

## “THE CASE OF THE LOST THIMBLE”

### WORK-BOXES, WORK-BASKETS, HOUSEWIVES AND TRAVELING SEWING BOXES

Virginia Mescher

“Your thimble gone? Your scissors, where are they?  
Your needles, pins, your thread, and tapes all lost.  
Your house-wife here, and there your work-bag tost.”  
*The Workwoman’s Guide*

How many of us have begun a mending task and spent more time looking for scissors, thread and needle than it took to do the chore? Apparently, this was also the case with our foremothers. Most needlework advice and books, when discussing both plain sewing and fancy work, stressed the importance of having an organized workbox or basket for the use of the professional seamstress, housewife, house-maid or even a small child just learning to sew.

Work-boxes and baskets played an important part in the life of a nineteenth century woman, who rarely had idle moments in her life. In the days before sewing machines, most women spent “sitting-down time” either mending, hand sewing garments from start to finish, knitting for the family, or maybe doing “fancy-work” if time permitted. Even after sewing machines became more common in households, hand sewing was still a necessity because a sewing machine could not do everything. Young girls started their sewing instruction between the ages of three and four, depending on their ability to hold a needle, and continued the occupation for the rest of their lives. One of the most important items for sewing was a work-box or sewing basket, for holding the sewing implements and uncompleted work, and was considered a necessary accessory to any home.

#### BOXES vs. BASKETS AND THEIR CONTENTS

There were discussions in needlework books as to whether a workbox or basket was preferred. There were merits to both and Marion Pullan suggested having both. She wrote, “There is often a question as to whether a work-box or basket is preferable; we think it would be best answered, — as children between pie and cake, - *both!* The head of any family, even if it consists but of two or three persons, certainly requires a large roomy workbasket; and there are many things which can be kept more neatly and convenient in a box.”

The following sections are taken from several needlework book that contained advice on the actual container as well as the contents. [All the bibliographic information for each citation will be found in the Bibliography.]

From *The Workwoman’s Guide*.

“The next thing which will come under our observation is the work-box, or basket, and of this is may be useful to say a few words, as much of the comfort of a good workwoman depends on the choice and arrangement of her tools (if they may be so termed) and materials.

A work-box, or basket, should be large enough to hold a moderate supply of work and all its requisites, without being such a size as to be inconvenient to carry about, or lift with ease. There should be in it divisions or partitions, as they assist in keeping it in order; but some persons are apt to run into the extreme of over-partitioning their boxes, which defeats its own purpose and becomes troublesome: this should be carefully avoided.

A work-box should contain six or eight of the useful sized reel sewing cottons, black cotton, and silks, white, black, and coloured, both round and for darning; a few useful tapes, bobbin, galloon [A thick gold

lace with an even selvedge, on both sides; also a trimming of wool, silk, cotton, worsted, or a combination of fibers and was used for trimming garments, hats, hat bands, shoes, and furniture. The trimming was a narrow ribbon and was sold in rolls of 36 yards.], buttons of all kinds, including thread, pearl, metal, and black; also, hooks and eyes. An ample needle-book, containing a page of kerseymere [a twilled fine woolen cloth] for each sized needle, not omitting the darning, glove, stay, and worsted or carpet needles.

There are various kinds of scissors; the most useful are,

A large pair, for cutting out linen;

A medium size, for common use;

A small pair with rounded points;

A smaller pair with sharper points, for cutting out muslin work, &c.:

Lace scissors with a flat knob at one of the points;

Buttonhole scissors.

A pincushion, an emery cushion, a waxen reel for strengthening thread, a stiletto, bodkins, a thimble, a small knife, and a yard measure, made like a carpenter's foot rule [folding wooden ruler] , only with nails instead of inches marked upon it:....

These complete the list of things necessary for a good workwoman; other things, as shield, tweezers, which are often added, may be considered superfluities.”

The *Ladies' Work-Table Book* included the following advice.

“We shall therefore proceed, at once, to give plain directions, by which any lady may soon become expert in this necessary department of household uses, merely observing, that a neat work-box, well supplied with all the implements required — knife, scissors (of at least three sizes), needles and pins in sufficient variety, bodkins, thimbles, thread and cotton, bobbins, marking silks, black lead pencils, India rubber, &c., should be provided, and be furnished with lock and key, to prevent the contents being thrown into confusion by children, servants, or unauthorized intruders.”

Several French needlework books were also studied. In *La Livre de la Couturière* two pairs of scissors were recommended, one with pointed ends used for taking out seams, and the other with rounded ends for easily cutting out; a rough textured thimble because a smooth surface could cause the needle to slip; a wooden needlecase, which kept the needles from rusting better than a metal needlecase; a finger sheath\*; a large bodkin and a tape measure.

\*A finger sheath protected the finger by avoiding punctures with the needle. “It is useful to avail oneself of a rubber finger sheath, which one buys from merchants of sticking plasters, or of parchment, which one can make oneself, by taking a small band of parchment shaping it around the finger, and folding it so that it does not obstruct the knuckle.”

The section below was found in the February 1857 issue of *Godey's*.

“How to Cut and Contrive Children's Clothes.

THE FITTINGS OF THE WORKBOX.— Before beginning any such lengthened occupation as preparing a baby's wardrobe, every implement necessary should be procured. We consider the following as quite essential: Large, small, and button-hole scissors; thimble; a round and a flat bodkin; good needles, from five to eleven; stiletto; bobbin; cotton cord of various sizes; tapes; stay-binding; flannel-binding; white silk; fine knitting-cotton; sewing-cottons of various sizes; Mecklenberg thread: and linen and pearl buttons of medium and very small sizes. The pincushion should also be well stocked with pins; and a few fine headless needles, with sealing-wax tops, are very useful in all fine work. We use both cotton and linen or Mecklenberg thread; the former for cotton work, the latter for linen and French cambric. The patent glacé thread is really a most delightful addition to the workbox.”

From *Beadle's Guide to Dress-Making*.

