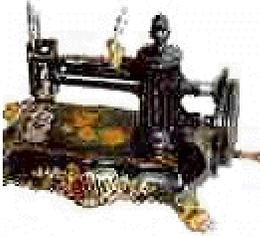


## The origins of the Sewing Machine - a Time Line

From "About.com Sewing Machine Wars"

<http://inventors.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?site=http://web.archive.org/web/20011217140917/http://fudgefunnies.com/wars.htm>



Arguments persist to this day over who invented the sewing machine. By default, Elias Howe usually receives the honor, more for his 1844 patents than for the machine he designed. But even here, there's confusion. **Englishman John Fisher** may have beaten **Howe** to the patent office only to lose out because someone misfiled his papers.

Nonetheless, **Elias Howe** did hold the crucial sewing machine patents when **Isaac Merritt Singer, Wheeler, Wilson and Grover Baker**, soon to become the three biggest companies, began manufacturing their machines . . . a fact that led to what newspapers of the day correctly labeled *The Sewing Machine Wars*. And ironically, the blustering, cantankerous, hot-headed **Isaac Singer** could have owned **Howe's** patents for a pittance--\$2,000. A destitute **Howe** approached **Singer** in early 1851 with an offer to sell. Instead of buying, **Singer**, who at the time was strapped for money himself, flew into rage and threatened to toss his rival down a flight of stairs. **Howe** returned in the summer of 1852, this time with an offer to license his patents to **Singer**. **Singer** now had money and a new partner, **attorney Edmond Clark** (**Clark** subsequently constructed the **Dakota Building** in **New York City**, where singer/composer **John Lennon** was shot to death by **Mark Chapman** over a century later on December, 8, 1981). **Clark** doubted **Howe** had the finances or the fortitude to take his battle to court, and **Clark** questioned the validity of **Howe's** patents. **Singer** and his lawyer-partner messed up, grandly . . . and thereby, especially to **Singer's** later consternation, made **Elias Howe** a fabulously rich man.

The rhubarb over who invented the sewing machine stretches back to the mid-1700s, and more or less follows a now recognized path.

**1755, England**--German immigrant **Charles Weisenthal** receives a patent for "a needle to be used for mechanical sewing". No patent was applied for or issued for a device to perform his mechanical sewing.

**1790, England**--**Thomas Saint** patents a machine fitted with an awl that makes a hole in leather and allows a needle to pass through it. No evidence exists that Saint produced a single machine, and those who followed his patent specifications failed.

**1804, France**--**James Henderson** and **Thomas Stone** hand produce a machine that unsuccessfully attempts to duplicate hand sewing.

**1804, Scotland**--**John Duncan** demonstrates a working but unreliable machine that embroiders using several needles at once.

**1810, Germany**--**Balthasar Krems** makes a machine for "sewing caps" but takes out no patents.

**1814, Austria**--**Josef Madersperger** receives patent for a mechanical device that mimics the hand movements of sewing. **Madersperger's** real genius, however, leads him to

invent a needle with its eye near the needle point and a shuttle for pulling through a second thread. Madersperger fails to patent his inventions. He, however, can't see beyond duplicating hand movements with a machine and continues to modify his patent. He fails to produce a single successful sewing machine. Still, those who single him out as the inventor of the sewing machine can and do build an interesting case for the **Austrian**.

**1818, United States--John Doge and John Knowles** turn out a machine that stitches reasonable well but only on short lengths of material. The machine also suffers from complicated and time-consuming resetting for each piece of fabric sewn.

**1830, France--Bathelemy Thimonnier** receives a patent for a hardwood machine with a barbed needle. A decade later, **Thimonnier** has sold several machines for commercial sewing and owns a factory in **Paris** with up to 80 of his machines used to sew **French army uniforms**. Members of the **Tailor's Guild**, fearing the demise of hand sewing, storm **Thimonnier's plant**, destroy his machines, and burn down his building.

**Thimonnier** improves the design of his machine and begins large-scale production. Members of the **French guild** again attack his manufacturing facility, forcing the beleaguered inventor to flee to **England** with a single machine he manages to salvage. **Thimonnier** scored three major firsts: his machines worked, he sold them to other businesses, and he established the first garment factory. In some quarters, **Bathelemy Thimonnier** qualifies as the inventor of the world's first practical sewing machine.

**1833, United States--Walter Hunt** abandons attempts to emulate hand sewing movements and produces a sewing machine with a lock stitch that uses two spools of thread and an eye-pointed needle. **Hunt's machine** fails, limited like the **Doge and Knowles** machine to stitching short, albeit straight, seams.

**1842, United States--John Greenough** hand tools a working machine that pushes the sewing needle completely through the material being sewed. **Greenough** fails to raise sufficient funds to pursue his invention and abandons it.

**1844, England--John Fisher** receives a patent for a machine that produces lace. **Fisher's** design incorporates all the functions of a successful sewing machine, but his patent is apparently misfiled. This is essentially the same machine that will make **Elias Howe** and **Isaac Singer** millionaires.

**1844, United States--Elias Howe** receives a patent and demonstrates a reliable, commercial sewing machine but fails to make a single sale.

**1851, United States--Isaac Merritt Singer** introduces sewing machines based on **Elias Howe's patents**. **Singer** soon realizes there's little money in manufacturing commercial sewing machines for garment makers. He turns his energies to selling his machines for household use and his company becomes the first to deliver a product and then collect monthly installment payments. The concept revolutionizes the sewing machine industry, then spreads to other industries.

