

WALKER'S WALKERS

The Colt Walker Revolvers of Captain Samuel H. Walker, Texas Ranger

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Few firearms in history have captured the imagination of collectors and historians as has the Walker Model Colt Revolver of 1847. Considered to be the crown jewel of any firearms collection, the Walker Colt is unique among historic firearms, for it was the development and subsequent governmental adoption of this revolver that enabled Colt to become the household name in quality firearms that it has been for the past 150 years. It may seem hard to believe that despite Colt's best efforts as a salesman and showman it was the practical and inventive genius of Captain Samuel Hamilton Walker of the U.S. Mounted Rifles that rescued Samuel Colt from the brink of oblivion and bankruptcy and made Colt the world-renowned manufacturer of "the world's right arm."



the NRA Gun Collectors Committee, as well as the Colt Collectors Association, is an effort to finally establish a fact-based accounting of the history of the most historic and valuable revolvers in the world.

Basic Background Information

In the 1971 film *Dirty Harry*, Clint Eastwood's character, San Francisco Police Inspector Harry Callahan, stops a bank robbery in progress with his S&W Model 29. As he stands over a wounded and bleeding perpetrator, he levels his revolver at him and says, "This is a .44 magnum, the most powerful handgun in the world, and it will blow your head clean off..." This became a popular line to repeat, but, as it is with a lot of the history surrounding the Walker Colt,

Seminole War. It was during this conflict that Walker first was exposed to the repeating arms of Colonel Samuel Colt, and it is quite possible that he made Colt's acquaintance when Colt visited the seat of the war to assess the performance of his firearms in their first test of real combat.

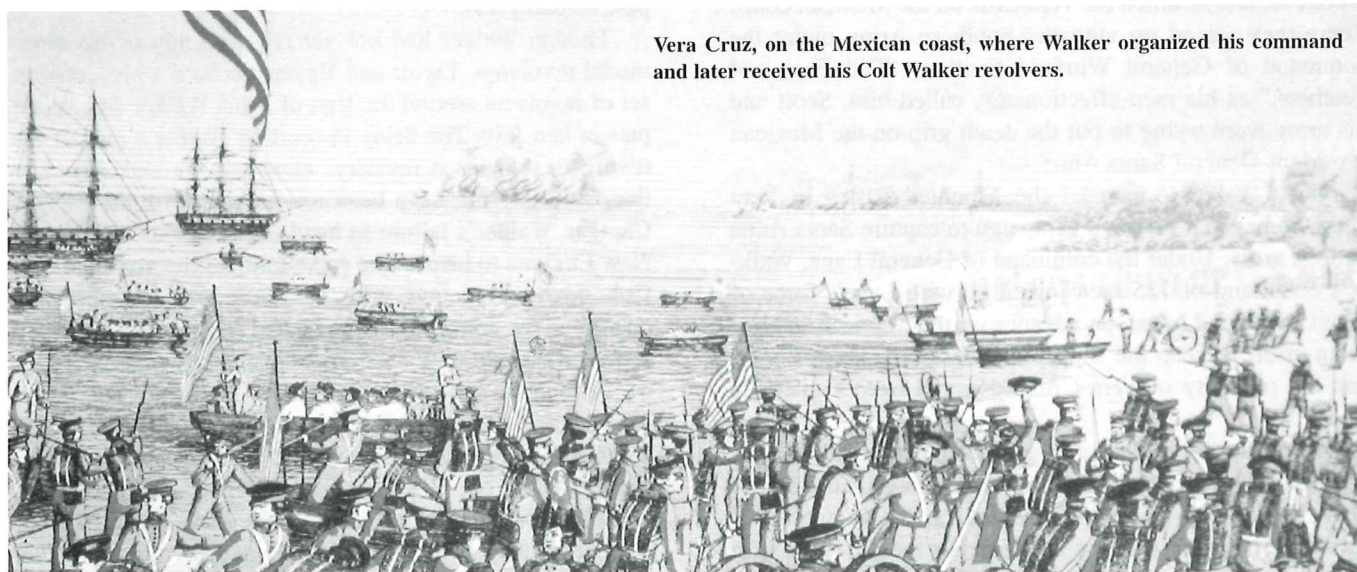
Once the Seminole uprising was quashed, Walker, still yearning for a life of adventure, followed the sound of gunfire to the open plains of the Republic of Texas. He was soon commissioned a Texas Ranger under the command of Colonel Jack "Coffee" Hayes. He earned a reputation for fearlessness and bravery, a reputation that would become well known in military circles when the War with Mexico broke out in 1846. Walker first served under the command of General Zachary Taylor and, following some heroic exploits in the northern theater of the war, was promoted to Captain of the newly formed branch of service called the U.S. Mounted Rifles (USMR).