“A workwoman is not half prepared for her business who is not properly provided with tools and materials. It is embarrassing for her to find herself without some essential but trifling article, at the moment she requires it for service; and it frequently causes not only loss of time, but serious damage to the garment on which she is employed. Let her, then, make a point of keeping her work-box or basket *always* furnished with everything really indispensable....

..... In this box [the work-box], which always has suitable divisions, we should keep —

Two thimbles: one of steel, lined with silver; and one of ivory, for hot-weather wear.

Two pairs of scissors: one small, with fine sharp points, and one medium-sized pair, with one round and one pointed end. To these may be added a pair of button-hole scissors, and a pair of lace scissors.

One steel stiletto, or piercer, with a handle of ivory or mother-of-pearl.

A yard measure, such as dress-makers use, measuring sixty inches or so.

Two bodkins. Sizes different.

Silks. Black, white, and a few useful colors. The black should be fine, coarse, and medium.

China silks. On small spools, for glove-mending.

Sewing cotton. On spools 12, 16, 20, 24, 36, 50 and 70. W. Evans' Boar's Head crochet cotton are the generally useful sizes of the best cotton in the world.

Needles. From five to ten, besides darners.

Pins. Various sizes.

Needle-pins. These are broken needles, or needles with defective eyes, on which heads of red wax are stuck. For rich silks and satins, for muslins, and all kinds of fancy work, they are better than the finest pins.

Besides the above, rug, embroidery, crochet, knitting, and netting needles, a tatting shuttle, and other trifles for fancy work (if that happens to be a favorite employment), but the list we have given is strictly for plain work.

The WORK-BASKET should hold —

Hooks and eyes, black [Japanned] and white [tinned which produced a silver color], of various sizes.

Buttons. Various sizes; linen, pearl, and china.

Tapes. Black and white, and at least three widths the latter.

Bobbin, or round tape; useful for children's things.

Cord, for piping; black and white, of various sizes.

Cotton, for machine work, Evans' Boar's Head Machine cotton.

The most convenient way of keeping these various trifles is, to have a lining of silk round the interior of the basket, set round with a number of pockets, each drawing up, and capable of holding a small stock of these goods.

A pair of *large* scissors, for cutting out, should also find a place in the work-basket.

A large pincushion is indispensable. A common brick, covered with calico, having a bag of bran sewed on at the top, and the whole is neatly covered with silk or damask, is the most convenient. It is heavy enough to hold the work pinned on it, yet not awkwardly ponderous. As, however, needles are apt to get lost when stuck in such a cushion, it will be better to have a small, separate one for them. The nicest is in the form of a miniature mattress, of layers of flannel, covered with silk. About five inches by three, and half an inch thick, is convenient. It is made exactly like a mattress, and answers for both pins and needles.

.... A piece of wax [beeswax, either natural or bleached] candle, for waxing thread, is often of service.

The wax-headed needles of which we have spoken, should be used for all silk materials, in which even fine pins make holes that never quite disappear. The needles have the other advantage of being longer; and the red heads make them easily discernible. If every needle of which the eye is broken be kept for this purpose, a sufficient stock will generally be on hand; but the damaged needles are, also, we believe, to be purchased, being extensively used by gilders, and in other trades."

Catherine Beecher and her sister Harriet Beecher Stowe included suggestions for furnishing work-baskets. "*Work-baskets*. — It is very important to neatness, comfort, and success in sewing, that a lady's work-basket should be properly fitted up. The following articles are needful to the mistress of the family: a large basket to hold work; having it fasten a smaller basket or box, containing a needle-book in which are needles of every size, both blunts and sharps, with a larger number of those sizes most used; also small and large darning-needles, for woolen, cotton, and silk; two tape needles [bodkins], large and small; nice scissors for fine work, button-hole scissors; an emery bag; two balls of white and yellow wax [beeswax]; and two thimbles, in case one should be mislaid. When a person is troubled with damp fingers a lump of soft chalk in a paper is useful to rub on the ends of the fingers.

Besides this box, keep in the basket common scissors; small shears; a bag containing tapes of all colors, and sizes, done up in rolls; bags, one containing spools of white and another of colored cotton thread, and another for silks wound on spools or papers; a box or bag for nice buttons, and another for more common ones; a bag containing silk braid, welting cords, and galloon binding. Small rolls of pieces of white and brown [unbleached] linen and cotton are also often needed. A brick pin-cushion is a great convenience in sewing and better than screw cushions. It is made by covering half a brick with cloth, putting a cushion on the top, and covering it tastefully. It is very useful to hold pins and needles while sewing, and to fasten long seams when basting and sewing."

Suggestions for work-box contents did not seem to change over the following years. *Cassell's Household Guide*, included some specific advice for sewing implements. "If a word about work materials is necessary, we would suggest the following: Purchase an easy-fitting thimble of *steel, lined with silver*; it is well worth what it will cost. Have two good pairs of scissors — one pair of large ones, .... and a fine embroidery pair.... It is always good to have an old or common pair kept handy where any one can have free access to them, because this saves good scissors. [I guess our foremothers had the same problem with people in the household using for purposes other than needlework. Who hasn't had a ruined pair of sewing scissors because someone



used them for cutting paper or wire?] Always take care to have good needles and cotton; bad cotton knots, breaks, and makes bad work. Sewing machine cotton is the best made. Always have a lead pencil — an HB is the most useful — and a penknife in the work-basket. One of those covered baskets that stand on legs are the tidiest and most useful to hold work.... A large work-box to hold the material is also needed. Procure fine cotton and find needles for babies' work; needles Nos. 8 and 9 should be used, and the best cotton in about three sizes. Do not use the glazed cotton. Some persons like to wax their cotton; if the hands are over-warm, and emery cushion is useful to thrust the needles in; and do not commence to work without a good leaden pincushion, a yard measure, and plenty of pins."

