

15th PA

Stone's River Revolver: *1 of 100 to J.C. Grubb & Co.*

by Tony Morreale

March 24, 1990, didn't look like it would bring any excitement. As I was pulling my relic hunting gear together, I noted that the skies were overcast and the thermometer hovered in the low 40s. No matter. My hunting would be cut short that day anyway, as I'm a volunteer at Stone's River National Battlefield and the 24th was clean-up day along the roads in the park.

I was to report to the visitor's center at one o'clock, so I figured I could squeeze in some hunting during the morning hours. After loading the car I proceeded to one of my stand-by spots, a site that saw some of the opening action at Stone's River on December 31, 1862. The property owner is kind enough to let me have the run of the land at any time, so when I pulled into the driveway at 7:30 I headed straight for the field. Since I only had a couple of hours, I hadn't bothered to buy fresh batteries for my detector. I wasn't counting on finding much that morning, and besides, I'd walked that field at least seventy times and my luck had been in a definite downward slide.

My relatively low expectations seemed right on target. The first two or three hours yielded two dropped .58s,

a couple of shell fragments, and enough fired bullets to provide ballast for a small ship. As I poked around a little longer, the temperature began to drop noticeably, the finds became fewer and farther between, and—the crowning blow—the old batteries in my machine started to announce that my morning hunt was going to draw to a close.

I decided to head back to the car along a route that I couldn't remember hunting. The batteries were getting weaker, but I was still rewarded with a couple of Enfield bullets and a large shell fragment. All of a sudden, a "WHANG!" echoed through my ears. Not three paces from the shell fragment, the meter on my detector registered brass, then dropped to iron as the batteries finally gave up the ghost. Convinced I had another large fragment, I thrust my shovel into the ground and turned over a large clod of dirt that must have been seven or eight inches thick. Grabbing my machine, I scanned the plug of earth and got nothing. My detector had given its last hurrah.

I was getting frustrated, but something told me to keep looking for that elusive fragment. I felt I had to recover this last signal—if for nothing else, to kill time before going to pick up garbage. I broke the dirt clod into small pieces, but



Photo, Steve Sylvia

found nothing. I picked up my shovel and began to dig again. This time, I hit something solid. At a depth of one foot I saw a rounded piece of iron, which convinced me that I'd found my shell fragment at last. I moved my shovel a few inches to the left and again hit iron. My fragment was rapidly turning into a large spike or a broken fence post. I worked to the right and this time it wasn't rust that met my eyes, but the beautiful green patina of 128-year-old brass. Now I knew I had something!

Drawing my knife, I began to probe near the center of the object and learned that the iron and the brass were connected. Twenty minutes later, I was kneeling over a hole that had grown to a foot deep and foot and a half across. At the bottom of the hole lay an 1861 Colt "new" navy revolver, intact except for its grips.

Despite the fact that it was cold enough to see your breath, I suddenly became very warm and shed my coat. Of course, it could have had something to do with the fact that I was jumping around the hole in such a frenzy that had anyone seen me they would have thought me certifiable. After a few minutes, I settled down enough to ask myself a few sensible questions. Is it in one piece? How should I get it out of the hole undamaged? Did I damage the cylinder when I struck it with my shovel? I planned my course of action and decided that the best bet was to remove the pistol in its own clod of dirt. Working slowly, I gingerly removed the revolver from the hole and wrapped it in an old towel. I then filled the hole, picked up my gear, and made a dash for the car.

I headed straight for the visitor's center at the battlefield, where the staff and I went to the basement to remove some of the dirt from the piece. My hands were shaking so badly that more than one person asked if it was wise for me to carry it. As we cleaned the revolver, I noticed that the mainspring was broken but still held in position by the mud between the trigger guard and the backstrap. I cleaned that area very gently, then turned my attention to the chambers.

Maybe I'd be lucky and one or two might be loaded. With a soft toothbrush, I slowly cleared the dirt from the mouths of the chambers and discovered that one, two, three...four, and five still had rounds in them. The sixth chamber was in line with the barrel, which I cleared of obstruction. Number six was *also* loaded. As I continued my cleaning efforts, the percussion caps came into view. The revolver was fully capped, with the hammer resting above an unexploded cap.

