

Uncommon, but Super:

The Pre-WWII Colt Super .38 Automatic

by Kevin Williams

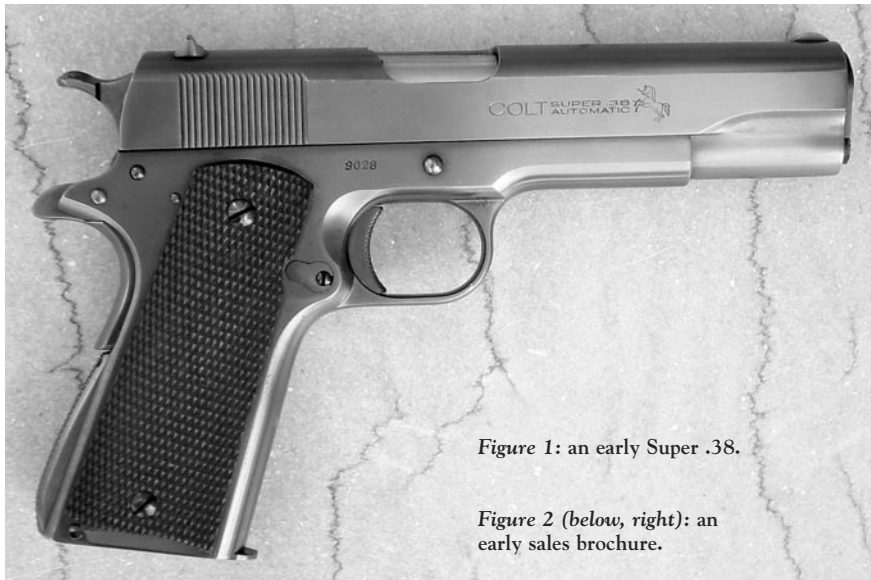


Figure 1: an early Super .38.

Figure 2 (below, right): an early sales brochure.

BACKGROUND

John M. Browning's first automatic pistol, now commonly referred to as the Model 1900, was for .38 caliber. It was quickly followed by the Military and Sporting Models of 1902, and in 1903 a shortened version was sold as the Pocket Model. The U.S. Ordnance Department conceded that these pistols "posses[ed] numerous advantages over the revolver"¹ and bought a limited number of them. However, .38 caliber revolvers proved to have such limited stopping power during the Philippine Insurrection that the Army's Chief of Ordnance, General William Crozer, ordered Captains John T. Thompson and Major Louis A. LaGarde, M.D., to study the issue and make recommendations for "a bullet which will have the stopping power and shock effect...for a pistol for the military service."² The Thompson-LaGarde study on livestock and cadavers led to the development

of the M1905 pistol and .45 ACP ammunition. The Browning-designed 1902 was scaled up and strengthened to handle the larger caliber, and the design continued to be tested, refined and developed until the Colt Model of 1911 was adopted as the standard sidearm of the U.S. Army. The Navy quickly followed suit.

Colt began offering a commercial version of the M1911 in March 1912. Its official designation was the "Colt Government Model Automatic Pistol, Caliber .45." The earlier designs in .38 ACP continued to be sold by Colt, but sales declined through the 1920s, even though the cartridge had

some solid proponents, such as Major Julian S. Hatcher, who thought the ballistics of the .38 were too good to die.

By 1928, Colt had redesigned the Government Model to fire an improved .38 ACP cartridge and previewed it at



The New Colt Super 38 Automatic

What more logical step could Colt engineers have taken than to produce a .38 — with all the advantages of this powerful cartridge — along the same lines as the famous Colt .45 Automatic Government Model. Every outstanding feature of this world renowned arm has been embodied in the New Super .38 — all of its safety features, the arched housing permitting a firmer, surer grip, its proven accuracy, its unflinching efficiency. With such a heritage... small wonder the New Colt Super .38 looms as the most popular all around outdoor arm ever produced.

Specifications

CAPACITY OF MAGAZINE.....9 cartridges
LENGTH OF BARREL.....5 inches
LENGTH OVER ALL.....8 1/2 inches
WEIGHT.....39 ounces
FINISH—Full Blued, Checkered Walnut Stock
CHECKED TRIGGER
ARCHED HOUSING

A Real He-Man Gun!