*The Home Needle* from 1882 stressed the importance of a well-fitted work-box. "The first requisite for good sewing is good implements." The items mentioned were good scissors, sharp needles, the proper sewing cotton in the same size as the item being sewn, and a high quality thimble. The work-box should contain a stock of needles, cotton, sewing silk, tapes, buttons, cord, hooks and eyes, and "all the innumerable odds and ends so constantly used in household sewing."

Even reading period literature is a way to ascertain the contents of a work-box and the importance placed upon the box and items. In the book, *Wide, Wide World* by Susan Warner, there was a wonderful description of a work-box and its fittings. Young Ellen was preparing for her trip to live with a relative and her mother purchased Ellen a work-box. "... The box was of satin-wood, beautifully finished, lined with crimson silk; and Mrs. Montgomery had taken good care it should want nothing that Ellen might need to keep her clothes in perfect order.

'Oh, mamma, how beautiful! Oh, mamma, how good you are! Mamma, I promise you I'll never be a slattern. Here is more cotton than I can use up in a great while — every number [refers to the size of thread], I do think; and needles, oh, the needles! what a parcel of them! and, mamma! what lovely scissors did you choose it, mamma, or did it belong to the box?'

'I chose it.'

'I might have guessed it, mamma, it's just like you. And here's a thimble — fits me exactly; and a



From *Girl's Own Book*

emery-bag! how pretty! — and a bodkin! this is a great nicer than yours, mamma — yours is decidedly the worse for wear; — what's this? — Oh, to make eyelet holes with [a stiletto], I know. And oh, mamma, here is almost everything, I think — here are tapes, and buttons, and hooks and eyes, and darning cotton, and silk-winders, and pins, and all sorts of things. What's this for, mamma?

'That's scissors to cut button-holes with. Try it on that piece of paper that lies by you, and you will see how it works.'

'Oh, I see!' said Ellen, 'how very nice that is. Well, I shall take great pains now to make my button-holes very handsomely.'

#### FOR THE YOUNG SEWERS: AN EARLY START

Many of us have pleasant memories of our mother sitting and doing the mending or some handwork. The following quote seems to sum up that feeling. "Think how nice it would be, when Mother is busy with her sewing and mending, to sit beside her on a little low chair and help her with that big sewing basket overflowing with work." (Kirkwood)

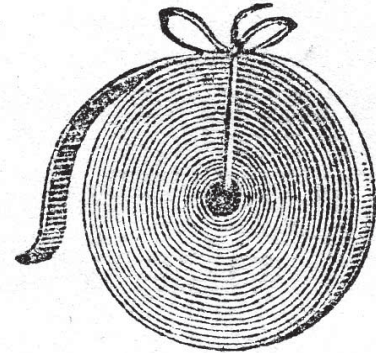


Left: From *Girl's Own Toymaker*.

Most children's activity books were biased according to the sex of the intended reader and books for girls featured sewing, crafts, and other "girl stuff." along with riddles, games, puzzles, and other activities. *The Girl's Own Toymaker* featured chapters on making doll's furniture, constructing doll's clothing, sewing projects such as watch pockets and hooks, pincushions, needlebooks, and pen wipers.

Young girls were often introduced to sewing by watching their mothers sew or by making doll clothes but the workbasket was just as important as the sewing. Maria Child wrote, *The Girl's Own Book*, "There is no accomplishment of any kind more desirable for a woman, than neatness and skill in the use of a needle.... The first and most important branch, is plain sewing. Every little girl, before she is twelve years old, should know how to cut and make a skirt with perfect accuracy and neatness." The author next gave brief instructions for making the shirt.

Good sewing habits were important in a young girl's education and activity books contained advice and instructions for making small items. Maria Child wrote, "Those little girls who wish to keep a neat work-box, will do well to take care of their tape in the following manner. Take a piece of pretty silk cord, or very narrow tape [sic, should be tape], about three or four inches long; wind your tape around this, and when it is all wound, tie the cord so as to confine the end. You will never undo this knot; you have only to take hold of the end of the tape and press backward against the cord, a little, when you want to unwind the tape; and if you take off too much, you have merely to slip the cord along until it is wound up again. This picture shows how it looks with a little piece unwound."



From *Girl's Own Book*

In *The Girl's Own Toymaker* and in the April through September 1860 issues of *Godey's* were instructions for dressing one's doll. [*Godey's* apparently copied directly from *The Girl's Own Toymaker* but did not include all the craft items shown in the latter.] There were patterns and instructions for making a chemise, corset, drawers, flannel petticoat, hoop petticoat, white petticoat, petticoat bodice (similar to a corset cover), frock, pinafore, cape, hat, and nightdress as well as patterns for various pieces of doll's furniture and cottage accessories. In *The Ladies' Guide to Needle Work, Embroidery, Etc.* were also instructions for making doll's clothing. The emphasis of the latter book was not for the young girl to make doll clothing for her doll but suggested that an older girl make doll clothing for her younger sister's doll.

Although much past the Civil War period, probably the most interesting book with an emphasis on sewing for young girls was written in 1913 by Jane Eayre Fryer. The book was titled, *The Mary Frances Sewing Book and Adventures Among the Thimble People*. The sewing instructions were given in the form of a story and included patterns for all the clothing needed for a doll.

## HOUSEHOLD WORK-BOXES/BASKETS

It was not just the homemaker or budding seamstress that needed a work-box or basket; it was also important for the female staff of the house to have them, in order to do small mending tasks. The author of the *Workwoman's Guide* included the following. "It is a good plan to fit up a square basket for the use of each working servant in the house, as for instance, the lady's-maid, the nurse, the house-maid, the laundry-maid. These baskets should vary sufficiently in form and size to be easily distinguished one from the other; the kind usually sold for babies' baskets is the most convenient, being large enough to hold plenty of work, and yet shallow, so as to easily search for things at the bottom.

