

COFER CONFEDERATE PATENT CARTRIDGE REVOLVER





THE COFER REVOLVER

BY B. D. MUNHALL

On August 12, 1861 the Confederacy granted its only known revolver patent. Is this fragment an example of this hitherto unknown handgun?

ALL OF THE firearms used by Southern forces during the Civil War were, with one exception, either made in the North, imported from overseas, or copied from contemporary Northern weapons and manufactured in the Confederacy. The one exception is the little-known Cofer revolver, which was the first and perhaps the only revolver ever patented by the Confederate States. Thomas W. Cofer of Portsmouth, Virginia, received Confederate Patent No. 9 on his "Revolving Pistol," dated August 12, 1861. Until recently, but one specimen of Cofer's revolver was known. This example, now in the Steuart Collection at the Battle Abbey, Richmond, Virginia, has a brass frame, a six-shot cylinder and a seven inch, .36 caliber barrel.

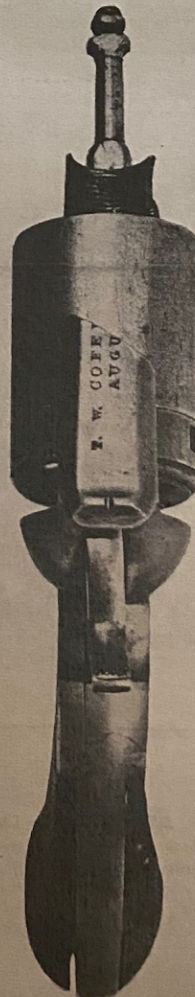
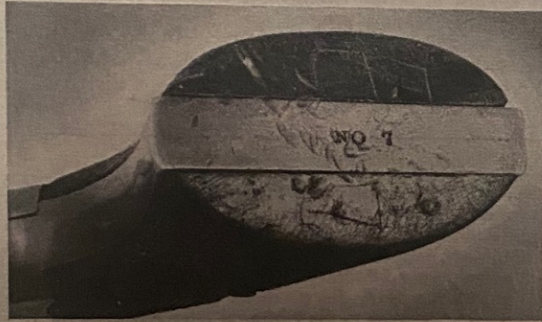
Fuller and Steuart, in their "Firearms of the Confederacy"

(Standard Publications, 1944) note that Cofer was a resident of Portsmouth, near Norfolk, Virginia, where he set up a shop employing fewer than a dozen men. The March-April, 1862, issue of "De Bow's Review" makes the statement that Cofer was making his revolvers on a small scale in Portsmouth; but since Norfolk and Portsmouth were both evacuated by the Confederate forces in May of 1862, never to be recovered, it has always been a mystery as to what became of Cofer and his factory. Since no records have been uncovered indicating the operation of the plant under Union occupation, it is assumed that production was discontinued. Similarly the activities of Cofer himself, after the fall of Portsmouth, seem to be a mystery.

The authors of "Firearms of the Confederacy" quote the

Here (disassembled) and on the facing page are views of the unique Cofer fragment





following from the *Richmond Daily Examiner* for July 17, 1861:

"Mr. T. W. Cofer, of Portsmouth, Va., has just completed an improvement in revolving firearms whereby the process of loading is so much facilitated that a Colt or other revolver may be loaded and discharged with fourfold rapidity."

Again from the *Examiner* of October 17, 1861, Fuller and Stuart quote: "A citizen of Portsmouth, T. W. Cofer, has made and patented a revolving pistol which seems to possess very many advantages over that of Colt's, so general in use and from which in the manner of loading it differs in sundry important aspects while it is of long range and equal accuracy. It is fired with a prepared Minie cartridge and about these times must be considered not only a useful invention, but a decided evidence of the inventive genius of the Southern people."

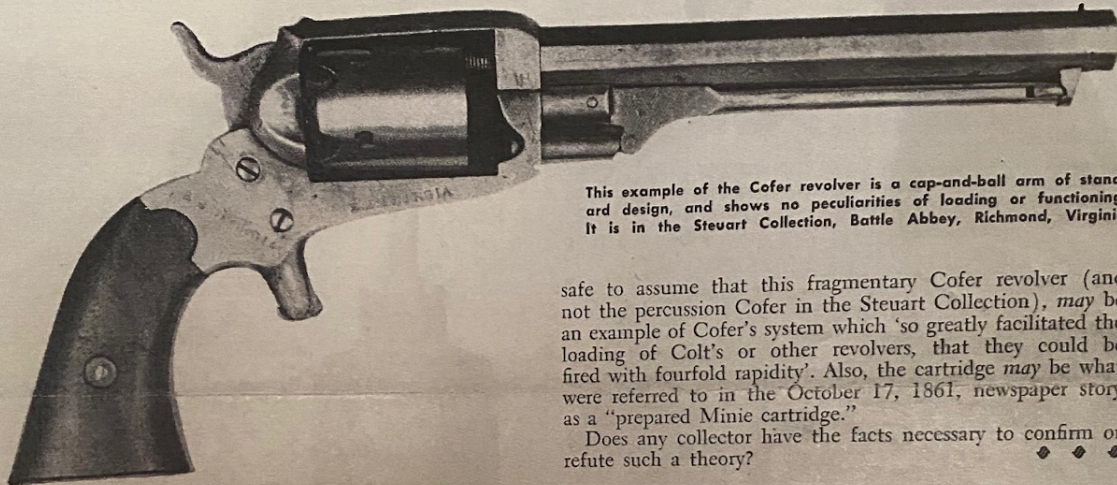
There is obviously little about the one previously known example of the Cofer revolver to warrant such statements as

that it permitted discharge "with fourfold rapidity," or that it possessed "many advantages over that of Colt's," nor does the loading of it "differ in sundry important aspects." Furthermore, what was a prepared Minie cartridge? The answers to these apparent anachronisms may have been found with the recent discovery of a fragmentary Cofer revolver of previously unknown type.

It is not the intention of the writer to take issue with any of the splendid research that has been done on the subject by others. His sole purpose is to present some thought-provoking evidence that may or may not partially lift the veil surrounding Cofer's history and achievements. The evidence in question is a percussion breech-loading metallic cartridge revolver—unfortunately, in badly mutilated condition. A description of this weapon in comparison with the

One might be of the opinion that some later gun enthusiast altered a Cofer revolver to this unique cartridge system, but this is refuted by the absence of the cut-outs previously mentioned. The partial marking on the top of the frame might indicate that Cofer moved to Augusta, Georgia, to continue his gun work, or it might simply be what is remaining of his Confederate patent date of August 12, 1861. It could even be an *earlier* version than the revolver in the Battle Abbey, if the evidence of a low serial number means anything. In any event this is a most interesting weapon and presents a challenge to arms students which might well be met by some reader. It is hoped that anyone having fuel to add to this struggling blaze will contribute freely so that we all might be better informed.

Even though additional evidence may not turn up it seems



This example of the Cofer revolver is a cap-and-ball arm of standard design, and shows no peculiarities of loading or functioning. It is in the Stuart Collection, Battle Abbey, Richmond, Virginia

safe to assume that this fragmentary Cofer revolver (and not the percussion Cofer in the Stuart Collection), may be an example of Cofer's system which 'so greatly facilitated the loading of Colt's or other revolvers, that they could be fired with fourfold rapidity'. Also, the cartridge may be what were referred to in the October 17, 1861, newspaper story as a "prepared Minie cartridge."

Does any collector have the facts necessary to confirm or refute such a theory? ♦ ♦ ♦

previously known Cofer is in order. The brass frame of the cartridge revolver is of the same size but without the cut-outs just ahead of the cylinder which facilitated the frontal loading of the earlier-type paper cartridges and on the breech plate for easy capping. The grips are of the same size, only checkered. The complete cylinder is six chambered and of the same diameter and length. The caliber is .36.

Features found *only* on this metallic cartridge revolver are the cylinder pin and its latch, the heel of the butt marked "No 7" and the top of the frame marked "T. W. Cofer" and "AUGU 2". The cartridges are two inches in length, with a 1-3/16 inch brass body and 3/8 inch steel nipple extending from the rear end. The major diameter of the body is .392.

Please report changes of address direct to the National Rifle Association, allowing five weeks before change is to take effect. Be sure to send your old address, preferably an address label from the RIFLEMAN, together with new address. Make sure of getting your RIFLEMAN promptly each month by notifying the NRA direct, in advance of change. Send new address to the National Rifle Association, 1600 Rhode Island Avenue, Washington 6, D. C.

HUNTERS, ATTENTION: On the big NRA Convention agenda will be special hunters' clinics. Guest experts, in open panel meetings, will give the latest dope on proper equipment, hunting methods, and game management. You'll have a chance to talk and get advice on your own hunting problems as well as to help other hunters solve theirs. If you are a hunter don't miss these meetings at the 3rd NRA Members Convention, San Francisco, October 2-6.



The author of this 1950 article Burton Munhall was author of the 1948 1st edition text on cartridge headstamps and expert on revolver ballistics. No one else had one of these cartridges at the time.

CONFEDERATE ARMS

By

WILLIAM A. ALBAUGH III

and

EDWARD N. SIMMONS



THE STACKPOLE COMPANY
HARRISBURG, PENNSYLVANIA

HANDGUNS

DANCE BROTHERS (See Plates 27, 28, 29, 30)

The Dance Brothers revolvers were made in both army and navy calibres (.44 and .36). They are unmarked except for serial number. Both are patterned after the Colt navy with the dragoon barrel, and are distinctive because of their "flat" frame, there being no recoil shield. These guns are valuable and highly desirable, so much so, in fact, that in recent years several have been "manufactured" by taking a Colt or some imitation Colt of unknown origin, and filing the recoil shield flat. While the flat frame is a distinctive feature of the Dance revolvers, all guns with flat frames are not from the Dance Bros. factory.

TUCKER, SHERROD & CO. (See Plates 31, 32, 33)

The Tucker, Sherrod & Co. revolvers are a true copy of the original Colt dragoon, and are of .44-caliber. They are distinguishable through their barrel frame which has no loading aperture on the right side, customary on most guns.

GEORGE TODD (See Plate 34)

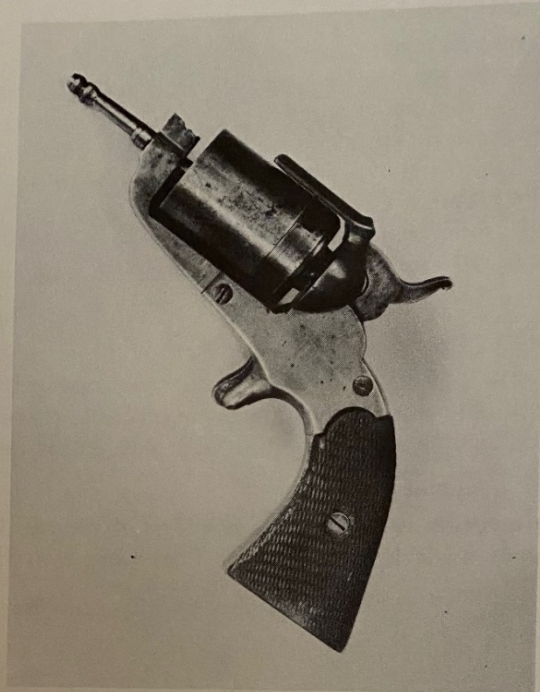
Only passing mention is made of the revolvers of George Todd of Austin, Texas, as these were made before the war. They were iron-framed imitation



PLATE 24A. 1st Model of the Cofer revolver, showing the 2 picced cylinder, and the special cartridge required.

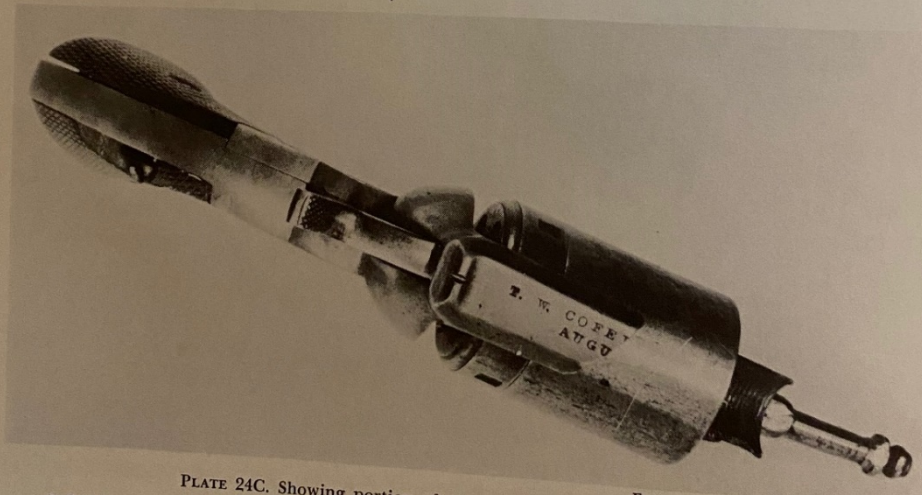
From the collection of B. D. Munhall.

CONFEDERATE ARMS



Collection of B. D. Munhall.

PLATE 24B. Only known example of the 1st Model Cofer.



From collection of B. D. Munhall.

PLATE 24C. Showing portion of markings on 1st Model Cofer.