For the Big Game Hunter, Trapper, Explorer and Target Shooter

That split second of danger, when every shot must reach its mark...unfailing, unswerving... calls for an arm that shoots fast, with deadly accuracy and telling results. Lives may hang in the balance, and lives may well depend on such an arm as this — a faster, straighter, more effective shooting .38 than ever before produced. Modeled after that most famous of all Automatics... the Colt .45 Government Model... the New Colt Super .38 bids fair to match its famous brother in all that a gun can do. A grip that's certain, an action that is positive, and a safety lock that simply cannot fail. Every merit a gun could possibly possess — backed by 93 years experience of the oldest and most famous manufacturer of firearms in the world... makers of Colts since 1836.

BALLISTICS
Weight of Bullet... 130 Grains
Muzzle Velocity... 1180 Feet Per Second
Muzzle Energy... 408 Foot Pounds
Penetration... 12 1/2 in. Pine Boards

the National Matches in Camp Perry, Ohio, that fall. The Colt Super .38 Automatic Pistol began shipping in January 1929, and the May 1929 issue of the *American Rifleman* carried an article by Maj. Hatcher that could not have been more enthusiastic. He compared it to the Luger and Mauser pistols in 9mm and found the simple, strong, modern design of the Colt, and the ballistics of the new Super .38 cartridge, vastly superior. The flat trajectory and deep penetration of the cartridge were heavily promoted with hunters of the day. "The Ideal 'One-hand-gun' for Big Game. Will stop any animal on the American Continent" heralded early advertisements. But forward-thinking men on both sides of the law took note of Hatcher's prescience when he wrote, "...that a man wearing one of the bullet-proof vests which are now becoming popular in certain quarters would have much more reason to be afraid of the Super .38 than of the .45."³

COPS AND ROBBERS

The "Roaring Twenties" were partially symbolized by the Thompson submachine gun and Colt automatic pistols, which were being used by mobsters from Chicago to New York. Recognizing the need for greater firepower, police departments in Burlington, Vermont, St. Louis, Missouri and Escanaba, Michigan, started buying Colt Super .38 pistols. The ability to penetrate car bodies and bulletproof vests became important and did not go unnoticed by the infamous gangsters of the 1930s—John Dillinger, "Baby Face" Nelson, Homer Van Meter and many others. Dillinger and Nelson had saddle maker and gunsmith Harold Lebman of San Antonio convert Colt pistols into fully automatic submachine guns complete with extended magazines and Thompson foregrips.

Colt's engineering department submitted similar design prototypes, in both Super .38 and .45 ACP calibers, to the U.S. Government for consideration as military weapons. TWA equipped their pilots with Super .38s, and foreign sales to countries like Panama, Siam, the Philippines and Mexico were brisk. Quite a few Texas Rangers, FBI Special Agents and Sheriffs all across the country started carrying the Colt. The power and the popularity of Colt's Super .38 prompted Smith & Wesson to load a hotter .38 Special cartridge and develop the .38/.44 Heavy Duty revolver. They followed up in 1935 with the introduction of the .357 Magnum