As the Captain of Company C, USMR, Walker returned to Washington City to recruit and equip his company to serve as scouts and anti-guerrilla forces in the southern theater. It was during this visit to Washington in January of 1847 that Walker received a letter from Colt asking him to endorse his Paterson revolver. Colt hoped to secure a government contract that might end his recent financial bankruptcy. Walker, having used the Paterson Model revolvers with great effect against the Comanches in his duties as a

Ranger, replied that the Paterson revolvers were the best available; he suggested, however, that if Colt would only beef them up, they might be just the weapon to beat Santa Anna and end the war.

Following an exchange of letters with Colt, an improved version of the Paterson revolver was developed. It was produced in .44 caliber instead of .36. A triggerguard and a more substantial frame were added, as well as a loading lever, making it in appearance and performance quite different from the Paterson. Even the shape of the front sight was something that Walker took a personal interest in and for which he submitted a design for Colt's approval.

In Parson's *Sam Colt's Own Record*, a near-complete journal of Colt's early correspondence, the reader can follow the development of the Walker revolver. We see Walker suggesting design changes and begging for a sample to examine. We hear Colt urging Walker to come to New England to personally inspect the production and to run interference with the Ordnance inspectors and, especially, General George Talcott, the Chief of Ordnance for the U.S. Army. Talcott's nit-picking at the Colt contract delayed delivery so severely that, at one point, Walker offered to inspect the guns in the field. When rebuffed by Talcott, Walker asked Colt to send the guns to him directly, stating that he would pay for them personally if the Army didn't accept the guns under the terms of the contract.



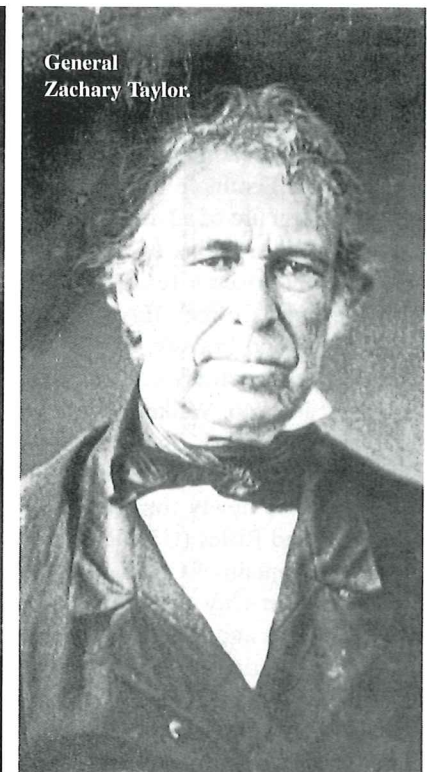
Vera Cruz, on the Mexican coast, where Walker organized his command and later received his Colt Walker revolvers.



Colonel George
Talcott, Chief
of Ordnance.



Winfield Scott.



General
Zachary Taylor.

In March, Walker and his new command left New Orleans, where he had saddles and holsters for the revolvers produced, and steamed for Vera Cruz on the Mexican coast. There they joined up with the Southern Army under the command of General Winfield Scott or “Old Fuss and Feathers,” as his men affectionately called him. Scott and his army were trying to put the death grip on the Mexican President-General Santa Anna.

Once Walker organized the Mounted Rifles in Vera Cruz, he began a personal campaign to capture Santa Anna and his army. Under the command of General Lane, Walker’s command of 185 men joined up with Lane’s force of about 3,300 and began an advance on the Mexican interior in an effort to keep the supply line between General Scott and the port city of Vera Cruz open and free of guerrilla raids.

It was during the early months of the war that Walker and his Texas Rangers had come to the personal attention of General Zachary Taylor, who relied on the Rangers and spoke well of their fighting abilities. His main trouble with

abilities would be better used in the south fighting the kind of warfare they had been carrying on with the Mexicans for the past 12-odd years.

Though Walker had not yet received any of his new-model revolvers, Taylor and Hayes received a presentation set of revolvers around the first of June. Walker was sent a pair in late July. The delay in sending Walker a pair of the revolvers remains a mystery; however, we can speculate that Colt may not have been too pleased with the Ranger Captain. Walker’s failure to heed Colt’s advice to come to New England to inspect the production of the guns had cost Colt dearly in delays with the Ordnance inspectors. A change in the contract’s wording had forced Colt to supply a flask and mold with *each* pistol instead of with *each pair* of pistols, as originally planned, incurring additional expense and delays. Walker kept up a steady stream of letters to Colt begging for delivery before his expected arrival in Vera Cruz, but to no avail. Colt actually seemed to go into hiding at one point as Eli Whitney and a host of other contractors began to pester him to pay for the work that

& Belden's classic work, *A History of the Colt Revolver*. From Castle Peorte, Walker wrote to his brother James in Washington on October 5th... *I have just received a pair of Colt's pistols which he sent to me as a present, there is not an officer who has seen them but what speaks in the highest terms of them...*