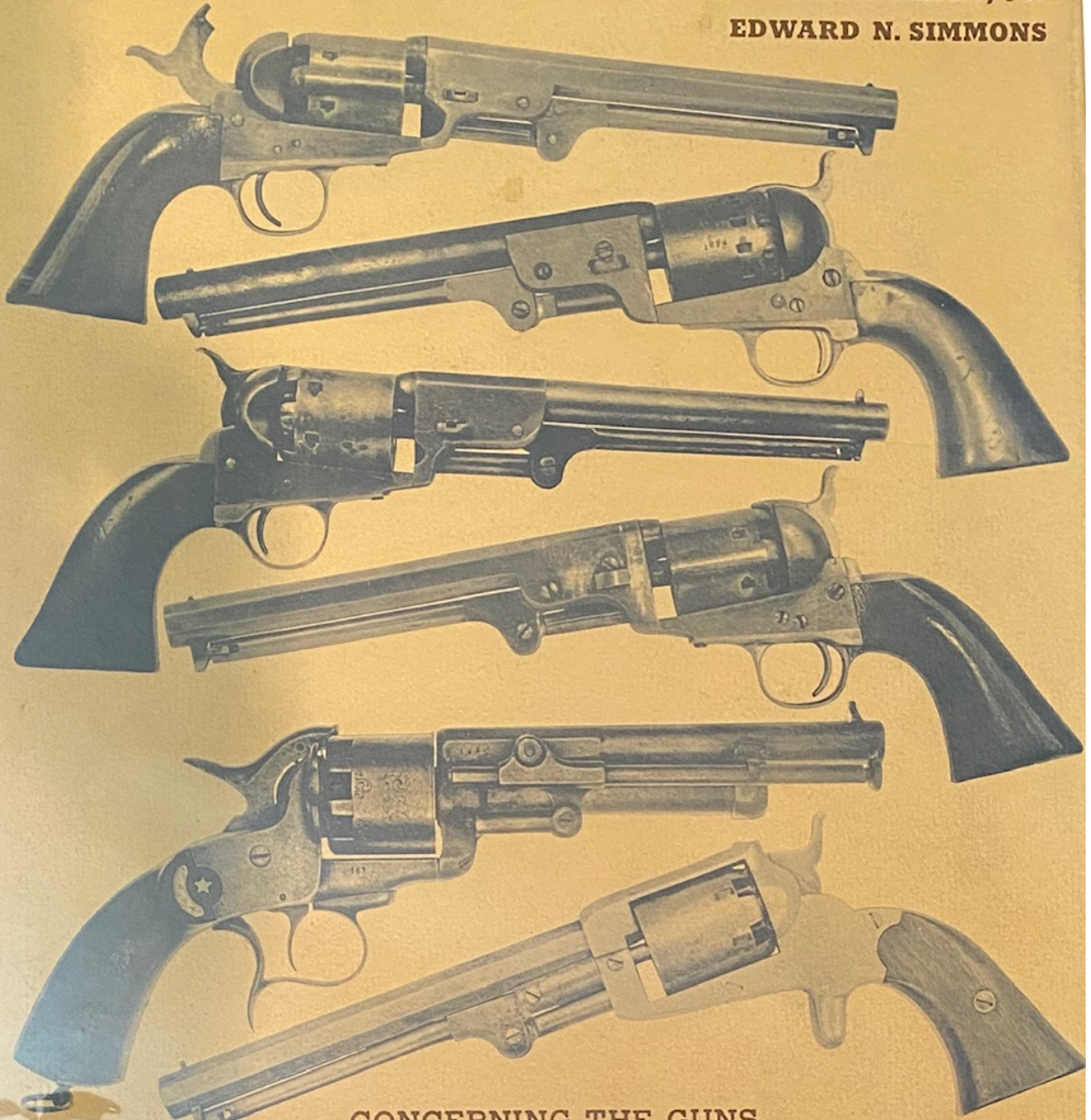
CONFEDERATE HANDGUNS

BY

WILLIAM A. ALBAUGH, III

HUGH BENET, JR.

EDWARD N. SIMMONS



CONCERNING THE GUNS

THE MEN WHO MADE THEM AND THE TIMES OF THEIR USE

Thomas W. Cofer

THERE comes a time in every aspiring historian's career when he pushes back from his typewriter and utters the academic equivalent of "to hell with it." The frustrations and uncertainties which lead to such imprecations are legion and none are more exasperating than those which beset the foolhardy amateur who attempts research on a secondary source of Confederate arms. This is particularly true when one digs into the record of one Thomas W. Cofer, of Portsmouth, Virginia, who invented and patented a process for loading certain types of firearms. The weapons he manufactured in 1861 and part of 1862 represent one of the few types of revolving pistols that can truly be called *secondary* Confederate martial weapons. Such arms were uniformly made for military use during the war in sufficient quantities to be recognized as a type, and were used by troops in the field as a sidearm even though they were not official "issue" weapons. At this writing, at least seven Cofer revolvers are known to have survived the years.

The story of Cofer and his revolvers is a challenge to the collector-historian. Unfortunately, most of us lack the three essential prerequisites for a really definitive study—time, money, and patience. Through tolerant, kindly, and extremely cooperative friends, we have checked almost every source we could think of for data, but doubtless more exists. It now remains for local collectors in Virginia, Washington, D. C., and adjacent areas, to pick up the trail and see what

they can do. The trail may lead to still another revolver and patience like virtue, hath its reward, although it is doubtful that the successful seeker will receive what he deserves. With this glum observation, we proceed to Thomas W. Cofer and his works.

TIDEWATER GUNSMITH

According to family genealogical notes, the ancestors of Thomas W. Cofer settled in Tidewater Virginia around the middle of the 17th century, in the vicinity of what is now Smithfield, Isle of Wight County. Concerning the name, it is pertinent to know that it was spelled *Coffer* in various records until the end of the 18th century. Then, for a short period, *Copper* alternated with *Cofer*, and the latter has been the preferred spelling since the first decade of the eighteen hundreds. This sort of evolution in American names is by no means unusual, but presents certain difficulties to the historian.

Thomas Wrenn Cofer¹ was born March 22, 1828, near Smithfield. If his ability as a grammarian and orthographer is any criterion, he was not given too lengthy an education, but this does not mean that he was unintelligent, backward, or neglected. He appears to have received about as much formal education as any farm lad did in those days, and if anyone cavils at Tom's phonetic spelling, let him but view the efforts of many a latter-day scholar. His penmanship was excellent and he could write a clear, direct, forceful letter, as will be seen.

A bit of information furnished by a descendant was that Cofer had been "in business" with a cousin, one P. D. Gwaltney. This seemingly unimportant tie is actually the reverse, because Pembroke Decatur Gwaltney was a gunsmith. What's more, in 1859, when Cofer was 31, Gwaltney was doing business as P. D. Gwaltney & Company. It is quite logical to assume that young Cofer had been apprenticed to his cousin at a fairly early age and had later gone into business with him, particularly in view of the close-knit family society of the Tidewater. Ironically enough, the firm's address was 8 Union Street, Norfolk. Norfolk, incidentally, is just

tion of city directories, because Cofer seems to have gone into business for himself sometime before 1861. The proof of this lies on the locks and barrels of two shotguns, both of which leave no doubt of their being from T. W. Cofer & Co., Portsmouth, Va., and both being of pre-war manufacture. These weapons are discussed in detail later on.

A summary of gunsmiths and their addresses from the Norfolk-Portsmouth City Directories, and comparison with a contemporary map, shows that Norfolk, like most cities, once had its Gunsmith's Row, and 8 Union Street was in the heart of both it and the business district. We also

LISTINGS FROM THE NORFOLK-PORTSMOUTH DIRECTORIES

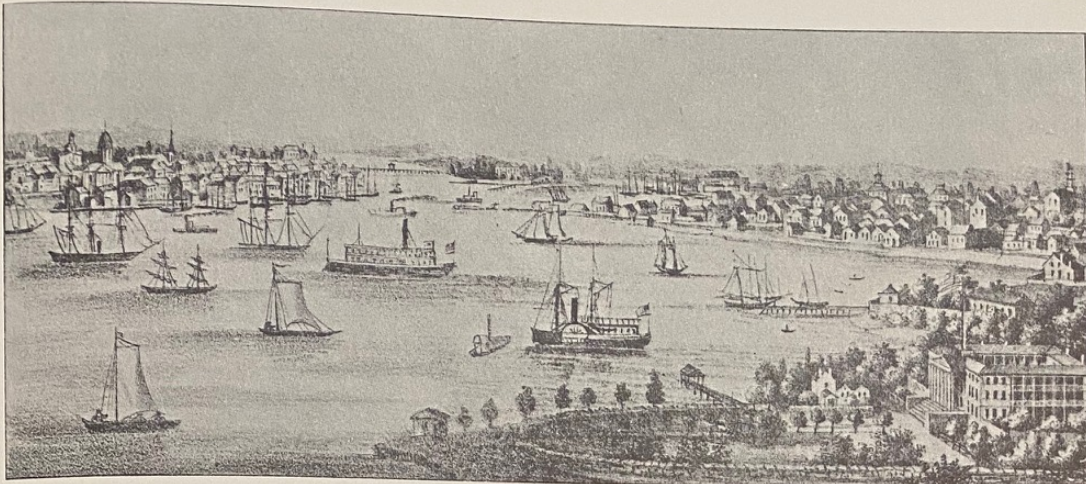
<i>Gunsmith</i>	<i>Address</i>	<i>Year or Years at Location</i>
BELL, LLOYD C.	5 Union Street	1860
CARR, JOHN J.	Crawford near High	1872-73
CARR, JOHN J.	20 High Street	1874-75
COFER, THOMAS W.	Market Square	1869, 1870
COFER, THOMAS W.	13 Union Street	1872, 1872-73, 1874-75
DEY, DAVID, JR.	8 Union Street	1867, 1869, 1870
DEY, DAVID, JR.	15 Union Street	1872, 1872-73, 1874-75
FOSTER, W. E.	23 Bank Street	1866
FOSTER AND SPAULDING	23 Bank Street	1867
FREEMAN, JAMES	75 S. Church Street	1860
GWALTNEY, P. D., AND CO.	8 Union Street	1859, 1860
GWALTNEY, B. L. W. [<i>sic</i>]	8 Union Street	1860
HUDGINS, W. R.	35 Market [<i>sic</i>]	1874-75
MORRIS, DAVIDTON [<i>sic</i>]	5 Union Street	1859, 1860, 1866, 1867
MORRIS, DAVID	5 Union Street	1869, 1870, 1872, 1872-73
MORRIS, DAVIDTON [<i>sic</i>]	8 Union Street	1874-75
REED, JAMES H.	8 Union Street	1866, 1867, 1869, 1870
ROBERTS, THOMAS	106 Crawford Street	1872-73
SOREY AND DEY	15 Union Street	1872, 1872-73, 1874-75
SOREY, P. A.	15 Union Street	1874-75
SPRATLEY, W. S.	14 Union Street	1851-52, 1859, 1860, 1866, 1867

across the Elizabeth River from Portsmouth, a distance of less than a mile.

It is unfortunate and rather maddening that there were gaps of many years between publica-

tion of city directories, because Cofer was active as a gunsmith after the war, but without Gwaltney.

Cousin Gwaltney is well remembered, but not because of his activities before the war, or for



Courtesy Hugh Benet, Jr.

A VIEW OF NORFOLK AND PORTSMOUTH, VA.

Published by Chas. Magnus, Circa 1850

his service as a field ordnance repairman in T. J. "Stonewall" Jackson's 2nd Corps of the Army of Northern Virginia.² Rather, he was Virginia's postwar "Peanut King," the man who put Smithfield back on its feet and was responsible for the name "Smithfield" now being synonymous with ham (at least to most Virginians, and to many Marylanders). He who has not enjoyed the gastronomical delights of real Smithfield ham has my sympathy. The connection between peanuts and hams, for the benefit of the uninitiate, is hogs, who eat the one and are made into the other, and it was Gwaltney who founded a business of national scope and reputation to capitalize on the felicitous result. Forsaking his former trade as a gunsmith at the war's end, he returned to his family's farm and shortly built an enterprise which, under the capable direction of his grandson and great-grandson, upholds a glorious tradition today.

Cofer, who was quite capable of producing small numbers of serviceable revolving handguns, apparently never sought a government contract to furnish them, nor private or governmental financial backing to manufacture them in

quantity. This is puzzling, because his invention received a fair amount of publicity at a time when no other revolver manufacturer had appeared on the scene, and he was actually making and selling his revolving pistols when there was a desperate need for weapons. However, as far as it is known, the Chief of the Confederate Ordnance Corps, General Gorgas, never mentioned Cofer in any of his letters, orders, or personal papers,³ and no trace of him has been found in any other official records.

One may only surmise that Cofer was satisfied with the income he received from making, repairing and selling arms in Norfolk early in the war, and made no real attempt to enlarge his operations. It is further surmised that our Tidewater entrepreneur was somewhat outclassed by the big operators who had gathered in Richmond by the time he moved there, and that this and the loss of his home, shop, tools and everything else he possessed when Federal forces captured Norfolk and Portsmouth proved too much for him.

However, from conjecture we now move to reality. On July 19, 1861, only 49 days after the

No. 9

THE CONFEDERATE STATES OF AMERICA.

To all to whom these Letters Patent shall come:

Whereas

Thomas W. Cofer of Portsmouth Virginia

has alleged that he has invented a new and useful

Improvement in Loading Fire Arms

which he states has not been known or used before... application has been made that he is a Citizen of the Confederate States that he does really believe that he is the original and first inventor or discoverer of the said Improvement and that the same hath not to the best of his knowledge and belief been previously known or used;

has paid into the treasury of the Confederate States, the sum of Fifty dollars, and presented a petition to the Commissioner of Patents, signifying a desire of obtaining an exclusive property in the said Improvement and praying that a patent may be granted for that purpose.

These are therefore to grant according to law, to the said

Thomas W. Cofer his heirs, administrators or assigns, for the term of Seven years from the Twelfth day of August one thousand eight hundred and sixty one the full and exclusive right and liberty of making, constructing, using, and vending to others to be used, the said Improvement a description whereof is given in the words of the said Thomas W. Cofer in the schedule hereunto annexed, and is made a part of these presents.

In Testimony Whereof, I have caused these Letters to be made Patent, and the Seal of the Patent Office has been hereunto affixed.

Given under my hand at the City of Richmond this Twelfth day of August in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty one.

J. J. Benjamin Secretary General

Richard R. Rhoads Commissioner of Patents

Commissioner and Seal of the Patent Office

Courtesy Mrs. Richard S. Cofer

COFER'S CONFEDERATE PATENT

Patent number 9, given 12 August, 1861, for an improvement in firearms.

Confederate Patent Office was established,⁴ Cofer filed the specifications for his patent.

In so doing, the services of a certain James S. French, late of Washington, D. C., were obtained. Upon the secession of Virginia, Mr. French (perhaps scenting profit and undoubtedly for patriotic motives as well) emigrated to Richmond, where he proclaimed in a handbill: "Having for many years been connected with the United States Patent Office, as one of the principal examiners, I am familiar with the special knowledge and experience which this long service is calculated to give, and after a careful examination and comparison of the respective laws of the United States, and Southern Confederacy (the latter had simply copied those of the former) in relation to this most important public interest, am prepared to transact all business connected in any way with the Confederate Patent Office, Richmond, Virginia."