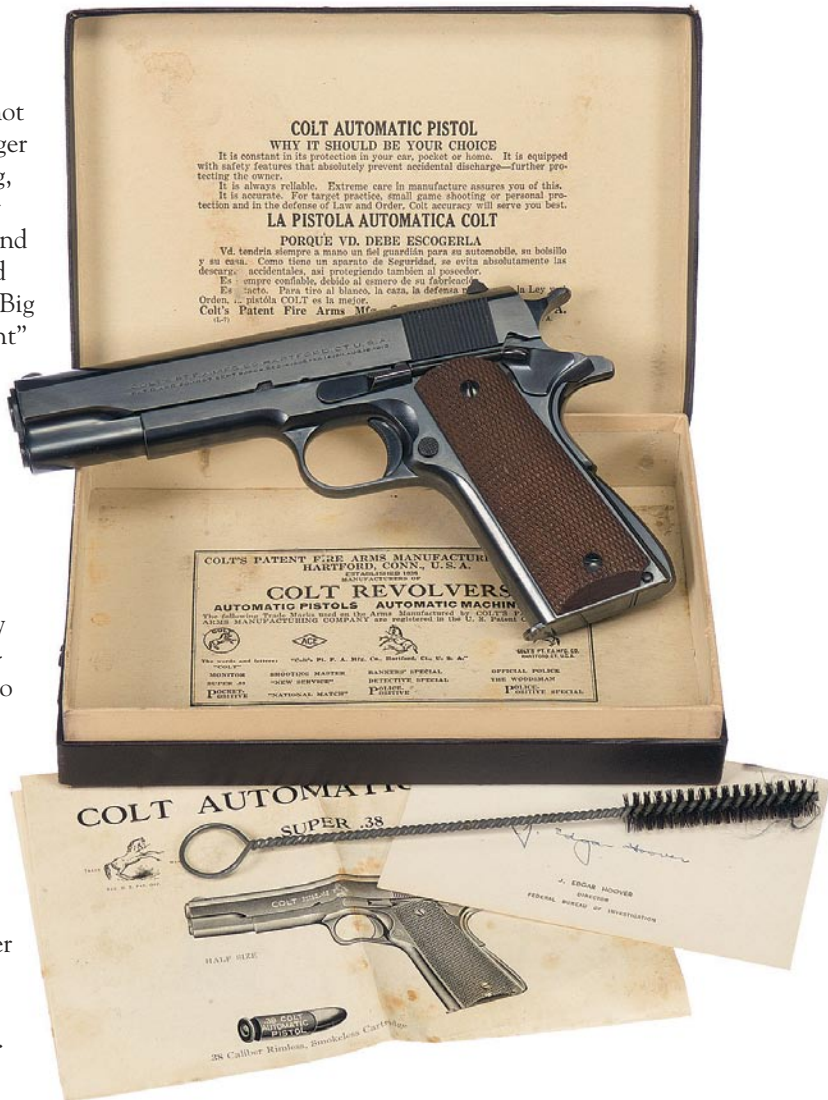


Figure 3 (above): J. Edgar Hoover's Super .38.



Figure 4 (above): a Super .38 converted to full-auto by Colt.

Figure 5 (below): the front strap of a police-issue Super .38.



revolver,
which fired the first
handgun cartridge to eclipse
the power of the Super .38.

TARGET SHOOTERS AND THE SUPER MATCH

In 1932, Colt had begun offering an upgraded





Figure 6: Super Match and National Match. The Super Match in factory nickel is a rarity.



Figure 7: a "Battle of Britain" Super .38. Note the British marks inset at right.



Figure 8: a Super .38 supplied to the OSS. Inset are a close-up of the ordnance escutcheon on the right side of the frame behind the grip, and a package of U.S. military Super .39 ammunition.

Government Model .45, the National Match, which featured Partridge sights, a hand-honed action and “selected” match barrel. The Super .38 shooters demanded the same upgrades, so in 1934 the Match Super .38 was introduced. In 1935, the roll mark was changed to Super Match, and the Stevens adjustable sight became standard on the Super Match pistols and was offered as an option on the National Match pistols. The number of permutations for future collectors was growing rapidly. There were now standard Super .38s, Match and Super Match pistols, fixed or adjustable sights, not to mention options like a nickel finish, special stocks (grips) or factory engraving. In 1937, the Swartz firing pin safety was slipped into production (noted as “NSD” for new safety device in the shipping records), adding yet another variation.

WORLD WAR II

Before America entered the war, Great Britain took delivery of 1,120 Super .38s and 309 Super Match pistols to help defend their home front. Many of these had a wide red stripe painted on top of them to highlight the fact that they were a non-standard caliber. All of them got the standard British property and inspection marks.

Shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Colt suspended manufacture of commercial pistols (including international sales) to devote their production capacity to filling U.S. government contracts. The U.S. Army saw no reason to consider a replacement caliber for the

M1911A1 (upgraded from the M1911 configuration in 1926). However, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), which was America’s first centralized intelligence service, preferred the Colt Pocket Hammerless pistols in .32 and .380 caliber, and the Super .38. A memorandum from the London OSS office dated May 22, 1943, explains:

On the supply side I believe that the most important single item for this theater is pistols.

I have talked to some of our recruits who may be going to the field in June, and they want very much a 32 calibre Colt or Browning, or a 38 calibre Super Colt.

These weapons are much better for use in the field than the 45...