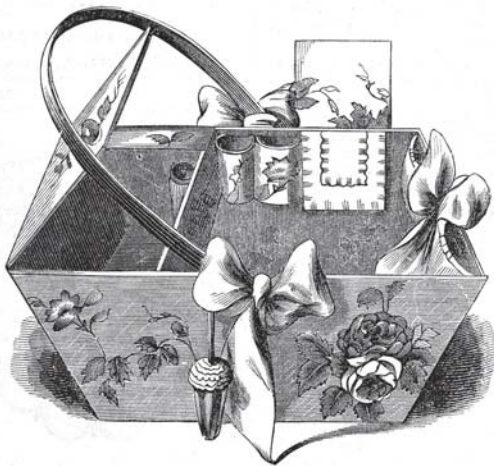
To these baskets should belong, a small tin for buttons, hooks and eyes, bodkins, &c.; a large pair of scissors and sheath tied to each other, fastened by a long string to the handle of the basket. A heavy pincushion, for of a brick or piece of iron or lead, placed in a bag full of bran, padded with flannel, and covered with print or calico. A large needle-book. A bag to contain tapes, silks, darning cottons, &c. It is advisable to mark the scissors-sheath, needle-book, pincushion, bag, and even the basket, with the initial of the maid by whom it is used, as H. B. for house-maid's basket."

## INSTRUCTIONS FOR MAKING WORK-BOXES OR BASKETS

Not all work-boxes or baskets were purchased: some were homemade as well as the pincushions, needle-books, emery-bags, and etc. Period magazines such as *Godey's Arthur's* and *Peterson's* included directions for constructing one's own work-box or sewing basket, which could always be personalized for individual needs. Below is just one example of such a work-box/basket.

In the January 1861 issue of *Godey's*, the following instructions were given for a work basket.

THE CHINTZ WORK BASKET.



January 1861 *Godey's*

### “THE CHINTZ WORK BASKET.

THIS basket is made of bright colored furniture chintz. As will be seen by the picture, its construction is very simple, being merely pieces of pasteboard, cut any size the maker may fancy, and the shape of those in the engraving. These are covered neatly with chintz, and sewed together. The little box to the left is for buttons; it is made of pasteboard, cut to fit accurately into the basket, with a cover of tin, covered with chintz. The advantage of tin is, that it will not curl as a pasteboard one would. There is a little stuffed cushion, fitted into the button box, for pins. The little bag is of chintz, and intended for a thimble. The two little bags to the right of the button box, are for spools of cotton; a needle-book comes next, having a cover of pasteboard sewed over the flannel. The bag to the right is made of chintz, very full, gathered in at the bottom, and confined at the top by a ribbon; this is for tape, and the many little trimmings to be found in a lady's work basket. At the side opposite the needle book, there is a bag of chintz for the scissors, and a strip sewed down tightly, and fastened at proper distances, for papers of needles, and bodkins. The

handle is a strip of tin covered with chintz, fastened at the sides by bows of ribbon.”

## VARIOUS WORK-BOX SUPPLIES

Work-boxes/basket, alone are not very useful, but needed to be outfitted with supplies. Some items were homemade and others were purchased. Sewing notions were commonly purchased in dry goods or general stores and *Historic Accounts* listed bunches and rolls of cotton, linen or wool tape, silk or wool braid, pins, needles, spools, skeins, or hanks of linen, cotton, or silk thread, buttons, hooks and eyes were. Cakes or balls of beeswax, emery strawberries, pin-cushions, scissors, thread winders (skeined thread was wound on these) made of pasteboard, wood, or ivory, in plain or ornate shapes, yard or tape measures, bodkins, stiletos, scissors and shears, and thimbles could also be purchased.

Instructions for scissors sheaths, needle-books, and pin-cushions abounded in period publications and needlework books. An entire book could be written with a compilation of these various items, so rather than present directions for unique items, below are some general directions for making pincushions, emery bags, and needle-books. Although the passages come from a children's book, the instructions are general and may be adapted to almost any design.

Taken from *The Girl's Own Book*.

### “PINCUSHIONS.

The forms into which pincushions have been manufactured of late, are almost without number. The most common kind consists of two circles of pasteboard, covered with silk, with narrow ribbon sewed between, and stuffed with bits of flannel cut of the size of the pasteboard. Cotton [as is polyester fiberfill because it will dull the pins and needles]] is very bad for the stuffing, because the pins enter



Silk velvet, corduroy, and wool pincushion. Decorated with a silk rosette.

Author's collection



it with difficulty; and when the cushions are of such shape that they can be stuffed with flannel, it is much preferable to wool. When sewed with silk of a very decided colour, and the stitches taken with great regularity, an edge resembling delicate cord may be produced.

Some cut the pasteboard into oblong pieces, and then paint rabbits, or squirrels, of a size suitable to cover each side, and after the cushion is made, they paste them on; the places for the pins then come between the two rabbits. Others paint a cat seated, for each side, and made the cushion of such a shape as will fit in well. Some cut the figures of the cats in black velvet, and put little spangles for eyes. I have seen butterflies painted and pasted on each side, in the same way. Some do the paintings on rice paper, and put them on cardboard, cut out precisely in the shape of the figure. They look richer, but are more easily injured. A very pretty pincushion may be made in the shape of a small easy chair.

There is a old-fashioned kind of pincushion which looks rather clumsy, but it is extremely convenient for a journey. The cushion is nearly an inch thick; no pasteboard is put on the outside, in order that there may be more room for pins; the inside is a piece of cardboard, covered with silk; a round hole is cut in it, and a piece of cardboard, just big enough for a thimble, let in. Little bars, stitched across on each side of the thimble hole, form places for scissors and bodkin. All this should be arranged before the stuffing is put in, and the bit of silk on the outside fitted; it is very inconvenient doing it afterward. The pincushions forms but half of the establishment. Flannel leaves are put in for needles, and the outside is covered with silk, with a little pocket for thread. This pocket consists of a plain piece of silk, nearly the size of the pasteboard, fastened to the outside by means of little gores at each end.

What used to be made in olden times, and called housewives, were similar to the travelling [sic] pincushion. These has a piece of silk, the same width as the cushion, and little more than a quarter of a yard long, neatly stitched into compartments, to answer the purpose of thread papers. This was rolled round the cushion, and fastened by a small loop and button. Housewives are very useful things, but they are out of fashion now.