Mr. French did indeed know his way around and Cofer had his patent—the ninth granted by the Confederate Patent Office—in jigtime. It was issued on August 12, only 25 days after filing, a bureaucratic record of some sort, even then. Cofer's invention seems to be a successful evasion of Smith & Wesson's Rollin White Patent (U.S.) for a bored-through cylinder, but this was probably of no particular consequence to Tom, French or the Confederate Patent Office.

Whatever French's other professional qualifications may have been, he or an employee was an excellent draftsman, and the patent drawing is crystal clear.

The working model, required by the Confederate patent law, must have been a revolver (probably imported from England) made under the Adams patent, and altered to the Cofer system, inasmuch as one such is shown in the patent drawing. The weapon is referred to in the patent specifications as no longer needing its rammer lever, once having been converted to the Cofer system.

This brings us to a consideration of just exactly

what Cofer patented. Was it a new type of pistol, or was it a means of loading a revolving pistol, or what? A look at the patent will answer these questions, which have intrigued collectors for years.

THE CONFEDERATE STATES OF AMERICA

To all to whom these Letters Patent shall come:

Whereas Thomas W. Cofer, of Portsmouth, Virginia, has alleged that he has invented a new and useful Improvement in Revolving Fire Arms which he states has not been known or used before his application has made oath that he is a Citizen of the Confederate States, that he does verily believe that he is the original and first inventor or discoverer of the said Improvement and that the same hath not, to the best of his knowledge and belief, been previously known or used; has paid into the treasury of the Confederate States, the sum of Forty dollars, and presented a petition to the Commissioner of Patents, signifying a desire of obtaining an exclusive property in the said Improvement and praying that a patent may be granted for that purpose.

These are therefore to grant according to law, to the said Thomas W. Cofer, his heirs, administrators or assigns, for the term of fourteen years from the twelfth day of August one thousand eight hundred and sixty-one the full and exclusive right and liberty of making, constructing, using, and vending to others to be used, the said Improvement a description whereof is given in the words of the said Thos. W. Cofer in the schedule hereunto annexed, and is made a part of these presents.

In Testimony Whereof, I have caused these Letters to be made Patent, and the Seal of the Patent Office has been hereunto affixed.

Given under my hand at the City of Richmond this Twelfth day of August in the year of Our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-

one Specifications annexed to Patent No. 9, granted to Thomas W. Cofer, August 12, 1861.

To all whom it may concern:

Be it known that I, Thomas W. Cofer of Portsmouth, in the County of Norfolk, and State of Virginia have invented a new and improved mode of making many chambered revolving pistols, which may also be applied to firearms and to cannon, and I do hereby declare the following is a full and exact description thereof reference being had to the accompanying drawings and to the letters of reference marked thereon.

The nature of my invention consists in so arranging the chambered cylinder of breech loading pistols, firearms, so that the chambers in the revolving cylinder shall be charged with cartridges or ammunition contained in thimbles, in place of the chambers being loaded with powder and ball as usual, and that the nipples for the reception of percussion caps shall be inserted in a circular plate distinct and separate from the revolving cylinder, yet corresponding with it in diameter and fitting close to its rear end, so that when fitted to, and placed in conjunction with the revolving cylinder, the added plate and cylinder revolve together on the same pivot causing the cylinder to present no changes in appearance, other than that it is lengthened by the thickening of the plate.

The drawing Fig. 1, shows the rammer marked A, attached as usual, but this arrangement entirely dispenses with it, and increases greatly the facility of loading.

To enable others skilled in the art to make and use my invention, I will proceed to describe its construction and operation.—I take the common revolving chambered cylinder as used by Colt and others, and in the rear end of this cylinder I insert in each chamber a thimble fitting closely and flanged around its outer end to prevent its being driven into the chamber as shown in B, Fig. 2.

These thimbles are charged with powder and ball and constitute the cartridge, and have a

small hole in their flanged end, by which fire is communicated to the powder. I then take a circular iron plate about one fourth of an inch thick and fit it closely against the chambered cylinder, and mark out recesses in it corresponding exactly with the chambers in the cylinder—these recesses I turn out, or cut down, so that they shall receive and hold the rear end of each flanged thimble as shown in Fig. 3, and the plate marked C, yet fit close against the cylinder D, as shown in Figs. 1 and 2, fitting close, yet separate from it.

From the outside of this plate C, communicating with these recesses I screw into the plate nipples for holding percussion caps, so inserted that the hole through the nipple shall be in a line with, and correspond with the hole in the thimble, so as to form a direct communication between the percussion cap and the powder, which is best done by making the vent hole in the thimble in the center of its flanged end.

The cartridges being placed in the cylinder and the percussion caps on the nipples, the recessed end of the plate C is fitted over the flanged thimbles, and the whole cylinder formed of the two parts; the plate, with its nipples and recesses and the chambered cylinder, are then placed in position, and the pivot rod run through them, and the pistol is ready for use.

Or the nipples, in place of being screwed into the plate, may be screwed into the thimble, or the thimble, still reserving the flange on it, may terminate in a nipple, as shown in Fig. 4, so that the cylinder may be capped at the same time it is loaded, and the plate will then be fitted on with the ends of the thimbles terminating in nipples, and projecting outwardly as in plate C, Fig. 1.

While I have described this invention as applicable to a pistol, it is obvious that the same principle may be applied to firearms generally and even to a cannon, the mode of communicating fire to the powder in the cannon being adapted to the cannon in any known way—Figs.

5 and 6 represent it as applied to a cannon. In such, even the pivot rod for holding the revolving cylinder would pass in through the rear end of the frame, and a small platform placed in a horizontal plane with the bottom of the cylinder would have to be placed on each side of the frame, so that the cylinder, or the pivot rod being withdrawn from it, can be rolled out on the platform in order to be charged; these platforms are represented in the figures last mentioned by the letters M & N.

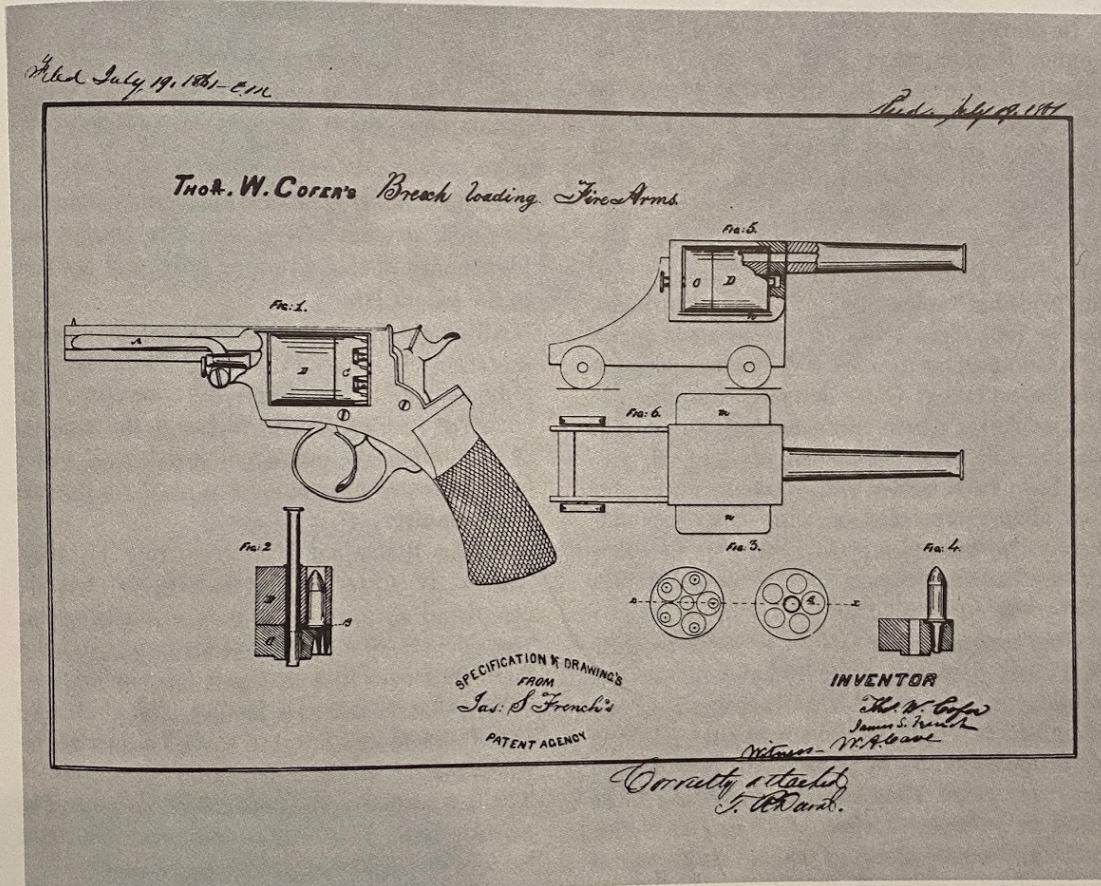
Having described my invention, what I claim and desire to secure by letters patent, "is the divided cylinder D-C, formed of the chambered portion D and plate C in combination with thimbles for holding the ammunition when constructed and used substantially as herein described."

/s/ Thos. W. Cofer

Witness

/s/ Robt. D. Ward

/s/ James S. French



Courtesy Mrs. Richard S. Cofer

PATENT DRAWING FOR COFER'S BREECH-LOADING ARMS

Received July 19, 1861, and letters patent given 12 August, 1861. The elapsed time would indicate alacrity on the part of the young Confederate States Patent Office.

Boiled down and wrung out, the specifications call for "a new and improved way of making many chambered revolving pistols, which may also be applied to firearms and to cannon," which upon analysis, means two systems by means of which any percussion weapon with a revolving cylinder could be equipped with either variation of Cofer's two cylinders and loaded with fixed ammunition. Cofer did not invent a pistol or a cased cartridge (although he designed two types) but a means of bringing the two together.

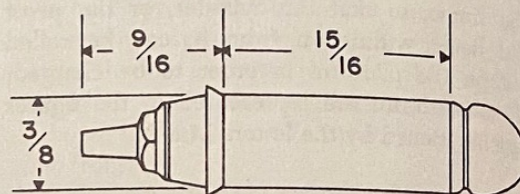
In retrospect, one might well regard the invention is impractical; it was practical for the times—if we except its application to cannon and consider it in relation to the many other ignition systems then in use. It is true that formed metal rimfire cartridge cases were even then being manufactured for .32 caliber Smith & Wesson revolvers, and that the end of the war would see full-scale production of heavier rimfire loads for Yankee military rifles and carbines, but in 1861 Cofer's second system made sense.

It is important to make a distinction between the two cylinders Cofer designed. The first described in the patent specifications (Fig. 2, Patent drawing) was not particularly original, having been tried before with matchlock weapons and always discarded because of ignition difficulty. No examples of this cartridge or cylinder are known, however, so whether or not Tom ever made either is a matter for conjecture.

Four cartridges like Cofer's second type (Fig. 4, Patent drawing) were found with an unmistakable Cofer revolver, and another has been identified in a midwest collection after puzzling cartridge collectors as to its origin and identity for many years. They are remarkably like those used in northern "Coffee Mill" machine guns and early model Gatlings with some degree of success.

The relatively crude Cofer system is remarkably similar to the various conversion systems designed shortly after the war by Rider, Thuer,

Richards and Mason, and applied to Colt's percussion pistols prior to the expiration of the Rollin White patent. The unknown gunsmith who altered a .36 caliber percussion Manhattan to cartridge (perhaps Tom Cofer) certainly used the same principle.



A COFER CARTRIDGE

Drawn by W. E. Codd from one of four found in a Patent Cylinder Cofer revolver. The case is brass and the nipple is steel.

There is more to be said about the patent, but let's look at what was going on in Norfolk and Portsmouth in the spring of 1861, and get back to the patent later.

Although the notice Cofer's patent received was scanty by today's standards, there was some publicity, and four surviving newspaper accounts of Tom's activities, although the mainstay of all previously published articles on Cofer, must be recounted (at least in part) for the sake of continuity.

In the *Richmond Examiner*, July 17, 1861: "Mr. T. W. Cofer of Portsmouth, Va., has just completed an improvement in a revolving firearm whereby the process of loading is so much facilitated over that of a colt [sic] or other revolver that it may be loaded and discharged with fourfold rapidity. Mr. Cofer has just left for Richmond to secure a patent for his invention." The last sentence we know is fact, because of an existing letter from Cofer which mentions that he and Gwaltney made the trip together.

A week later, the *Examiner* mentions that a "pistol factory" had been established at Portsmouth, Virginia, and it is assumed that this casual and perhaps inaccurate statement might



Courtesy National Rifle Association

THE FIRST, OR PATENT CYLINDER MODEL COFER

Marked with serial number 7 on the bottom of the grip frame, this arm was made expressly for the divided cylinder. The complete marking on the top strap of the frame was probably T. W. COFER'S PATENT/ AUGUST 12, 1861. The trigger and hammer screws are blind in this model. It is said to be the only known specimen. The thinness of the metal in the top strap of the frame is readily apparent. The failure of this part was in great measure responsible for the damage to the arm.

refer to Cofer's activities. What this had to do with the aforesaid trip to Richmond leads to much interesting speculation. Had Cofer tried for a government contract and failed? Had he sought financial backing and failed? Did he decide to go ahead on his own at home after an official rebuff?

On October 17, 1861, the *Examiner* again refers to Cofer and his pistol, "which seems to possess very many advantages over Colt's. . . . It is fired with a prepared minie cartridge. . . ." True enough, except that a prepared minie cartridge was *paper*, whereas Cofer's was *brass*.
DeBow's *Review*, March-April issue, 1862,

page 327, manages to confuse matters by allowing that "Mr. Thomas W. Cofer of this city, has, since the commencement of the War, invented and patented a revolving pistol, pronounced by judges to be superior to the celebrated Colt pistol. He is engaged at present in manufacturing them on a small scale, as his means are limited."