The Ordnance Department would not let Colt divert the production of M1911A1s to meet the OSS demand for Super .38s until April 1945, when a requisition for 400 Super .38s was given to Colt. These pistols were delivered to the OSS warehouse in Rosslyn, Virginia, in July 1945.⁴ The Super .38s made for this contract were not U.S. Property marked. However, they did have a number of distinctive features:

1. A flat-sided hammer, rather than the wide prewar hammer.
2. A checkered thumb safety but grooved slide stop.
3. A stamped trigger, rather than the milled prewar version.
4. Brown plastic military grips.



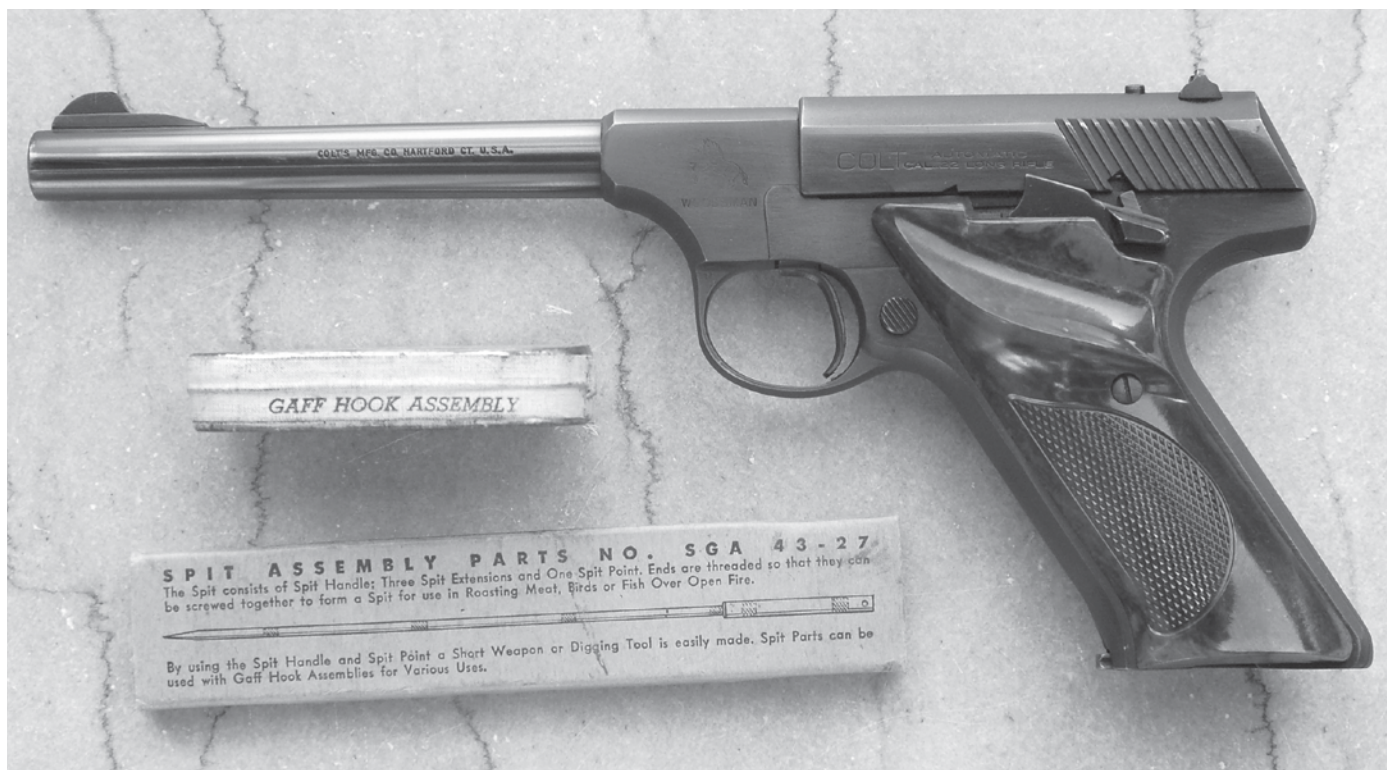
Two Super .38 pistols, serial numbers 35100 and 35475, were delivered in February 1944 to the Office of the Chief of Ordnance, Technical Division, Washington, D.C. Until recently, it was assumed that these pistols were connected to the OSS contract, even though that requisition was delivered more than a year later. The reality is that these pistols have their own story to tell, which came to light when the author acquired one of them.

