

THE LEMAT REVOLVER

FIREARMS OF THE CONFEDERACY

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The most unusual—and since the War the most famous—of all Confederate revolvers was the LeMat, the invention of a Southerner, but the product of a French factory.

Dr. Jean Alexander Francois LeMat was a Creole physician of New Orleans before the War. Being of a mechanical turn of mind, he was granted a patent by the United States Patent Office under date of October 21, 1856, for his revolving pistol.

The weapon had a revolving cylinder containing nine shots of .42 caliber and an under barrel of .60 caliber for a shot cartridge. This last was fired by a small movable head on the end of the hammer.

When the War began, Dr. LeMat lost no time in offering his invention to the Confederate Government. About this time LeMat made a connection with the Edward Guatherin Company, of New Orleans, which was engaged in buying tobacco for the French government. The firm began the manufacture of military clothing, the goods being imported from France.

There is no evidence that any LeMat revolvers were manufactured in this country. The only suggestion to that effect is an article in the *Richmond Daily Examiner* of June 28, 1861, which quotes the *New Orleans Daily Delta* as saying:

"F. W. C. Cook, of the firm of Cook and Brother, manufacturers of Enfield model guns, contemplates the manufacture of Dr. LeMat's grapeshot revolver, one of the most formidable weapons of the pistol kind ever invented."

But this never materialized, and LeMat ran the blockade and took passage for Europe on the English mail liner *Trent* with Mason and Slidell. He escaped capture when the *Trent* was stopped by a Federal warship, and Mason and Slidell were taken prisoner. LeMat continued to Paris and entered into partnership with Girard & Son to make the revolvers.

General Gorgas reported on August 12, 1861, that he had given LeMat a contract to make 5,000 revolvers for the War Department.²¹ Later the Confederate Navy Department gave LeMat a contract for 2,000 (or 3,000) to be delivered for inspection in London.

Under date of July 30, 1862, Secretary Mallory of the Navy Department wrote to Commander James D. Bulloch, C. S. Navy, in Liverpool, saying in part:

²¹ Official Records, Series IV, Vol. 1.

"You will observe by the terms of the contract with Mr. LeMat that the pistols are to be delivered and inspected in London and you will inspect them or designate an officer of the Navy in England to do so and receive them, after which you will pay for them out of any funds in your hands and forward them to the Confederate States. Two hundred pistols have been delivered and paid for here."²²

To this the Secretary received the following reply from Commander Bulloch, dated Liverpool, September 24:

"Immediately upon receipt of your letter of July 30, in which you direct me to carry out the terms of this contract, I wrote to Messrs. C. Girard & Company informing them of the fact and stating that I would make arrangements for the inspection of the pistols as soon as they could deliver them, at stated periods and in sufficient numbers to make it advisable. I was obliged to inform them at the same time that I had no available funds from which to make the prescribed payments, but, to avoid, if possible, any delay in forwarding the arms, I requested them to suggest some means by which I could give them security for ultimate payment, and am now awaiting their reply."²³

On October 25, Bulloch again wrote the Secretary of the Navy:

"Messrs. C. Girard and Company have agreed to deliver the revolvers without payment being made here. No sample of the pistol furnished the War Department has been sent me, and it is therefore impossible to judge of the relative character of those the contractors are making for the Navy."²⁴

Under date of November 7, 1862, Bulloch again wrote to Mallory and had this to say about the LeMat Navy revolvers:

First, contract for revolvers.—This contract, whether regularly made over by Colonel LeMat or not, is in the hands of Messrs. C. Girard & Co., of Paris. When these gentlemen, after some correspondence, declared their willingness to deliver the revolvers upon a simple receipt with or without payment, I directed the inspecting officer, Lieutenant Chapman, since relieved in this duty by Lieutenant Evans, to ask for a sample of the pistols already delivered to the War Department and to get a written certificate from the manufacturer that the one furnished him was identical with those previously accepted. He was then to see that the revolvers offered for the Navy came fully up to the sample. One hundred have been accepted by Lieutenant Evans, and I hope they will be here in time to send by Lieutenant Wilkinson. Lieutenant Evans reports that these hundred are quite as well furnished in every way

²² Records of the Union and Confederate Navies, Series II, Vol. II, Page 230.