DeBow uses the dateline *Portsmouth*, but does not say the pistols are being produced there, while the *Examiner* does. Cofer's use of a die to mark not only his pistols but his longarms, *PORTSMOUTH, VA.*, leads one to think that his shop was there, but members of the family state otherwise and certainly it is logical to assume that he would use the facilities on Union Street and not go to all the trouble of moving and setting up across the river. The reader may draw his own conclusions as to the actual site of Cofer's "pistol factory," but the writer leans toward Norfolk and 8 Union Street.

One may imagine how fast Cofer's product was snapped up, limited production or no. In 1861, from Norfolk County alone, no less than 32 Virginia militia units were mustered for the defense of the Norfolk area.⁵ Confederate troops were sent in also, until many thousands manned the forts hastily thrown up outside the ports, and during off-duty hours the men thronged the streets of both Norfolk and Portsmouth, a great many anxious to purchase revolvers. The war was young, sidearms were scarce, greatly in demand. Every soldier felt that he absolutely must have a pistol and a bowie knife, no matter what other weapons he carried or was issued. Countless warriors had their fierce-visaged daguerreotypes made, their right hands clutching a "Navy" revolver of some sort, while their belts were stuffed with at least one, sometimes two, bowie knives. In many cases, these stark images are the sole records these pleasant young men left for posterity and their families. The demand changed later, when experience and Army orders put a quietus to the desire for other than service issue weapons.

In March 1862, at Norfolk, a unit of the Confederate Signal Corps, 127 strong was formed.⁶ Many years later, there appeared for sale a Cofer in a holster marked: "21 July 1864. This revolver and holster was [sic] captured from a rebel signal officer by Capt. S. H. Merrill, 11th Maine Reg't." Coincidence? Hardly. Very likely the unknown rebel purchased his weapon from Cofer in 1862. If so, it must have given good service, to have withstood over two years of use in the field.

In 1956 the writer had the pleasure and privilege of discussing Cofer with his kinsmen in Norfolk, and learned that many papers had been destroyed by the recent hurricanes that had successively inundated a family home in Ocean View, where they had been stored. Among them were Cofer's account books. Without them, and owing to the peculiar system, if system it was, he used to number his weapons, we can only guess at the total production of his shop.

Cofer did not furnish a pistol of his own design and manufacture when he filed for his patent on July 19, 1861, hence we may assume that he did not have one to file. Norfolk and Portsmouth were captured by Butler's Yankees on May 9, 1862, and Cofer's shop and home with them. Between these dates, there were roughly 42 weeks of production. Let us further assume that a survival rate of 5 per cent would be about right. (Sam E. Smith estimates 10 per cent for single-shot U.S. martial pistols and 6 per cent for the relatively scarce Dance Brothers revolvers,⁷ while James E. Serven estimates the survival rate of Colt's famous Walkers at 5 per cent.) Seven pedigreed Cofers of all types exist today so, if seven equals 5 per cent, then perhaps 140 were made. Certainly, an average output of around three a week is not unlikely, considering that Cofer must also have repaired arms and probably took a day off now and then to look at the troops or go fishing.

It may be that the survival rate would have been higher, were it not for two peculiarities

seen in all existing pistols, regardless of model. We refer first to an error in design that becomes obvious when pictures of all specimens are examined: a weak frame. The top strap and the front end of the frame that hold the barrel simply do not contain enough metal, particularly the soft brass Cofer used. The cartridge pistol appears to have blown apart at this point. Also, the top straps of the frames of most other Cofers seem to be ever so slightly bent downward, or humped. This is usually noticed in an otherwise perfect specimen when one attempts to aim the piece and finds that the front sight is invisible, even though its pin seems to be about the right height.

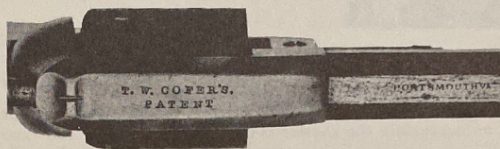
Also, the rammer lever is poorly case-hardened and, like its Whitney prototype, tends to stick, so that considerable pressure on the lever is necessary to force it home. As a result, most levers are bent to some degree. On one revolver, the front of the lug in which the rammer pivots was actually sheared off by someone with more strength than brains.

Finally, the absence of ordnance reports, government contracts or other official records, together with the other reasons mentioned previously, indicates that the Cofer revolver was not a government issue weapon, but found its way into service through private purchase. As such, no spare parts were available from the Ordnance Department, and field repair would depend necessarily upon availability of parts from other weapons which just happened to fit, or needed only a minimum of alteration. An example might be the Whitney rammer assembly found on the Steuart Battle Abbey Cofer. This lever is numbered 21177A, and so is its base pin. The cylinder is not numbered, but it is not like other Cofer cylinders and appears to be Whitney also. With the hard use a weapon, even a sidearm, normally receives in the field, the low survival rate estimated makes sense—it may even be a bit optimistic.

Now let's take a good look at Tom Cofer's

pistols—the ones that remain, that is. It was impossible to gather them all together and take them apart and study them privately and seriatim, but by means of reports from several critical and knowledgeable collectors and through examination of excellent photographs we believe that we have the data we need.

There exist today seven revolving pistols, undoubtedly made by Cofer. There can be no doubt that these weapons are genuine. It may be that others will turn up, and we hope they will—just as long as they were made in 1861 or 1862.



Courtesy Harry C. Knode

COFER MARKINGS

Frame and barrel markings on a Third Model Cofer. It is interesting to note that a dot or period was used in Cofer's name, possibly because an apostrophe stamp was not available.

At one time we intended to supply the minutiae of each known Cofer in tabular form, down to the last .001 of an inch, but decided against it. There should always be at least one unknown point to confuse those among us who are possessed of great mechanical skill but few scruples. All known Cofers are .36 caliber, brass-framed, octagon-barreled, 6-shot "Navy" revolvers, with sheath triggers and two-piece walnut grips. Why Cofer didn't put a trigger-guard on his pistols, we'll probably never know. The rear sight is cast into the frame and a pin front sight of brass was used.

Contrary to popular belief, the most numerous variety of Cofer bears many marks which appear to be serial numbers but may be assembly marks. With the exception of the Patent Cylinder model, surviving Cofers are uniformly and painstakingly marked *T. W. COFER'S/PAT-ENT* in two lines on the top of the frame. The

ON TO RICHMOND!

On to Richmond! was the Yankee war cry in the winter of 1862, and as Major General George B. McClellan planned it, the seizure of Norfolk and Portsmouth was a necessary preliminary to the big push which was to roll up the Peninsula to the Rebel Capital. Plenty of notice was given the South of Little Mac's intentions, but there was a general attitude of indifference and disbelief in Northern capabilities. After First Manassas it was popularly held that Southern armies could whip anybody, and no one seems to have paid much attention to the lessons taught by joint U.S. Army-Navy operations in both the East and West. There was incredible disorganization, which made it next to impossible to meet the logistics requirement of armies in the field, let alone move to safety the fledgling war industries which dangled, defenseless, within reach of the encircling land and naval forces of the United States.

In March of 1862, Cofer paid a visit to Richmond, in company with cousin Gwaltney. One would like to imagine that they were thinking of setting up shop there, looking for a government contract, or both. Whatever happened, Cofer's shop remained in the Norfolk-Portsmouth area.

On May 9, 1862, a contingent of Federal troops left Fortress Monroe, landed unopposed near what is now called Willoughby Spit, then Willoughby's Point and received the surrender of Norfolk. Portsmouth was no problem to them. A corporal's guard in a rowboat could have taken it, and probably did, because the Rebels had pulled out, regarding the ports as indefensible. Cofer, under no illusions as to what the Yankees were likely to do with a captured rebel gunsmith, prudently hied himself to Richmond, sending his wife and children to live with her parents in the hamlet of Somerton, Gates County, North Carolina.⁸ The U.S. Marshal took over the pistol factory, if it may be called that.

The *Old Dominion*, a newspaper of Portsmouth, carried the following notice for one month, starting December 18, 1863.

CONDEMNATION NOTICE

January 1, 1864, Portsmouth, Virginia

District Court of the United States, for the Eastern District of Virginia.

To Thomas W. Cofer and all whom it may concern, Greeting: Notice is hereby given, that on the second day of December, 1863, all the right, title, interest and estate of Thomas W. Cofer in and to all that certain lot of land situated at the intersection of Court and Clifford Streets in the City of Portsmouth, in the Eastern District of Virginia, beginning at said intersection and running north on Court Street, thirty feet, thence west one hundred twenty feet, thence south thirty feet to Clifford Street, thence east one hundred twenty feet to the beginning. Together with the furniture, goods, wares, chattels and other property and in and upon said premises belonging to the said Thomas W. Cofer, was seized by the Marshal of the United States for said District as forfeited to the use of the United States and the same is libeled and prosecuted in this Court in the name of the United States, for condemnation for the causes in the said libel set forth and that said cause will stand for trial at the Court-room in the City Hall of Norfolk, on the third Monday of January next, when and where all persons are warned to appear to show cause why condemnation should not be decreed and to intervene for their interests.

December 18, 1863 William H. Barry, Clerk

In due course, on February 18, 1864, in United States District Court, Portsmouth, Virginia, Judge J. C. Underwood presiding, testimony was elicited proving the disloyalty of, among others, Thomas W. Cofer, and a decree of condemnation was ordered against his property.⁹

Unfortunately, the court records are lost or misplaced, and we will perhaps never know if Tom's account books were used as evidence, or what they contained. Shortly after the condemnation of Cofer's property, it went under the hammer at a U.S. Marshal's auction, to be purchased by a speculator from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. This worthy, one Samuel Freedley, obtained Tom's Court Street house for \$500.¹⁰

THE WAR YEARS

After the capture of Norfolk, barring at least one interval when his name came up in the draft (known, in those days as "The Conscription") and he reported to the Richmond Camp of Instruction, Cofer seems to have been employed by the Confederate Government at the Artillery Work Shops in Richmond. This assumption is borne out by Special Orders No. 316, issued to Cofer at the Richmond, Virginia, Camp of Instruction. In no uncertain terms, these orders ordered conscript Cofer of Richmond to report to Brigadier General Gorgas for duty with James D. Brown, Superintendent of the Artillery Work Shops, Richmond Arsenal. It is safe to suppose that Tom had rather powerful influence exerted to get him back whence he had departed in the first place. For some unaccountable reason, despite the havoc wreaked upon the struggling Southern arms industry (and others, equally vital) by the conscription, and a general recognition of this lamentable state of affairs which had resulted in a system of exemptions supposed to prevent it, mechanic after mechanic was inducted. No matter what his superiors said or did thereafter, usually the hapless artisan was never seen by his erstwhile employer again. It is thought by his family that Cofer was a foreman, was well connected, and a key man. It is certain that he was lucky.

Only two of Cofer's letters are known to have survived the war years. One, mentioned before, contained but a scrap of information. The other,

transcribed here, is the sort of material one dreams of finding, but seldom does. If ever an unwitting capsule description of a nation's economic and military agony was written, Tom Cofer wrote it. Never mind the spelling, just read it.

Richmond Va. May 3rd, 1864

Dear Mag

I have though of writing to you for the last three or four day thinking you would be anxious to heare frome me. I wrote in my last letter I thought we would have to go out in a few days but it past oft and we have not yet ben cald out but can not say how soon. Mag, I would like to come to see you but I can not say when I will come. I think not untile we have the big fight that every one is expection to come oft soon so you must not look for me soon but write as often as you can and I will do the same. I wish it was so you could come to Richmond and spend a week or so with me but I do not see much chance of that as you could not well leave the children so I will get along the best I can hoping soon to see you all. I received a letter frome Dick on yesterday stating he was over to see you all as you stated in your letter which I received on last Friday. He wrote me word he had to bring Nannie over the river with him as she got so surly could not get along with her he wanted to now what she would sell for hear. Negros are veary cheap at this time owing to the Curancy as money is veary scarse now and with all people are expecting a big fight to come oft soon and they do not now what the result will be.

Mag, if you see aunt Pattey ask her the least she will take for Nannie in new Curancy and let me now and if it is not two much I will buy her myself. I do not want her to sell but to keep. I will take her to Richmond and hire her out find out and let me heare frome you soon. Mag I sent in a letter on the 5 or 6 of April a ten dollar note new Curancy and I received two letters from you since and you did not say any thing about it I thought propley you did not receive it. In my last letter I gave you a statement of what money I had on

hand and what disposition I would mak of it if I should be call out so I will send you a nother one now and if I should be call out will make the same disposition turn over to Mr. or Mrs. Tignor what money and papers I have. This statement is made up to the first of May 1864—all of my matters is paid up the above date for bord and the amt is due to me which statement I will give you as neare as I can blow.

Amt on hand at this date	\$ 1103.00
Amt Due by T. W. Tignor for the bacon & lard I bought for him	183.00
T. W. Tignor to T. W. Cofer 7 lbs. of bacon 4.75	33.25
T. W. Tignor to T. W. Cofer for lead	137.75
	1457.00

Mag besides the above amt I have due me the first of May—by the Government for last mounth work—One Hundred and Eighty Four Dollors which I will get paid to me on the 5 of this mounth ading this amt to the amt above of

.....	\$ 1457.00
	184.00
making.....	1641.00

I have other small amt due me which I shall colect on the 8 when the pay oft amt to \$73.00 added

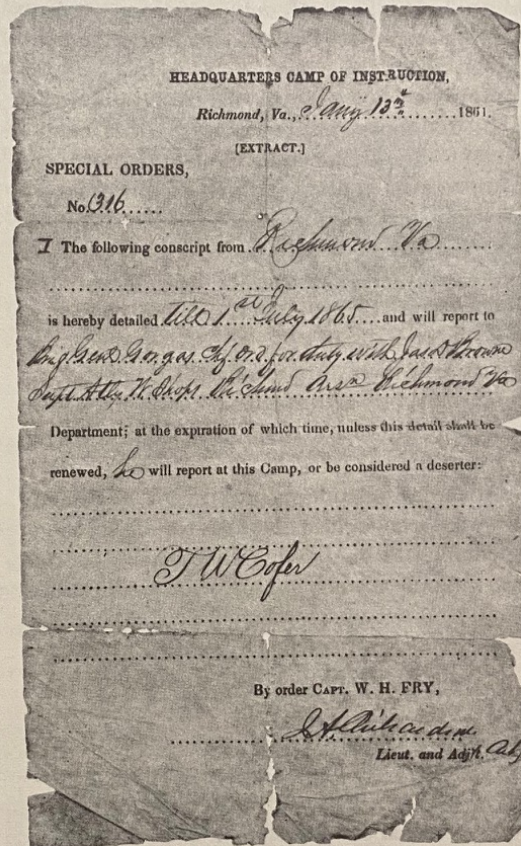
.....	73.00
making in all	\$ 1716.00

The lard I think I shall sell soon as it cominces to run out. I have been offerred Eight Dollors pr lb. in our issue for it, Mag there is nothing of such interist. I am well hoping this may find you all well. My love to all. I will send your cloth and also the leather soon. Your Husband. T. W. Cofer

Now let's interpret this letter.

