

CUSTER ERA COLT CAVALRY REVOLVER

Serial Number 6078

By Rusty Edwards

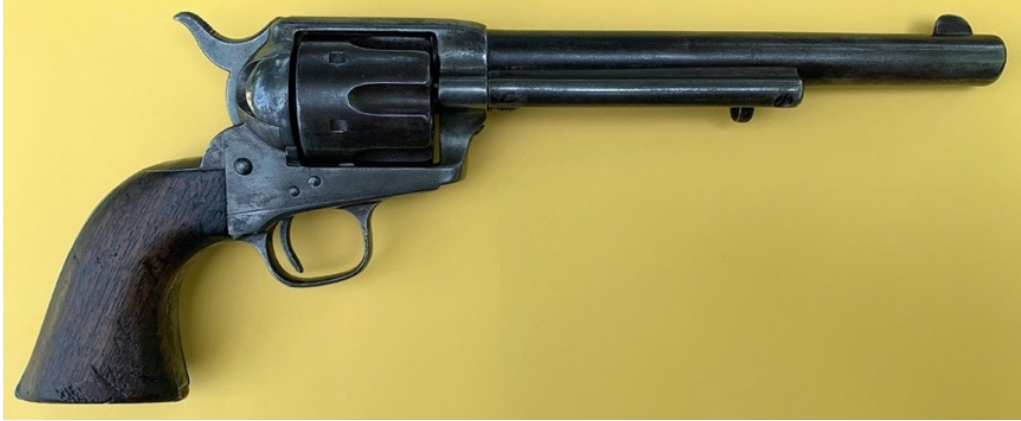


Colt historian and author John A. Kopec personally inspected and authenticated this Colt Single Action Army (SAA) cavalry revolver on July 23, 2019. Kopec and Dr. H. Sterling Fenn wrote *Cavalry & Artillery Revolvers...a Continuing Study*. This book is considered by many to be the definitive collectors' guide for Colt Cavalry and Artillery revolvers. In his authentication letter, Kopec noted that this revolver was manufactured during 1874 and sub-inspected by Ordnance Department employee Orville W. Ainsworth. Ainsworth was responsible for inspecting the first group of Colt SAA cavalry revolvers purchased by the U.S. Government.

In 1874, the U.S. Ordnance Department issued 921 Colt SAA cavalry revolvers to the 7th Cavalry while the regiment was at Fort Abraham Lincoln in the Dakota Territory. Of this number, 282 were from Colt Production Lot 6, which consisted of revolvers in the 5506-6516 serial number range. Companies D & I were issued 166 of these sidearms, with the remaining 116 being distributed to other companies in the regiment.

In a letter dated June 9, 2003, Dr. Fenn stated that all 282 Lot 6 revolvers issued to the 7th Cavalry saw action at the Battle of the Little Bighorn. He added "very few" of them survived capture by Sitting Bull's warriors.

Mr. Kopec later acknowledged, "Because so many of these 7th Cavalry revolvers had been captured during the Battle of the Little Bighorn, records of verified and accountable serial numbers are very sparse." Today, there are two dozen or so cavalry revolvers from Lot 6 (#5506-#6516) with documented 7th Cavalry history or Little Bighorn Battle association. Here are some of them.



Subject Revolver, Serial Number 6078

- #6038: This revolver is on display at the Custer Battlefield Museum and is pictured in the book *Artifacts of the Battle of the Little Big Horn* by Will Hutchison.
- #6048: The backstrap from this revolver was unearthed in 1984 during an archeological dig at the Custer Battlefield.
- #6055: Captain Myles Moylan, Commander, Company A, 7th U.S. Cavalry, carried this revolver during the Battle of the Little Bighorn.
- #6066: According to the book *Documenting the Weapons Used at the Little Bighorn* by Wendell Grangaard, this revolver was found in the engine room of a decommissioned steamboat used to transport troops. The "U.S." on the frame had been obliterated and the gun painted black, both modifications indicative of Indian use. Mr. Kopec's book lists this gun as a "presumptive" Custer Battle revolver.
- #6067: This revolver was found at the Fort Peck Sioux Reservation, north of the Custer Battlefield. Indian oral history indicates it was captured at the Little Bighorn. Like our subject revolver, the "U.S." on the frame had been removed.
- #6086: According to the book "*Artifacts of the Battle of the Little Big Horn*," this revolver was captured on the Custer Battlefield by Lakota warrior White Bull. This gun is discussed further on the next page.
- #6269: This revolver was found at the site of Sitting Bulls' camp in Saskatchewan, Canada. The Hunkpapa Lakota medicine man migrated there after the Battle of the Little Bighorn.
- #6298: Mr. Kopec said this relic revolver was located 10-20 miles south of the Little Bighorn Battlefield in the ruins of a burnt-out wagon on the Cheyenne reservation.
- #6310: In 1999, Dr. Fenn concluded this revolver was likely captured or lost at the Battle of the Little Bighorn. He noted the U.S. acceptance mark and part of the patent information were missing.

