



ANTIQUE FLAT IRONS The Norman Raubenstine Collection

In 1983, HAHS was given a collection of antique flat irons, known as the Norman Raubenstine Collection. Unfortunately, old records do not tell us who Norman Raubenstine was or why he had at least 16 flat irons to donate. (Sixteen is the number we've been able to document.) Current-day researchers have not been able to learn about him. We can say we are grateful for the collection of these antique flat or "sad irons." Several irons are on display in the Hanover Area History Museum.



The following information is from collectorsweekly.com. Hover over each photo for a description of the iron in HAHS's collection.



Sad irons, also called flat irons or smoothing irons, are shaped pieces of metal that are flat and polished on one side and have a handle attached to the other, created for the purpose of de-wrinkling fabric. "Sad" is an Old English word for "solid," and the term "sad iron" is often used to distinguish the largest and heaviest of flat irons, usually 5 to 9 pounds.

The forebears to modern electric irons, these flat irons are often triangular or come to a point to make it easier to iron around [buttons](#). The heft of a sad iron would help it hold heat, as well as to press the fabric flat. To protect fabric and surfaces from singeing, sad irons often came with metal [trivets](#) to rest on, and these are often-beautiful, intricate, and collectible examples of metalwork that were made in a myriad of designs.



The earliest metal flat irons were forged by blacksmiths in the Middle Ages. These were heated on an open fire or a stove, and the metal handles had to be grasped with a thick potholder, rag, or glove. Women had to be careful not to track soot or ash on the clothing they were ironing.

But the desire for wrinkle-free garments started long before medieval times: Documents reveal even Vikings in the 10th century wanted their

clothes de-wrinkled. They used round, glass “linen smoothers” to accomplish this task. This led to handled “glass smoothers,” also called “slickers.”

Glass smoothers developed into mushroom-shaped “smoothing stones”—also called “slickstones,” “sleekstones,” and “slickenstones”—made of wood, glass, stone, or bone. A “smoothing board” or “mangle board” (called “battledores,” “battels,” “beatels,” and “bittle and pin” in England) featured a rolling pin, or roller turned by a lever, which was the basis for future ironing machines. The “linen press” or “screw-presses” flattened the fabric between two flat surfaces.



It was trade with China in the 12th century that introduced to Europeans the idea of using heat to iron clothes. The Chinese had been pressing pans filled with hot coals over stretched cloth since first century B.C. Once the concept of heat-pressing was embraced in Europe, Western fashion became centered on starching and ironing.

For example, the elaborate white ruffs or collars worn around the neck during the Elizabethan Era would be heavily starched and pressed. Round ruffles would be created by “goffering irons,” made of slender rods arranged on a stand. “Fluter” or “crimping irons” made angular crimps.

Sad irons didn’t change much during the Middle Ages. A master tailor would employ an extremely heavy sad iron, weighing 16 to 18 pounds, known as the “tailor’s goose.” This iron got its name from the goose-neck-shaped handle, and some were made to look like geese. Occasionally, housewives who made a lot of woolen clothes for their families would use these irons to press tricky woolen seams flat.



One problem with sad irons is that they cooled quickly, which meant work had to stop while irons were reheating. One solution was the charcoal iron, which was hollow to hold charcoal or a hot piece of metal. “Box,” “ox-tongue,” and “slug irons” were also designed to hold a heated slab of metal. Charcoal irons released a lot of smoke, and it was difficult to design them so the coals got enough oxygen to stay lit. Some came with chimneys to protect the garments from smoke, while others had small openings to help fan the flames.



Ironing was always a laborious, miserable task, particularly for housewives and servants. Fires had to be stoked all day, even in the dog days of summer. In early America, it became traditional that Monday was washing day and Tuesday was ironing day. Rural families would not have many changes of clothes, but they would have sometimes dozens of children, which led to multiple sets of sheets that all needed to be laundered and ironed. Housewives often made their own starches out of wheat, corn, or potato flour. Ironing was such an important skill, that little girls would be given miniature sad irons as gifts.

In 1870, a woman by the name of Mary Florence Potts, in Ottumwa, Iowa, was awarded a patent for a sad iron with that came to a point on both ends, which allowed women to iron in either direction. Then, a year later, she introduced the biggest innovation in ironing thus far; a sad iron with a detachable, wooden handle. Mrs. Potts' Sad Irons were sold in sets with three irons and one handle, the idea being that two irons could be heating on the stove while one was in use. When that iron cooled, another was ready to go. This invention was a big hit with housewives for several reasons. First, it was patented by a woman, before women could even vote. Second, it was widely marketed in [magazines](#) and five-and-dime stores in the growing post-[Civil War](#) economy.



Also in the late 1800s, inventors came up with irons that were heated by gas and alcohol fuel, which eliminated the need to burn fires all day. One plugged directly into a natural gas line. Others stored fuel in a tank at the back of the iron. But the fuel smelled bad, and the irons often exploded or caught on fire when lit, burning the handle and, sometimes, the user.

The first electric iron was invented in 1882, but at the time, most regions of the United States didn't have electricity, and those that did, only had it only at night for lighting. Earl Richardson in Ontario, Canada, was the first to convince the local electric company to run electricity on Tuesday, ironing day. However, a good number of women, particularly in rural areas that were late getting electricity, held onto their sad irons well into the 1950s.



These irons were "found in collection" and while most likely were part of the Norman Raubenstein Collection, we can't say that with certainty.



