

The Manhattan Fire Arms Manufacturing Company

An Epic Adventure

by Michael Hunting

WARNING – Before reading this article think about your wallet! I was given a similar caution a couple of years ago by a serious Manhattan collector but I'm afraid that his wise words fell on deaf ears and as a result I'm now lighter be a fair few quid! Mind you every time I hold one of my Manhattans, I'm glad I didn't heed the warning! Well now it's up to you...read on if you dare!

When it was suggested that I write a follow on article on Manhattan Firearms, to the one published in the Summer 2010 edition of *Black Powder*, I felt a great sense of responsibility, almost too much to bear in fact, because, in a way, I would be following in the footsteps of the great Waldo E Nutter, whose 1958 book, 'Manhattan Firearms', is a real gem of arms literature. I'll let you know at the end of this article how to get your very own copy.

Please note few pictures accompany this article. This is because I have listed two outstanding websites as a footnote which give excellent, comprehensive coverage of Manhattan and Bacon arms in great detail!

In 1857, Colt's original patent of 1836 expired, thus opening the field for others to manufacture revolvers, so it comes as no surprise that a number of companies had great ideas about getting their share of this lucrative part of the arms market. Of course no one could have predicted that just 4 years away was the American Civil War which had a huge implication for anyone associated with the production and supply of military type weapons.

The Manhattan Fire Arms Manufacturing Company was set up on 26 May, 1855, by a group of 18 New York City and Newark, New Jersey businessmen with a capital stock of \$40K. One of these men had the intriguing name of Jephtha C. Groshong! I wonder what he and his colleagues looked like. Serious men I expect, with, sober suits, beards and a clear view about the profits to be earned from their fledgling Company! They must have felt really excited by the whole venture but tempered perhaps about concerns over technical aspects of arms production as I don't think any of them were in any way innovative engineers in the way that Colt was. I suspect that they were entrepreneurs who saw an opportunity in the market place and who appreciated that they would need to hire in the technical expertise so vital to an arms based enterprise.

Arms production began in Norwich, Connecticut, in early 1856 and was focused on bar hammer single-shot pistols and pepperbox revolvers. On 1 September, 1857, Thomas Bacon, a respected gunsmith, contracted to produce key arms parts for Manhattan, the latter having provided Bacon with financial aid to enable him to extract himself from commitments to other businesses. In September 1858, just 12 months down the line, Bacon resigned from his agreement with Manhattan setting in train a very high profile litigation case whereby Manhattan sought to prevent Bacon from becoming involved in the arms trade on his own account or for any other organisation.

As it transpired, whilst Bacon had signed himself up to a 20 year contract with Manhattan, Albert Beach, who appears to have held a post with Manhattan which could best be equated to Company Secretary, failed to countersign the contract, thus rendering it null and void. Epic stuff really. As it happens Bacon set up his own pistol production business called the Bacon Manufacturing Company. The

lesson here is: Pay attention to contracts and legal issues and employ senior administrators who are commercially aware and hang onto key personnel lest they become competitors!

I bet Jephtha C. Groshong and the boys were getting a bit hot under the entrepreneurial collar about all this fuss and legal expense! I've had to pour myself another whisky just thinking about it, even though it was 115 years ago.

Keep a lookout for early Bacon revolvers as they are quite similar in appearance to Manhattans, although they have a different design of loading lever retention latch and they have no intermediate cylinder slots. The top of the barrel is marked to Bacon although the exact wording differs slightly depending on when the pistol was made and which model (of 3) it is. The later model 2 and model 3 versions differ more obviously from the Manhattan design.

All was not lost, as Manhattan obtained the services of two engineers, Augustus Rebetey (who may have held the position of Superintendent of Manhattan's factory) and Joseph Gruler who were instrumental in helping the Company to progress in terms of design features. Between them they introduced a number of patents setting Manhattan arms apart from those of competitors.

So what features you say could the Company cite as making Manhattan arms stand out as the pistol of choice when viewed from the standpoint of a prospective purchaser, given the variety of arms available to the public at that time? Well, with my salesman's hat on and focusing on the Manhattan cap and ball revolvers in direct competition with Colt's (and other manufacturers) pocket and navy models here goes:

1. Manhattan revolvers come in two packages: the .31 pocket and the .36 belt/navy. Both are proven designs, resulting in reliable, easy to handle and effective pistols.
2. The provision of five additional slots (or in some cases six depending on the model of revolver) which serve to lock the cylinder so that no nipple/cap rests underneath the hammer is a great benefit in terms of safety. The design also avoids placing strain on the bolt spring.
3. The spring plate fitted to some of the .36 calibre revolvers between the rear of the cylinder and the recoil shield is designed to be effective in terms of safety and efficiency. Firstly, it deflects laterally the fire from the nipple, thus reducing the risk of a chain fire from other chambers. Secondly it tends to hold struck caps on the nipples thus preventing them from falling into the lock and clogging up the cylinder or other moving parts.