When the skilled worker was not occupied with disengaging himself from the clutches of the army, and was able to devote his whole attention to the production of guns, shell, cannon, harness, shoes, or whatever, another official im-

provision was likely to foul things up. This was an organization known as the Militia of the Second Class. This bellicose body was as a rule composed of mechanics and artisans like Tom Cofer, organized into companies and battalions by shop and factory, commanded by mill owners and superannuated or disabled veterans who were serving locally as government inspectors.



Courtesy K. D. Sykes

MR. COFER "DETAILED" TO THE RICHMOND ARSENAL

Although the Southern arms industry in general had great difficulty in protecting its skilled hands from the draft, this special order to report for duty at the Richmond Arsenal shows an exception in the case of Thomas Cofer, a conscript.

Its effectiveness as a fighting force may be debatable, but there is no question of its effectiveness in bringing production to a complete standstill. Its formation and use was a measure born of desperation, and there is a slightly desperate note sounded in Cofer's letter when he mentions "being called out." Moreover, the system used to call the general public to arms was, in itself, enough to cause the staunchest to search his soul, with its death defying pronouncements of "No Surrender!—Under Any Circumstances!!!" posted about the cities.

However, lest one gain the wrong impression from the above, be it understood that on two occasions the Richmond Militia took part in extremely hard fighting, not only doing a creditable job but actually keeping veteran Yankee troops at bay until relieved by regular troops of Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. Thus, when Tom writes of being "called out," and of the general expectation of a "big fight," he is not speaking as a civilian, safe from shell fragment and minie ball, but as a blooded infantryman who had probably heard their song, and "seen the elephant."¹¹

Galloping inflation insured that a mechanic's pay wasn't enough for him to live on, let alone send much to his family. Hence many became part-time merchants, and dealt in products and produce from home, sending back whatever they could pick up in exchange, as well as money. This could hardly be called "speculating," and is not to be confused with what came to be known as "Black Market" operations during World War II, although the resemblance is obvious. It was perfectly legitimate, but not highly regarded when conducted on a large scale. Tom was a small operator, judging from his letter.

Tom Cofer was an enterprising man, apparently in the thick of things and even interested in the possibilities inherent in renting out a slave. Reading between the lines of his letter, one gathers that he didn't own one himself, but thought that it might be a good business ven-

ture. Lest he seem a cold-blooded, callous wretch, in the best tradition of Simon Legree, remember that Negroes were regarded as valuable (though troublesome) property.

One can learn a good deal about a man from a letter to his wife, especially when written under the stress and strain of war's uncertainty. Cofer was worried about his family. Communications were chancy. Was his wife getting the money he sent home? He missed her—this is quite apparent. He was likely to be mobilized for active duty with his militia outfit, but didn't want her to worry. He wanted to make sure she understood the state of his finances, if anything happened to him. This leads to a most revealing personal financial statement, as well as directions as to whom to turn for help—another gunsmith named Tignor, whose activities included dealings in meat, if Cofer's note means anything—or it may be that Tignor's establishment housed numerous boarders. It's hard to tell. It is inferred that Cofer boarded with the Tignors. Cofer wrote a neat hand, he made his points, and signed his name. No more can be asked of any man.

Just one more item, and we can leave the war years. Cofer's whereabouts and activities during the war have intrigued not a few collectors, and his presence here, there, and elsewhere hopefully suggested, while uncounted attempts have been made to identify numerous unmarked weapons as having been made by him. The evidence seems plain that when Norfolk and Portsmouth were captured and all his goods and possessions with them, Tom Cofer went to work in the Artillery Work Shops at the Richmond Arsenal and remained there.

RECONSTRUCTION

When the war was over, Cofer gathered together his family and returned to Portsmouth. Penniless and without property, Cofer set to work to repair his fortunes. Within a year he

had somehow managed to regain his house on Court Street, paying \$650 to the same Samuel Freedley who had bid it in at the U.S. Marshal's sale.¹² It will be remembered that Freedley had paid \$500. The profit may seem small by today's standards but the price was high in the post-war South, whose economy was in ruins, and, remember, Cofer's "secesh" money was worthless.

Cofer is listed as a gunsmith in the Norfolk-Portsmouth directories from 1869 through 1875, doing business first at Market Square and later 13 Union Street in Norfolk as a gun and locksmith.

On July 23, 1885, aged 57, which would now be considered an early age, Thomas Wrenn Cofer died. He is buried in old Oak Grove Cemetery, Portsmouth. Oddly enough, he is remembered by his family not for his activities as a gunsmith, but as the inventor of a clockwork device for dispersing the common housefly! Although of no significance to those of us who are

accustomed to window screens, this later invention was of importance in the days preceding their use and enjoyed moderate success. One may still find them in antique shops, from time to time.

T. W. Cofer remains, in the final analysis, as a figure seen through an age-dimmed glass. He emerges from the blur only momentarily through a handful of pistols and cartridges, his patent, a few letters, his Army orders, and deeds and court notices. No one now alive knew him at an age that could produce clear impressions.

It is unfortunate that his accounts seem to be lost, that no identifiable likeness of him exists. One can only hope that collectors will exert every effort to reconstruct the work and image of this man. The fragments are fast disappearing, the grand old people who knew the men of '61 and '65 are almost gone. Time has nearly run out, and a priceless opportunity to obtain vital information is slipping away.

FOOTNOTE REFERENCES

1. Cofer's middle name was from his mother's family. The Wrenns were from Wrenn's Mills, Virginia, a hamlet now vanished. This intelligence is furnished for those hardy souls who may wish to do a little Cofer hunting of their own.
2. Colonel William Allan, "Reminiscences of Field Ordnance Service with the Army of Northern Virginia, 1863-1865," *Southern Historical Society Papers*, Vol. XIV, 1886, pp. 137-146.
3. General Gorgas's unpublished and unedited records were not available for study, and a thorough examination of the scantily indexed mass of Confederate Records in the National Archives was not possible.
4. Established by an Act of the Confederate Congress and approved by President Davis on 21 May, 1861, the Confederate Patent Office commenced operations the next day.
5. John W. H. Porter, *History of Norfolk County, Virginia* (Portsmouth, Va., W. A. Fiske, 1892). Hereafter *Porter*.
6. *Porter*, p. 133. This source also lists Robert E. Cofer and Reuben F. Cofer as members of Saint Bride's Light Artillery, later Co. I. 38th Virginia. Their relationship to T. W. Cofer is unknown.
7. Sam E. Smith, "Survival Figures for the Dance Brothers Revolvers," *The Gun Collector*, No. 22 (May, 1948), p. 178.
8. Cofer's family seems to have spent most of the war at his wife's family's home in Somerton, North Carolina. "Mag" Cofer, nee Margaret Augusta Saunders, a college graduate, had her hands full, dodging Yankees and raising children.
9. Cofer was indicted and tried *in absentia* under the provisions of a Federal law passed July 1862, "to suppress Insurrection, to punish Treason and Rebellion, to seize and confiscate the Property of Rebels, and for other Purposes." The shadow of this ominous instrument fell over all who assisted in rebellion or insurrection against the United States. It has been pointed out that no other cases of a gunsmith having been tried under it are known, and it is conjectured that Cofer was some sort of public official. However, in the absence of information to the contrary, and in view of the publicity given his invention, we feel that his "pistol factory" was responsible for Cofer's conviction. Condemnation of rebel property was by no means unusual, on scantier pretenses.
10. The U.S. deed is now in the possession of the family.
11. This contemporary expression must be understood to be appreciated. This strange bit of slang was the way veteran troops were wont to refer to having been under fire. It stems from the then popular tale of the farm lad who was asked to describe an elephant he had seen someplace or another. He couldn't—all he knew was that he had "seen the elephant"—and didn't want to see it again!
12. Freedley merely endorsed his U.S. deed over to Cofer.

**CONFEDERATE
LONGARMS
AND
PISTOLS**

A PICTORIAL STUDY

CONFEDERATE LONGARMS AND PISTOLS

A Pictorial Study

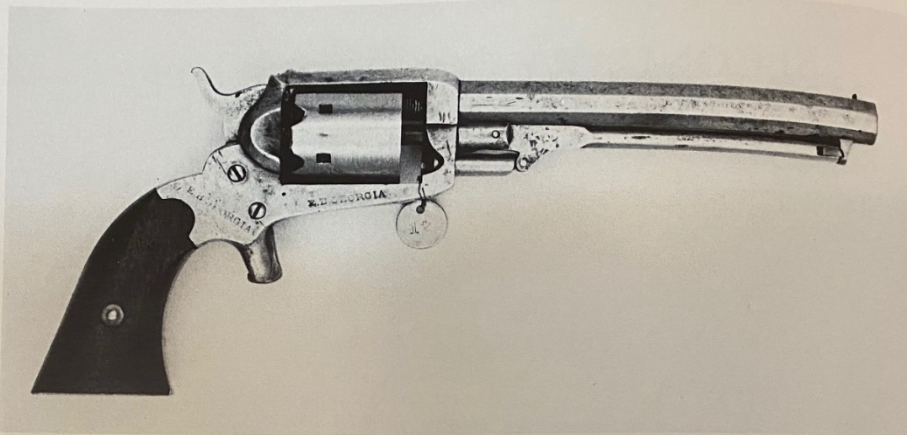
by

Richard Taylor Hill
and
William Edward Anthony

Photography by Richard Taylor Hill

Richard Taylor Hill and William Edward Anthony, Publishers
Charlotte, North Carolina

T. W. COFER REVOLVER



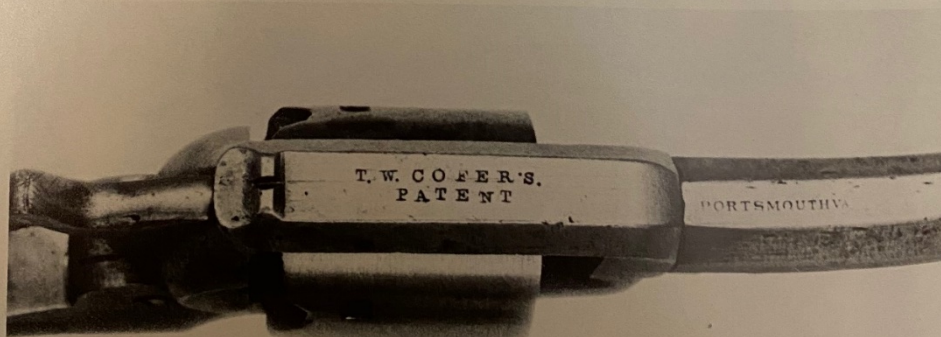
Manufacturer: Thomas W. Cofer
Location: Portsmouth, Va.
Dates of Production: 1861-1862
Number Produced: Approximately 150
Caliber: .36
Pattern Model: Similar to Whitney Navy

Barrel Length: 7 1/8" (Octagon) "Portsmouth, Va."
Total Length: 12 1/4"
Frame: Brass — Topstrap "T. W. COFER'S/PATENT"
Cylinder: 1 11/16" — 6-Shot
Trigger Guard: Spur Trigger
Grips: Walnut — Two-Piece

Comments: Thomas W. Cofer did not receive a Confederate contract for the above revolver. Cofer was a gunsmith and arms dealer and his revolvers were sold to the public. He did receive one of the first patents issued by the Confederacy. His patent covered a unique design

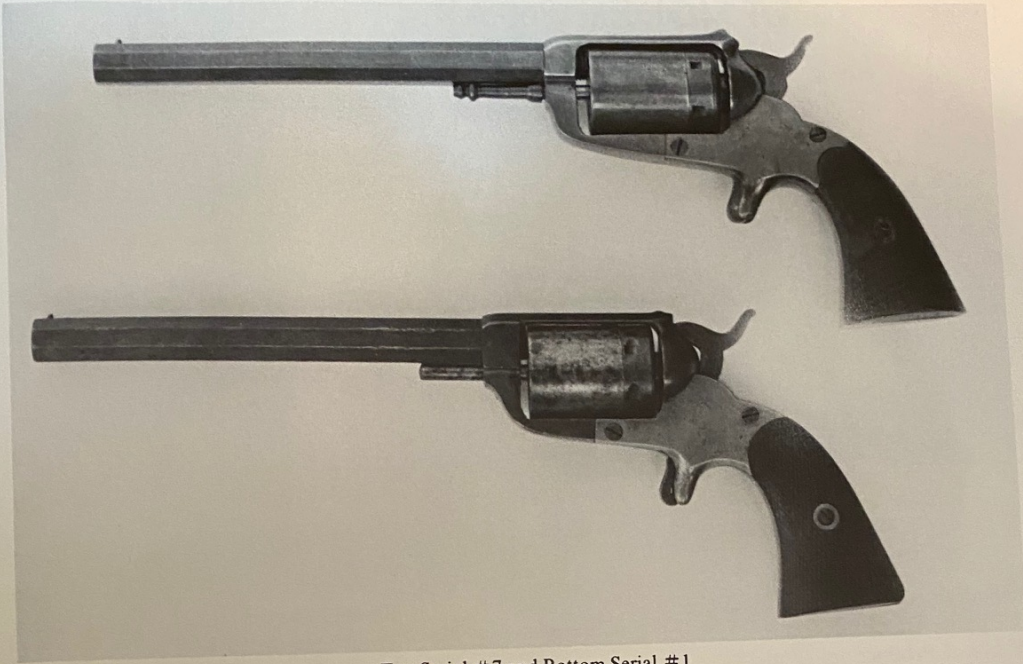
cylinder which could be loaded the conventional way with an additional chamber for a metallic cartridge with a nipple. This cofer has a replacement cylinder.

