

A Colt Dragoon Revolver from the "U.S. Revenue Brig Lawrence"
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In the entire realm of Colt Firearms and United States Revenue Cutter Service collecting, those few guns that are distinctly identified by inscription are certainly the most prized. Such as the case with Colt First Model Dragoon #1352 that is in a private collection.

With the advent of Colt's Paterson Revolvers in 1836, firearms technology changed forever and the advantages were quickly noted by military personnel who fought in the Seminole Wars followed by officers on the high seas.

Ships in the Revenue Cutter Service have always used single-shot flintlock or percussion pistols until this new invention proved its worth, and many officers in the Revenue Marines purchased the Paterson revolvers privately for service use. Finally in 1848, the U.S. treasury Department ordered twelve Colt Dragoon Revolvers for the Revenue Brig Lawrence, which was newly built and destined for service on the west coast.

These twelve revolvers are the earliest government issue, factory-inscribed Colt Revolvers and only two are known to have survived, serial number 1343 (formerly in the William Locke Collection, pictured in the book of the same name on page 45), and our subject gun, serial number 1352. Additionally, they are the earliest known firearms identified by inscription to have been used by the U.S. Coast Guard.

The *C. W. Lawrence* was named for the Collector of Customs at the Port of New York, Cornelius W. Lawrence, who served in New York during the 1840s. The Revenue Cutter *C. W. Lawrence* was built as one of seven replacements for cutters lost during the Mexican War. She was built by William Easby at Foggy Bottom in Washington, D.C. She was a brig-rigged Baltimore clipper with raked masts. She was 96 1/2-feet in length and displaced 144 tons. She was "staunchly built of white and live oak, yellow pine, cedar, locust, and mahogany and was copper fastened and sheathed." She was launched at Foggy Bottom on 20 August 1848. Her first commanding officer, who oversaw her construction, was Revenue Captain Alexander Fraser, and he attended her launching. The 30 October 1848 issue of Washington's *Daily National Intelligencer* wrote of her launching:

"Scarcely had some of her blocks been knocked away, when she began, at first imperceptibly, to slide down her slippery ways, and Capt. Fraser and his lady, to whom was assigned the honor of christening the vessel, could scarcely, with all his exertion, find time to leap upon her deck before she plunged to the bosom of the Potomac. . . She was launched with all her masts and rigging on board, and with colors flying. . ."

She was christened *Cornelius W. Lawrence*, after the collector of the Port of New York. She spent the next few weeks fitting out and her hull was painted black. The Revenue Marine accepted her for service on 11 October 1848. She was assigned to the west coast, with Captain Fraser's orders being to secure the revenue, enforce U.S. laws on the seas, aid distressed vessels, and to sound and chart the new territory's harbors and inlets.

With a crew of 43 aboard, with most of Fraser's officers being political appointees with no sea-going experience, *Lawrence* set sail for the Pacific on 1 November 1848 around Cape Horn. After an arduous voyage of over 11 months, including five weeks spent attempting to sail around the Horn, she arrived in San Francisco on 31 October 1849. Difficulties soon visited the cutter though when the crew learned of the vast fortunes being made by those hunting gold inland and Fraser soon found himself without a crew. Even his officers resigned to join the gold rush. The Collector had to charter a small schooner, the *Argus*, and purchased another, *Catherine*, to carry out the Revenue patrols while the *Lawrence* remained tied up.

For a hectic year, with only a few loyal men, Fraser did his best to secure the revenue, enforce the shipping laws, and prevented mutinies on the merchant craft at anchor in San Francisco Bay when gold fever swept aboard the newly arrived ships. His efforts were summed up in a letter to him from the Customs Collector, J. Collier:

"Few men have had more difficult or responsible duties to perform. You have been in a harbor from four to five hundred vessels were riding at anchor, in the midst of a great excitement, with crews insubordinate and lawless, without the aid of civil tribunals or civil process, and when day and night you have been called upon to render assistance and aid masters of vessels in suppressing mutiny and violence."

In late 1850 *Lawrence* was fitted out for a cruise down the coast to San Diego once the cutter *Polk* arrived to patrol San Francisco. She

cleared the Farallon Islands on the night of 26 December 1850. She cruised the coast, charting the coastline and the inlets as she sailed. She arrived in San Diego on 19 January 1851 and then sailed for the Hawaiian Islands, arriving at Hilo on 7 March 1851. After visiting Honolulu she set sail for San Francisco, arriving there on the evening of 4 May 1851. Fraser requested a leave of absence, which was granted, and he was relieved by Revenue Captain Douglas Ottinger on 7 June of that same year.

Ottinger and some of his crew participated in the *Challenge* affair, when the crew of that vessel attempted to mutiny. He and the Revenue sailors helped quell the mutiny and Ottinger later was called to testify at the trial of the ring leaders.

Lawrence's career, unlike Ottinger's, was over shortly after this. She ran aground and was lost at the entrance to San Francisco Bay on the night of 25 November 1851. All hand were saved. The wreck was later sold at auction the following year.

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Colt First Model Dragoon #1352 (Private Collection)



The revolver clearly inscribed with "U.S. Revenue Brig Lawrence".



Close up of the inscription of the Colt First Model Dragoon Revolver.



When recovered from the wreck site area, the revolver still has some of it's chambers loaded.



Another view of the revolver's cylinder with it's loaded chambers.