Further cleaning efforts at home revealed screw heads in the frame, as well as rounded screw heads just forward of the trigger and at the juncture of the backstrap and trigger guard. I also discovered, stamped in the brass trigger guard, the revolver's serial number—3097. The stamping "36 CAL" appeared on the left side of the trigger housing and a "4" was discovered right behind the trigger. The only structural damage, aside from the broken spring, was the bent trigger guard. The artifact was otherwise sound.

After I'd taken care of the next necessary action—which was, of course, to tell all of my friends about the morning's hunt—I began to address two questions: First, how do I go about tracing the history of the weapon? Second, how do I best preserve it?

I sent a request for assistance to Colt Manufacturing Company, advising them of the model and serial number and enclosing a \$35 check. (Colt will attempt to trace the origin of a weapon through their archives. Many of the old records were destroyed in a fire, but as luck would have it the serial number of my navy revolver happened to fall within a group whose records were available.)

While the people at Colt were doing their bit, I placed calls to the National Park Service Restoration Center at Harper's Ferry and made inquiries with a number of collectors and dealers about preservation methods. The number of suggestions I was given were astounding and ranged from doing nothing to coating the revolver with WD-40™, to boiling it in paraffin, to performing electrolysis, to soaking it in a mixture



of thinner and polyurethane. During my search for the method that sounded right to me, I kept the Colt lightly covered in WD40™ to repel water and stored it in a display case with a packet of Silica Gel to absorb moisture in the air.

I discounted the paraffin approach because it would leave a waxy film on the relic. I tossed out electrolysis because it might ruin the lead and weaken the revolver by removing too much rust. The park service said that they would help if they could unload it. Sorry, guys, but no. I finally opted for the polyurethane/thinner method.

I soaked the revolver in distilled water for a couple of days to remove any salts or chemicals that may have soaked into the pores of the iron. Then I submerged the pistol in alcohol for two days to draw out the water and moisture. Next, the pistol was submerged in a solution of three parts thinner to one part polyurethane for about eight days. This would allow the piece to absorb the solution and acquire a deep, penetrating barrier to air and water, forestalling further decay of the iron. At the end of the soaking, I let the Colt dry and put it in its case with the Silica Gel.

As this process was under way, Colt sent its response to my inquiry. My revolver was one of a hundred shipped to J.C. Grubb & Company of Philadelphia on November 2, 1861. The revolver had a "Blue/Brass" finish and the type of wood used for the grips was unspecified.

Now I knew the weapon's origin, but how did it make its way from Pennsylvania to Tennessee? I consulted *The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* and discovered that there were seven Pennsylvania units in the Army of the Cumberland during the Stone's River Campaign. Unfortunately, none were positioned close to the area where I unearthed the revolver. Could it have been purchased by a civilian who later went to war? Had a Union officer bought it while passing through Philadelphia? Was it a battlefield pick-up that made its way into other hands, Union or Confederate? Did a cavalry unit perhaps camp on the site after the Battle of Stone's River? Although the revolver was found in a spot where the infantry fought, I'd found a number of cavalry relics there as well and

the cavalry camp idea seemed very possible.

Steve Sylvia of *NSTCW* was kind enough to send me some information on J.C. Grubb from Bruce Bazelon and William McGuinn's *Directory of American Military Goods Dealers and Makers 1785-1915*. It seems that Grubb had a contract for cavalry sabres in 1861 and, according to the first volume of Francis Lord's *Civil War Collector's Encyclopedia*, Grubb also provided the US government with hat cords.

The company went out of business in 1866, leaving no traces that I have been able to uncover.

Just to be sure, I made several calls to Philadelphia and confirmed that there was no longer a J.C. Grubb & Co. City hall and chamber of commerce records shed no further light, but Jefferson Moek, the historian at the chamber of

commerce, gave me leads to two local museums, the Military Order of the Loyal Legion and the GAR Museum. Sadly, these leads also came to nothing and I have come to believe that all of Grubb's records have been either lost or destroyed over time. The only thing of note that I was able to procure from Philadelphia was a tax appraisal of the buildings where J.C. Grubb & Co. was once located. The paper, a victim of water damage and abuse, is illegible except for the date, 1842.