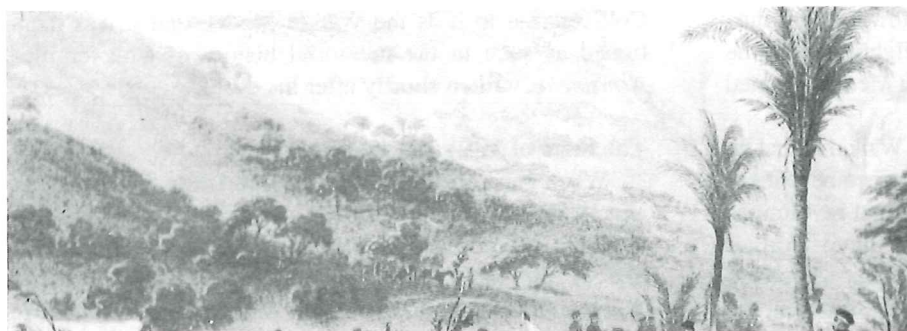
At this point, Walker must have been as excited as a child on Christmas; his revolvers had arrived. The revolvers for his command were waiting for him in Vera Cruz and would be picked up at the end of the current expedition. For Walker, the current chain of events must have seemed as if the hand of fate was guiding things. He was writing from Castle Peorte, a place where Santa Anna had once imprisoned him during his service with the Republic of Texas. It was during this earlier confinement that Walker — after narrowly escaping death himself only to watch a number of close friends suffer that fate from a summary firing squad arranged by Santa Anna personally — vowed to one day hold the Mexican general accountable for his crimes. Also during that confinement at Peoete, Walker had placed a dime in a hole under the flagpole in the center of the courtyard, promising his fellow prisoners that he would one day return and retrieve the dime as a free man. He was as good as his word; shortly after he finished the letter to his brother, he went to the flagpole and retrieved the dime he had placed there years before. Armed with his new revolvers, and in charge of a courageous company of men, Walker was confident that the planned expedition to relieve Puebla would result in the quick destruction of Santa Anna and his army.

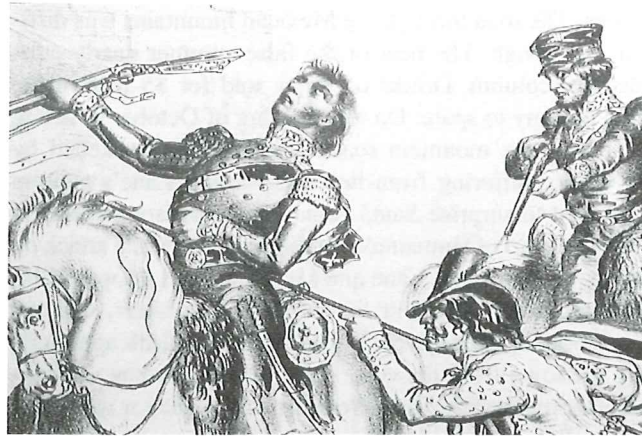
On the morning of October 6, Walker and the main body of General Lane's command left Peorte for the town of Puebla in an effort to lift the siege that the American Garrison under Colonel Childs had endured for a number of

weeks. The road through the Mexican mountains was difficult and rough. The heat of the false summer nearly crippled the column. Drinks of water sold for \$5 from those who had any to spare. On the morning of October 9, strung out along the mountain roads and severely weakened by stragglers suffering from heat prostration, Lane's column managed to surprise Santa Anna and a garrison of lancers near the town of Humantala. In preparation for the attack on the garrisoned town, Lane quickly divided his troops. Walker's command was sent forward as skirmishers, Colonel Wyncoop, of Pennsylvania, was on the left flank approaching the town from the east, and Colonel Gorman, of Indiana, approached the town from the right flank, or west side. Most of the artillery under Captain Heintzelman was sent in with Wyncoop's men on the left, and a portion was held in reserve with Colonel Lally.

Forward of the main body of troops, Walker learned from a field hand outside the town that the area was lightly defended. Wasting no time to notify General Lane and wait for orders, Walker, astride his cream-colored horse, gave his two hundred mounted men the order to "charge." They dashed into the town at a gallop and overtook a battalion of lancers and a battery of artillery. So quick was their charge and so complete was the surprise, that Walker and his men rode into the center of the town and captured the Mexican artillery before it ever had a chance to be fired. Not having any cannon fuse or primers, Walker personally reversed the pieces in the battery and employed his new revolvers in the task of firing the cannons. By aiming the revolvers at the guns' breeches and firing, the fire from the charges was enough to ignite the powder and fire them.

Walker and his command had flushed the town of the five hundred lancers and Mexican artillerists, killing dozens of them and capturing over seventy that had defended the





Legend persists that Walker was killed by a lance. In fact, he was struck down by an escopette round fired from a balcony.



