By John Marshall

The Smith & Wesson Model 1 revolver, first offered in 1857, was a landmark handgun in more ways than one. It was the very first Smith & Wesson revolver, and it also introduced the first .22 rimfire cartridge, which was patented earlier by S&W in 1854. That ammunition is still made today and is known as the .22 Short. These tiny revolvers were revolutionary when first introduced, and they are collector classics today.

Horace Smith and Daniel B. Wesson had formed their first partnership in 1852. They were involved in manufacturing a number of guns, notably lever-action pistols and rifles using self-contained caseless cartridges. That same lever-action “Volcanic” operating system ultimately morphed into the Henry and then the Winchester Models 1866 and 1873 rifles. In the middle 1850s, Wesson had begun work on a small revolver to use their new .22 rimfire cartridge. The cylinder was bored clear through with chambers designed to accept these cartridges from the rear. In investigating the possibilities for patenting for his invention, Wesson discovered an existing patent by one Rollin White, a former Colt employee, which covered a revolver with a cylinder bored through end to end. In October of 1856, Wesson wrote to White, expressing interest in using his patent. On November 17, 1856, both Wesson and Smith met with White in person and sealed a deal. This agreement gave Smith and Wesson an exclusive license to manufacture a revolver using the White patent. White was to receive a royalty of 25 cents per handgun produced during the active patent period, which was to expire in 1872.

With the White patent secured, Mr. Wesson and Mr. Smith set up a new partnership, the Smith & Wesson Revolver Factory, based in Springfield, Massachusetts. Wesson contributed the grand sum of $2003.63, and Smith pitched in with $1646.68. By 1857, only four revolvers had been produced, and White was richer for that accomplishment by one dollar. Soon, however, the wheels of industry began to roll at S&W, and a company was moving to become an eventual legend in the firearms world.

That first revolver came to be listed as the Model 1, although originally only the .22 cartridge carried that name. Initially, the gun was known in the factory as the “Seven Shooter,” but it soon acquired the name of the cartridge it fired. Today, that first version is classified by modern day collectors as the Model 1, First Issue. It was a small “tip up” revolver that had a spur trigger and a square butt. A single-action design, it had to be cocked each time to fire successive shots. To reload, the user pulled down on a flat latch in front of the frame and tipped or swiveled the hinged barrel upward. Then the cylinder was removed, reversed, and the individual cases were poked out of it by impinging each chamber in turn on the ejector rod under the barrel. Awkward and slow, but it did work. The hammer actuated a spring-loaded cylinder stop located above the cylinder to permit it to rotate, index and lock in place for firing. A small circular plate on the left side of the brass frame allowed access to the lockwork. The early flat release latch was soon replaced with a dual-button latch that was pushed upward to allow the barrel to be swiveled up. The barrel was stamped with the S&W name on top, and the non-fluted cylinder had markings reflecting the patent dates. The barrel measured 3-3/16” long.

The curved convex brass frame was usually silver plated, with a blued cylinder and barrel, but was later available fully plated. This first issue revolver was manufactured with minor changes along the way from 1857 through 1860. Serial numbers of all variations on this first issue ran from 1 through 11,671. The little gun sold to dealers for $12.75, and the dealers could also purchase a $1.25 Gutta Percha presentation case, embossed on its lid with an image of its contents or a heraldic “stand of flags” design.

These first issue guns were somewhat difficult to manufacture, and required careful hand fitting.