



Colt and His Legacy in Hartford

Rather than focusing on Connecticut industry at large for this article in the *Connecticut Industry During Times of War Series*, I wanted to focus on a specific Connecticut industrialist. That being the highly influential Samuel Colt and his legacy. Samuel Colt was born in 1814 in Hartford, Connecticut and maintained an interest in pyrotechnics through his youth. Experiments involving pyrotechnics would see him kicked out of boarding school in 1830 after causing a fire damaging school property. His father then sent him off to learn to be a seaman that same year. It was here that Colt saw the clutch mechanism of a ship's wheel that inspired him to improve upon the revolver design (connecticuthistory.org).

Colt being the inventor of the revolver is not technically correct. Indeed, guns firing from a revolving cylinder had been around centuries before Colt. However, the cylinder or "wheel" of these wheelguns had to be turned and indexed by hand. Colt's revolutionary contribution was his idea of a manually operated hammer that would automatically revolve the cylinder and lock into the correct position for firing. He would receive a patent for his revolving pistol design and create his first company, the Patent Arms Manufacturing Company, in 1836 in the town of Paterson, New Jersey. This first venture was a failure with the company closing 7 years later. It wasn't until Captain Walker of the Texas Rangers asked Colt to make him 1,000 pistols of a new design that Colt would have the capital to establish his new business back in Connecticut: Colt's Patent Fire-Arms Manufacturing



Company (Museum of Connecticut History). Colt's design would now continue to see successful iterations and rising sales numbers.

One of Colt's greatest strengths was his marketing prowess. He would present engraved and gold decorated guns to notable individuals and heads of state to attract new orders via an early version of celebrity endorsement (Museum of CT History). If a news source mentioned Colt or talked negatively about his competitors, he would buy hundreds of copies of that edition and send the editor a free revolver with his inscription on it (Hosley 1999). He saw the value of mythmaking and catchy marketable slogans. Samuel Colt and later the Colt company would often market the product as an equalizer for the vulnerable against the powerful, a protector, or an essential part of rugged frontier life.

In 1855, Colt built the Hartford factory complex complete with its Blue Onion dome atop the East Armory that we've all driven by on I-91. The complex, named Coltsville, spanned 260 acres complete with multiple factory buildings, recreation areas, worker housing, and Colt's personal mansion. In just a year, Colt's factory was producing 150 firearms a day. Although the assembly line concept is largely attributed to Henry Ford, Colt's Hartford location was one of the birthplaces of precision manufacturing and mass production (Eric Hintz, Smithsonian). Working with Elisha Root, the Colt factory had specialized machinery to assist in making identical parts, hastening the old process of hand fitting. Different steps of the process would then be done by employees in an assembly line fashion.

I mentioned the Blue Onion, but the one we are familiar with is not the original. Samuel Colt would die in 1862 and a fire would burn down most of the armory in 1864. The heir to his company would be his wife, Elizabeth Colt, who would lead the company until 1901. It was her decision to rebuild the structure, including the iconic blue dome, rather than close it down. The rampant colt that sat in Colt's private garden was used as the replacement to adorn the top of the dome. A century later, the dome was in disrepair and efforts to do



maintenance caused the head of the colt to fall off. It was sold to Peter Tillou, an art dealer of Litchfield, who then sold it to the Museum of Connecticut History. The picture seen in this article is of the 1867 rampant colt statue that can be seen at the museum today. The colt that sits on the current Blue Onion was commissioned in the early 2000s and is made of fiberglass (National Park Service).

Samuel Colt was not only a revolutionary inventor, but a remarkable salesman, innovator, and industrialist. The Colt name is one that nears the top of the list in terms of Connecticut ingenuity throughout the years. Today, a collection of rare or early Colt firearms can be seen at the Museum of Connecticut History, where much of the information found in this article was sourced. Since 2014,

Coltsville has been in the process of becoming an official National Historic Park with the National Park Service. Colt Gateway, a management company currently owning most of the Colt complex, hosts apartments, commercial offices, an event venue, and the Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts Full Day high school. All of this helps maintain the spirit of innovation in this area and sees that the legacy of the Colt family continues to be preserved.

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The Gardiner Hall Jr Museum is open to the public Saturdays from 10:00am to 12:00pm. For more information, please call 518-791-9474.