²³ Ibid., Series II, Vol. II, Page 274.

²⁴ Records of the Union and Confederate Navies, Series II, Vol. II, Page 282.

as the sample, but adds that the barrels, lock frames, and hammers are of cast iron; that the contact between the barrels and cylinders is so loose as to permit much escape of gas; and that the cylinders, not being provided with springs, as in other repeating arms, are apt to revolve too far when the pistols are rapidly cocked, so that the hammers are likely to fall upon the divisions between the nipples when the firing is quick. These are such serious defects that I shall decline receiving any more of the revolvers under this contract unconditionally, but will write Lieutenant Evans to say to Messrs. Girard & Co. that he will forward the balance subject to inspection upon arrival in the Confederate States. I presume you have not seen any of the pistols already sent forward, but I beg that you will have them inspected and instruct me what to do in the matter as soon as possible. The ordinary revolver costs in England about 63s. and the grapeshot revolver Messrs. C. Girard & Co. are now supplying can be manufactured by the London Armory Co. for something less than £5 each."²⁵

There is an unexplained interval of some 16 months between the foregoing correspondence and the next letters on the subject in the records, as witness the following:

CONFEDERATE STATES, NAVY DEPARTMENT,
Office of Ordnance and Hydrography, Richmond, April 7, 1864.

SIR: Herewith you will receive a copy of a contract with Messrs. C. Girard & Co., for 2,000 "grapeshot revolvers," for the use of the Navy, to be delivered and inspected in England.

Commodore Barron has been requested by this office to select an officer to inspect and receive the pistols, and upon the presentation of bills properly certified by such officer, you will please direct Messrs. Fraser, Trenholm & Co. to pay them according to the terms of the contract, chargeable to the appropriation for the ordnance for the Navy.

When the pistols are received for service with 10 rounds of ammunition for each (percussion caps to be included) please have them shipped by first favorable opportunity to Nassau, New Providence, consigned to L. Heyliger, Esq., agent, Navy Department, with instructions to him to ship them to a Confederate port in lots of 250 each,

marked  accompanied by invoices and letters of advice, or they may be shipped in lots of 500, if favorable opportunities offer, direct.

Respectfully, your obedient servant,

JOHN M. BROOKE,
Commander in Charge.

Commander J. D. BULLOCH, C. S. Navy,
Liverpool, England.

Paris, June 13, 1864

SIR: Under a contract made by the Confederate States Navy Department with Messrs. C. Girard & Co., for 2,000 grapeshot revolvers, with 10 rounds of ammunition for each, to be delivered in England for use of Confederate States Navy, you are hereby appointed the officer to attend to the inspection and reception of the pistols. You

²⁵ Ibid., Page 295.

²⁶ Records of the Union and Confederate Navies, Series II, Vol. II, Page 620.

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will certify bills for all that may pass a satisfactory inspection, and forward them to Commander J. D. Bulloch, who is authorized to direct the payment according to the terms of the contract.

Respectfully etc.,

S. BARRON,
Flag Officer.

Lieutenant W. H. MURDAUGH, C. S. Navy,
*Paris.*²⁷

Lieutenant Murdaugh evidently took his assignment seriously, for under date of Paris, June 23, 1864, he reported to Barron:

Paris, June 23, 1864.

SIR: In obedience to your order of the 13th instant, I have inspected the pistols made by C. Girard & Co. under contract with the Navy Department and have the honor to report that from the general bad character of the workmanship I have declined to receive those which they had on hand ready for delivery. As a specimen of the workmanship, I would state that of the first seven examined six had defects, as follows, viz: In one the grapeshot barrel went off at the fourth or fifth fire of the revolving cylinder from a defect in the hammer. In the next the cylinder would not revolve from defect in spring of revolving apparatus. In the next the hammer at times would miss striking the nipple altogether, seriously damaging it. In the other three the fixed and revolving barrels were not true with one another when in position for firing, and in one of these the hammer did not strike fair.