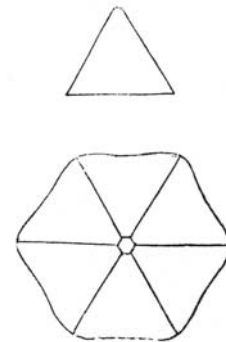
..... Another toilet cushion is very pretty and convenient, made of bits of ribbon so as to form a six-sided circle. This is the shape of each piece:

When put together, this is the appearance of it.

The little hole in the centre is left hollow. The pearl edges of the ribbon are stitched together at the outside. The edge is left perfectly straight; the pretty scalloped appearance is merely a little juttet out, where the slanting edges of the six bits of ribbon are sewed together. The beauty of the shape depends a good deal on its being stuffed full, plump, and even.

What are called 'bachelor's pincushions,' are made very thin, so that gentlemen can carry them in their pockets with convenience. No margin of ribbon, or taste [tape], is put between the bits of pasteboard, in making these cushions. Two round pieces of pasteboard are covered with silk, and neatly sewed together, with one or two thin pieces of flannel between them. Of course, merely one circle of pins can be put in.

..... EMERY-BAGS. Emery-bags are made in various forms. Some are merely little square bags, stuffed hard with emery; others are made round, and painted like an apple, plum, or peach; others imitate a little barrel, with cord put round for hoops. But the prettiest are imitations of strawberries, made of crimson merino, worked with green and brown silk to represent the calyx and spots of the strawberry. Unless these bags are made of very firm stuff, they should be lined; for the emery is exceedingly apt to sift out.



From *Girl's Own Book*

NEEDLE-BOOKS. Needle-books are usually made with a pincushion on one side; that is, instead of two thin covers merely, one side consists of two pieces of pasteboard, with a margin of ribbon between, and stuffed with flannel. The flannel leaves for needles should be of different sizes, neatly cut in delicate points around the edge, or worked with coloured silk. These books can be round or square, or oblong, according to fancy. Some make butterfly needle-books; the outside wings of embroidered velvet; the inside of silk; and flannel, for needles, between. The body is stuffed with emery.”

One important tool that was not described in detail in most period references was the tape measure. Yard measures were mentioned but little information was given. Several inexact methods of measuring were used; the end knuckle of a finger equaled one inch, the distance from the nose to the end of an outstretched arm equaled on yard, or a foot was equal to a man's foot.

Standard measures were given in nails or ells (A nail or ell is two and one quarter inches with four equaling one quarter yard.), inches or centimeters, and yards or meters. European or English measures generally were marked in centimeters and meters. As early as the Renaissance in France, ribbons were either embroidered or inked measuring increments were used as measures. In 1799, Mr. George Atkinson related that he made

an inch measure of parchment and marked it with inches, halves, and quarters. Fancy cases for tape measures were made of wood, ivory, vegetable ivory and metal and came in various shapes ranging from the practical to the whimsical. The containers had the marked ribbon attached to a reel inside the container which was wound by the use of a hand crank or pin. Some metal-cased tape measures had a small crank in which to rewind the tape. The pushbutton self-retracting tape measure was patented in 1868 by A. J. Fellows.



From the cargo of Steamboat Bertrand

Wooden yard measures were also used but did not fit in the work-box. *The Workwoman's Guide* suggested using a yard measure that was similar in appearance to a folding carpenter's rule and was marked on one side with inches and the other side with nails.

Original tape measures may be found but often they are not working correctly or are very fragile.

It is not recommended that one use an original because of the possibility of loss or damage. It is not difficult to make a tape measure by using natural-colored twill tape or silk ribbon and either embroidering or inking the quarters, half and inch increments on the tape. It may be rolled and stored neatly in the work-box/basket and if lost, they can be replaced.

Other implements and notions, such as scissors, shears, buttonhole scissors, thimbles, bodkins, stiletos, hooks and eyes, and buttons, were purchased.

Scissors and shears have not changed much from those used in the nineteenth century. Below are some examples of period scissors and shears similar to those found in the 1865 *Illustrated Catalogue of American Hardware of the Russell and Erwin Manufacturing Company*.



Large shears

Ladies'			
Fitted bows, full crocus polished			
No. B1-BBB-			
Length, inches	4½	5	5½
Per dozen	\$10.00	10.50	11.00
Ladies'			
Shear bow, solid steel, nickel plated.			
No. B8-BBB-			
Length, inches	6	6½	7
Per dozen	\$8.00	8.50	9.00

Embroidery or Lace			
Fitted bows, full crocus polished.			
No. B2-BBB-			
Length, inches	3½	4	4½
Per dozen	\$9.50	9.70	10.00



Hand crank metal case tape measure with cloth tape  
Author's collection



Top: Vegetable ivory, Stanhope lens in crank and cloth tape marked in inches.  
Bottom: Wooden barrel, cloth tape marked in centimeters.  
Author's collection

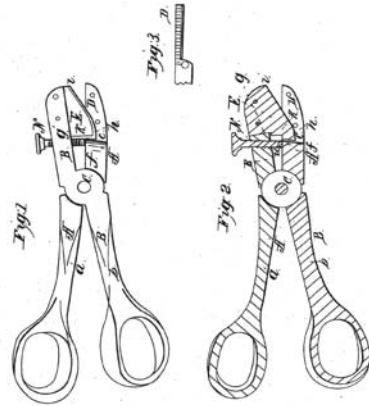


Button-hole scissors were mentioned in publications as early as 1838 but the earliest United States patent located was May 23, 1854.

*T. W. Brown,  
Button-Hole Cutter.  
N<sup>o</sup> 10,972. Patented May 23, 1854.*



Buttonhole scissors from 1870's



Although folding scissors have been documented in the United States, they were European imports. It was not until the mid-1870s that they became common in the United States. They were patented by A. J. Young on May 28, 1872, but advertisements for the scissors did not start appearing until 1876.