The sacking of Humantala by U.S. troops was one of the worst wartime atrocities ever committed by American forces.

place. With the main body of Lane's troops not expected to reach the town for another forty-five minutes, the Mexicans made a desperate attempt to recapture the town. It was during this counterattack that Walker, while fighting from the concealment of a door frame, was shot by a Mexican armed with an escopette musket.

One of the many enduring myths about Walker is that he was killed by a Mexican lance, quite ironic since he is inexorably linked to the creation of the firearm that revolutionized mounted warfare. Other accounts have Walker suffering death at the hands of a Mexican soldier whose son Walker had supposedly beheaded with his sword during the

Army up to that point. No quarter was given. Walker was temporarily buried within a stone wall on the edge of town and eventually was moved to San Antonio where he currently rests. Within two days of Santa Anna's humiliating defeat at Huamantala, the President-General of Mexico was stripped of his command and office.

Scott's victorious army had entered the fortress of Mexico City only three weeks before, bringing an effective conclusion to the War with Mexico. The Mounted Rifles received their coveted revolvers shortly after the Battle of Huamantala, but the main fighting of the war ended with Walker's death. They would not have much cause to employ these revolvers, which were the state of the art in firepower.

Colt's fortunes, in the meantime, had begun to reverse themselves. Only three weeks after Walker's death, he managed to secure another government contract for an additional 1,000 revolvers. The balance of the 100 commercial Walkers were sold from Colt's retail store in New York City. The Walker contract enabled Colt to acquire from Whitney the tools, dies, gauges and machinery necessary to produce arms at his own factory — a factory that he quickly established in Hartford, Connecticut. The new revolvers that he produced there were slight improvements over the Walker pattern, yet they found acceptance with the armed services and led to a continuing stream of contracts, money and firearms between Colt and the U.S. government that has remained virtually unbroken ever since. With the new contracts, and with his pistols gaining in military acceptance, Colt's future was secured.

Walker died never having married and leaving no apparent heirs. His name has been linked forever with the revolver that he designed and carried at the time of his death. The traditional model designation for military arms seemed to escape attachment to the Walker Model. Even Colt referred to it as the Walker Model, and it was mentioned as such in the memorial history of Colt, entitled *Armsmear*, written shortly after his death.

The Saga of Walker's Walkers

When gun collecting began to flourish in the late 1920s and 1930s, the Walker revolver was an instant rarity. Of all the arms and models manufactured by Colt, the Walker was one of the rarest, with only 1,100 produced. Prescott Webb's national best seller, *The Texas Rangers*, added to

early list, we can see the beginning of what has become somewhat of a controversy for the last 40 years...where are the Walker Colts that Walker had with him when he died? The 1952 edition of the Quick list shows that commercial model Walkers #1009 and #1010 were with the Walker family in Maryland. Yet another Walker, #1020, is listed in the Colt Museum Collection in Hartford, Connecticut — a Walker that Colt himself had come to believe was one of the two that he had his brother James present to Walker in July of 1847.

In 1961, Colt historian and author R.L. Wilson mounted an historic exhibit entitled “Samuel Colt Presents,” a collection of presentation Colts that were on exhibit from November 1961 until January 1962 at the Wadsworth Atheneum. Though not identified as having belonged to Walker or even having been lent by the Walker family, these two revolvers (#1009 and #1010) took somewhat of a back seat to #1020, which was identified as having been *the* Walker presented to Walker from Colonel Colt. The basis for this assumption is a letter in the Colt files from Captain Bedney McDonald of the 3rd U.S. Artillery that identifies #1020 as Walker’s personal Walker.

That would conflict with the Walker family history claiming that the family revolvers were indeed Walker’s true Walker Colts. In the late 1940s, noted gun collector Dr. Roy Horton, of California, managed to locate the Walker family in Baltimore, Maryland, and talked them out of one of their two revolvers, #1010. Dr. Horton cherished the gun for nearly 30 years, never revealing to anyone how he truly came to own the gun. Eventually, in the 1970s, Dr. Horton sold the gun to Arkansas collector Johnie Basset, who later passed it on to Bob Berryman and then Warren Anderson of Australia. In 1992, Walker #1010 returned to the United States and was acquired by the Robert E. Petersen *Guns & Ammo* Magazine Collection of Los Angeles, California. Revolver #1009 was retained by the family of John Walker Taylor, descendants of Sam’s brother Charles. It was eventually sold to Herb Glass in 1979 and subsequently to Richard Ellis, Bob Berryman, Frank Singer and again acquired by Richard Ellis in 1996. It’s interesting to note that Bob Berryman has owned both #1009 and #1010 at different times.

Will the Real Walker’s Walkers please...

