

The Talented Benjamin Franklin Joslyn **by James Genco**

Benjamin Franklin Joslyn was a prolific inventor. During his lifetime he secured 25 patents relating to firearms, designed three different breech mechanisms for long-arms, and a large caliber percussion revolver. All models of his carbines and pistol saw extensive use in the Civil War.

Joslyn was born in 1821, probably in Worcester, Massachusetts, and grew up in that community. Although little is known of his youth, Joslyn developed a great interest in firearms, no doubt influenced by the substantial gun manufacturing industry in the Worcester area. Joslyn first broke upon the firearms scene in 1855 with his patent for a breech-loading carbine. The design featured the use of a long lever at the back of the barrel which operated the breech plug. The lever terminated in a distinctive loop, giving rise to the collector's label as the Joslyn "monkey tail" carbine.

To manufacture his newly patented carbine, Joslyn went to nearby Millbury where he engaged the long established gun manufactory of Asa H. Waters. Waters, a quality gun-maker with fifty years of experience, ultimately made 1,500 carbines and a few hundred rifles in 1855-56. The single-shot carbine was finely made, with a 23 ½ inch, .54 caliber barrel, brass butt plate, trigger guard and barrel band, and a walnut stock. It had a vulnerable rear sight with the single folding leaf, with an elevation bar, and no protective siding. Ignition was with a percussion cap and it had a carbine sling ring opposite the lock.

Joslyn retained William C. Freeman of New York City to market his gun and Freeman was able to convince the U.S. Army to include the M1855 Joslyn in tests conducted in 1857 and 1858. Although it was the runner-up to the Burnside in both years, the Joslyn tested well enough to obtain Army contracts for 1,200 carbines for further testing in the field. When the Civil War broke out, these carbines were among those to first to see service. Records reflect that the 2nd, 3d, 4th and 6th Ohio Cavalry were all armed in part with M1855 Joslyn carbines. The fact that they were in the field for the entire war explains their scarcity and generally well-used condition today. In addition to the Army carbines, the Navy contracted for 500 rifles of this pattern, but for unknown reasons, only a couple hundred were delivered. Thus it appears that less than 2000 M1855 long arms were made, and almost all saw military service.

With the outbreak of the Civil War, Benjamin Joslyn moved to the borough of Stonington, Connecticut, located on Long Island Sound, adjacent to the Rhode Island border. There he established the Joslyn Fire Arms Company and leased an impressive granite factory building owned by a prominent resident, John F. Trumbull. The factory was located on the harbor, was a fairly new structure being built in 1851. Its location on the harbor facilitated easy shipment. It had been first used to make horseshoe nails, and then "trinkets" for trading in Asia. Furthermore, Stonington's relatively isolated location, with few manufacturing facilities in the area to compete for workers, undoubtedly allowed Joslyn to assemble a work force with a reasonable payroll. From this modest factory, the Joslyn Fire Arms Company produced a total of 16,500 carbines, 11,261 of which were sold to the Federal Government, and 3,000 army caliber revolvers.

When Joslyn established his new factory, he tooled up for a carbine with an entirely different, newly patented breech and ignition design. The new carbine, the M1862, featured a rimfire cartridge, rather than a percussion cap ignition. Furthermore, the long "monkey tail," breech system was replaced by a simple friction latch, operated side to side, that caused the breech-block to pivot sideways toward the off-side of

the arm. The caliber was reduced to .52, and the barrel was shortened to 22 inches. The rear sight was redesigned to a sturdier folding leaf with side protection. The over-all carbine did, however, retain its general configuration with a walnut stock and brass mountings. The Government purchased 2,200 of these carbines made between 1862 and 1863. An additional 1,300 were made and purchased on the open market by individuals or States.

In addition to his carbine, Joslyn decided to use his new factory to make an impressive army revolver of his own design. The system had been patented in 1858 but never put into production. The .44 caliber revolver features a side-mounted hammer and is reminiscent of the small .31 caliber Colt Root pocket model. It is a five-shot revolver with a cylinder pin that is extracted to the rear. Although the earliest guns had brass butt plate, most of the production was made with an iron butt-plate. Approximately 3,000 were made from late 1861 through 1862, with about half being purchased by the Federal Government. Most, if not all of the Government purchases were issued to Ohio cavalry units.

In field service the friction breech block was found unsatisfactory in that it could be inadvertently opened if it caught on something or was struck, so Joslyn improved and patented a new design that used a pull-knob in place of the friction latch. He also made the firing pin less prone to damage by designing a protective hood to shield it. Finally, as this new design went into production as the Model of 1864, he substituted iron mountings for the brass. By this time, the factory was running smoothly and he turned out over 12,500 of this model, 8,000 of which were sold to the Federal Government. Virtually all of these carbines were delivered in time to see service in the war. Union cavalry regiments armed with M1862 and M1864 Joslyn carbines included the 4th and 8th Indiana, 19th New York, 13th Tennessee, 9th Pennsylvania, 3d West Virginia, 2nd Wisconsin, 1st Nebraska, 1st Nevada and 11th Ohio.

The Ordnance Department was so impressed with the M1864 design that it purchased over 3,000 of the breech units to use to build rifles. These were the first true breech-loading rifles built at a National Armory. They were not conversions, but built from scratch and fired a 50-60-450 Joslyn rim-fire cartridge. Between January and June 1865, Springfield Armory made 3,007 of these rifles. Records show that they were issued to U.S. Veteran Volunteer units manning the defenses of Washington.

With the end of the Civil War, Joslyn, like many war time gun makers, fell on hard times. The civilian market was not strong enough to sustain the company. In short order, Joslyn went bankrupt and his assets were sold at Sheriff's sale in 1868.

Sources: Carbines of the Civil War, by John D. McAulay (1981); U.S. Civil War Carbines, by James Whisker, Larry Yantz and Daniel Hartzler (2001); Civil War Guns, by William B. Edwards (1962).

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