Bodkins, used for drawing a ribbon or cord through a casing, came in all sizes, shapes or materials.



Bodkins. ivory and brass.  
Author's collection



Stiletto, ivory (left), steel and ivory (right).

Author's collection

Stilettoes were used to punch holes in fabric or leather or pull out stitches. They were made from various materials with some having steel points and others were made entirely from bone or ivory.

Thread waxers were used to keep the thread from tangling and made it stronger and the thread was run through a piece of beeswax or a decorative waxer. When using a waxer, make sure that the wax is 100% beeswax, rather than dyed paraffin or a combination of paraffin and beeswax. Pure beeswax will feel slightly sticky and may have a mild honey scent.



Decorative thread waxer with silver top.

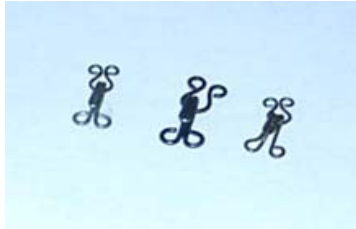
Private collection



Chunk of natural beeswax

In the United States, the first hook and eye was patented on February 24, 1843, and continued to improve. Below is an image from the March, 1862, issue of *Godey's*. As a comparison, also included are images of original hooks and eyes from the author's collection and the cargo of the Steamboat Bertrand.

MADAME DEMOREST'S ESTABLISHMENT.  
No. 473 Broadway, New York.  
GREATLY IMPROVED HOOKS AND EYES.



Hooks and eyes from author's collection. Left to right: brass, japanned, and white (silver color)



Side view. Notice the hump on the far left set (like on the Godey's drawing) and none on the others

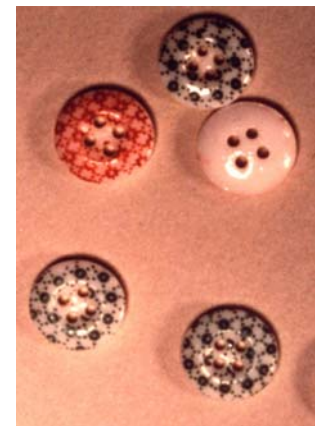


Brass hooks and eyes from the Steamboat Bertrand

Buttons came in various types, materials and sizes. Shown are images of several buttons from the author's collection as well as some from the cargo of the Steamboat Bertrand. Button images are not actual size.

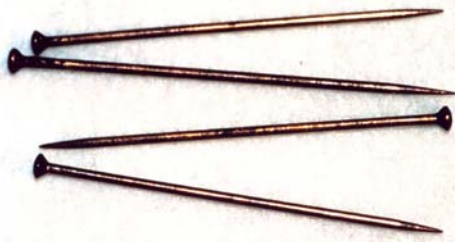


Calico and plain china buttons. Author's collection.



From the Steamboat Bertrand. Buttons are 7/16" in diameter

Pins and needles were both necessities for the work-box/basket. By the mid-nineteenth century, pins looked very similar to our modern pins. They were machine-made and called "solid-headed" pins because the head and shaft were formed the same piece of wire, rather than having the shaft and head made separate pieces. They were constructed from drawn brass wire with pressure being applied to one end to form the head. The completed pins were cleaned by boiling them in a solution of a weak acid or a solution of tartar (cream of tartar). The pins were "tinned" or "whitened" by boiling them in grain-tin and cream of tartar until they were coated with tin. To obtain the shiny silvered surface they were brightened by shaking the pins in a bag of bran. Some pins were packaged in a paper (toilet or dressmaking pins) by machine and sold as a paper of pins while other were sold either loose (bank pins) or strips of paper were coiled and formed in a pyramid (desk pins). The cost of a paper of pins, ranged from ten to twenty cents, depending upon the number of pins in each paper.



From the Steamboat Bertrand. Not actual size. These pins are 1 1/16" long with flat heads.

The making of needles was labor intensive and required many steps. The needles were made from steel wire, with two pins being made at one time. The wire was straightened and each end was ground to a point. The wire was cut in the middle and the cut end was flattened which was then heated so an eye could be drilled. The groove at the top of the needle was cut and rounded off. The needles were next tempered by heating them and then plunging them in cold water and then reheating them in boiling oil. Next, they were polished by putting them in a mixture of oil and emery-powder and agitated; the emery-dust and oil were removed by putting the pins in sawdust. This process was repeated several times, using finer emery- powder each time. Finally, they were cleaned with soap and water and dried thoroughly with dry wash-leather. Each point was honed by hand and packed in papers of twenty-five per paper, which cost about thirteen cents per paper.



Thimbles from the Steamboat Bertrand. Left thimble has an open top.

Thimbles were also a needed sewing implement. Pictured are two brass thimbles recovered from the Steamboat Bertrand and a one from the author's collection. Note the open topped thimble from the Bertrand.



Antique brass thimble. Author's collection

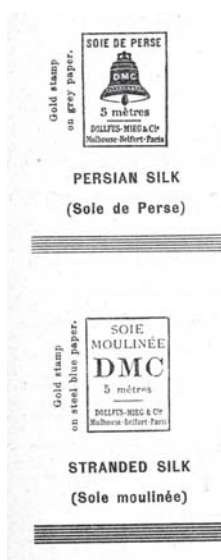


Period style spool similar to those found on the Steamboat Arabia

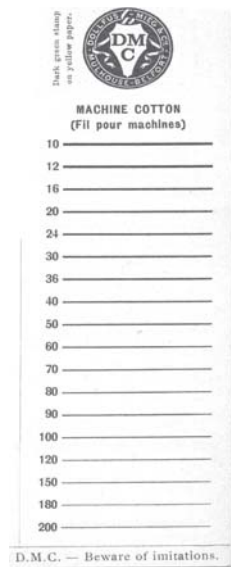
Several different thread sizes were mentioned in the contents of work-boxes but it is difficult to know what the various threads sizes looked like. Not being able to find a Civil War era thread size chart, the images below were taken from a post Civil War book in the author's collection, *Encyclopedia of Needlework*, but they do give an indication as to the difference in threads and sizes.