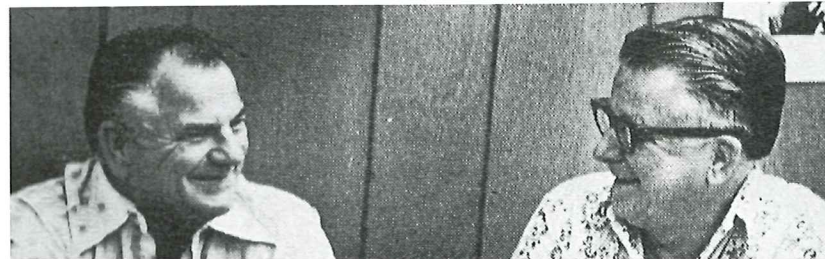
the rest is history, but the history itself is somewhat unclear.

According to R.L. Wilson’s *The Arms Collection of Colonel Colt* and numerous other publications, Colt went to his grave believing that the revolver he owned, #1020 — which was once mated to #1019, as the cylinder from #1019 is on #1020 — was one of the guns that Walker had received from him in the fall of 1847 and had in his use at the time of his death. The basis for this belief is understandable because Colt himself referred to the revolver as Walker’s. In 1860, some 13 years after Walker’s death, Colt had received a letter from Captain Bedney McDonald of the 3rd U.S. Artillery. It reads, “*I hope you have the pistol I let you have that Capt. Walker left me when he was killed in a good state of preservation.*” Given that Colt wasn’t present when the revolvers were sent to Mexico, and in light of the fact that, at that time in Colt’s history, factory records were not kept on the Walker Models and their serial numbers to help establish who had received which of the commercial patterns, Colt had no way of being sure that the “McDonald” Walker was really the one sent by Colt to the young Captain Walker. However, he didn’t really have any cause to doubt the authenticity of McDonald’s letter or question his act of kindness. It was a natural assumption that McDonald was being genuine in his gesture.

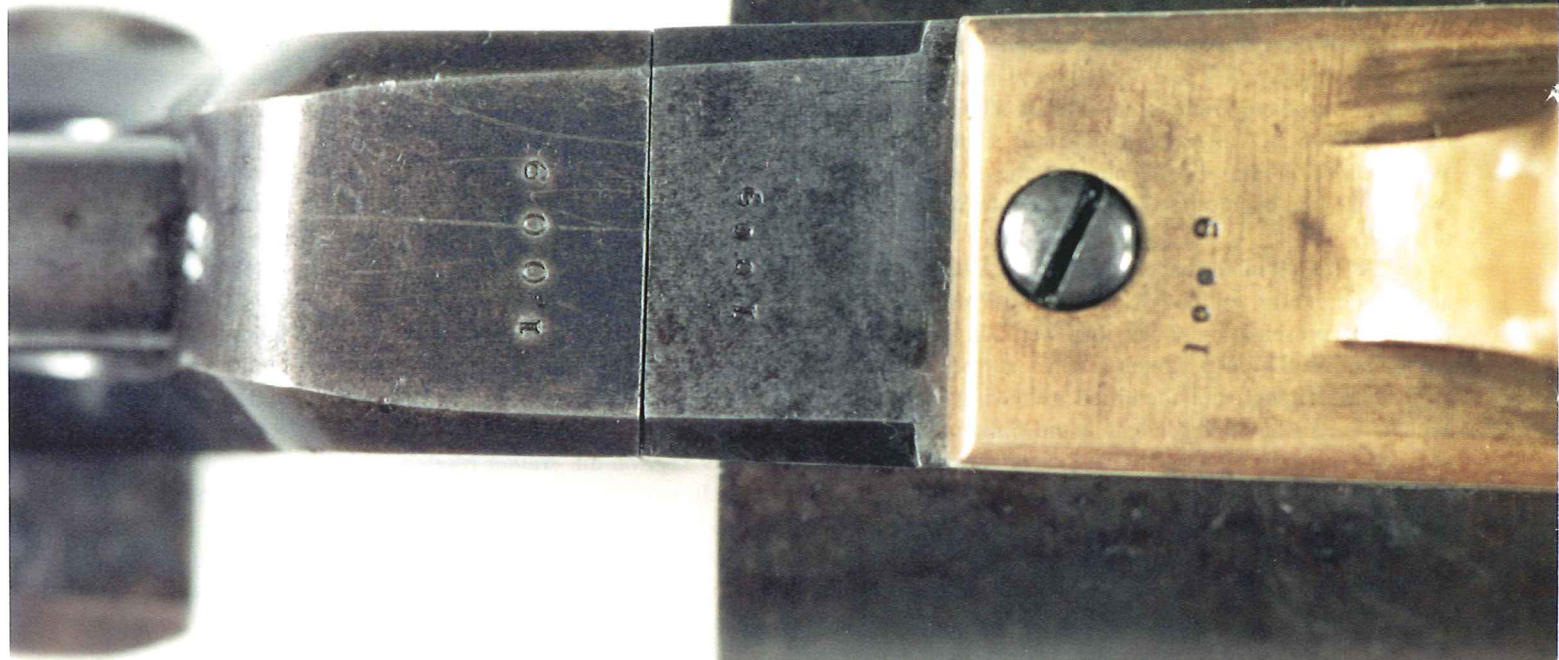
In the early 1990s, more than just a few collectors began to realize that there were three Walkers with claims to being with Sam Walker at the time of his death. Dr. Horton’s gun, #1010, was acknowledged by the NRA Gun Collectors Committee as being a true Walker’s Walker and received NRA Silver Medal #152 at the 1975 Annual Meetings. Richard Ellis exhibited his Walker #1009 at the 1990 NRA Annual Meetings in Anaheim, California, and received NRA Silver Medal #294 for the gun.

