

North American Arms

.450 Magnum Express

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In the early 1980s, there was a growing demand for increased handgun power, especially in the world of revolvers. While the .44 Magnum had always been a great big-game and silhouette round, folks still wanted more. I guess a lot of this started in the 1950s when Dick Casull began to hot rod the old .45 Colt. With the right gun and modern brass, he was able to blow the doors off the new Remington offering. Even when limited to triplex loads (which I'd never mess with), Dick was pushing 260 grain bullets to 1,800 fps out of his home-built revolver; the .44 Magnum on the other hand was 300 - 400 fps slower with a 240 grain bullet.

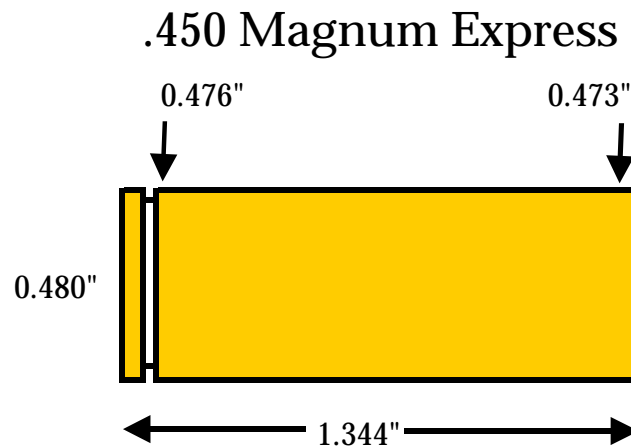
Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Dick Casull chambered quite a few guns in .454 Magnum, a couple of which were home-built using 4140 frames and over-sized 5-shot cylinders. Early on, he used Super Blackhawks for the conversions and eventually produced a few .454s through North American Arms. The NAA guns are scarce however, so much so that I've never even seen one in the flesh. Then in the late 1970s, Dick and Wayne Baker founded what would become the finest revolver company in the world, Freedom Arms. While North American Arms wouldn't be the company to bring the .454 Casull to the masses, they still wanted a handcannon in their line-up.

When the .454 Casull was announced by Freedom Arms in the early 80's, very few companies had a platform strong enough for the round. Sporting Arms/United Sporting Arms of Arizona did manufacture the stainless Seville, which used 17-4 PH cylinders and very tight construction. A handful of Sevilles were chambered for the Casull, but bankruptcies constantly plagued the company. Between Sporting Arms and United Sporting Arms, around 80 .454 Magnums were produced and all were of excellent quality. Short of the Seville,

no other single-action was offered for the mega-magnum, though Ruger could've re-engineered the Super Blackhawk to handle the .454.

CARTRIDGE DEVELOPMENT

North American Arms designed their .450 Magnum Express around 1981, though it would take some time for it to reach production. Most people when they hear of the round immediately think of a big bore rifle cartridge, but names can be deceiving. In fact, the NAA .450 is nothing more than a .45 Winchester Mag that's been lengthened to 1.344". In my opinion, it's design sort of doomed it from the start in that crimping becomes troublesome with rimless revolver cartridges. Short of the lack of rim and ~0.04" difference in overall length, the .450 Magnum Express is very close in size to the .454 Casull. Dimensions are as follows:



North American Arms had Winchester manufacture the brass, all of which were headstamped "450 Mag Express". This made sense since Winchester was already churning out .45 Win Mag and the Express was only fifteen thousandths longer. From what I understand, 100,000 cases were made, of which only 20,000 were loaded using 260 JHP Sierras and Hodgdon H-110 powder. Considering that many of these were shot, original .450 Mag Express' are rare and usually sell for \$20 - \$30 per. Loaded ammunition was shipped from the factory in 50 round MTM boxes and all had NAA information posted on each end.