Of all those examined, none appeared to be reliable, and almost all of them had serious defects, such as those enumerated. In all the metal of which the faces of the hammers were made was too soft.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

W. H. MURDAUGH.

Flag Officer S. BARRON,
*Paris.*²⁸

The result of Murdaugh's report was that Barron promptly annulled the Navy Department's contract, as shown in the following letters:

Paris, February 6, 1865.

GENTLEMEN: Your letter of the 5th, asking "for a copy of the order from the Navy Department of the Confederate States giving you (me) authority to send us such notice," viz, "to annul our contract with the Navy Department for revolvers" is received. In reply to your request I have to state that the contract made by you with the Navy Department has been sent to me for my guidance, and in it you agree that "500 of said revolvers are to be delivered per month, the first delivery of 500 to be made before the 1st of November next," 1863. The terms stipulated in this agreement have by no means been complied with by you up to this day; nevertheless, so long as there was a chance of getting these arms into the Confederacy and cotton out to pay for them,

²⁷ Ibid., Page 670.

²⁸ Records of the Union and Confederate Navies, Series II, Vol. II, Page 676.

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I did not hesitate to take upon myself the responsibility of ordering the inspection and payment of such as were received, but now, the aspect of things is so changed by the closing of our ports that I do not feel myself authorized to continue the inspection and payment without further orders from the department.

Respectfully, etc.,

S. BARRON,
Flag Officer.

Messrs. C. GIRARD & Co.,
*No. 9, Passage Joinville.*²⁹

Paris, February 7, 1865.

SIR: According to the terms of the contract made by Messrs. Girard & Co. with the Ordnance Bureau, the first 500 pistols were to have been delivered on the 1st of November, 1863. They have not been delivered up to this date, but 100 are now reported ready for inspection. I have directed these to be inspected, and such as are reported worthy of being received, to be paid for; and have notified Messrs. Girard & Co. that I do not feel myself authorized to continue the inspection and receiving under the present condition of affairs until I learn the views of the department. The closing up of our ports by the blockade and the fall of Fort Fisher, thus rendering it quite impossible to get arms into the Confederacy and cotton out, together with a report from Commander Bulloch, financial agent of the department, of the shortness of money to meet all the engagements made under bona fide contracts and faithfully complied with and the noncompliance by these contractors with their agreement, have induced me to notify these gentlemen in order that they may not run into any further expense on account of this contract. They shall lose nothing by what they have already manufactured so far as they are reported favorably on. I do not think these gentlemen will have any just grounds of complaint after the indulgence that has been shown to them. They complain of my decision, and are about to make a formal protest, which I shall forward to the bureau when it is received by me.

I am, most respectfully, your obedient servant,

S. BARRON,
Flag Officer.

Commander JNO. M. BROOKE,
*Chief of the Bureau of Ordnance and Hydrography.*³⁰

It is apparent from the foregoing that few of the LeMats made for the Navy Department ever reached the Confederacy. Supposedly these Navy LeMats were the smaller type, with rifled barrel of .35 caliber and shot barrel of about .50 caliber. These small LeMats are exceedingly rare. There is a fine one in the Nunnemacher Collection in the Milwaukee Public Museum. There is, however, no documentary evidence to indicate that the Navy LeMats differed in size from those furnished the Army.

The War Department seems to have fared better than the Navy Department in its contract for LeMat revolvers.

²⁹ Ibid., Page 795.

³⁰ Records of the Union and Confederate Navies, Series II, Vol. II, Page 795.