In January 1944, Colonel W.M. Tisdale, Ordnance Department, Chief, Field Service Branch of the Army Air Forces (USAAF) wrote to the Commanding General of the Army Services Forces at the Pentagon to request a number of small arms to be evaluated by a board of officers convened to consider the best emergency survival weapons for AAF flying personnel downed in isolated country. The list of requested small arms is reminiscent of Noah's Ark — two of every sort:⁵

5. Fully blued magazine.
6. Ordnance escutcheon on the right side of the frame behind the grip.
7. "G.H.D." military acceptance stamp on the left side of the frame near the magazine release.
8. Swartz safety.

*Figure 9 (above, left): Colt .32 shipped to the OSS.
Figure 10 (below): Super .38 survival pistol.*





- Pistol, automatic, cal. .45, M1911A1 2 each
- Pistol, automatic, cal. .38 2 each
- Revolver, Colt, cal. .38, special 2 each
- Pistol, automatic, cal. .32, Colt 2 each
- Pistol, Colt, cal. .22 Woodsman—Long barrel 1 each
- Pistol, Colt, cal. .22 Woodsman—Short " 1 each
- Carbine, cal. .30, M1A3 (Folding Stock) 2 each
- Gun, over and under, cal. .22/.410 gage 2 each

When the guns were shipped, two .32 caliber Colt revolvers, a .380 caliber Colt automatic pistol and two smoothbore .45 caliber barrels for the M1911A1 pistol were included, along with 500 rounds of ammunition for each weapon. The over/under guns were Marble's Game Getters, one with 18-inch barrels and the other with 12-inch barrels.

The Super .38s have no U.S. Property or military inspection marks and appear to be cobbled together with some wartime parts. The major components (frame, slide, barrel, hammer, slide stop, thumb safety and mainspring housing) are prewar quality and finish. However, the rear sight, grip screws, plunger, grip safety and magazine catch are parkerized M1911A1 parts. The magazine is fully blued. When purchased by the author, No. 35475 was wearing a set of carved ivory "dragon chasing a pearl" motif grips, usually associated with occupied Japan. It would have shipped with either fully checkered walnut grips like the prewar pistols, or, more likely, a set of brown plastic military grips.

The exact process and outcome of the emergency weapon evaluations is unknown. However, Marble's Game Getters were carried in some bombers during WWII, as were M1 Carbines. The smoothbore barrels for M1911A1 pistols were approved in September 1945. M12 and M15 .45 ACP shot shells had been developed in 1943 and were included in the C1 survival vests issued to AAF pilots. In 1949, the U.S. Air Force bought 925 Woodsman pistols for Arctic survival use.

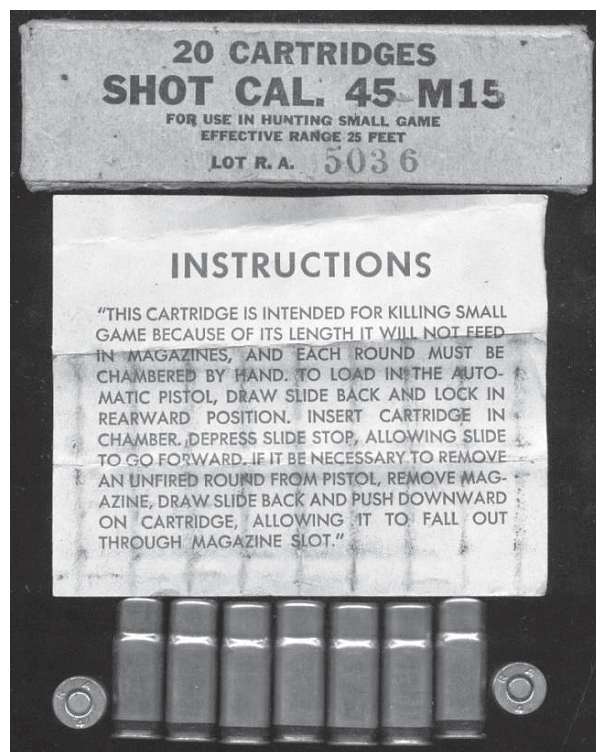


Figure 11 (top): an Arctic survival Woodsman.
 Figure 12 (middle): .45 ACP survival shot shells.
 Figure 13 (bottom): Marble's Game Getter.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The definitive books on Colt's .38 caliber pistols are those by Doug Sheldon, and a number of relevant sources are listed below. More recently, CCA Historian Lowell Pauli has done extensive research on these pistols, including the original shipping records at Colt and has finally given collectors firm production figures (see the collector notes below).