Magazine articles on the three guns circulated in the gun press for thirty years, each drawing their stories and conclusions from secondary sources and few, if any, primary

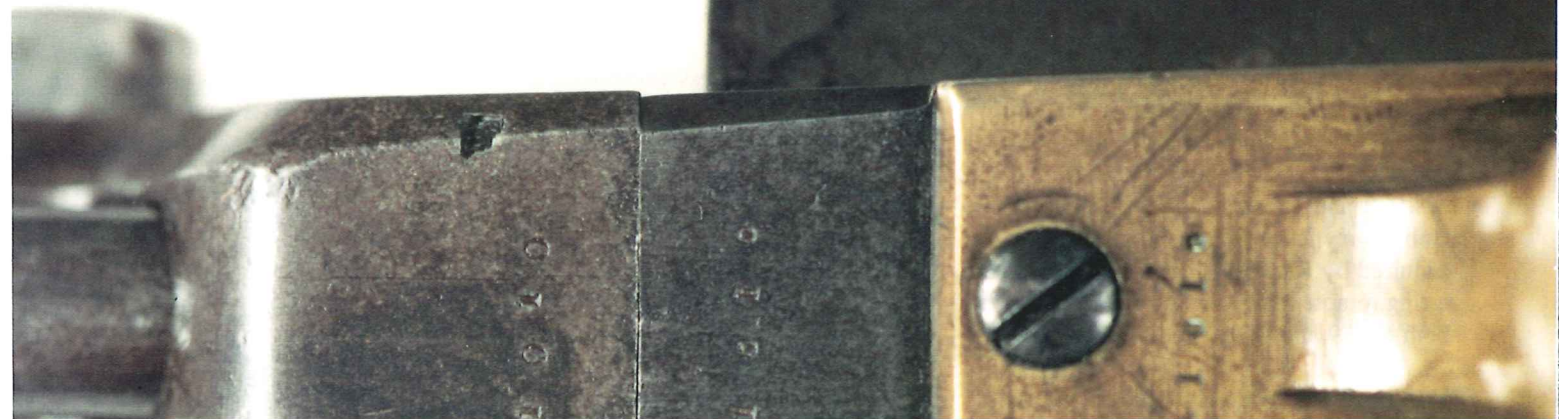
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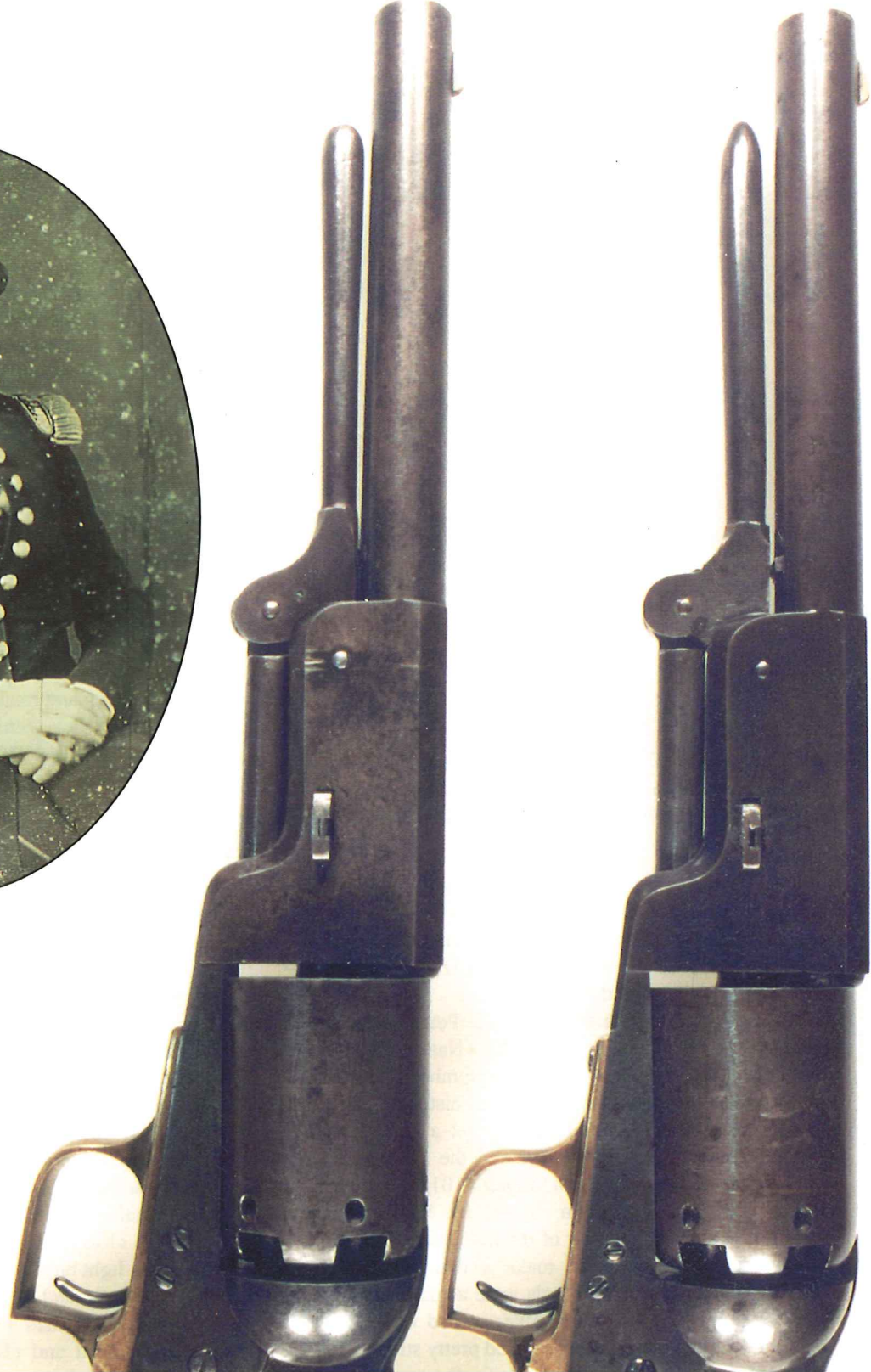