Load data for the .450 Express can be found in the mid-1980's Hodgdon manual. I'm unaware of any other published data for the cartridge,

and the last time Hodgdon listed it was in the early '90's (these loads are detailed in the Appendix). The .450's ballistics are impressive, even though the factory ammo was limited to 260 grain bullets. Hodgdon also lists light bullet loads, but I question this practice since many aren't intended to be driven at such speeds (185 JHPs @ 2,000 fps are a good example of this). As with the .454 Casull, the .450 Express is better served with bullets ranging from 250 and 325 grains in weight; recommended powders include H110, W296, Lil' Gun, AA#9, H4227, and 2400. Bullets and powder aren't a problem when shooting the NAA .450 however, the hang-up is in the brass. Since .450 cases are uncommon and quite collectible, it's more practical to form your own using .308 Winchester derivatives. Another option is to use .454 Casulls to make the Express. By simply turning the rim to 0.480" or less and full length sizing in a .45 Winchester Magnum die, the .450 Mag will be produced. The last step involves trimming to an overall length of 1.340". My gun came with a box that were based off of .454s and they work fine. If case forming isn't something you enjoy though, Quality Cartridge does sell the .450 Express for \$99.00 per hundred ([http://owl.net.com/quality/450 Mag Exp.htm](http://owl.net.com/quality/450%20Mag%20Exp.htm)) Again, .45 Winchester Magnum dies work for reloading the round.

THE GUN

North American Arms built the .450 on their very stout "Eagle" single-action revolver. Like the Freedom Arms 83, the Eagle was constructed out of 17-4 PH stainless and had a five-shot cylinder. The frame, backstrap, and internal parts however were unique to North American Arms and did not share interchangeability with other makes such as Ruger. Unlike Ruger's transfer bar, the NAA Eagle used a sliding bar safety that is similar to those found in the Freedom Arms line. Other features include set-screw base pins, recessed cylinders, Millet sights, and sleeved cylinder base pin holes. The hammer spurs were also long and possessed a sharp upward curve. I actually like this design, as do I the backstrap profile and NAA's choice of grips. The latter were oversized walnut and had a slight recess towards the top that worked as a thumb rest. Interestingly enough, the gripframe is reminiscent of the Keith #5, so that's probably why I like them so much. My gun also came with a second set of wood grips that were thin and contoured to the exact shape of the backstrap. Short of the pair I have, I've never seen a .450 Magnum fit with the alternate set.

The Eagle was inscribed in three areas. The first was a four digit serial number on the left hand side of the frame; all started with the prefix "5".

The second two were barrel inscriptions with “North American Arms, Corp., Spanish Fork, Utah, 84660” on the left side, and “.45 Win Mag/.450 Mag Express” on the right..

North American Arms offered very few options on the Express in that the only available barrel length was 7.5”. In spite of this, three finishes were used with high polish stainless being the most predominant. Matte stainless was the next most common, and though black chromex was catalogued, only a handful were produced. Questionable features include flat main springs, very heavy trigger pulls, slightly oversized chambers, and excessive barrel throating (> 0.75”). Otherwise, the Eagle is an exceptionally tight revolver.

Knowing that the acceptance and distribution of .450 Express ammo would be slow, NAA decided to include a .45 Winchester Magnum cylinder. A third cylinder in .45 Colt was also offered, though I doubt that many of these were produced. All were stamped on their face as to indicate the chambering using either 450, 45W, or 45C. It’s not surprising that when you do find these revolvers, the .45 Win Mag cylinder is in the gun and the .450 Express cylinder often looks unused. Again, since only 20,000 cases were ever distributed, .450 ammunition was, and still is, pretty rare.

Though North American Arms began developing the .450 Mag Express in late 1981, the gun wasn’t unveiled until 1984. Sales were slow however, and the model was discontinued after only 530 were produced. Then in 1987, NAA’s parent company was sold and the new ownership had no interest in resurrecting the Eagle. As a result, the remaining primed brass, tooling, and associated parts were warehoused. When the company was sold for a second time in 1992, none of the .450 Express inventory was included in the deal. Word has it that the previous owners destroyed the brass and tooling in 1994.