"The Field Manual for the Use of the Officers on Ordnance Duty," prepared by the Confederate Ordnance Department and printed by Ritchie & Dunnavant, of Richmond, in 1862, contains in the chapter on small arms in use in the Confederate armies this paragraph:

"Grapeshot pistol—This pistol is manufactured by M. LeMat, of Paris. It has a cylinder which revolves, containing nine chambers, a rifled barrel and a smooth-bore barrel. The latter receives a charge of buckshot, and is fired by a slight change in the hammer. Some are in our service."

Col. John M. Payne, detailed as ordnance officer in charge of imported munitions of war at Wilmington, N. C., reports the receipt of 150 LeMat revolvers in July, 1863, which were "not approved." Colonel Payne's record book, which is preserved in the Museum at Richmond, shows that LeMat revolvers came through the blockade with some regularity in 1864. The following excerpts are from this record book:

"On June 17, 1864, the steamer *Lynx* arrived with four cases of LeMat revolvers, which were forwarded to Richmond.

"On July 27, 1864, the *Lynx* again landed four cases of LeMat revolvers.

"On May 16, 1864, the steamer *Pevensey* landed five cases of LeMat revolvers."

Among the arms found on the Confederate ironclad *Atlanta*, captured June 30, 1863, were three LeMat revolvers and 32 Colt revolvers.²¹

When Lieut. John Taylor Wood and a party of picked men from the *C. S. S. Patrick Henry* burned the steamship *Alleganian* in November, 1862, it is recorded that the men were armed with LeMat revolvers.²² Kent, Paine & Company, Richmond arms dealers, advertised LeMat revolvers for sale in December, 1862.²³

LeMat revolvers were recognized for use in the army. "The Field Manual for the Use of Confederate Officers on Ordnance Duty" refers to them on page 54. In the Confederate Museum in Richmond are LeMat revolvers used by Gen. J. E. B. Stuart, General Beauregard and Gen. Patton Anderson. The Chicago Historical Society has the LeMat revolver carried by Maj. Henry Wirz.

There were many changes in the LeMat models. The earliest ones had round barrels, spur trigger guards, loading

²¹ Records of the Union and Confederate Navies, Vol. XIV, Page 696.

²² Official Records, Vol. V, Page 141.

²³ The Richmond Whig, December 4, 1862.

levers on right side and were marked "LeMat's Patent." Later the marking was changed to "Col. LeMat's Patent." The loading lever was shifted from the right to the left side, and the spur was removed from the trigger guard. The markings were changed to "Col. LeMat, bte.s.g.d.g. Paris."²⁴

Plate XXXII shows two models of the LeMat Army Revolver. Figure 1 is the first model, with loading lever on right side, spur trigger guard and ring in butt. On top of barrel: "Col. LeMat's Patent," Serial 168. Figure 2 shows the last war model, with loading lever on the left side and no trigger guard spur. On top of barrel: "Syst LeMat, Bte, s.g.d.g., Paris." Serial 1824.

All these references are to the percussion LeMat. The pin-fire LeMat was a post-war model and was not used in the Confederacy.

There are also LeMat revolvers marked "LeMat & Girard's Patent, London." Often these are found with Birmingham and other English proof marks, indicating that they were imported to England "in the white," that is, unfinished, and were finished and proved in England.

The first patent issued to LeMat by the British Patent Office was in 1859, and is applicable to both muzzle and breech-loader. His second patent, No. 1,081, issued in 1862, shows the ramrod on the left side and merely claims a new kind of cylinder stop. There is a third patent of 1868 for breechloader and a fourth of 1871 with a new type of hammer, but these latter patents were issued after the end of the War.

The LeMat revolver had serious defects other than those found by the inspector. The most notable of these was the small, movable tip on the end of the hammer. When this tip was turned down, it fired the shot cartridge. But when it was broken off, as was frequently the case, the weapon was useless.

Another and even more serious defect was that the LeMat revolver would not take the regulation .44 caliber revolver cartridge.

THE COFER REVOLVER

According to the records of the Confederate Patent Office the first—and probably the only—revolver patented and made in the Confederacy was the Cofer. The other revolvers manufactured there were "captured" models.

²⁴ Manufactured for the inventor.