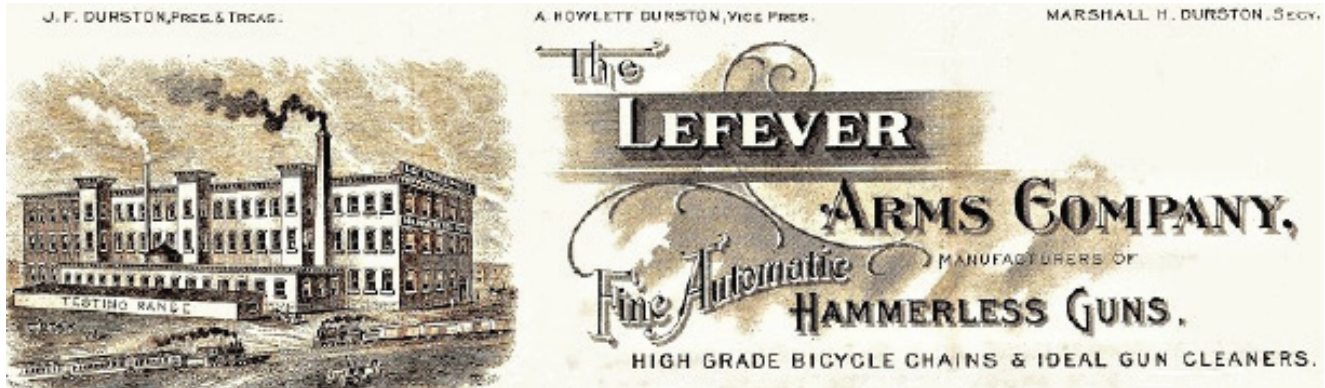


*The Lefever Arms Collectors Association*  
*Dedicated to the Study, Collection, and Preservation of Lefever Firearms and History*



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**Nichols & Lefever Back-Action and Bar-Action  
10-Gauge Waterfowlers**  
**Stephen Wesbrook**

Two years ago, I acquired at auction the Nichols & Lefever back-action 10-gauge waterfowler, s/n 5759, shown in the first picture below. The gun is in high original condition. The non-rebounding sidelocks are nicely machined and appear to be of British manufacture. The English walnut stock has some figure, good grain alignment, and 22-point checkering. It shows only a few handling marks, and the wood is solid both on the outside and behind the locks. The 31-inch barrels are made of laminated-steel and have 2-7/8-inch chambers. They retain over 95% of the original finish, although somewhat faded, and have no dents or pitting. The engraving is near pristine with realistic game-scene vignettes on both sidelocks. The gun weighs over 10 pounds and throws a pattern with about 80% of the pellets striking above the point of aim, as was typical of British waterfowlers. The gun locks up tight and is on-face. The serial numbers stamped on the receiver, locks, and barrels at the time of their manufacture are all 759. The serial number engraved on the trigger guard is 5759.

