

III. Sewing-Machine Styles

To a limited degree, the style of the sewing machine may be used to establish an approximate date. Since there are many exceptions, extreme caution must be used in this method of dating. Some of the styles of sewing-machine heads continued to be used for many decades. Minor improvements that were patented can be very helpful in limiting the date as these parts are frequently stamped with this patent information. Furniture styles of tables or cabinets also changed with trends for certain woods, manufacturing processes, and design taste.

1850s

Although a few sewing machines were sold in the late 1840s, the manufacture of sewing machines in quantity dates from 1851. In the early 1850s most of the machines were built to be used in manufacturing processes, although this might be on a small scale and sometimes even in the home. Since these machines were to be in constant use they were built rugged, usually of cast iron. The packing box might double as the table or a sturdy table might be furnished with the machine (see figs. 30, 31, 70, and 72). The exception to the ruggedly built machine was the light machine made by Wheeler and Wilson. Almost immediately, this company recognized that there was a large commercial market in filling each home with a family sewing machine. Although light in style, this machine became the shirtmakers' most valuable tool. By the middle 1850s both the Grover and Baker company and the Singer company had also introduced lighter weight machines for family use. By the end of the decade, a number of companies were producing machines for the home. The different machines made by these companies usually had a wood-top table with cast-iron legs; the casting was light in design and artistically attractive (see figs. 101, 105, and 127).

Cabinet machines appeared as early as the table models. The cabinets were usually of solid wood, walnut, mahogany, or rosewood, and simple in line (see figs. 35 and 116). The extreme popularity and desirability of the sewing machine as a consumer product is evident in the influx of inexpensive machines that appeared on the market as have been discussed in chapter four. By the end of the decade, the *Scientific American* reports in the July 30, 1859, issue that there were twenty-five sewing machine manufacturers in the United States making thirty different sewing machines of which 1,500 were being sold weekly. They also estimated that 100,000 sewing machines were in use at that time. The sewing machine had made a good beginning.

1860s

The light design of the ironwork of the 1850s gradually became more detailed and beautifully ornate. Unfortunately, by the end of the decade the castings had become heavy. Cabinet styles continued to be quite similar to those of the earlier decade. This is really a period of continuation for the styles were considered new and much of the market was still untouched.

1870s

From the late 1860s, probably due to the exhibition of sewing machines at large international expositions such as the one held in Paris in 1867, sewing-machine cabinets became more and more elaborate for those who could afford to pay for the ornate woodwork. It was understandable that, once the sewing machine was accepted as the mechanical wonder that it was, each manufacturer would attempt to make the packaging of his machine—the stand or cabinet—as eye-