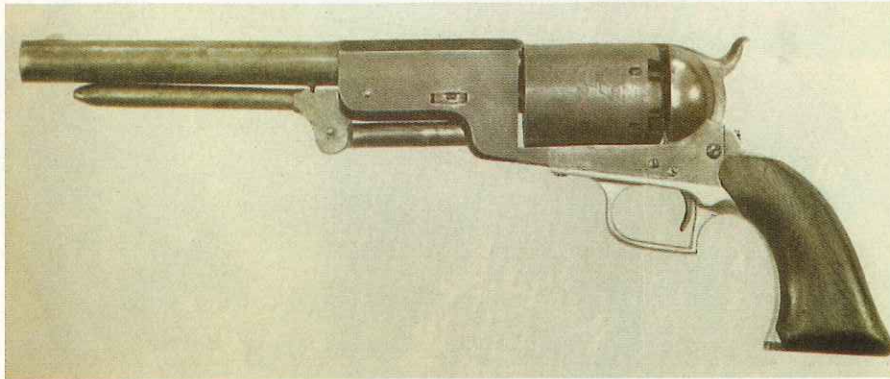


## FORMER TEXAS RANGER SAMUEL WALKER COLLABORATED WITH SAMUEL COLT ON A POWERFUL NEW REVOLVER. BY PHILIP SCHREIER



NATIONAL FIREARMS MUSEUM, FAIRFAX, VIRGINIA

*During the Mexican War, Samuel Walker received two Colt Model of 1847 revolvers (later called "Walker Colts"), including the one seen here—No. 1009.*

IN THE 1840S, TEXAS could be a rough place, even after it became the 28th state on December 29, 1845. Texas had won its independence from Mexico in 1836, but there really had been no peace with the Mexicans or the Comanches. The few companies of Texas Rangers had done all they could to protect their fellow citizens, but more trouble than they could handle alone soon arrived. The American annexation of Texas led to war with Mexico in 1846.

Although the Mexican War is often seen today as a minor speed bump in the fulfillment of the United States' manifest destiny, American success was not a forgone conclusion at the outset of war. Five companies of Texas Rangers saw service with General Zachary Taylor early on, and then they provided most of the manpower for the U.S. Mounted Rifles, a new branch of the mounted service created by General in Chief of the Army Winfield Scott to bring the war to the Mexicans on their own terms. Of the new mounted riflemen, none was as well known for his dashing bravery as Samuel Hamilton Walker, a man destined to become better known for a particular revolver he helped develop rather than for his use of a rifle.

Light-haired, blue-eyed Samuel Walker was born on February 24, 1817, in Prince George's County, Md. He had three sisters and three brothers. Samuel and brothers Nathan, Jonathan and Charles grew up on their father Jonathan's farm and took an early interest in the outdoors and horses. On June 1, 1836, Samuel went to Washington, D.C., to enlist in the Washington City Volunteers for service in the Creek War.

Walker served with distinction against the Creeks and then in Florida against the

Seminoles. He ventured to Texas and joined Jack Hay's company of Mounted Texas Rangers in 1844. He and the other members of the unit were kept busy dealing with Comanche raiders and Mexican guerrillas. When the Mexican War broke out, Walker was commissioned a captain on April 11, 1846, in what would be known as "Walker's Co. of Texas Mounted Rangers." By June 24, he had become a lieutenant colonel, due in part to his aggressive, risk-taking ways in combat. He often volunteered to run the gantlet through enemy lines to reach General Taylor's besieged troops. Late that year, Taylor sent him to Washington to recruit men and bring the U.S. Mounted Rifles to full strength—five companies (A through E), each with 110 men. Walker himself was captain of C Company.

From his days fighting Indians and Mexicans, Walker had come to rely greatly on the revolving firearms of Colonel Samuel Colt and his Patent Arms Manufacturing Co. of Paterson, N.J. Colt's five-shot revolvers had proved to be popular on the Texas frontier because of the advantage in firepower they had over single-shot pistols. When he was back in Washington, Walker wrote Samuel Colt, asking about the availability of his revolving side arms. Much to Walker's surprise, he found out that Samuel Colt was out of business and bankrupt. Unable to secure government contracts on his "Paterson Colts," his Patent Arms Manufacturing Co. had been placed in receivership.