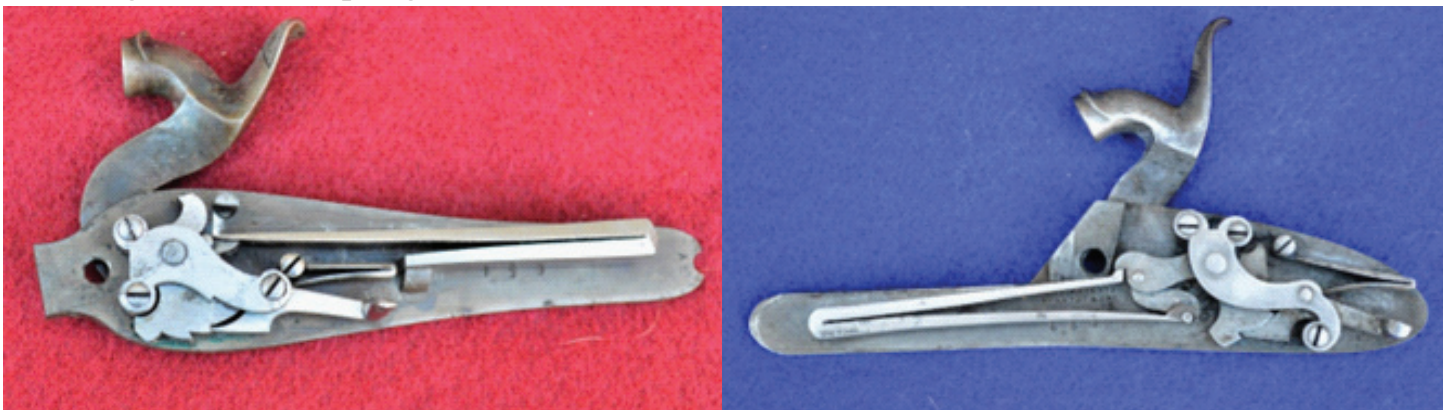


I already owned a N&L 10-gauge bar-action waterfowler, s/n 5462, which is shown in the next picture. [Throughout this article, pictures of s/n 5759 have red backgrounds and pictures of s/n 5462 have blue backgrounds.] This gun was featured in the Association's March-April 2018 Newsletter, and at that time was thought to be the second oldest N&L known to exist. Subsequently, this shotgun was central to an article in the September-October Newsletter entitled "The Petroleum-Based Threat to the Preservation of Classic Shotguns" and another in the 2020 Guns & Hunting Issue of Sporting Classics magazine entitled "Stock Therapy: 100 Years Is Too Long Between Oil Changes."

### **Differences Between the Back-Action and Bar-Action Waterfowlers**

On the back-action shotgun, the front of the lockplates do not extend beyond the back of the receiver. This is characteristic of most classic back-action sidelocks, the exception being that some lockplates have a protrusion that serves to strengthen the connection with the side of receiver. This functions the same manner as dolls-head top-rib extensions do between the barrels and the top of the receiver. Also, on the back-action about three-quarters of the length of the lockplate is to the rear of the hammers. On the bar-action shotgun, a portion of the lockplates (the bar) extends forward of the rear of the receiver, and about two-thirds of the length of the lockplate is in front of the hammers.

The reason the majority of the length of the lockplate is to the rear of the hammer on a back-action hammergun is because the mainspring is situated at the back of the action. On a bar-action hammergun, the mainspring is situated in the bar at the front of the action.



The design of a sidelock, whether back-action or bar-action, can generally be deduced visually from the outside based on the position of those pins and the machine screws that extend through the lockplate. On the back-action lock, as shown below, the pin that is visible to the rear of the hunting vignette is integral to the mainspring and protrudes from its side. This pin anchors the mainspring to the lockplate. On the bar-action, the pin which anchors the mainspring to the lockplate is visible at the front of the bar.



The style of the engraving differs substantially between the two models. The back-action gun has game-scene vignettes engraved on the sides and a stag on bottom metal. The engraving on the bar-action gun is deeply cut English scroll. The borders of both guns do use a similar geometric pattern.

The engraving patterns N&L used on the back-action model may have been because the shape of the lockplate lends itself to game-scenes. Or, perhaps N&L simply wanted to further differentiate the two models.



