

VIII. Biographical Sketches

BARTHELEMY THIMONNIER

The first man known to have put a sewing machine into practical operation, Barthelemy Thimonnier, was a Frenchman of obscure parentage. His father, a textile dyer of Lyon, left that city in 1793 as a result of the Revolution and journeyed with his family to l'Arbresle where Barthelemy was born in August of that year.

The family resources were small, and, although the young Thimonnier was able to begin studies at the Seminaire de Saint-Jean at Lyons, he soon was forced to leave school for financial reasons and return to his home, then at Amplepuis. There he learned the tailoring trade and by 1813 was fairly well established in his own shop.

At that time many of the town's inhabitants were weavers and almost every house possessed one or two looms. The noise of the shuttle echoed from these family workshops. Thimonnier noted the relatively small amount of time needed to weave a fabric compared with the slow painstaking task of sewing a garment by passing the needle in and out for each stitch of each seam. When his mind began to dwell on the idea of producing a machine to do this stitching, another of the town's occupations supplied him with a clue and an additional incentive. This village industry produced a type of embroidery work called *point de chainette*, in which a needle with a small hook was used to form the chainstitch, a popular type of decorative stitch long used in countries all over the world. It was Thimonnier's plan to use this type of hooked needle and produce the stitch by machine, employing it both as a decorative stitch and a seam-forming one.

In 1825 Thimonnier moved to St. Etienne, where he became completely absorbed in the idea of inventing a sewing machine. Ignorant of any of the principles of mechanics, he worked alone and in secret for four years, neglecting his tailoring business to the extent that neighbors looked upon him as peculiar, if not crazy. By 1829 he had not only mastered the mechanical difficulties of bringing his dream to realization, but also had made the acquaintance of the man who helped

him to success. Ferrand, of l'Ecole des Mines of Saint-Etienne, became interested in the machine and helped finance Thimonnier through his trials and disappointments. In 1830 Thimonnier received a patent on his machine, which produced the chainstitch by means of a needle shaped like a small crochet hook.

Thimonnier, together with Ferrand and a M. Beaunier, made attempts to introduce his machine in Paris. By 1841 they were successful in having eighty of Thimonnier's machines in use sewing army clothing in a shop in Paris. But the fears of the tailors could not be quieted. The machines were destroyed by an ignorant and



Figure 215.—BARTHELEMY THIMONNIER, 1793–1857.
From an engraving in the *Sewing Machine Advance*, November 15, 1880. (Smithsonian photo 10569–A.)