Together again...

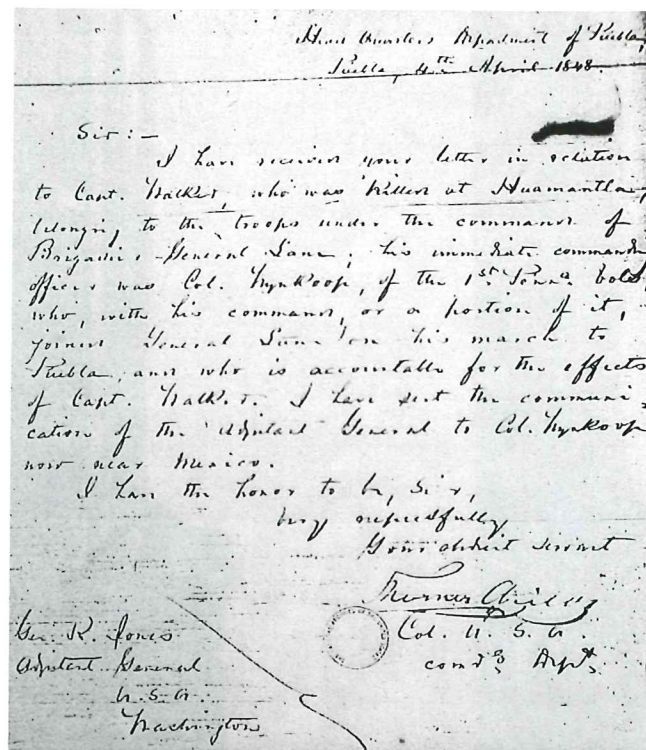


**Walker's
Walkers**





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Letters from the Adjutant General's office document how seriously they took the task of returning Walker's belongings to his family.

sources. To add mystery to the controversy, Dr. Horton claimed in print that his gun, #1010, had been purchased from a nomadic wanderer in the desert Southwest, an obvious attempt to keep his word to the Walker/Taylor family about the true origins of the pistol.

When asked to curate the Robert E. Petersen *Guns & Ammo* Magazine Collection at the NRA's National Firearms Museum in 1992, I was amazed at the number of differing opinions that surrounded the Walker Colt history. I felt that, one way or another, I would need to get a better understanding of the history of Walker and the history of his revolvers before I could present Walker #1010 to the public with an accurate description. Since, by Walker's own account, he only had one pair of the revolvers, I had to do enough primary research to make a determination for myself as to which pair of pistols were actually Walker's. Evidence suggesting that the Walker owned by Colt was one of the two original Walkers seemed pretty strong. How-

per at Pickett's Charge during the Battle of Gettysburg in 1863. Oral history aside, it would take real primary evidence to find out which pair of revolvers were the real Walker Walkers and which were the pretenders.