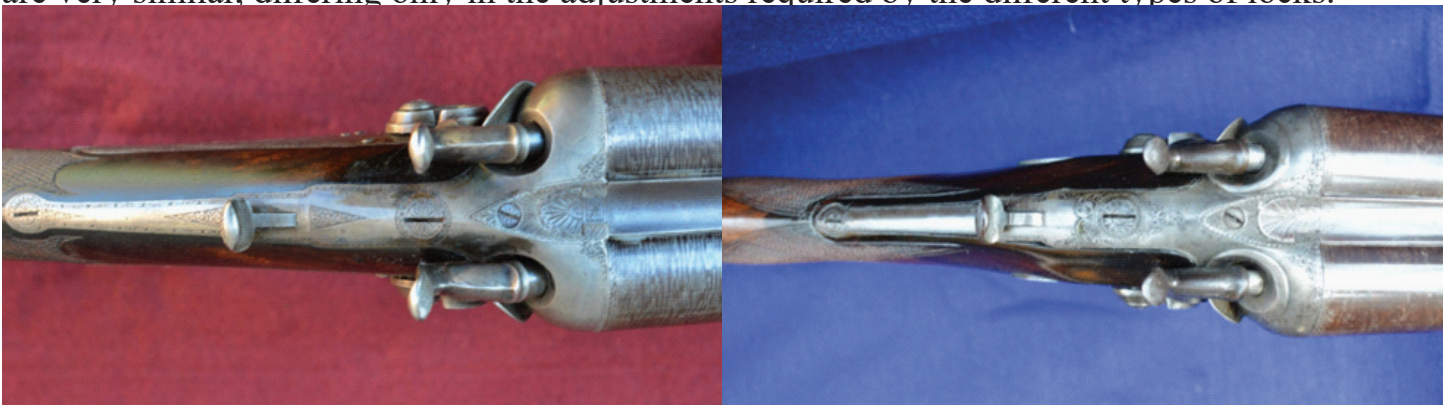
### **Similarities Between the N&L Back-Action and Bar-Action Waterfowlers**

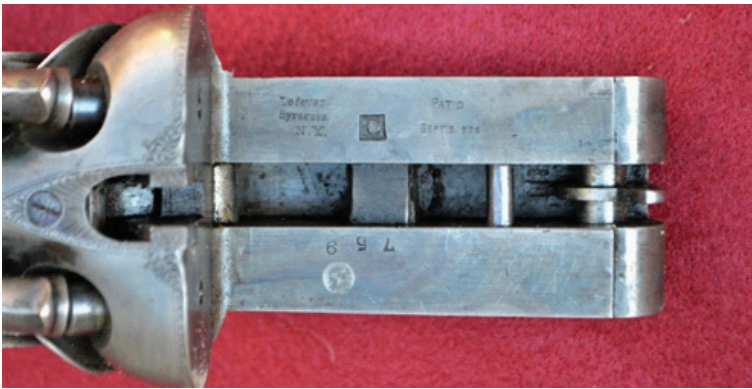
Source of key components. The locks and barrels of both guns appear to be of European manufacture. This would be consistent with the statement in the N&L 1877 catalog that “We use English locks exclusively.” Also, all Damascus and other forms of laminated-steel barrels used on American-built doubles were imported, primarily from Belgium and Britain, “in-the-white” and finished here.

Break-action release mechanism. Both guns use the Lefever-patented thumb-push release mechanism, and both guns have “PAT’D Sep. 3, 1872” stamped on the water tables.

Forend metal. The design of the forend metal is identical.

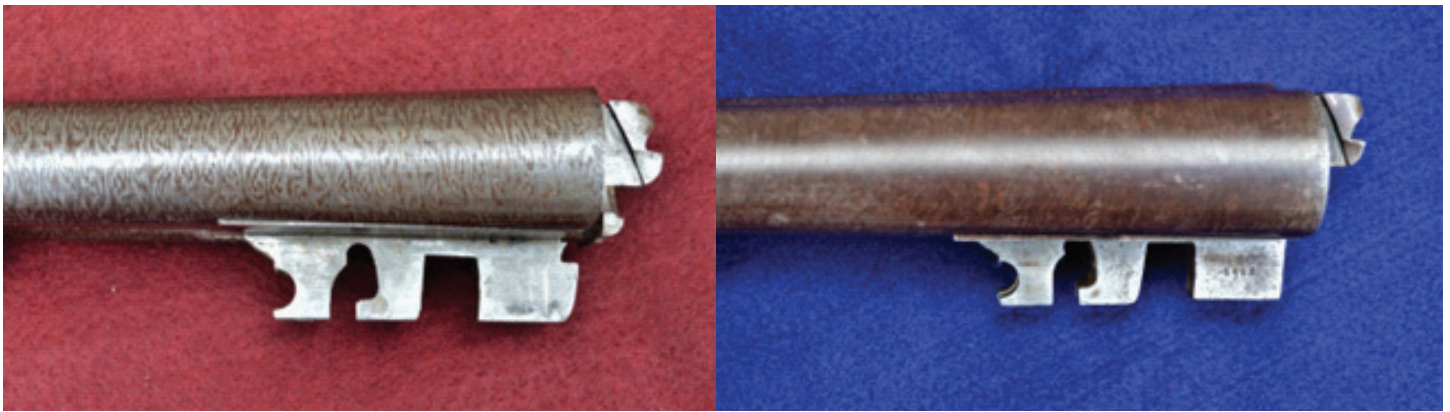
Receivers: The tang, flash guards, screw placement, water table, hinge pin, and extractor hook are very similar, differing only in the adjustments required by the different types of locks.