Not much has been written of these guns, and collector interest is limited. Prices, as of 2005, seem to be between \$700 and \$1,500 depending on the gun’s options and accessories. Interestingly enough, I’ve seen a handful of NAA Eagles that only have the .45 Win Mag or .450 Mag Express cylinder. Based on the 15 – 20 that I’ve seen for sale over the past five years, prices seem to go as follows:

- \$700 - \$800: Gun is in excellent(+) condition, but only has one cylinder
- \$900 – 1,100: Excellent(+) with both the .45 Win Mag and .450 Express cylinders
- \$1,200 - \$1,500: Excellent(+) with all three cylinders, and/or the factory wood presentation case with papers.

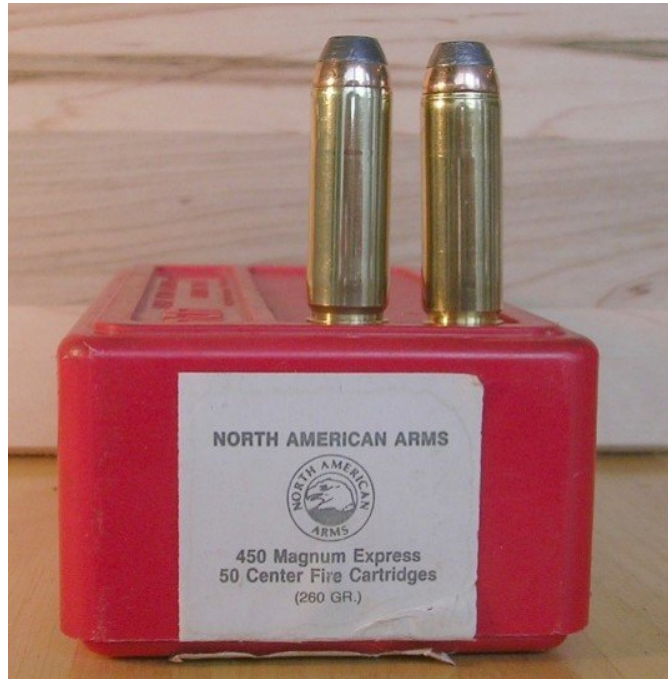
NOTE – throughout this article, I’ve referred to the revolver as the “Eagle” model. This was the name given to the gun when development started. Once released, NAA chose not to use the “Eagle” designation. Instead, they referred to the gun simply as the “North American Arms .450 Magnum Express”.

If you have any questions or comments, please write me at sc429@yahoo.com

PICURES BELOW



North American Arms .450 Magnum Express



Original, unfired box of factory .450 Magnum Express. The cartridge on the right is a .450 based on a .454 Casull.

LOAD DATA

BULLET WT	POWDER	GRS	VELOCITY
185	H4227	34	1,747
	H4227	36	1,884
	H110	38	1,966
	H110	40	2,109
	HS-7	17	1,216
	HS-7	22	1,644
	HS-6	14	1,040
	HS-6	19	1,609
	HP38	9	922
	HP38	15	1,602

BULLET WT	POWDER	GRS	VELOCITY
200	H4227	34	1,688
	H4227	34	1,814
	H110	36	1,893
	H110	38	1,990
	HS-7	16	1,039
	HS-7	21	1,521
	HS-6	13	891
	HS-6	18	1,503
	HP38	8	816
	HP38	14	1,449

BULLET WT	POWDER	GRS	VELOCITY
225-230	H4227	31	1,589
	H4227	33	1,704
	H110	32	1,733
	H110	34	1,841
	HS-7	15	938
	HS-7	20	1,412
	HS-6	13	913
	HS-6	17	1,276
	HP38	8.5	835
	HP38	12	1,236

BULLET WT	POWDER	GRS	VELOCITY
250	H4227	30	1,488
	H4227	32	1,637
	H110	31	1,624
	H110	33	1,763
	HS-7	15	932
	HS-7	19	1,307
	HS-6	12	898
	HS-6	16	1,247
	HP38	9	880
	HP38	11.5	1,106

BULLET WT	POWDER	GRS	VELOCITY
260	H4227	29	1,461
	H4227	31	1,590
	H110	30	1,574
	H110	32	1,728
	HS-7	14.5	902
	HS-7	18.5	1,258
	HS-6	12	854
	HS-6	15.5	1,159