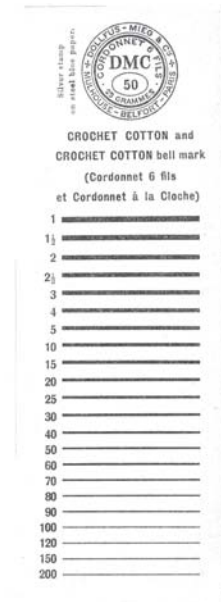
Marking and darning cotton thread sizes



Silk thread sizes



Sewing machine thread sizes



Crochet cotton thread sizes



## HOMEMADE SEWING RELATED ITEMS

The previous instructions give the reader a general idea of how the contents were made and how they could be adapted for personal preference. For additional ideas of the more creative items that could be made, please refer to period ladies' magazines, such as *Godey's*, *Peterson's*, *Arthur's*, and *The Ladies' Friend*. English publications also had numerous projects for sewing boxes and their contents.

Child included in her book, instructions for making thread bags for keeping balls or spools of thread neat, pincushions, emery bags, and needle-books. *Godey's* and *Peterson's* also included instructions, in their juvenile section, for making small items such as pincushions, needle-books, and work-boxes or baskets. These items were often sold at fancy fairs or given as gifts for family and friends. Eliza Leslie included in her book, patterns and directions for fourteen pincushions, six for needle-books, and various other projects that required sewing. A great many of these small items were used for Christmas gifts and were often hung on the Christmas tree.

As an example, the story below illustrates a way that the craft projects were used. In the December 1861 issue of *Godey's* there was a story titled, "Auntie's Merry Christmas" by T. P. W. A family had decided that there was no money for Christmas presents that year and all gifts must be homemade. The following is an excerpt from the story.

"Now that they [children, grandchildren, servants] all know there can be no expensive presents, the simple gifts of olden time may be acceptable.

Auntie hurried down town, and bought bristol-board, gold-paper, bright-colored sewing-silks, emery, white wax [bleached beeswax], colored worsteds, and bits of merino; the old patterns that forty years since gave variety to fairs were brought into requisition.

There were emery-bags, and little wax fishes with golden scales and fins; there were needle-books of bristol-board, cut in points, and wound with bright-colored silks, and between the leaves of these little books dimes were curiously fastened; there were merino pincushions, wrought with colored worsted; and baskets of bristol-board, cut like oak-leaves, bound with gold-paper, and pleasant verses written between the veins of the leaves. When Christmas eve came, there were twenty-seven little packages in readiness for distribution, the whole amount of the cost being two dollars and eighty-five cents!"

Work-boxes/baskets and their contents were not just made as Christmas gifts or fancy fairs; they were also used to raise money for Civil War causes. In *The Tribute Book*, various contributions for sanitary fairs were listed. As an example, "Mrs. Lucinda Brewer, of Sterling, Illinois, a lady in her seventy-eighth year, gave eight work-baskets, twenty pin-cushions...." These items were sold at the fairs and money was raised to contribute to the welfare of soldiers.

## THE HOUSEWIFE, SEWING KITS, and COMFORT BAGS

While not exactly a work-box or work-basket, the housewife or sewing kit should also be included as a part of an article on sewing necessities. There were many instances where the larger work-boxes were not practical; while traveling, a lady might need sewing implements for a clothing repair or a soldier would need a small sewing kit. Patterns for these small sewing kits were included in most lady's magazines and the Christian Commission distributed a pattern for a soldier's housewife.

*The Workwoman's Guide* included instructions for a simple housewife. "This is made of leather, stamped paper, silk, ribbon, satin, velvet, white dimity, Holland, or any other material, even common print.

Two pieces, the size of A B C D, are first of all cut out and back-stitched along, to form the thread runners, after which another piece, E F G H, is cut out, and the places for the scissors, bodkin, &c., made then a long strip is cut, not only sufficient for the whole length, but to turn over at the end to form a pocket. The other pieces are neatly bound to it, and the flannel or kerseymere for needles is added. The initials may be put at the sloped end. The case may wrap up..." An illustration accompanied the instructions, but no exact measurements were given.

From the November 1864 issue of *Godey's*.

"We also give an article that every lady can make, and every gentleman wants— that is, single gentlemen; and what a suitable present for a soldier brother— "Housewife for a Gentleman," a most useful article.

#### HOUSEWIFE EMBROIDERED ON TICKING.

THE material recommended for this useful little article will make it very strong and durable; and as any odd pieces of colored silks can be used for the embroidery, it will not be expensive to complete. Linen bed-ticking is the best for the purpose, and it will require a strip 24 inches in length and 5 inches wide—that is, 15 white stripes. This will allow 2 for the turnings, the housewife being 13 stripes wide when finished. For the lining, a yard and a quarter of cerise or blue sarcenet [thick plain or twilled silk] ribbon 4 1/2 inches wide, or a piece of silk wide enough to allow for turnings may be used instead; 12 yards of narrow gold braid, and coarse netting-silk of various colors.

The embroidery is worked on the white stripes of the ticking, one end of which should be cut to a point in the centre to form the extreme outside of the case; the other end is left square, and when made up this is turned over two inches to form the first pocket.

1st stripe. The little leaves are worked in blue silk, and formed by three long stitches taken from the centre of the white stripe to the edge of it, and then three stitches taken the reverse way; the straight line down the centre is of gold-colored silk.

2d. Make the cross lines which form a diamond with light green silk, and then work the straight lines with crimson silk.

3d. Work the long diamonds alternately with black and green, and form the cross in the centre of the black diamond by two straight stitches each way, worked in green; the cross in the centre of the green diamond should be of crimson.

4th. Make the short cross in black, of a single stitch each way; but the long crosses should have two stitches close together, and be worked in cerise silk.

5th. The three little leaves are composed of three stitches taken straight, and then three stitches worked in a slanting direction on each side. Three sets of these leaves should be worked in green, and the three next in pale gold-color, alternately.

