

.54" BURNSIDE CARBINE



The **Burnside** was a breech-loading carbine that saw widespread use during the American Civil War. The carbine was designed about 1855 and patented by Ambrose Burnside, who was treasurer of the pre-war Bristol Firearms Company, of Bristol Rhode Island, and who resigned his commission in the U.S. Army to devote himself full time to working on the weapon. Over 100,000 (progressive of 5 improvements) were made by the Bristol Firearms or Burnside Rifle companies between 1858 and 1870.

In 1857, the Burnside carbine won a competition at West Point against 17 other carbine designs. In spite of this, few of the carbines were immediately ordered by the government, but this changed with the outbreak of the Civil War, when over 55,000 were ordered for use by Union cavalymen. This made it the third most common carbine of the Civil War; only the Sharps carbine and the Spencer carbine were more widely used. They saw action in all theatres of the war. Five different models were produced, but toward the end of the Civil War, production was discontinued when the Burnside Rifle Company was given a contract to make Spencer carbines instead.

There were so many in service that many were captured and used by Confederates. By using ordnance returns and ammunition requisitions, it has been estimated that 43 Union cavalry regiments were using the Burnside carbine during the 1863-1864 period. Additionally, seven Confederate cavalry units were at least partially armed with the weapon during this same period. A common complaint by users was that the unusually shaped cartridge sometimes became stuck in the breech after firing.

The carbine used a .54" calibre brass cartridge patented by Burnside on March 25, 1860 (Pat. #14491). Pressing the weapon's two trigger guards opened the breech block and allowed the user to insert a cartridge. The unique, cone-shaped case sealed the joint between the barrel and the breech. Most other breech-loading weapons of the day tended to leak hot gas when fired, but Burnside's design eliminated this problem



The familiar lubrication belt at the mouth was an improvement under the George Foster patent #27791 of April 10, 1860 and 21,819,200 of these were purchased by the Ordnance Department during the civil war.

The organisational issues that plagued Burnside after he became a General in the Federal Army did not begin with warfare. Difficulties in filling orders and meeting deadlines plagued the Bristol arms company. After orders were placed by the federal government, missed production deadlines and snafus in logistics drove the War Department to commence production of the cartridge at its own arsenals, (which goes some way towards explaining the number of case variations known).

The Burnside carbine, obsolete after the Civil War, was rapidly withdrawn from service. But its use by black powder enthusiasts, along with many other Civil War firearms, continues to the present, with both metallic and plastic case reproduction cartridges made for that purpose.



Above is a red plastic reproduction case made by Quinlan's Cartridges of Florida. (I imported a few of these to try during the late 1960s.) **BWG**