Notice "E. B. Georgia" stamped on the frame.

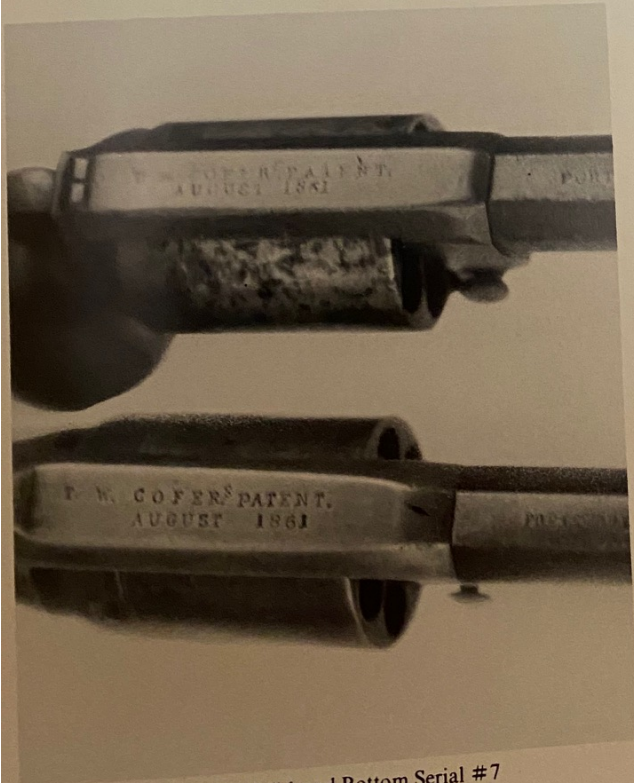


This Revolver Reproduced Through Courtesy of Virginia Historical Society

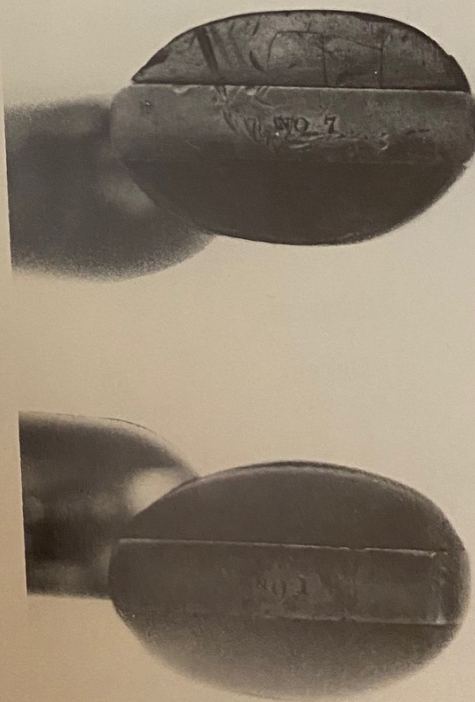
T. W. COFER REVOLVER — CONTINUED



Top Serial #7 and Bottom Serial #1



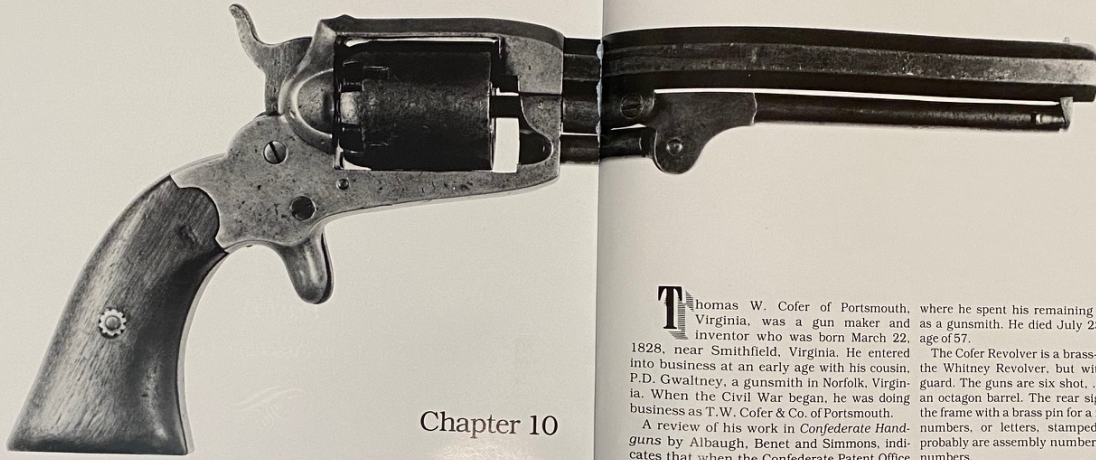
Top Serial #1 and Bottom Serial #7
"T. W. Cofers Patent."
"August 1861"



Top Serial #7 and Bottom Serial #1

Confederate Revolvers

By William A. Gary



Chapter 10

The Cofer Revolvers

Thomas W. Cofer of Portsmouth, Virginia, was a gun maker and inventor who was born March 22, 1828, near Smithfield, Virginia. He entered into business at an early age with his cousin, P.D. Gwaltney, a gunsmith in Norfolk, Virginia. When the Civil War began, he was doing business as T.W. Cofer & Co. of Portsmouth.

A review of his work in *Confederate Handguns* by Albaugh, Benet and Simmons, indicates that when the Confederate Patent Office was set up, Cofer applied for a patent to cover a method of loading a revolver cylinder from the rear, instead of from the front. He was granted Patent No. 9 on August 12, 1861.

There are only a very few known examples of a Cofer Revolver that incorporate this patented cylinder. All other known Cofer revolvers feature the standard percussion cylinder.

Cofer never had a contract with the Confederate Government, so all his revolvers were sold on the open market.

When Union forces occupied Norfolk and Portsmouth in May 1862, Cofer abandoned his home and shop and moved to Richmond, Virginia, where he remained for the balance of the war years. While in Richmond, he was employed by the Confederate Government at the Artillery Work Shops.

Cofer returned to Norfolk after the war

where he spent his remaining years working as a gunsmith. He died July 23, 1885, at the age of 57.

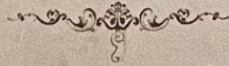
The Cofer Revolver is a brass-framed copy of the Whitney Revolver, but without a trigger guard. The guns are six shot, .36-caliber with an octagon barrel. The rear sight is cast into the frame with a brass pin for a front sight. The numbers, or letters, stamped on the guns probably are assembly numbers and not serial numbers.

The top of the frame is stamped T.W. Cofer's Patent in two lines with the letters individually stamped. The top of the barrel is die-stamped Portsmouth, VA.

The number of Cofer revolvers that were made is pure speculation, although only about 13 are known to exist today. Even though they are only a secondary Confederate arm, they have become one of the most prized Confederate revolvers. These guns rarely come up for sale. When they do, the price is usually higher than for any other Confederate revolver.

No. 7

THE CONFEDERATE STATES OF AMERICA.



To all to whom these Letters Patent shall come:

Whereas

Thomas W. Cofer, of Portsmouth, Virginia,

has alleged that he has invented a new and useful

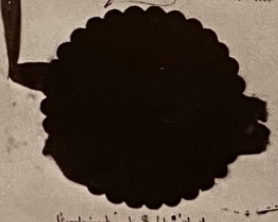
Improvement in Loading Fire Arms

which he states has not been known or used before his application has been made and that he is a Citizen of the Confederate States, that he does not believe that he is the original and first inventor or discoverer of the said Improvements and that the same hath not, to the best of his knowledge and belief, been previously known or used;

has paid into the treasury of the Confederate States, the sum of Fifty dollars, and presented a petition to the Commissioner of Patents, signifying a desire of obtaining an exclusive property in the said Improvements and praying that a patent may be granted for that purpose.

These are therefore in great according to law, to the said

Thomas W. Cofer, his heirs, administrators or assigns, for the term of Seven years from the Twelfth day of August one thousand eight hundred and sixty one the full and exclusive right and liberty of making, constructing, using, and vending to others to be used, the said Improvement a description whereof is given in the words of the said Thomas W. Cofer in the schedule hereunto annexed, and is made a part of these presents.



In Testimony Whereof, I have caused these Letters to be made Patent, and the Seal of the Patent Office has been hereunto affixed.

Given under my hand at the City of Richmond this Twelfth day of August in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and Sixty one.

J. J. Benjamin Attorney General

Reginald R. Rhodes Commissioner of Patents

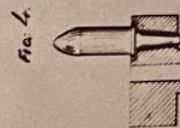
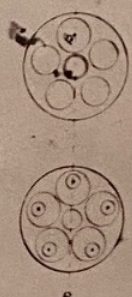
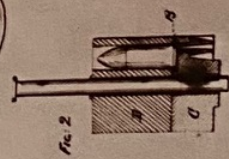
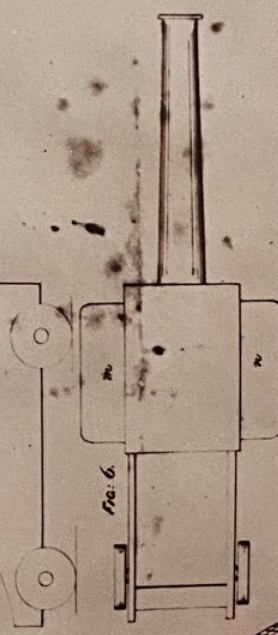
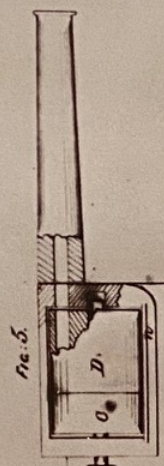
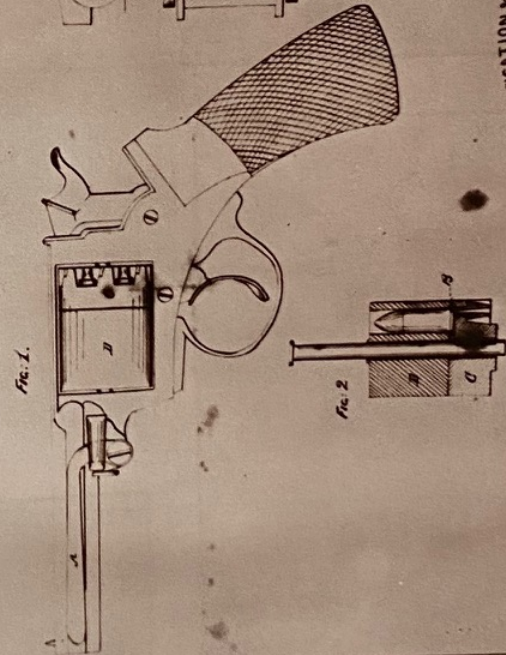
Printed and Sold at the Seal of the Patent Office.

Patent papers with the Confederate Government for the Cofer cartridge revolver.

Patented July 19, 1881

U.S. July 19, 1881

THOMAS W. COGER'S *Breech Loading* *Fire Arms.*



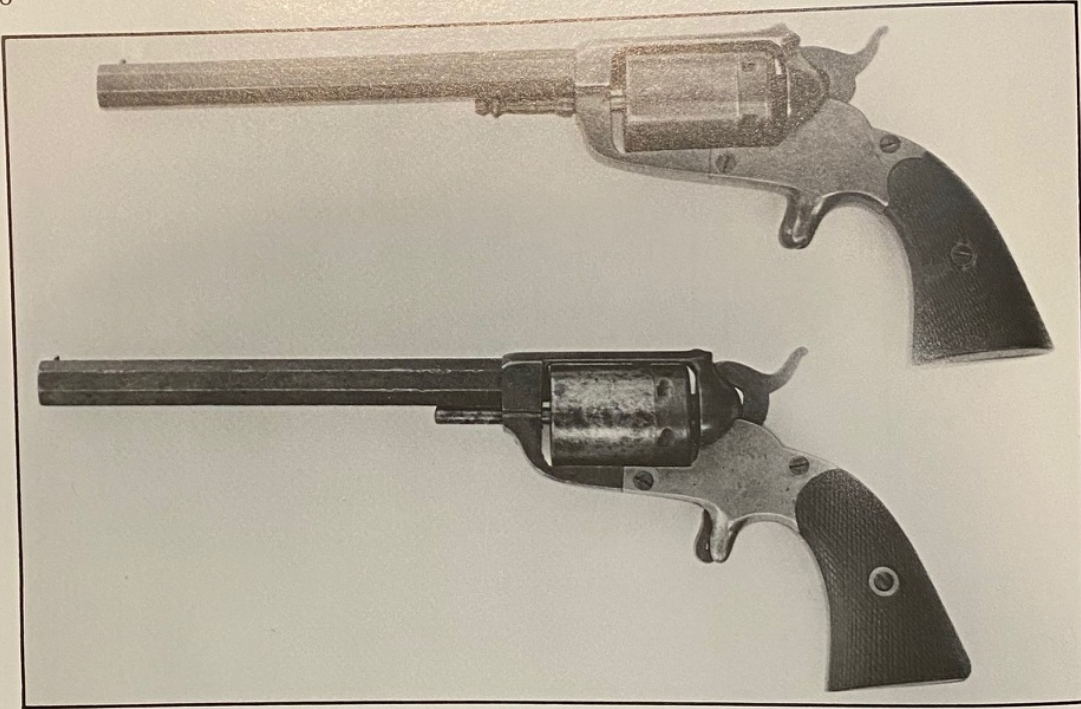
SPECIFICATION & DRAWINGS
FROM
Law. S. French's
PATENT AGENCY