The author would like to thank John Lay, Lowell Pauli and Charles W. Pate. Collectors with further information to share on Colt's Super .38s can contact Kevin Williams via email at kevin@kwill.com.

ENDNOTES:

¹War Department, Annual Reports, 1900.

²October 8, 1903, letter from Gen. Crozer to Maj. LaGarde.

³Hatcher, Major Julian H., "The New Colt Super .38 Automatic," the *American Rifleman*, May 1929.

⁴Note: 24 of the 400 pistols ordered for the OSS were delivered to Remington for ammo testing. A huge quantity of ammunition had been ordered—32,000,000 rounds—and Remington figured that they would wear out 24 pistols testing that much ammo. The mistake was discovered at some point, but 2,000,000 rounds were produced and at the end of the war, the OSS had over 1,000,000 rounds of Super .38 ammo still in inventory at the Letterkenny Ordnance Depot.

⁵*The Bible*, Genesis 6:8-13

General Sources

Douglas G. Sheldon, *Colt's Super .38, The Production History From 1929 Through 1971*, privately published, Willernie, MN, 1997.

Douglas G. Sheldon, *Colt's .38 Automatic Pistols, The Production History of the "Automatic Colt Pistol"*, privately published, Willernie, MN, 1987.

Douglas G. Sheldon, "Colt's Military Super .38s," *American Rifleman*, October 1999.

Massad Ayoob, "The .38 Super Today," *Guns* magazine annual, 2003.

John Potocki, *The Colt Model 1905 Automatic Pistol*, Andrew Mowbray Publishers, Lincoln RI, 1998.

Charles W. Pate, *U.S. Handguns of World War II, The Secondary Pistols and Revolvers*, Andrew Mowbray Publishers, Lincoln, RI, 1998.

Charles W. Clawson, *Colt .45 Government Models (Commercial Series)*, privately published, 1996.

T.J. Mullin, *American Beauty, The Prewar Colt National Match Government Model*, Collector Grade Publications Incorporated, Cobourg, Ontario, Canada, 1999.

Walter Rickell, "The Super .38," *Guns*, October 1985, pp. 50-52, 57-59.

A Century of Achievement, *Colt's 100th Anniversary Fire Arms Manual*, Colt's Patent Fire Arms Mfg. Co., Hartford, CT, 1937.

Lt. Col. Williams S. Brophy, *Arsenal of Freedom, The Springfield Armory, 1890-1948*, Andrew Mowbray Incorporated—Publishers, 1991.

EX E X

O.O. 400.325/26717-Air Corps

Attn: SPOTS

AAF 400.1 (6 Jan 44)

3rd Indorsement

Figure 14: an Ordnance Dept. letter ordering test pistols.

Army Service Forces, Ordnance Department, Washington, D. C., 8 Feb 44

To: Headquarters, Army Service Forces, Washington, D. C.

1. Letterkenny Ordnance Depot has been directed to ship to the Army Air Forces Board, Orlando, Florida, the following items:

- a. Two (2) Pistols, Automatic, Caliber .45, M1911A1.
- b. Two (2) Revolvers, Colt, Caliber .38 Special.
- c. Two (2) Carbines, Caliber .30, M1A1 (folding stock)

The above items are to be shipped on Shipping Order No. A-B-16117.

2. Forwarded this date to the address mentioned in second indorsement from this office on Shipping Order No. SPOTS 10-5095 are the following items:

- a. Two (2) each, Pistols, Automatic, Cal. .38 (Colt Super .38) #35100 and #35475.
- b. Two (2) each, Pistols, Automatic, Cal. .38, Colt, #557390 and #558117
- c. One (1) Pistol, Automatic, Cal. .22, Colt Woodsman w/6 1/2" barrel, #148009
- d. One (1) Pistol, Automatic, Colt Woodsman, Cal. .22 w/4 1/2" barrel, #152363
- e. One (1) Pistol, Automatic, Cal. .380, Colt, #194829
- f. One (1) Marble Game Getter, Cal. .22-.410 w/18" barrels
- g. One (1) Marble Game Getter, Cal. .22-.440 w/12" barrels
- h. Two (2) Barrels, Smooth Bore, Cal. .45, M1911 (for use with Cartridges, Ball, Cal. .45, and Cartridges, Shot, Cal. .45, #12 & #15.)

