

KEEP YOUR POWDER DRY!

Part 4.1:

Unusual Firearms I

THE PREVIOUS ARTICLES IN this series focused on the main types of firearms found within each “era.” Every era, however, saw plenty of innovation in the desire to produce more efficient and effective firearms. Not all such innovations worked; among those that did, some simply never gained enough traction to become staples of their era. This article in the series looks at the latter, offering a list of unusual firearms in which to pepper your campaign.



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MOVING BEYOND CURIOSITIES

There's a reason why some firearm innovations took and others didn't; the revolver, for example, is clearly better than a harmonica pistol. This leads to the question of why one might introduce an unusual firearm into their campaign? There are several reasons.

First, the curiosity may simply be on the cutting edge of technology in your campaign. While a revolver is clearly superior to a turret pistol, if flintlocks are the norm in your campaign then maybe someone recently came up with the idea of a turret gun. This example works for standard weapons as well; in a campaign where only matchlocks have been introduced, an NPC carrying a new wheellock or flintlock pistol would be an impressive sight!

Second, the player characters may stumble across the curiosity as part of a treasure hoard or in the hands of a non-player character who fancies using a unique weapon. Perhaps the firearm was handcrafted by a favorite aunt or it saved their life in a previous battle. Such curiosities work well as magic items, where the deficiencies of such weapons have been overcome with magic. In other cases, the NPC was lucky enough to acquire a clearly "better" weapon, such as a grapeshot revolver or a hexagonal rifle.

Third, not all cultures develop at the same time and, in isolation, one culture may develop wheellocks earlier than another or, in the race to come up with effective multi-shot weapons one culture may stick with superimposed guns while another may develop turret guns. Pride may also play a role—patriotic aristocrats may choose to rely on the works of their own gunsmiths rather than clearly better imported firearms.

Fourth, a particular group may use unusual firearms out of necessity; history is rife with

Style over Substance

Firearms continually evolve over time. The first firearms were bulky and inaccurate, and attempts to make them more efficient often created new problems, especially amongst the more unusual firearm designs. In these articles, we've taken care to present all firearms as relatively accurate as possible within the rules of the game.

Having said that, you may want to include a firearms design within your campaign simply because of the aesthetics ("turret revolvers are cool!") and not want to worry so much about the real-world problems. In such cases, you can opt for the expensive solution of magic (making such firearms magic items) or simply say that there is a gunsmith so skilled that she's perfected the design, in which case you can remove the negative properties of the weapon.

Also, it bears repeating that the weapons listed here are drawn from history, but there are still far more variations to be had. Feel free to change up weapon properties as you see fit, or even adapt a firearm to be another type (such as a hexagonal revolver, a needle pistol, or a lever-action rifle). It's your world, add to it what you will!

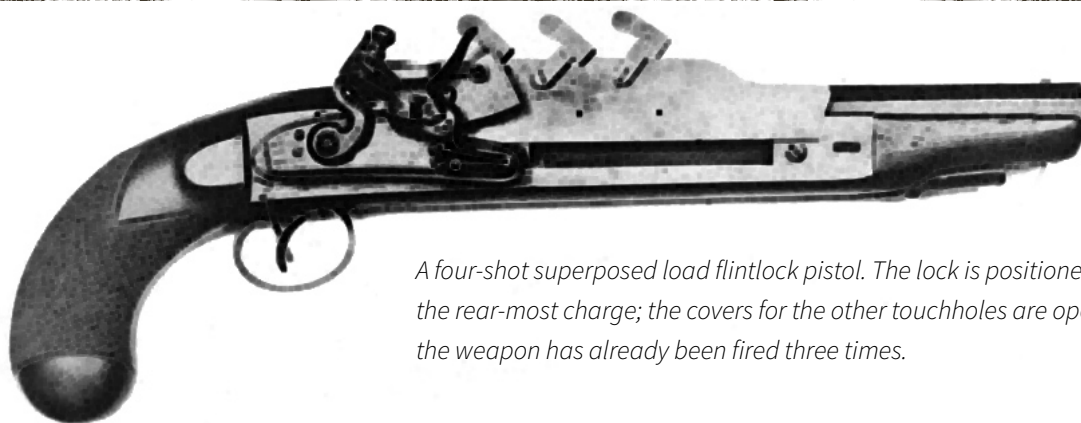
examples of soldiers using outdated firearms because they couldn't afford or access the newer ones. A remote village, for example, may have a stockpile of fire lances because they never replaced them with matchlocks.

