

Volume 15

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A House Divided (3): Spencer
Repeating Rifle

Lead: One hundred and fifty years ago the Republic was facing its greatest crisis. This continuing series examines the American Civil War. It is *A House Divided*.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: On March 6, 1860, young Christopher M. Spencer, was issued his first patent for a breech loading, repeating rifle. This weapon would become one of the most trusted, popular and perhaps decisive of the war between the States. Prior to the

Civil War, the basic infantry weapon used in battle was the muzzle loading smooth bore musket, which fired a single shot, was accurate up to 100 yards. Even by a good shooter loading, shooting, and re-loading was pretty slow.

In 1855, President Pierce's Secretary of War, Jefferson Davis, authorized the adoption of the .58 caliber Springfield "rifled" musket. Also muzzle loaded, it was more accurate out to about 500 yards, but was still very slow. The best marksmen could get off only three shots per minute.

In March 1860, inventor Christopher Spencer, formerly of the

Samuel Colt Fire Arms Company of Hartford, Connecticut, received a patent for a repeating rifle whose seven magazine-fed cartridges could be fired in about eighteen to twenty seconds. Spencer's original patent was for a carbine – a shorter and lighter rifle used by cavalry troopers. With this patent, Spencer opened his own company in Boston, personally demonstrated his rifle to Abraham Lincoln in 1863 – half way through the war. Lincoln was impressed and Spencer's rifle and carbine were adopted by the United States Navy and then the Army.

200,000 Spencer rifles were manufactured and the “Spencers” became highly coveted for their

power, dependability and portability. They gave the Union cavalry and infantry a great advantage, near modern firepower ability, in the closing years of the war.

Research by Ann Johnson, at the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

Civil War Weapons. 31 December 2009 <
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