

A SUCCESSFUL FAILURE

FIRST MODEL ALLIN ALTERATION

SPRINGFIELD MODEL 1865 RIFLE

by Martin Miller

Dec. 5, 1864 memo from Brig. Gen. A.B. Dyer, Chief of Ordnance: "...experience of war has shown that breech lading arms are greatly superior to muzzle loaders..."

December 19, 1864 memo from Major Laidley to Brig. Gen. Dyer: "...Twenty-five rounds were fired from a Springfield musket altered to breech loader from the plan proposed by Mr. Allin."

Great, now the US Army could be equipped with breech loading, metallic cartridge arms, except Congress had prohibited buying for testing any new designs. So what was going on? There are no records. All was done in what we would today call a "black program", a secret project, kept even from Congress' eyes. It also allowed Erskine S. Allin, Superintendent of Springfield Armory's design a head start on other designers and manufacturers. Several other designs, like the Peabody, were tested with good results. The Peabody was sold in large numbers overseas.

The Civil War ended and the Army was allowed to re-equip with breech loading rifles and final fine tuning was done on Allin's design which became the Springfield Model 1865 Rifle. Five thousand and six were produced commencing in January 1866. Springfield's writ was to "alter" existing percussion muskets of the 1863 type with the least cost, emphasis cost, and alteration of parts.

This was the successful part of the Allin design. Essentially a partial section of the breech end of the barrel was "scoped" out, a hinged bolt, and frame brazed in and the hammer face milled flat to hit the firing pin. The cost was roughly \$5.00 versus \$20.00 for a "new" rifle. Since most of these First Models are dated 1865 it's obvious that there was not a lot of "altering" complete muskets going on. Best guess is that they were made up from completed, but not assembled, parts. The caliber was also .58 caliber rim-fire.

It quickly became apparent that the "ratchet assisted" extractor was too delicate for hard use. Oh, and a new cartridge, the caliber .50-70 Gov't. would replace the .58 RF Musket cartridge. In 1866 a redesigned "Trapdoor" Allin was introduced with more altered parts, including a new bolt and bored and sleeved barrel. The Allin was again altered in 1868 and 1870 by which time there were few if any "original muskets" being utilized. Some 87,922 rifles were manufactured in the later three models.

In 1873 a totally redesigned “Trapdoor” rifle and carbine were adopted with the new .45-70 Gov’t. cartridge. This model, and its tinkered with cousins, were manufactured from all new parts.

In a number of trials other designs, such as the Remington Rolling Block would prove superior in performance to the Allin design, but the Army would stick with the Trapdoor until the bolt-action Krag-Jorgensen was adopted in 1892. There has always been the suspicion that the Allin was a “political” choice because of his job at the Armory and that old canard “not invented here”. The Trapdoor was always a weak design with the hinged bolt, but did prove adequate for the most part and is a highly collectible US Military arm.

A quick look at two auction sights in 2010 and 2011 show an estimated price of \$2750-4500 and \$6,000 to \$8,000 price range for First Models in good to fine condition.