

A Philadelphia Percussion Pistol

by Ian Ford



The subject of this article is a single shot pistol, with an eight inch smooth bored barrel of .45 calibre, with a hooked percussion breech which has been filed away on the left hand side. It has a very well made back action lock, with the cock being of rounded form and secured with a bun nut, rather than the more normal flat headed screw, and there is a detent on the half cock notch. All the furniture is of iron, with the exception of the nose cap which is made of black horn, and the rounded walnut butt has well executed checkering.

The word PHILADELPHIA is stamped on the top flat of the barrel, now rather faint, and J V TRUMP on the lock plate (see images below), but there are no proof marks on the barrel. This is normal for American guns, and ones made for export to the USA, and it would appear to be a typical belt pistol of the 1840 / 1850s popular with travellers and emigrants to the West.

Charles E Hanson's book on Plains Rifles shows, on pages 140 and 156, sets of rough forged pistol parts for sale to Gunsmiths to make very similar pistols, and several photos of half stocked percussion pistols are also shown. Most of these however have a single set trigger with a spur guard, and a belt hook, which this pistol does not have.

Hanson also gives a list of Philadelphia Gun Makers who produced this type of pistol, but J V Trump does not appear among them, nor can I find him in any other of my reference books, apart from a brief mention in one of Hank W Bowman's series on Famous Guns from various collections, which are more picture than serious reference books. In the Harold's Club collection book he lists various centres where dueling type pistols were made, and J V Trump is shown among the Philadelphia makers.



Due to the style and quality of this pistol I suspect it was originally made in Birmingham and exported, quite likely to Philadelphia which was one of the main import centres for English goods. It may have been marked with the names before export or they may have been added in America. J V Trump was probably an importer or dealer, and the fact that Harold's Club has a similar pistol does not necessarily mean he made it.

Not having access to any Philadelphia Trade Directories, which could possibly solve the question, the true maker is at present debatable, but I am no expert and any comments from Members would be welcome.

The pistol is of above average quality, and shoots well. It has had a hard life and there are some deep gouges around the lock screw, from turnscrew damage, and the base of the butt has several dents as if it has been used as a hammer. The lack of proof marks would have rendered the sale of it in this country illegal originally, and if it went to the States it returned here at some time as it was bought from a part time general antique dealer in Bucks about 20 years ago.



End Note: A. Merwyn Carey in his "American Firearms Makers" (Thomas Y Crowell Company: New York, 1953. Library of Congress Catalog Card No. 53-7524) has the following entry:

Trump, J. V. about 1840. Made cased percussion dueling pistols at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Editor