That primary evidence came to light during nearly 300 man-hours of research at the National Archives, looking at endless rolls of microfilm. Letters from the Adjutant General's office showed that there was a concerted effort to locate Walker's belongings after his death, at the insistence of his family in Maryland. Two generals and a battery of colonels were tasked with retrieving Walker's effects and returning them to the family.

When Walker died, it would seem that his things were divided up rather quickly. As was the tradition, items not directly bequeathed to someone by the deceased were auctioned off to the officers of the regiment, and the proceeds were sent to the family. One of his "War Swords" was returned east via Lt. Bowman of Pennsylvania, where it is now on exhibit near Scranton. If Lt. Bowman had Walker's sword, it would seem feasible that Lt. McDonald could have been given and retained his pair of revolvers. The key to the mystery lies within a remarkable letter written by George Myers of Walker's command to Walker's mother.

Here he writes "Just before Captain Walker died he gave his pistols to young William Ashbaugh of our company, but soon after the death of Captain Walker, Lt. Claibourne took them from him also. These were the pistols made a present to the Captain by Mr. Colt, the maker." This statement is corroborated by the Claibourne papers in the University of North Carolina Library. Undoubtedly, Claibourne had retrieved the guns from Ashbaugh and returned them to the family with what other effects he was able to gather. How else would a family, so removed from the seat of the war, receive a set of Colt's new and improved pistols? As Walker himself said, there was not an officer in the Army who didn't desire a pair. If the family wanted his effects returned, who would have sacrificed their pair of what was considered to be the state of the art in firepower, while a war was still going on?

But what about Bedney McDonald's Walker and his gift to Colt? A close and personal examination of McDonald sheds some light on the subject. A careful reexamination of Walker's death and a reconstruction of the Battle of Humantala establishes a number of facts: 1) Walker was shot in the head and chest; he lingered for only a few

So why would he send Colt the mysterious revolver #1020? Checking into McDonald's background, I learned that he quit his commission shortly after the Battle of Humantala to chase his fortune in California, where he became a gold prospector and eventually became destitute. At some time, possibly after the Walker had been made obsolete by the 1851 Navy, he acquired #1020 and sent it to Colt with the story that Walker had given him the pistol as he died. So why would he return the gun to Colt? Was he looking for a favor or kindness? Maybe some financial reward? That might explain the letter written to Colt thirteen years after Walker's death. It is peculiar how he reminds Colt of the gift by asking if he has taken care of it. Was McDonald in need of a favor from Colt?

Well, as documents found in the archives show, he was! McDonald was convicted of falsifying his military pension records in an attempt to defraud the government. Seeing how there is no record of any further correspondence between him and Colt, there is ample room to believe that he wasn't beyond attempting to defraud Colt for some minor favor or consideration.

The Verdict

What kind of evidence are we left with to make a clear conclusion as to the identity of the true Walker Walkers? On one side, we have Walker #1020 that was once paired with #1019. This gun was given by McDonald to Colt with the explanation that Walker gave it to him before he died. Yet, we know McDonald was not anywhere near Walker at the time of his death, and we have two other eyewitnesses who identified William Ashbaugh as the soldier to whom Walker bequeathed the revolvers.

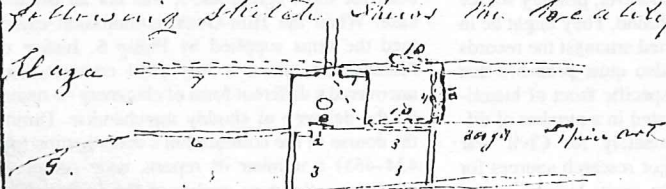
We know that the Walker family requested and received Walker's effects as evidenced by the paper trail left by the

man sword) with the ex/Corp [unclear] to return it to his Brother at Washington, I kept the sword with the permission of both Gen. Lane and Co. Wagoner but had it not more than two or three weeks before Lieut. Claibourne of our Company took it from me who swore that I should not keep it. I afterwards understood that he Lieut. C- had made it a present to Gen. Patterson, Just before Capt. Walker died he gave his pistols to young Mr. Ashbaugh of our Company but soon after the death of Capt. W- Lieut. C- took them from him also. These were the pistols made a present to the Captain by Mr. Colt the maker. If the relatives of Captain Walker has not received any of his Effects I think that Col. [unclear]

Detail of the letter written by George Myers to Walker's mother explaining what happened to his revolvers.

not clear the way, that he was going to attack Sabre in hand".

Having given his orders he commanded "Armas Sabre" and at a gallop entered the main street leading to the Plaza; the following sketch shows the locality of the Plaza



Lt. Thomas Claibourne's handwritten account of the Battle of Humantala, including his sketch of the plaza where Walker died.

Hamilton Walker's family received the pair of revolvers that Sam used to great effect that late fall afternoon in Mexico, where he died serving his country and his adopted state of Texas. □

Acknowledgment

This short work is the result of the help and assistance