3. Attention is invited to the fact that in addition to the weapons requested in basic communication, this office has forwarded one Colt Automatic Pistol, Caliber .380 and two smooth bore barrels, caliber .45 for use in the Pistol, Automatic, Caliber .45, M1911A1 in conjunction with ball or shot cartridges. It is believed these aforementioned items warrant consideration in the study as outlined in paragraph 2 of basic communication.

4. Ammunition requested is being procured and will be forwarded as soon as available.

For the Chief of Ordnance:

/s/ Rene' R. Studler
RENE' R. STUDLER
Colonel, Ordnance Dept.
Assistant.

Donald B. Bady, *Colt Automatic Pistols*, Pioneer Press, 2000.

Major Julian S. Hatcher, *Textbook of Pistols and Revolvers*, Small-Arms Technical Publishing Co., 1935.

Lowell E. Pauli, "Researching Colt National Matches and Colt Super Matches," *The Rampant Colt*, Vol. 28, No. 2, Summer 2008, pp. 9-12.

Collector Notes...

Between 1929 and 1945, Colt produced the Super .38 in its own serial number range: 1 through 37835. This range included 3,961 Match and Super Match pistols. Approximately 24,105 of these guns were shipped overseas or just after WWII, leaving less than 14,000 prewar guns in the U.S. (although many pistols originally shipped to international destinations have been repatriated). Many pistols on today's market are being "improved," i.e., refinished or modified to increase their value. Below are some details to help collectors ascertain originality.

BARRELS

Type	Years	SN Range	Super .38	Super Match
I.	1929-1933	1-15200	No markings	Circled M.B. on left lug (1934)
II.	1 st quarter 1934	14400 - ?	38 COLT on top of chamber	+ circled M.B. on left lug
III.	1934-1935	15000 - 20020	SUPER 38 AUTO on lower left side of chamber	+ circled M.B. on left lug
IV.	1935 to end	18900 - 37835	COLT SUPER 38 AUTO on lower left side of chamber	+ circled M.B. on left lug
V.	1937	25750 - 37835	N/A	COLT SUPER 38 AUTO MATCH on lower left side of chamber and circled M.B. on left lug

Note: the years and serial number ranges in the table above are approximated.



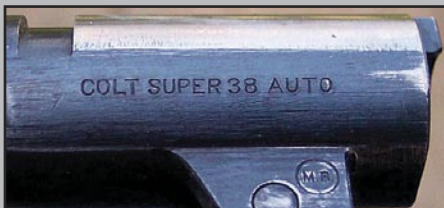
Type I Barrel



Type II Barrel



Type III Barrel



Type IV Barrel



Type V Barrel



Bogus Match Barrel

MAGAZINES

The magazines for the first 2,500 pistols (approx.) were roll-marked “.38 AUTO.” over “COLT” on the floor plate. The roll mark then changed to “COLT” in front of “SUPER” over “38 AUTO”. All prewar magazines were two-toned with pinned base plates.



First 2,500 magazines



Later magazines



Two-toned, pinned-base magazine. The “slot” at the top was added at about SN 10000 to aid feed reliability.

STOCKS (GRIPS)

The standard prewar stocks were fully checkered walnut with 28 rows of checkering between the screw holes. Ivory and pearl were factory options, generally without Colt medallions.



(left)
Original grips

(above)
Repro grips

SMALL PARTS

The hammer, trigger, slide release, safety, recoil spring plug and magazine release will all be checkered. The hammer will have a wide spur.

FINISH

Prewar guns have Colt's furnace-blued (Carbonia) finish, although nickel plating was a factory option.

MATCH/SUPER MATCH ROLL MARKS

The lowest number pistol with the MATCH roll mark is 14310; the highest observed is 17340. The lowest observed SUPER MATCH roll mark is 19667, although there are almost certainly some in the low 18000 range. The highest is 35999.

“SUPER MATCH” >18000

“MATCH” <18000

