), 257. The Whitney Conversion is not mentioned in Flayderman’s Guide. I believe this offers documented proof of the Whitney Conversion’s rarity rather than lack of documentation.
6. Nickel Plating Primer, online feature article. <http://www.pfonline.com/articles/040102.html>
7. McAulay, *Civil War Pistols*. 427-9.

Texas Ranger

DISPATCH