Walker met with Colt and promised him a contract for 1,000 revolvers if he could produce a model to his specifications. Walker then sketched out some major

changes for Colt. A Paterson could weigh as little as 1½ pounds, so the frame and overall size were increased considerably. The caliber was now .44 instead of the previous .36, and the weapon was a six-shooter instead of a five-shooter. A trigger guard and loading lever, along with a front sight that Walker designed, were incorporated into the new revolver. These changes made the Colt Model of 1847 more rugged than the Paterson Colt and better able to hold up in the field. The finished product was the largest production revolver made for the next 140 years (until the .454 Casul was produced in Wyoming in 1987). Weighing in at an incredible 4 pounds 9 ounces with a 9-inch barrel, the new Colt was not designed to be worn about the waist, but rather as a true horse pistol. When returning with his new men and equipment to Mexico, Walker stopped off in New Orleans to purchase double-holster pommel rigs.

Samuel Colt accepted Samuel Walker's contract for 1,000 "Walker Colts" in January 1847, even though he didn't have a factory for producing them. The entrepreneur subcontracted the various parts and elements of the revolvers to various craftsmen and had the completed product produced and assembled in the Whitneyville, Conn., factory of Eli Whitney, Jr., son of the inventor of the cotton gin. By June, Colt had begun to receive the first completed revolvers. He directed an overrun of 100 revolvers and soon made gifts of some of these "civilian" revolvers to officers of influence who might be of help in securing additional contracts for more guns.

Walker was on campaign with Brig. Gen. Joseph Lane when news of the completed revolvers reached him deep in Mexico. After some delaying hassles with military ordnance inspectors, the 1,000 revolvers were ready for pickup and distribution in the port city of Vera Cruz. Walker received a civilian pair of the revolvers, serial numbers 1009 and 1010, at the end of September 1847. He immediately wrote to his brother Jonathan, who was living in Washington, "I have just received a pair of Colt's pistols

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which he sent to me as a present, there is not an officer who has seen them but what speaks of them in the highest terms...."

Walker would soon have the chance to field-test these new revolvers in combat. The very day he penned the note to his brother, his company of Mounted Rifles saddled up and moved out with General Lane's column to assist in relieving the Mexican siege of an American garrison in Puebla. On October 8, while en route to Puebla, the column learned of a force of 500 Mexican lancers in Huamantla. Walker led the charge into town at the front of his company of Mounted Rifles. The surprised lancers were routed even though they had four times as many men. They departed so quickly that they left behind loaded artillery pieces. Walker turned one of them on its previous owner, but he had no primers or fuzes to ignite the charges. He turned to one of his huge Colts, firing a shot at the breach of the artillery piece.

The resulting flash of powder and roar of the cannon brought plenty of attention to Walker and his improvised artillery crew. The lancers counterattacked, trying to recapture the lost artillery pieces. Soon a fierce fight broke out in the square. Walker, according to eyewitness accounts, discharged his revolvers with great effect. However, a blast from a Mexican escopeta, a short, smoothbore flintlock, felled the gallant Walker with a lead ball to his head and another to his upper chest. He urged his men onward, passed his guns on to Private William Ashbaugh and then died. (Ashbaugh returned Walker's two revolvers to the Walker family at their request, and the pair of historic guns are now in a private collection in Philadelphia).

Less than four months after Walker's death, the war with Mexico was over, but the revolvers he helped design were soon issued to his men, and Samuel Colt received additional contracts for more revolvers. He immediately built a factory in Hartford, Conn., and Colt's Patent Fire Arms Manufacturing Co. was born in 1848. The Walker Colts had plenty of power and range, but there was concern about their durability. Most of them had been damaged by repeated firing during the war, and some of their cylinders had burst because of overloading. The Walker soon gave way to the Colt Dragoon, still a six-shot .44 but slightly lighter (4 pounds 2 ounces), with a shorter barrel (7½ inches) and cylinder, and made of stronger material. Still, the Walker Colt not only gave a major boost to Samuel Colt's fortunes but also set the pattern for the Dragoon and the other Colt percussion revolvers that followed. WW