

A Brief History of U. S. Handcuffs

The first handcuff manufactured in the United States was made by Elias Richards. While it is known to be used in 1859, it is believed to have been made 5 to 10 years previous to that date. The maker resided in Philadelphia between the years of 1793 and 1879 and made padlocks and other hardware at his shop. Larger sized leg iron versions of this restraint also exist. Only 6 pairs of these cuffs are known to have survived.



Rare Elias Richards Handcuffs

Historical Note: *On, October 16, 1859, John Brown led 21 men on a raid of the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia in a mission to abolish slavery. He attempted to arm slaves with the weapons seized but was met with resistance from Robert E. Lee and his militia. John Brown was wounded and captured during the siege. He was wearing one of these cuffs while he was being transported to Charlestown, Virginia, where he was tried and convicted of treason. He was hanged on December 2, 1859.*



1860 Providence Tool Company

During the Civil War, Providence Tools Company mass produced a copy of this design. These restraints were used for runaway slaves as well as prisoners of war and fugitives of justice.

The problem with the Richards and the Providence Tool design is that they were not adjustable for different sized wrists. In addition, the locking mechanism was activated by twisting a screw key in a rotating motion several times, which took time to lock the restrains.



1862 Adams

Patented in 1862, W. V. Adams corrected this problem by adding an adjustable swing gate with a ratchet on the locking end. The gate was locked in place with the simple turn of a key.



1866 Tower bottom key

Patented in 1866, John J. Tower placed the key hole on the edge of the frame. This designed was later changed by moving the keyhole to the side of the frame. Both the Adams and the Tower designs could be “shimmied” by placing a narrow piece of steel between the swing gate and the frame.

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1878 Tower Double Lock

Tower solved the shimming problem by adding a double locking mechanism in 1878. This prevented the gate from closing tighter on the wrists and also made “shimming the gate” next to impossible.



1879 Marlin Daley Handcuffs

The 1879 Marlin Daley handcuff was also called the bottleneck due to its distinctive shape. This restraint used a propeller key.



1876 Palmer Handcuffs

The Palmer family of manacles are among the most interesting and bizarre of all the older shackles produced in this country. Each shackle consists of three stamped metal sections, which are hinged together and close to form a circle. Again, the locking mechanism is the “twist” key design. Designs such as the Palmer were bulky and difficult to operate. Thus they did not sell well, making them extremely rare today.



1887 Giant Bean

While the 1887 Giant Bean was an innovative design, this restraint sold for four times more than other handcuffs, thus it did not sell well, making this restraint a rare collector's item. Note how long the keys are to enable accessing key hole when the prisoner is cuffed.

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Police Nippers and Come Alongs

Another popular device manufactured first in the late 1800s were police nippers or come alongs. These restraints were attached to a wrist of the suspect, the officer then grasp the handle and escorted the prisoner to jail. Should the prisoner resist, a simple twist of the handle placed pressure on the suspect's wrist, to gain pain compliance. The device was nicknamed a nipper because if the restraint was not properly placed on the wrist it would nip the skin of the prisoner.



1888 Eisaman & Rome Police Nipper

The 1888 Eisaman and Rome police nipper was also known as "the officer's friend." This rare restraint is very rare and highly collectible.



1912 Peerless

The handcuff world changed on February 20, 1912, when a patent was granted to George A. Carney for a revolutionary new style of handcuff. This light weight, swing-thru gate design, allowed a prisoner to be secured without the use of a key and became the de facto restraint of law enforcement agencies worldwide.

Today, most modern handcuffs around the world have been made with this same swing-thru design, with minor modifications. The Carney Patent was bought by

James Milton Gill who then started the Peerless Handcuff Company of Springfield, Massachusetts. Carney designed handcuffs have been manufactured ever since, becoming the irreplaceable tools of the trade for police officers.



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1916 Pratt Combination

On November 7, 1916, George W. Pratt patented a combination handcuff and nipper using the new swing-thru gate design. One swing arm is jointed which allowed it to be folded when used as a nipper. Sales of this design were slow and it was soon discontinued, making this another valuable collectors item.



1925 McKenzie Mitt

March 10, 1925, James Oliver McKenzie patented the McKenzie Mitts. These restraints were designed to completely enclose the prisoner's hands, which were then fastened to a belly chain to prevent these unusual cuffs from being used as a weapon. The theory behind this particular pattern was that in the event the guard fell asleep while transporting a prisoner on a long train journey, the prisoner could neither make use of the keys or be able to handle a gun. However, production of this item was stopped after only several dozen pairs were manufactured. The reason - these cuffs proved to be too good, making the wearer completely helpless to a point where personal needs could not be taken care of, and accompanying guards highly objected and refused to cooperate to this degree. Since railroads have strict rules about unshackling prisoners during transit , the cuff was used no further, and became the only locking device to be discontinued because it was too good."

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