Fifth and finally, the presence of magic or special materials may also play a role in engendering interest in an unusual firearm. Harmonica guns are unwieldy, but if there are enough wizards to make light bricks readily available or the kingdom has access to mithril then further development towards revolvers may not be necessary.

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A four-shot superposed load flintlock pistol. The lock is positioned to fire the rear-most charge; the covers for the other touchholes are open, as if the weapon has already been fired three times.

FIRST ERA (TO 1500 AD)

The following unusual firearms debuted, and were fielded in small numbers, prior to about 1500 AD.

Fire Arrow

One of the earliest uses of gunpowder in warfare was simply as an explosive. A pouch of gunpowder is attached to an arrow or crossbow bolt and lit, whereupon the shooter would fire the arrow or bolt normally. Ideally the gunpowder would explode on or near impact. This weapon appears in the Equipment and Customization section, below.

Fire Lance

This early firearm is essentially a pistol strapped to the end of a lance, polearm, or spear. The shooter ignites a slow match and aims the weapon at the target, firing streams of flame (projectiles were added later) at the target. Early fire lances were made of bamboo but were later made of metal. As the fire lance grew in popularity, soldiers began carrying the tubes without the melee weapon attached, becoming the first hand cannons.

Fire lances belch a line of fire which also lights flammable objects. Every creature in range must make a DC 15 Dexterity saving throw; on a failure the creature takes half damage. If a fire lance is loaded with a ball, then in addition to the fire damage it also does 1d6 damage to a single target in a (10/30) range on a successful hit. This attack is subject to misfire, which also keeps the fire lance from using its fire attack until cleaned.

SECOND ERA (1500–1700)

These firearms appeared after about 1500 AD until about 1700 AD.

King's Walking Staff

This formidable royal weapon is a walking stick that conceals three matchlock pistols in its head; the staff may also be used as a maul. As technology marches forward the matchlock pistols could easily be replaced with more advanced pistol designs.

Repeating Flintlock Pistol

A marvel in its time (hence the high price), the repeating flintlock pistol kept its rounds and its powder inside the gun; both were deposited into the barrel via a hand crank on the side of the pistol.

Revolving Blunderbuss

This blunderbuss has a three-chambered cylinder that deposits shot into the barrel. The cylinder must be manually turned.

Superposed Gun

This attempt at a multi-shot weapon is a wheellock (later flintlock) with either a sliding trigger or several triggers placed along the gun barrel to ignite each load. Each shot is loaded one behind the other so that the spark only ignites the powder one at a time; the next bullet prevents the next charge from igniting. Unfortunately, the superposed gun is particularly prone to misfires. This weapon appears in the Equipment and Customization section, below.

UNUSUAL FIREARMS

Simple Ranged Weapon	Cost ¹	Damage	Weight	Properties
Fire Lance	50 gp	special	5 lb.	Ammunition (range 5/15), heavy, loud, match loading, misfire, shot (2d4 fire, area), two-handed
King's Walking Staff	500 gp	1d6 piercing	6 lb.	Ammunition (range 20/60), capacity (3), heavy, loud, match loading, misfire ² , two-handed
Repeating Flintlock Pistol	1,000 gp	1d10 piercing	4 lb.	Ammunition (range 20/60), capacity (7), loading, loud, two-handed ³
Revolving Blunderbuss	500 gp	special	3 lb.	Ammunition (range 20/60), capacity (3), chain fire, heavy, loud, shot (2d6 piercing), two-handed

¹ Costs are for settings where such firearms are commonly available. The GM should feel free to increase the cost if the weapons are sufficiently rare; in some settings they may even be considered priceless "magic" items!

² A misfire with this weapon only fouls one barrel; the others may continue to be used normally unless they also misfire.

³ The repeating flintlock requires only one hand to use when firing a single shot; reloading it for another shot requires both hands.

WEAPON PROPERTIES

First-era and second-era weapons use properties that were initially described in the first three articles in this series.^{1,2,3} They have been reprinted here for your convenience.

