

Found In The Wall Of An Old House - A Research Note

By

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Just about everyone with an interest in history has heard a story about this or that treasure being found in the wall of an old house, usually by an antiques picker or a little old couple living in the country. Sometimes, these stories are even true. Following is one of those true cases.

Eighteenth and nineteenth-century military and related relics have been and, on occasion continue to be, recovered from barns, sheds, houses, and other structures in Virginia. Three interesting items were recently recovered together from a house that was being razed in the Lamberts Point neighborhood of Norfolk, VA, south of Old Dominion University. The finds were not made by a picker or couple in the country, but by the demolition crew of B&H Sales Corp. of Norfolk, VA.

The earliest item in the group is a 36 caliber, Model 1851, Colt Navy revolver, serial number 140824. All part numbers on this gun match the serial number. According to Colt records, this revolver was manufactured in 1863. It has the following owner identification engraved on the brass butt strap, W. R. Diller. The revolver has no U. S. markings; and with the personalized name engraving and date of manufacture, it likely was a commercial model purchased by an officer for use in the Civil War. This Colt Navy remains in its unaltered, original cap and ball configuration. Besides some light surface rust, the revolver is in relatively good condition (Fig. 1, Right side of revolver), (Fig. 2, Left side view), and (Fig. 3, Diller name engraved on butt).



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

The next item of the group is a 45 caliber, Remington Arms Company, rolling-block rifle, dating to the 1870s (Fig. 4, Remington rolling-block rifle) and (Fig. 5, Detail of rifle in Fig. 4). This rifle has a full-length stock and is better known as a "military musket". Despite having an extremely strong and efficient action, the rolling block was not adopted as the standard, U. S. military, service rifle. Instead, the less-robust, trapdoor Springfield, produced by the U. S. Springfield Armory, held that honor and served the U. S. Army in the post-Civil War and the Indian War periods. That said, Remington did supply the U.S. Army with a limited number of rolling blocks. Also, many armies around the world, adopted the rolling block as their standard issue rifle.



Figure 4



Figure 5

This particular Remington rolling block does not have a serial number or any U. S. or foreign marks. Therefore, it likely was sold commercially. This rifle has light surface rust and pitting, similar to the Colt Navy. It has seen considerable use but is intact and in relatively good condition.

The third and final item of the group is a leather belt complete with its circa 1880, stamped-brass, U. S. waist plate. This belt and waist plate are in excellent condition, are most definitely U. S. Army issue, and are of the late Indian War period (Fig. 6, U. S. belt and waist plate).



Figure 6

This research note will now focus on the identified 36 caliber, Model 1851, Colt Navy revolver.

The Civil War Database lists seven W. Diller's who served for the Union. There are no W. or W. R. Diller's listed who served for the Confederates. One of the seven Union service men likely is a match for the Colt Navy, a William R. Diller. William R. Diller transferred as a corporal in Company C., 160th Regiment P.V. (Pennsylvania Volunteers) to the 15th Pennsylvania Cavalry, Company H, as a second lieutenant in October 1863. He was discharged on February 6, 1865.

The 15th Pennsylvania Cavalry was assigned to the Army of the Cumberland in December 1862. During William R. Diller's service, the 15th Pennsylvania Cavalry was posted in and around Nashville, TN. Following his discharge, the 15th Pennsylvania Cavalry saw service in March and April 1865 in Southwest Virginia (Lynchburg, Hillsville, Wytheville, New London, and Martinsville) and in North Carolina (Boone, Salisbury, and Jamestown).

If the 1851 Colt Navy actually belonged to Lieutenant William R. Diller, and how it ended up in Norfolk, VA with post-1865 Indian War period relics are unknown. Here, we can only speculate. A plausible, but in no way certain, scenario is:

Diller purchased or was presented the commercial, Colt Navy revolver, that was manufactured in 1863, when he was promoted to lieutenant in 1863. Officers at that time generally were expected to provide their own arms. The revolver served him during his tour of duty in the U. S. Army during the Civil War until he was discharged in 1865. At that time, prior to returning to civilian life, Lieutenant Diller sold or gave his Colt Navy to a fellow officer, who remained in the Army through the Indian War period. Continuing with this speculative scenario, this U. S. Army officer purchased the commercial, military-style rolling block for his personal use. At the end of his Army service, this officer retained his Colt revolver, Remington rolling block, and U. S. belt and waist plate.

How these three related objects found their way to Norfolk and ended in a wall in a Lamberts Point house will remain a mystery, but they did. Apparently, they were concealed for some good reason at the time, and their owner forgot them or died before retrieving them. There they remained, unknown to numerous subsequent occupants and owners of the house, until discovered during demolition. Fortunately, these interesting relics of the Civil War/Indian War periods were not destroyed.