INVENTOR

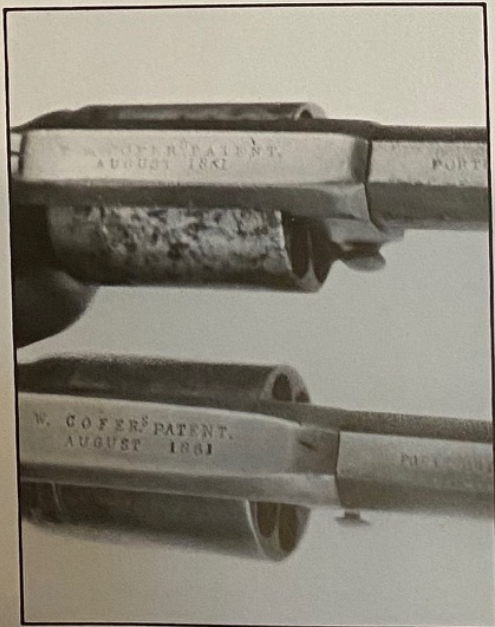
Thos. W. Coger
James S. French

Witness - W. A. Brown

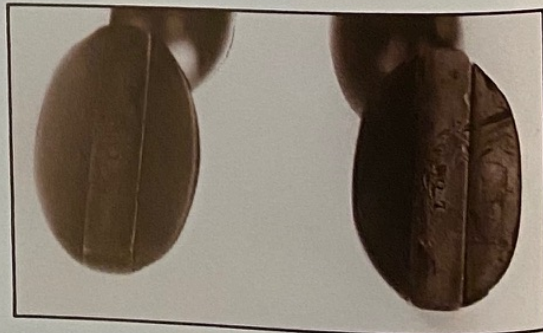
Correctly attested
J. A. Bond

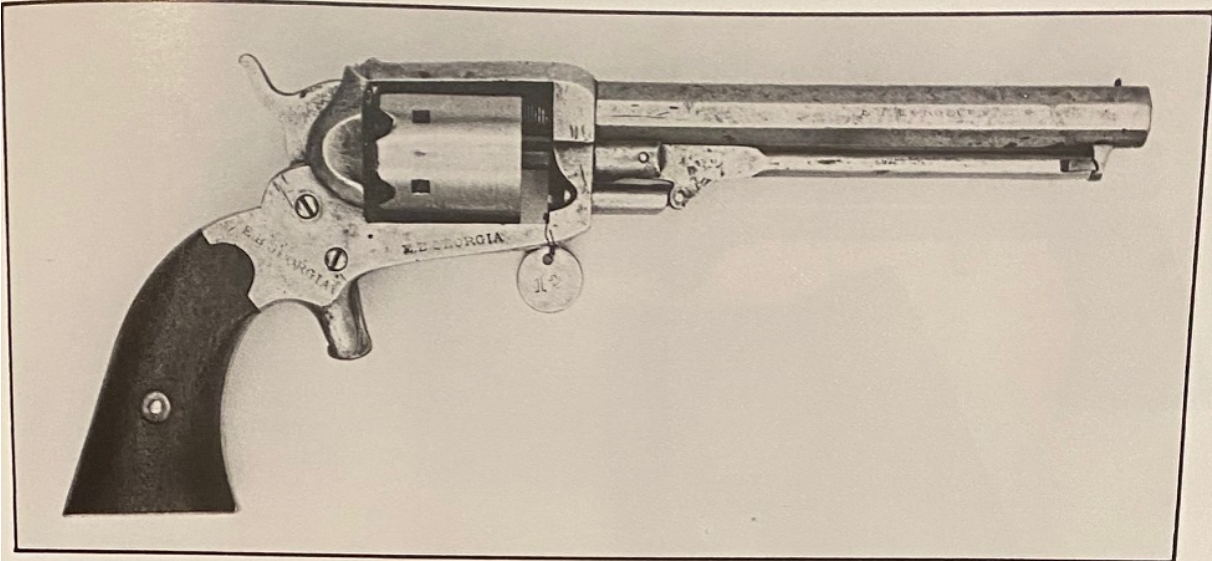


Courtesy Richard Hill and Confederate Longarms and Pistols

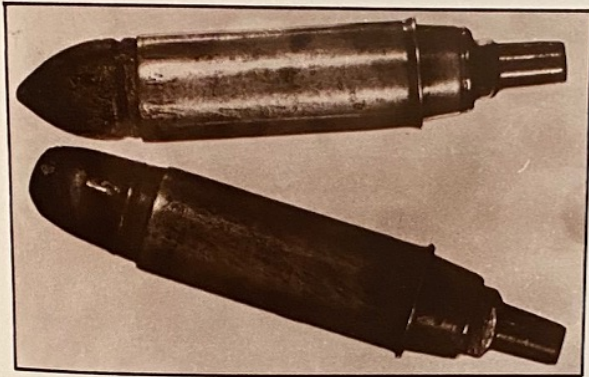


Cofer patented cartridge revolver numbers 1 and 7 with the two piece cylinder.





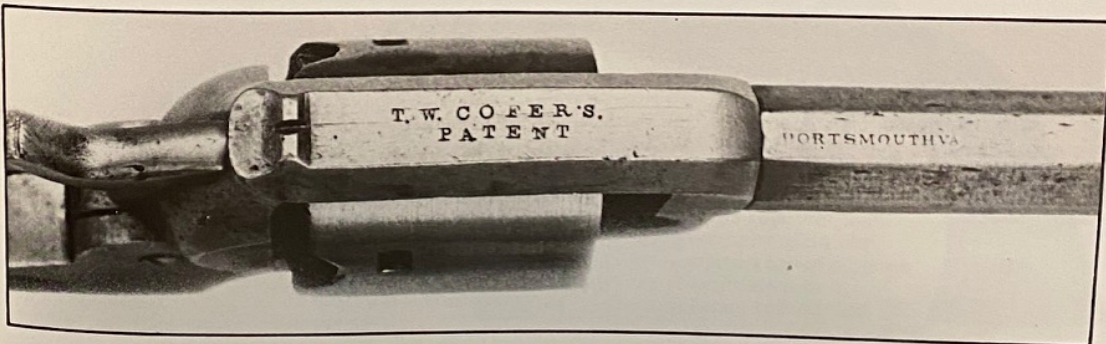
Courtesy Richard Hill and Confederate Longarms and Pistols

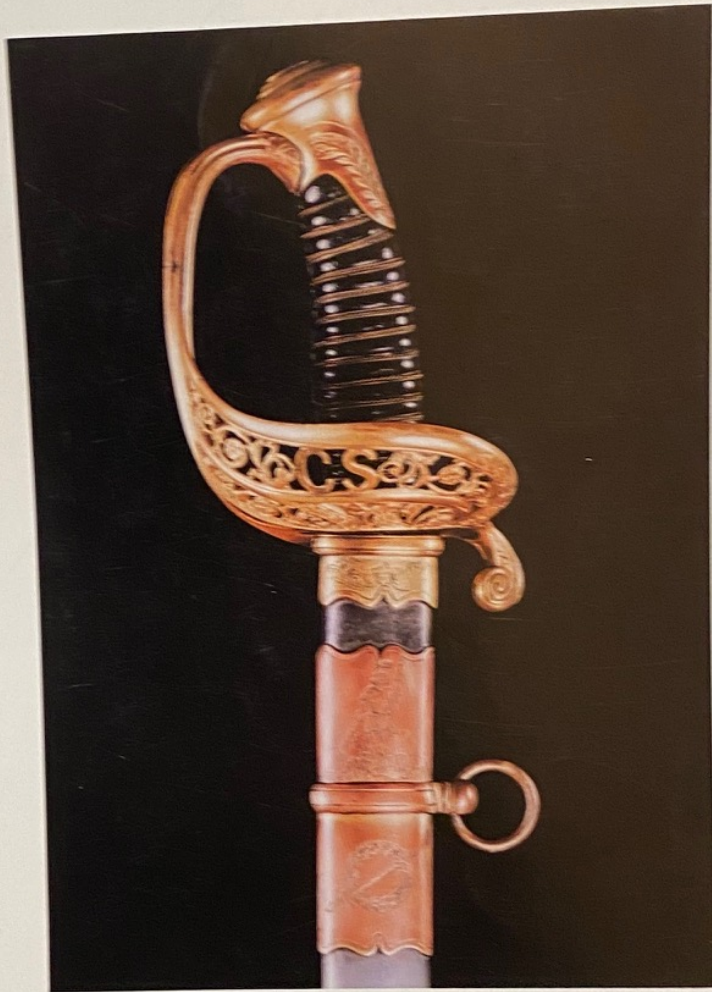


A Cofer percussion revolver from the Steuart collection in the Battle Abby Museum in Richmond, Virginia.

These cartridges were manufactured for the Cofer patented revolver with the two piece cylinder.

Typical name stamping on top of the frame and barrel of the Cofer Revolver.





THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF ARMS COLLECTORS
AT RICHMOND, VIRGINIA, MAY 3-7, 1995
BULLETIN NUMBER SEVENTY TWO

The Legacy of a Tidewater Gunsmith—Thomas W. Cofer

M. Clifford Young

A definitive study of the legacy of Thomas Wrenn Cofer has to encompass four main subjects: the Revolvers, Cartridges, Patent Papers and Government Contract. I will endeavor to outline important highlights of each which should give adequate coverage.

THE REVOLVERS

One of the rarest, ingenious, and most sought after of Confederate revolvers is the one made by Thomas W. Cofer, a Tidewater gunsmith from Portsmouth, Virginia. Copied from the solid frame principle of the Whitney model but with a brass frame and sheathed trigger, it was most colorful and distinctive. The only revolver made under a patent in the Confederacy, it was also the first made under a Confederate Government contract.

Although the patent was granted for and relates only to the original model with its unique two-piece cylinder, Cofer, for reasons of his own—perhaps pride—had all subsequent revolvers stamped on the tops of their frames: “T.W. Cofer’s Patent.”

Cofer produced three distinctive models before Portsmouth fell in early May of 1862. The first was a percussion-cartridge revolver typified by its patented split-cylinder for special reloadable cartridges. There are only two known examples; one is .36 caliber, the other about .33 caliber with a shorter cylinder. Both are in the Fred Slaton, Jr. collection.

The second model was also a percussion-cartridge revolver but utilized a single-piece cylinder for an improved reloadable cartridge. There is *one* known specimen which is on display.

Failing of success with the complexities of making these two metallic cartridge types, the exigencies of war prompted Cofer to be realistic and practical, especially since he had applied for and had been granted a Government contract. All of his efforts were then concentrated on producing a standard percussion model.

The third or standard percussion model could be called the production model as it is the most numerous of existing Cofers, there being about a dozen known examples in museums and private collections. The one on display is with its original Confederate style brown holster that is tooled with oak leaves and acorns and other design patterns. The holster is marked “21 July 1864. This revolver and holster



was (sic) captured from a Rebel Signal Officer by Capt. S.H. Merrill, 11th Maine Regt.”

While there are no known likenesses of Cofer, there is one of Capt. S. H. Merrill in the Maine State Archives as well as a photograph of his marker in Arlington National Cemetery.

THE COFER CARTRIDGES

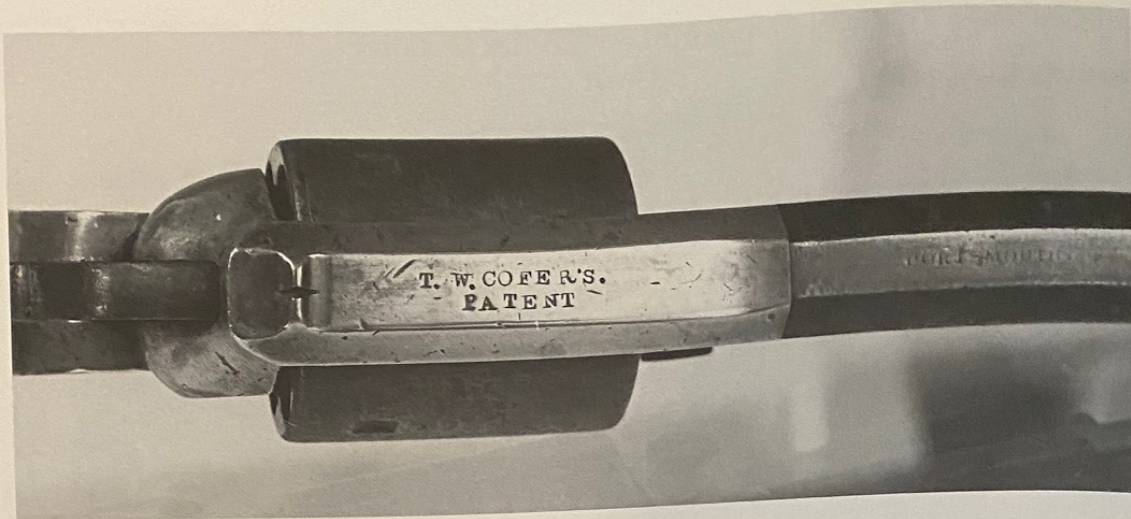
Cofer’s Confederate patent application described two different types of cartridges that could be utilized in his two-piece revolver cylinder. No examples of Type I cartridge or cylinder are known, however, so whether or not he ever made either is a matter of conjecture.

The Type II cartridge case consists of a brass cylinder with a flange near the head, followed by a steel nipple for a percussion cap. It was made specifically for the two-piece or split-cylinder revolver. There are about a dozen of these cartridges known, two of which are on display.

Type III was not covered by the patent but it was the logical culmination of Cofer’s search for a practical self-contained cartridge for the one-piece cylinder revolver. Although still utilizing a percussion cap, the cartridge is effectively a reloadable centerfire. Two *reproduced* cartridges that were probably the type used are on display with the single-piece cylinder revolver.

THE CONTRACT PAPERS

The Cofer revolver has always been classified by au-



Typical "T.W. Cofer's Patent" and "Portsmouth, VA" frame and barrel stampings.



Patented two-piece or split-cylinder percussion-cartridge revolver. Ser. No. 7. Exploded view of remnant revolver depicting component parts. Two known examples.

thors, researchers and collectors as a secondary Confederate or associated-Confederate arm. This second class status was based upon the fact that no information had come to light to indicate that the revolver was made under a government contract. Since the Portsmouth-Norfolk area was evacuated during the early part of the war, it was generally assumed that the relatively few revolvers that were made there, were sold privately.