Chain Fire. One problem with early multi-chambered firearms is that the spark of igniting the gunpowder could accidentally ignite all barrels. If a multi-chambered firearm such as a pepperbox or revolver is used in a ranged attack and a 1 is rolled, then the creature must make a chain misfire saving throw. On a roll of 10 to 20 the weapon misfires as normal. On a roll of 1 to 9 the weapon instead suffers a chain misfire, igniting an additional 1d2 chambers. All bullets fire at the same target, but the additional bullets have disadvantage on the roll and automatically miss if the target is beyond the normal range.

If a chain misfire is used with a revolver, then

the gun is also damaged and cannot be used until the gun is repaired with a gun kit during a short rest. If the chain misfire is used with a revolving carbine or rifle, then the creature using it also takes half damage from the extra bullets as they rip through its hand.

Loud. Firearms are noisy because of the explosion that occurs when they are fired. If you are hiding, then you have disadvantage on ability checks to remain hidden or move silently while other creatures have advantage on Wisdom (Perception) checks to see, hear, and smell you.

Match Loading. Your weapon requires several steps to load and fire. Because of the time required to load this weapon, you may not move in a turn when you fire this weapon, and you can fire only one piece of ammunition from it when you use an action, bonus action, or reaction to fire it. If there is already an accessible flame to light the match with, you may also move on a turn when you fire this weapon.

Misfire. Occasionally a firearm fails to fire due to fouling or the round getting stuck. If the d20 roll is a 1 when making a ranged attack, then in addition to missing the target the firearm is considered to have misfired. You must clear the barrel using a gun kit as an action before it may be fired again (note that the cleared ammunition may be used again). If the d20 roll is a 1 and you had

¹ Walt Ciechanowski, "Keep Your Powder Dry!: Firearms for Fantasy Campaigns," *EN World ENsider*, <https://www.patreon.com/posts/keep-your-powder-8437848>

² Walt Ciechanowski, "Keep Your Powder Dry!: Early Modern Firearms," *EN World ENsider*, <https://www.patreon.com/posts/keep-your-power-7985372>

³ Walt Ciechanowski, "Keep Your Powder Dry!: Industrial Firepower," *EN World ENsider*, <https://www.patreon.com/posts/keep-your-powder-7797923>

disadvantage on the roll, then you have cracked the barrel and the firearm is useless until repaired (requiring a day of work with a gun kit or a use of mending).

Shot. The weapon may fire multiple projectiles instead of a single round. If shot is used, then all creatures within range (the shot is cone-shaped) must make a DC 15 Dexterity saving throw or take damage. If the attacker has a spell save or maneuver save DC higher than 15, use the higher DC. Creatures in long range have advantage on their saving throw.

EQUIPMENT AND CUSTOMIZATION

All the equipment and options listed under Gunpowder and Ammunition and Customizing Firearms in the previous articles in this series are available for the firearms contained in this article. In addition, there are a few new and amended options listed here.

Ammunition, Fire Arrow/Bolt (20). Fire arrows are simply arrows or bolts with a tube of gunpowder attached that, when lit, explode once they hit the target. Such arrows or bolts have disadvantage on the attack roll but do 2d4 fire damage in addition to the normal damage to a target if they hit. Unfortunately, such weapons are very vulnerable to the weather and may not ignite if they're wet (GM's discretion). Fire arrows and bolts have double the normal cost for their type.

Superposed Barrel. One early solution to the problem of multiple shots was the superposed barrel—a barrel would have several shots loaded inside it with a separate touch hole for each. The creature would slide back the hammer to the appropriate touch hole to fire the next shot.

Superposed barrels can be applied to any firearm in any era, but have a couple of major drawbacks. First, all such weapons gain the loading and two-handed properties if they don't already have them, as it takes time and both hands to ready the weapon after a shot is fired (a creature wishing to only fire a single shot may do so one-handed as normal for one-handed firearms). Second, superposed weapons are subject to violent chain misfire that ignites all balls at once, damaging the weapon (as if a disadvantaged misfire) and causing damage to the creature holding the weapon equal to one ball as if it'd shot itself (damage may be doubled if there are three or more balls in the barrel). If there is only one bullet left in the firearm when the creature rolls a 1 to attack then use the normal rules for a misfire.

Modifying a firearm to take superposed loads requires several hours and a gunsmith workshop. Most superposed guns only have 3–5 shots; if a creature wishes to add more, then the GM may impose an appropriate gunsmith proficiency check to see if the gun is ruined in the attempt. Add 50 gp per extra shot (up to four) to the cost of a regular firearm. 🛠️