I'm sure that those readers who, like me, shoot cap and ball revolvers, often experience bits of cap debris jamming the action and preventing rotation of the cylinder for the next shot, or acting as a 'buffer' between the hammer and the hammer slot, thus preventing the face of the hammer from striking the next unfired cap! Frustrating as this is on the target range, a jammed pistol in close action with the enemy could have fatal results for the shooter and any design feature which lessened the jamming problem would be seen as being really worthwhile.

My 4th point would relate to retail price, however, to the best of my knowledge, no information exists as to how much Manhattans cost. My guess is that they were 'competitively' priced and that would have a bearing on demand.

Not all Manhattans were fitted with the spring plate referred to in 3 above and if you come across an arm that hasn't got one, check to see if there is a screw hole at 6 o'clock on the recoil shield as you hold it facing you. If there is a hole it is likely that a shield had been fitted but since removed. It seems some people chose to discard this feature for whatever reason. I gather that it was not uncommon for the spring plate to fracture at the top as a result of many strikes by the hammer and when this damage occurred some owners just unscrewed and discarded it and didn't bother to fit a replacement. The spring plate was invented by Ben Kittredge, of Kittredge and Co., in Cincinnati and became the 4th patent associated with the Company. The plate appears on some but not all .36 revolvers manufactured between the latter part of 1861 and 1868. The patent protecting this feature was granted in 1864, way after the device was first brought into production and use. Kittredge was probably Manhattan's largest distributor.

Despite the 4 years of the Civil War, Manhattan only supplied a tiny amount of arms to the Government and it seems that sales were limited to private purchase by civilians or serving soldiers. Manhattan did export arms to England and it is not uncommon to find such proofed revolvers on sale today in the UK or USA.

You may see .31 pocket revolvers, which look just like Manhattans, including the 10 (or 12) cylinder slots, but marked 'London Pistol Company'. It appears that these may have been Manhattan factory rejects put out by Manhattan's management at the end of the .31 pocket manufacture run and marketed under the 'London' name so as to keep them separate from 'first rate' Manhattans. This may all seem a little confusing as, of course, there was a London Pistol Company who took over Colt's factory when he closed his London operation in 1857. I gather that the people who took over Colt's London factory put out revolvers similar to Colt's but they soon went out of business.

Check out: www.manhattanfirearms.com
it's an outstanding source of information and photos.
Also www.baconfirearms.com which is another first class site.

I have been conducting research into the following:

1. What arms did Manhattan export to England and when?
2. Who was their agent over here?
3. Who retailed the arms in England?
4. Were Manhattans exported to the Confederates from England and, if so, by whom?

Following on from a notice in the Summer 2010 edition of *Black Powder* I have been encouraged by the most helpful response from MLAGB members who have volunteered important leads in respect of the above questions and which now form a key element of further research being conducted by myself. I need to investigate further but I believe it is possible that at least one British arms manufacturer was in discussions with Manhattan about importing their revolvers into England. I think, but cannot prove, that these arms were destined for onward shipment to the Confederates.

Manhattan ceased production of cap and ball revolvers with their 6 shot series V in December, 1868 and the business of arms production continued under the newly formed American Standard Tool Company, which focused on single shot pistols and .22 revolvers.

There is no doubt that, notwithstanding the lack of Government contracts, The Manhattan Fire Arms Manufacturing Company was a very successful and profitable enterprise and I'm sure that Jephtha C. G. and fellow entrepreneurs were well pleased with their investment.

Please contact me if you have any information which could help me with my research, either on 07896 640829, or at hawlett13@yahoo.com I'm also keen to receive information regarding serial numbers and barrel lengths, as I pass this information to a Manhattan expert/scholar in the USA because it helps with his on-going research.

As promised details of Waldo's book are as follows:

Manhattan Firearms by Waldo E. Nutter,
Published by STACKPOLE BOOKS
ISBN-10: 0-8117-0469-6

(I have just bought a reprint, to save wear on my first edition of 1958 and I can recommend this book as a real gem! Prospect Books UK telephone 02392 583368 sell it)



Navy Revolver, Series I
image courtesy: www.manhattanfirearms.com