6th. The stars are composed of eight stitches, each taken from the centre to the edge, and they should be alternately crimson and violet, the diamonds between the stars are of violet edged with crimson, or crimson edged with violet.

7th. The slanting lines are formed of five stitches worked across the white stripe with green silk, and the small stitches' between, alternately cerise and pale gold-color.

8th. The long stitches are to be black and the short ones crimson.

9th. Is formed of two stitches each way from the centre to the edge, and the first three sets of them should be worked with gold-color; the next three sets with crimson; then three with violet, and three with green.

10th. Same as the third stripe, working the long crosses with green, and the smaller in black.

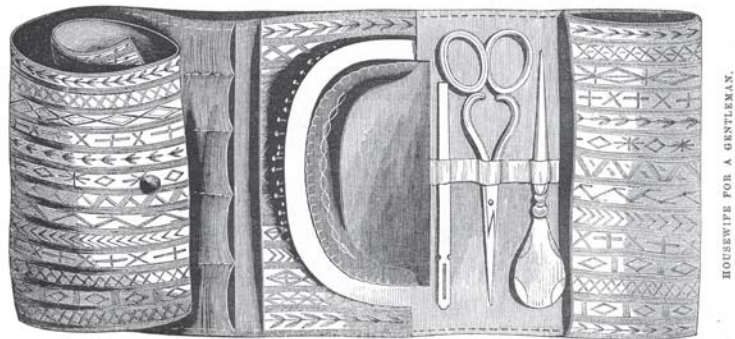
11th. The diamonds of violet, and the four straight stitches in crimson.

12th and 13th. The same as the 1st and 2d stripes.

The gold braid is run on the black lines of the ticking, working with fine gold-color sewing-silk. At the end of each line the braid should be carried across to the next, and not cut off. The braid at each edge should not be sewn on until after it is lined, as it then conceals the stitches.

To make up the case, it must be first lined throughout, stitching the ticking neatly to the ribbon; then make the pocket at the straight end, and for the second pocket embroider two inches of the ticking as before, line it, and sew one edge to the case, two and a half inches from the other pocket. Between the pockets a band should be made for the scissors, etc.

The leaves for needles are of white cashmere, and the edges overcast with cerise silk with a row of chain-stitches under it.



From *Godey's*, November 1864

The pincushion is formed of two oval pieces of card, covered with silk, and stitched together.

The casings for skeins of cotton and silk are made by placing twelve inches of the ribbon over the first lining, and working the runnings along it a little less than an inch apart, being careful not to take the stitches through the ticking.

A loop of braid should be sewed to the pointed end, and a button on the outside six inches from that end.”

Modern instructions, written by Suzanne Carter Issacson, for making this housewife may be found in the August/September, 1999 issue of *Citizens' Companion*.

Housewife instructions provided by the Christian Commission were much simpler. In part, the instructions, which included a diagram, read, “The following is the most simple, convenient and serviceable style we have seen. Let them be of calico or similar material, double, plain, neat with one pocket and needle-book, and well-made. Fill them with linen thread, needles, pins, buttons, &c., with a little letter giving them the name and post-office of the sender.” For full instructions, please visit Edinborough Press’ website at <http://www.edinborough.com/Life/Commission/Housewife.htm>

Newspapers also published information on how to make and outfit a housewife or comfort bag. The following excerpt is taken from the November 5, 1861 issue of the *Indianapolis Daily Journal*, which appeared in the August/September 2001 issue of *Citizens' Companion*. “Little Comforts.... Foremost among these [little comforts from home], and contributing very greatly to the daily convenience of the soldier, is an article known to bachelors and benevolent ladies as a ‘housewife’ and to sailors as a ‘ditty-bag’ — a roll, or a small sack, containing needles, buttons, thread and scraps of cloth for mending torn or worn clothing....

‘The simplest and consequently the best contrivance for this that I have seen,’ says our correspondent, ‘is a little bag of eight penny calico, six inches wide by four inches deep, with a hem three quarters of an inch wide at the top and one draw-string of colored cotton tape. On the outside of the bag, and about one and a half inches below the top, is sewed a flap of cloth for needles, and on the underside of this flap are stuck, six No. 5 needles; ‘blunts’ or ‘betweens;’ never ‘sharps.’ Inside the bag are put twelve black bone buttons (let them be of the best and strongest) and twelve metal buttons, such as are used on pantaloons, a few skeins of flax thread (black, white and gray) cut and plaited and secured at each end by a piece of thread wound firmly around it, and a little roll of fine strong linen twine, say two or three yards long.”

The *Southern Confederacy* also gave the following advice on outfitting a housewife for the soldier. “1 flannel housewife, for and full of needles—throw in a few pins while you are about it; 1 pair small scissors; strong white and black threads in tidy skeins.”

## TRAVELING SEWING BOXES

Gentlemen and soldiers were not the only ones who needed a traveling sewing kit. Often, travel advice recommended that one pack a traveling sewing box for emergency repairs. They may contain a few pins, needles, thread wound on winders or a small spool of thread, a thimble, small pair of scissors, and any other small items, such as hooks and eyes and miscellaneous sized buttons, that may be needed. These boxes could be purchased or travel kits could be homemade.

Below are two examples of traveling sewing boxes. The one on the left is an antique similar to a Shaker sewing box and the one on the right is a reproduction of the antique.



Left: Original leather covered traveling sewing box, containing a pair of scissors, thimble, and attached needle book. From a private Collection.



Right: Reproduction of traveling sewing box made by author.



The information and advice on work-boxes/baskets is timeless and is as valuable for today's seamstress as it is for the living history interpreter. If one is doing a period impression that involves sewing, either plain or fancy, a correctly outfitted work-box or a basket is as important as knowing how to do plain sewing or the desired fancy work. A soldier mending a tear, replacing a button or darning socks is always an interesting interpretation and usually generates questions from spectators. For both the soldier and the civilian, the best impression is made up of accuracy in the little things as well as the large and more noticeable details of dress and hair or military uniforms and equipment.

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