

## Greene Underhammer, aka Greene Oval-Bore

As a collector, I've always been particularly drawn to quirky guns. By far the most quirky gun in my collection is the Greene Underhammer. It was nicknamed the “plug ugly” by its inventor. So how was it quirky?

- 1) It was the first bolt action arm purchased by the United States government.
- 2) The first underhammer arm purchased by the United States government.
- 3) The only oval (or Lancaster) bore rifle ever purchased by the United States government. The bore was slightly oval shaped and would rotate throughout the length of the barrel and therefore, a tightly fitting projectile would come out spinning, just like a rifle bullet. Unlike a true rifle though, there are no grooves and therefore, no sharp rifling edges, which makes the bore easier to clean. As a result, the projectile would be distorted into an oval shape. One author wrote that he test-fired the Greene a number of times and achieved “remarkable” accuracy.
- 4) Finally, it is the only firearm I know of where, hard as it is to believe, the bullet is placed in the paper wrapped cartridge behind the powder charge which makes for a very quirky firing procedure (see below).



Designed by Lieutenant Colonel James Durrell Greene it was awarded patent #18,639 in 1857. Production began in 1859 at the old armory of A. H. Waters and Company of Millbury, Massachusetts. Of the approximately 4,000 that were made 3,000 were made for the Russian government, 350 for the Viceroy of Egypt, and 350 for various Massachusetts militia units. From 1862 to 1863 — 900 were purchased by the U. S. government for \$36.96 each, none of which are known to have seen combat service. The State of Massachusetts militia units used Greenes at the battle of Antietam. Greene bullets have been recovered at that battle site. Lieutenant Colonel James Durrell Greene later designed the more conventional Greene Carbine which saw wider use in the Civil War.

To operate the firearm, you must realize that the bolt action is actually a bolt within a bolt. You first place a bare bullet into the action, close the outer bolt, cycle the inner bolt forward to drive the first bullet into the chamber, open the outer bolt, place a paper wrapped cartridge in (now behind the first bullet), close the outer bolt, cock the

underhammer, place a percussion cap on the nipple (with a slight pinch to keep the cap from falling off) and fire. The skirt of the minié ball type projectile from the paper cartridge will expand on the face of the inner bolt creating a gas seal. You then cycle the inner bolt forward to drive the that second bullet into the chamber, open the outer bolt, place a paper wrapped cartridge in (now behind the second bullet), etc.

On second thought “quirky” might be a bit of an understatement!

The pictured Greene is serial number 3154, was probably made in 1863, has a barrel length of 35" and weighs 9 lbs. 9 ozs. It is .53 caliber, fired a 480 grain minié ball and used a 54 grain black powder load.



I had some trouble picturing this so I am taking the liberty of appending a drawing that I found (Ed.):