**Barrels:** Both sets of barrels are laminated steel of typical British design. Both have similar doll's head extensions and barrel lugs. The back-action's barrel flats and its water table are stamped with the same foundry mark (a capital C inside a square).





## History's Mysteries

Without documentation, the mysteries surrounding this gun are not likely to be solved. However, the physical evidence and the business practices in the sporting arms industry of the 1870s provide some clues.

From which firm or firms did N&L import its locks and barrels? One clue is the foundry marks on the back-action gun. Another is the design of the bar-action locks. Major Birmingham firms, such as W.&C. Scott, that both made their own guns and sold parts-kits, patented their locks. A comparison with guns of known manufacture might be revealing. However, the European export trade also provided knock-offs of popular designs.

How many back-action shotguns did N&L build? If the number of back-action survivors were known, along with the overall attrition rate of N&L doubles, one could make an estimate based on some assumptions. Otherwise, we are left with assessing the probability of various feasible production scenarios.

One scenario is that s/n 5759 was not a distinct model but rather a one-off special order. One problem with this scenario is that it must be accompanied by the improbable assumption of a 100% survival rate. Another problem is that N&L would have to have ordered only one set of locks and barrels. Also, the British supplier would have to have been willing to provide just one of each. Even today, this would not make good business sense. And 150 years ago, it was not how business was done. Barrels were imported in wooden crates typically containing 20 barrels. And locks and other parts were also batched, if only to simplify clearing customs and collecting tariffs.

Another scenario is that s/n 5759 was part of a limited production run. By 1870 a transition was underway in Britain from back-action to bar-action shotguns. It came as a result of British inventions in the mid-1860s, including the Purdey double-under-bolt, the Wesley Richards top-lever release and the dolls head extension, and the Scott swivel. European manufacturers continued to make back-action game guns in 20, 16, and 12-gauge for the rest of the century, although in smaller numbers. Back-actions allowed for a graceful design not possible with bar-actions, and the guns weighed less.

However, the bar-action was much stronger. As such, it was more suitable for 10-gauge waterfowlers and the heavier loads used in 12-gauge duck guns and live-pigeon guns. It is not improbable that British suppliers would have offered their excess inventory of large-bore back-action parts kits in the mid-1870s at huge discounts to their American and other international clients. If the price was sufficiently low, N&L might have bought enough to do a small production

run, if only to see if it was profitable.

Why did N&L not advertise its back-action waterfowlers? One possible answer is that the limited run turned out not to be profitable. And, of course, the company did not publish catalogs every year; a limited back-action production run might have simply missed the deadline.

### **Here and Now**

N&L's back-action 10-gauge, s/n 5759, was designed and built as a high-quality break-action cartridge shotgun. The workmanship and quality of the components are equivalent to those of its N&L bar-action counterpart, s/n 5462. Because that gun was made before N&L established grades, its list price too is uncertain. Its later comparable, the Grade D, is listed in the 1877 catalog for \$125. Perhaps the original owner of the back-action waterfowler was able to buy it for less than its bar-action counterpart. But that does not lessen the quality of its craftsmanship or its hunting effectiveness.

Whatever the historical context of the origins of s/n 5759, it stands today as a classic doublegun in high original condition with years of waterfowl hunting potentially ahead of it. I have shot many geese with mid-19th-Century exposed-hammer waterfowlers using low-pressure shells loaded with bismuth shot. These guns are as effective today as the day they were made. Moreover, no person hunting with this gun need to be concerned that he or she is ill equipped to compete with other hunters in their party who are using modern shotguns.



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