

I. Notes on the Development and Commercial Use of the Sewing Machine

INTRODUCTION

While researching the history of the invention and the development of the sewing machine, many items of related interest concerning the machine's economic value came to light. The manufacture of the machines was in itself a boost to the economy of the emerging "industrial United States," as was the production of attachments for specialized stitching and the need for new types of needles and thread. Moreover, the machine's ability to speed up production permitted it to permeate the entire field of products manufactured by any type of stitching, from umbrellas to tents. Since this aspect of the story was not completed for this study, no attempt will be made to include any definitive statements on the economic importance of the sewing machine at home or abroad. This related information is of sufficient interest, however, to warrant inclusion in this first Appendix. Perhaps these notes will suggest areas of future research for students of American technology.

READY-MADE CLOTHING

Whether of the expensive or the inexpensive type, the sewing machine was much more than a popular household appliance. Its introduction had far-reaching effects on many different types of manufacturing establishments as well as on the export trade. The newly developing ready-made clothing industry was not only in a state of development to welcome the new machine but also was, in all probability, responsible for its immediate practical application and success.

Until the early part of the second quarter of the 19th century, the ready-made clothing trade in the United States was confined almost entirely to furnishing the clothing required by sailors about to

ship out to sea. The stores that kept these supplies were usually in the neighborhood of wharf areas. But other than the needs of these seamen, there was little market for ready-made goods. Out of necessity many of the families in the early years in this country had made their own clothing. As wealth was acquired and taste could be cultivated, professional seamstresses and tailors were in increasing demand, moved into the cities and towns, and even visited the smaller villages for as long as their services were needed. At the same time a related trade was also growing in the cities, especially in New York City, that of dealing in second-hand clothing. Industrious persons bought up old clothes, cleaned, repaired and refinished them, and sold the clothing to immigrants and transients who wished to avoid the high cost of new custom-made clothing.

The repairing of this second-hand clothing led to the purchase of cheap cloth at auction—"half-burnt," "wet-goods," and other damaged yardage. When in excess of the repairing needs, this fabric was made into garments and sold with the second-hand items. Many visitors who passed through New York City were found to be potential buyers of this merchandise if a better class of ready-made clothes was made available. Manufacture began to increase. Tailors of the city began to keep an assortment of finished garments on hand. When visitors bought these, they were also very likely to buy additional garments for resale at home. The latter led to the establishment of the wholesale garment-manufacturing industry in New York about 1834-35.

Most of the ready-made clothing establishments were small operations, not large factories. Large