Within the past several years, a most startling discovery was made at the National Archives in Washington by William Leigh III, the eldest son of Lewis Leigh, Jr., the noted Confederate collector. Found in the "Citizens or Business Firms"¹ files were documents revealing that Thomas W. Cofer did, indeed, possess a government contract to specifically deliver eighty-two revolvers to Capt. Edgar Burroughs' Company, 5th Virginia Cavalry. These papers indicated, in detail, that seventeen revolvers were initially delivered on January 18, 1862, and payment was received on February 5, 1862. The balance of sixty-five revolvers were delivered on May 1st, 1862, and payment was received on May 31st. Two other receipts made references to the fact that the revolvers were part of a contract with Mr. Cofer.

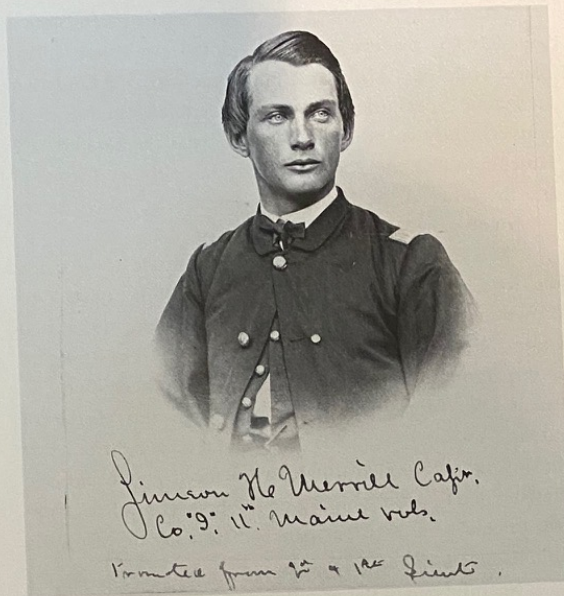
Although the Cofer was never classified as a primary Confederate revolver, it was always considered one of the most desirable. With the discovery of these papers, re-evaluation to primary status has finally been attained. And on another note of interest, although the original contract vouchers—like the patent papers—were issued in Richmond in 1862 and are now in the Archives in Washington, copies are now being displayed for the very first time and at the Society Meeting in Richmond.

THE PATENT PAPERS

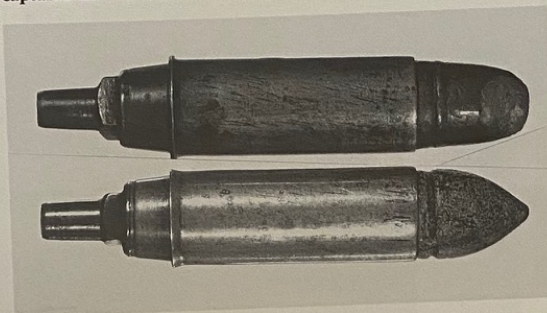
On May 21, 1861, an act by the Provisional Congress of the Confederate States established the Patent Office under a Commissioner of Patents who was to be appointed by the President and placed under the direction of the Attorney General. The Commissioner of Patents was Rufus R. Rhodes. The Attorney General was Judah P. Benjamin. Surprisingly, the principal difference from the U.S. patent law was that under the Confederate patent law, slaves could receive patents for their inventions.²

1. Confederate Papers Relating to Citizens or Business Firms. (M346, Box 205, 7W4, 9:7E). Confederate Records Division, National Archives, Washington.

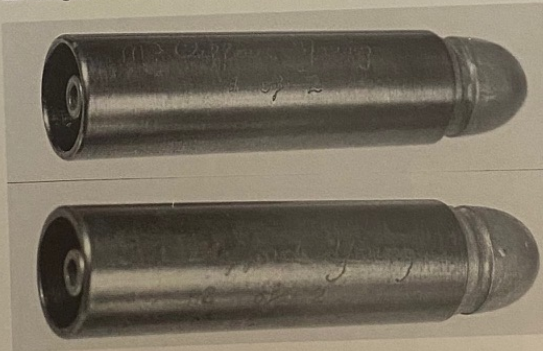
2. Kenneth W. Dobyns, *The Patent Office Pony: A History of the Early Patent Office* (Fredericksburg, Virginia, 1994)



Photograph of Capt. Simeon H. Merrill of the 11th Maine who captured the revolver and inscribed its holster.



Two original Cofer reloadable cartridges made under the same patent as the split-cylinder revolver. Shown together for comparison: You will note, from the distorted condition of one of the flanges, that that cartridge had more usage than the other.



Two conjectural made-up cartridges for the improved single-piece cylinder revolver. Note the recessed percussion nipples and the absence of flanges. Also steel rather than brass tubing was probably utilized for greater strength. They have been carefully inscribed for identification purposes to denote the fact that they are not original.

During the Civil War, the United States Patent Office issued 16,051 patents, while the Confederate Patent Office issued a total of 274 patents. Of the three surviving Confederate Patent Papers, the Cofer is the only one related to small arms. Of the two other known, one is at the Confederate Museum in Richmond, which was granted for a "Torpedo" and the other at the National Archives, was issued for an "Instrument for Measuring Distances."

The official Patent Office publication clearly detailed the requirements for obtaining a patent.³ In addition to presenting a patent *model*, preferably in working order, two copies of the patent were to be submitted consisting of *specifications* and a *drawing*. If the patent was granted, the Patent Office made up patent page one—the "Letter of Patent"—in duplicate, filed one set and returned the other to the inventor. Complete, there were three pages and one drawing tied together with a green ribbon. Thus, there were two original sets of patent papers. The copy on display is from the inventor's set.

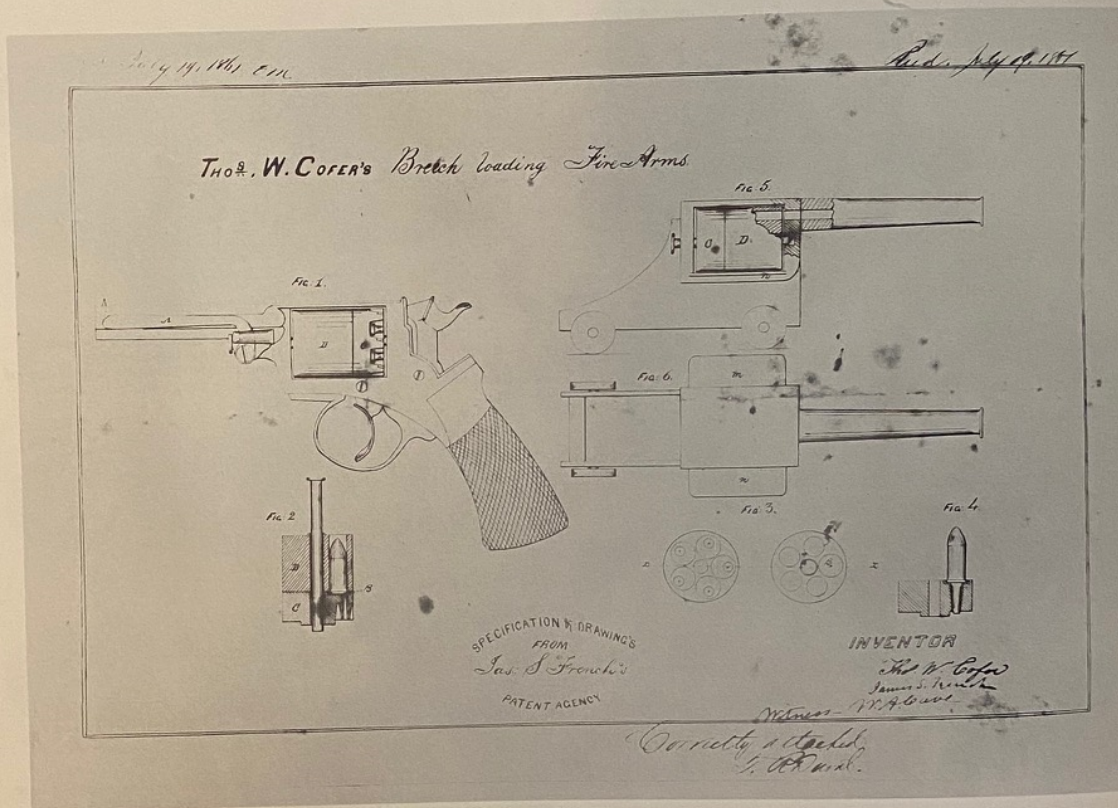
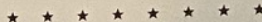
Near the end of the war, during the general evacuation

of Richmond, Confederate troops set fire to a warehouse to prevent the contents from being taken by approaching troops. The fire spread and on April 3, 1865, burned a large part of central Richmond including the building in which the Patent Office was located. Apparently, all the patent sets and models were destroyed.

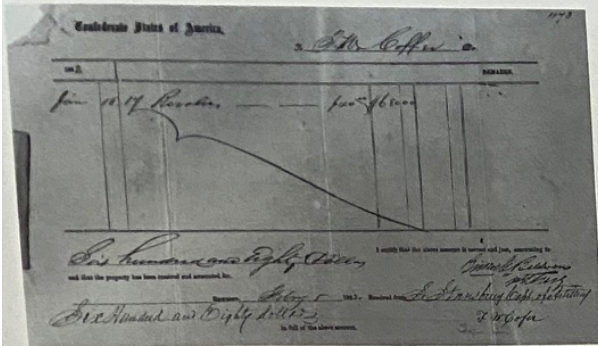
Miraculously, after over 130 years of neglect, the surviving Cofer Patent Papers surfaced in complete and relatively good condition. After acquiring them, I felt that I had an obligation and had them professionally restored to preserve them, using the latest techniques. They were later re-framed in natural North American black walnut with splined corners and 23-karat gold leaf trim.

Confederate Patent Number 9 was granted to Thomas W. Cofer on August 12, 1861 in Richmond, Virginia. Now over a century and a quarter later, they have returned to Richmond!!

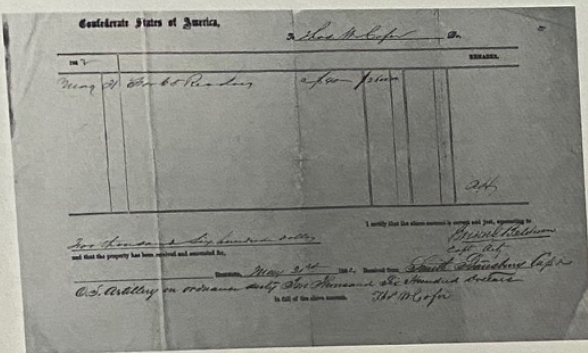
3. *Rules and Directions for Proceedings in the Confederate States Patent Office* (Richmond, 1861)



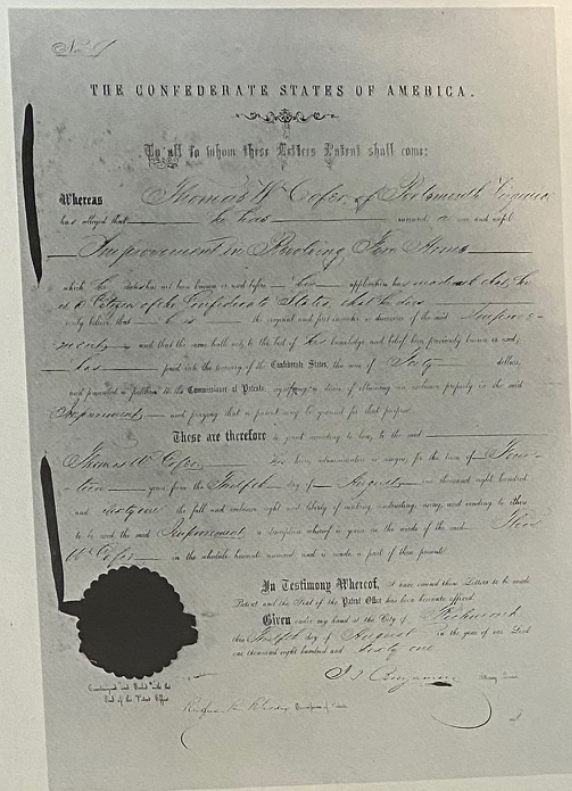
Required Confederate Patent Office drawing submitted with application.



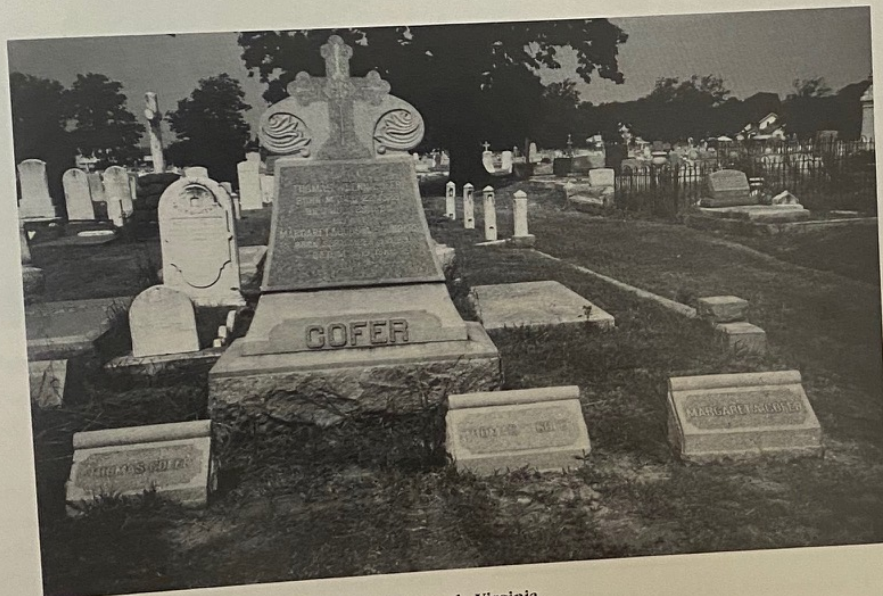
Confederate States of America contract voucher for 17 revolvers. Addressed to T.W. Cofer (mis-spelled with two f's).



Another contract voucher to Thos. W. Cofer for 65 revolvers.



The Confederate "Letter of Patent" granted to Thomas W. Cofer.



Cofer family lot in Oak Grove Cemetery, Portsmouth, Virginia.