I still wondered who brought the revolver to Tennessee and why he lost or discarded a pistol that had no apparent malfunctions. Perhaps the owner was killed, I reasoned, or perhaps the mainspring broke in action, rendering the weapon less than useful. I rather doubted this last, as the mainspring was in the proper position when the artifact was found.

Additional research paid off, and over the course of the next eight months I was able to piece together more information—information that may eventually lead to the owner of the 1861 Colt. I now believe that it was most likely carried by one of two men: Maj. Adolph Rosengarten or Maj. Frank Ward, both of the 15th Pennsylvania Cavalry, also known as the Anderson Troop. The majority of the men in the unit were from the upper-class families of Philadelphia—also the home of J.C. Grubb & Co.—and enlisted to act as Gen. Buell's bodyguard. I have reason to think that some of the officers may have purchased

Plotting this skirmish on a modern topographical map put the scene of the fighting in the exact area where I found the revolver.

Kathleen J. Hoyt, historian of the Colt Manufacturing Company, Inc., replied to the author's inquiry with the following information:

COLT MODEL 1861 NAVY REVOLVER

<i>Serial number:</i>	3097
<i>Calibre:</i>	.36/C
<i>Barrel length:</i>	7-1/2"
<i>Finish:</i>	Blue/Brass
<i>Type of stocks:</i>	Not listed
<i>Shipped To:</i>	J.C. Grubb & Co.
<i>Address:</i>	Philadelphia, PA
<i>Date of shipment:</i>	November 2, 1861
<i>Number of same type guns in shipment:</i>	100

their own sidearms in Philadelphia. The fact that the '61 Colt navy is not very common and was only purchased by the US government in small quantity, coupled with the fact that the men of the 15th were armed with .44 calibre Colts, leads me to believe that the weapon I unearthed probably belonged to an officer.

But what leads me to believe that the revolver is associated with the 15th Pennsylvania? Before the Stone's River Campaign, there was a mutiny in the Anderson Troop when all but three hundred men refused to head for the front. Rosecrans, then in command of the Army of the Cumberland, wanted the unit to join in active campaigning rather than serve as bodyguards or a headquarters escort. There was great controversy as to whether or not the men had enlisted under false pretenses, the mutineers were imprisoned, and the unit was thoroughly disgraced.

When the campaign got under way, Maj. Rosengarten and Maj. Ward were in command of those who would fight, roughly three hundred men divided into two battalions. On December 29, 1862, Rosengarten led the tiny command across Overall Creek on the Wilkinson Pike. The two battalions then chased a small group of Confederate cavalry toward Murfreesboro. Just where the road went through the woods, the men of the Anderson Troop ran into an ambush set by elements of the 10th and 19th South Carolina Infantry.

After scattering the Rebel skirmishers, the troopers regrouped and charged into the woods to the right of the pike. The horsemen encountered a rail fence and the main body of Confederate infantry one half mile from the road. A sharp

skirmish ensued. It was in this charge that Maj. Ward was mortally wounded and Maj. Rosengarten, leading his battalion to recover the injured Ward, was killed. Both bodies were recovered, but their horses and equipment were either lost or captured by the enemy.

Plotting this skirmish on a modern topographical map put the scene of the fighting in the exact area where I found the revolver. This skirmish would explain the cavalry artifacts I had found previously, and, perhaps, the revolver as well.

I'm still searching the archives for more information on both Maj. Rosengarten and Maj. Ward, as well as any in-depth information on the 15th Pennsylvania Cavalry. The assistance of readers who possess additional information or leads would be greatly appreciated.

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"Stone's River Revolver" marks Nashville resident Tony Morreale's first article submission to NSTCW. Readers with additional information on the 15th Pennsylvania, Maj. Rosengarten, and Maj. Ward are invited to correspond with the author c/o the magazine.

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