- #6450: The cylinder from this revolver was unearthed at the Custer Battlefield in 1978.

(Note: Colt produced up to 50 cavalry revolvers each day during this period. This means that #6078 and the first five revolvers listed above could have been made the same day!)

Here's a closer look at one of the firearms mentioned earlier. White Bull, the son of a Sioux chief and nephew of Sitting Bull, was 26 when he fought at the Little Bighorn. Following the battle, he fled to Canada with other members of his tribe. In a later interview, he recounted how he took a Colt revolver from a deceased soldier and obtained another handgun for an unidentified officer whom he had killed. Below is an image from the book "Artifacts of the Battle of the Little Bighorn," showing one of the two guns White Bull captured from the 7th Cavalry. Only seven guns separate it from subject revolver.



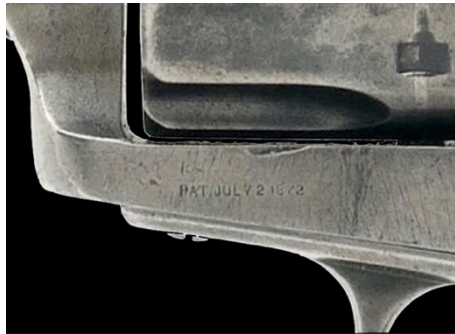
White Bull



In 1893, the U.S. Government declared the Colt SAA revolver obsolete. At this point, nearly all cavalry revolvers issued to the Regular Army were recalled by the Ordnance Department and placed in storage. Then in 1898, at the start of the Spanish-American War, most of these cavalry revolvers were altered to what we now refer to as the "Artillery" configuration. This

typically means that the barrel was cut to 5 ½ inches and the rest of the gun assembled with mixed parts without regard to serial numbers. How did this gun escape this process?

The absence of the patent dates and the U.S. acceptance mark on the frame may provide the answer. It was a common practice for hostile Indians to remove these symbols of Army ownership on captured weapons. In his book, Kopec identified four presumptive 7th Cavalry revolvers where the U.S. had been obliterated, presumably by Indians. In a letter dated February 24, 2018, he reiterated that the removal of these marks is “strong evidence of prior Indian use.”



*#6066 (Presumptive Custer
Battle Revolver)*



#6078 (Subject Revolver)

Colt cavalry revolver #6066 is identified in Kopec's book as a presumptive 7th Cavalry sidearm. In his authentication letter, he suggests the obliteration of the frame markings show it was likely an “Indian captured revolver.” During the Indian Wars, Native American tribes frequently removed the "US" markings from captured Colt revolvers as a symbol of ownership and resistance against the United States. Upon examining the photo of #6078, it appears the markings were obliterated in a similar manner as #6066.

Collectively, these findings provide a compelling case for the potential use of #6078 by the 7th Cavalry at the Battle of the Little Bighorn:

1. Subject revolver originated from Lot 6, a prime source from which the 7th Cavalry drew their sidearms nearly two years before the battle.¹
2. All Lot 6 revolvers issued to the 7th Cavalry in 1874 were carried at the Little Bighorn.²
3. Very few of the 7th Cavalry's Lot 6 revolvers at the Little Bighorn survived capture by Sitting Bull's warriors.³
4. This gun's serial number falls among a group of revolvers with documented 7th Cavalry history or Little Bighorn Battle association.⁴
5. The obliteration of the "U.S." and patent marks on the frame strongly suggests #6078 was captured by hostile Indians.⁵

6. The escape of #6078 from the Ordnance Department recall of 1893 raises the distinct possibility that it may have been lost, captured, stolen, or is in the possession of a state militia.⁶ However, the last possibility can likely be ruled out because there is no evidence that #6078 had ever been issued to a state militia.

Mr. Kopec reviewed the information presented here and provided the following insight: *“Because we have so few records of these early issues and transactions it will always be up to us to seek out the sparse information that we do have and try to make the best possible judgements. You have certainly accomplished this in your article.”* He added, *“Your analysis of the situation appears to be totally correct, with the little available information.”*



Subject revolver with original belt & flap holster. (Author's Collection)

Footnotes:

1. John A. Kopec & H. Sterling Fenn, *Cavalry & Artillery Revolvers...a Continuing Study*, 1st Edition (Newport Beach, CA 92660: Graphic Publishers, 1994), p. 259.
2. H. Sterling Fenn, "Letter of Authentication for Colt M-1873 Revolver S/N 6432," June 9, 2003. P. 2.
3. Ibid.
4. Colt Forum, 1st Generation Colt Single Action Army Serial Number List, <https://www.coltforum.com/threads/1st-generation-colt-saa-serial-numbers-1873-1940.296378/#replies>, Post 1, Dec 18, 2018.
5. Kopec & Fenn, *...a Continuing Study*, p. 281.
6. John Kopec, Memorandum to Rock Island Auction Company, June 10, 2021.