

Our Colonial Comb Industry

By HAZEL BAKER CLARK

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Not only in modern times, but from the dawn of Man's history have accessories to the garment reflected the character of the whole costume. Modern fashion magazines are prone to emphasize the importance of accessories as "accent." This was equally true always, and not only do these "accents" record the clothes fads of their day, but through their design, material, and method of manufacture, reveal the cultural and economic standards of their period.*

The Society is wise and fortunate in preserving a wealth of costume accessories which, though sometimes seemingly trivial individually, nevertheless, studied and classified, reflect the whole environment of the people who wore them and also its evolution. Such collections are of interest to the illustrator, and to students of cultural and economic history.

Such a collection is the Society's group of combs, from which Hazel Baker Clark has selected examples in illustration of her following article.

COMBS are so cheap today, both the sort used to adorn the hair and also to keep it in place as well as the ones used in untangling locks, that little thought is given to the slow evolution of their manufacture.

Modern manufacture in easy mass production of plastic materials is the reason, of course, with little hint of the long, slow, difficult journey started in early New England to that desirable end. The slow, individual, handmade product, the trials that beset all new ventures, the difficult evolution of a needed product, and then the selling of it, all early showed Yankee ingenuity and perseverance, and that combs are now a large New England industry also demonstrates New England tenacity.

The first known person to make combs in this country was Captain Robert Cook of Needham. Needham was in its beginning not only a part of Dedham but much more extensive in its territory even than that. George Kuhn Clarke's *History of Needham, Massachusetts, 1711-1911*, describes Robert Cook as a "hornebreak-

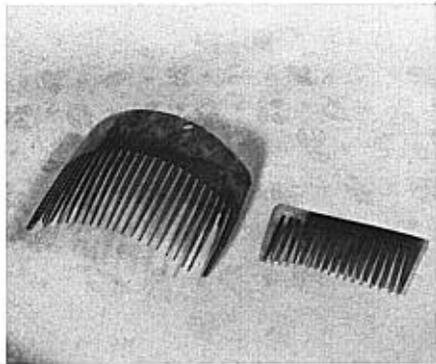


FIG. I. EARLY HORN COMBS, HAND-SAWED COARSE TEETH

er." Much more is known of Cook's services to his town and country than as a manufacturer, for he was captain of the Colonial militia, served for years in many capacities for his town, such as selectman for twenty-eight years, and treasurer for thirteen, besides being a representative to the General Court for three terms. The paucity of information about his combs is probably due to the fact that he found public life more rewarding and fun than

softening horn in hot oil and laboriously cutting combs by hand with knife and hatchet. Cook died in 1756.

The colonists were not limited to the scarce, homemade product. Imported combs were hard to get, expensive and highly treasured, but they were to be had.

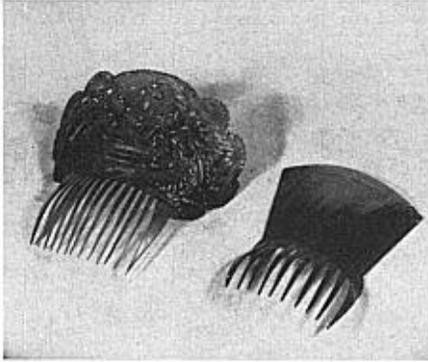


FIG. 2. TORTOISE SHELL COMBS, WITH ENGRAVED DECORATION SHOWING SPANISH INFLUENCE

Combs were so rare they were worthy of piratical loot. There is a record that "in 1653 Captain Edward Hull, a pirate, robbed a trading station at Block Island owned by one Captain Kempo Sebarda, and among other goods stole one hundred of Combs, 2 lbs. 10 shillings." In 1666, Nicholas Vanden, a servant, who ran away from his master, Robert Cross, of Ipswich, was accused of "breaken open a cheast steelin' a come cost 12 penc money."

The man who really started the comb industry in this country, and so made history, was a high individualist named Enoch Noyes. He lived in West Newbury, Massachusetts, and probably began his industry in 1759. He is supposed to have cut his first combs from horn with a jackknife. He made combs for nineteen years or more and, like many farm-

ers that not only produced but also sold their produce, he peddled combs. Noyes added to his stock-in-trade crude horn buttons. His combs and buttons were made without instruction until an eventful day when there came to Noyes a German comb-maker.

Came to Noyes a comb-maker who was a Hessian. One account, given in a sketch of the history of Newbury, Newburyport and West Newbury from 1635 to 1845 by Joshua Coffin, names him as a deserter from General Burgoyne's army. As history records many Hessians were kidnapped to serve under the British, and many came against their will, it could easily be true.

Enoch Noyes was politically a Tory, but what undoubtedly made the soldier welcome was his kit of curious tools which he had used as a comb-maker in Germany. His name has come down as William Cleland, probably an Anglicized Hessian name. *Comb Making in America* states that there are those who have doubted the advent of the Hessian and the part he played, but the veracity of the story is further substantiated by two incidents. The first, related by William Little, at one time president of the Newbury Historical Society, states that at the battle of Bennington General Stark captured a body of Hessians in an old sawmill. As the colonists had no place to quarter them, they were farmed out in squads. Major Little, living at Turkey Hill in West Newbury, took ten of these prisoners to his house. They were not kept under guard but were left to come and go as they pleased. No one knows what became of them. It is said the government passed a vote to send them home but did not do so.

The result of this visitor to Noyes was that they worked at comb-making for

many years. With the German tools and improved method the two men evolved the first "case comb" in this country.

In the small cellar of his home Noyes with Cleland made their combs. Like the attraction of the village blacksmith, children stopped to gaze at the unusual work below. When the horn was properly softened in a cauldron of hot oil, it was then thrown upon the floor, the men stamping upon it with their heavy boots. Pieces were placed under heavy stones until cool. Wrinkles were further removed by a handmade piece of wood called a "guillotine." More smoothing by other simple tools, a "shave" and "standing horse." Cleland gave the finish used in Germany with a "quarnet" somewhat like a mason's trowel but with teeth cut crosswise, about five teeth to an inch.

Tradition gives credit to a "gauge-leaf-saw" from the Hessian's wonder kit. With this the teeth of the comb were sawed one at a time by hand. With skillful hands the work was good. A "vise" clamped on the bench held the comb and cut away the teeth with a "carlet." The pointer finished the points of the teeth. In making dressing combs a curious tool called "the vidder" scraped away the plate, making a quill back.

Tortoise-shell combs came to be their specialty for the tortoise was then common.

From that little shop workmen learned the industry and it spread to all the Newburys and way beyond.

Ingenuity was developed into giving the horn comb amber and black effects and also mother-of-pearl. As the real tortoise became scarce with the encroachment of civilization a spatter-work came, giving the same effect or nearly so.

With the Newbury industry growing, factories elsewhere finally developed. Of-

ten the finishing of the combs was done by women of the villages who bent and polished them in their homes. The bending was done by slightly warming the combs and tying them over a rounded arm of wood. This was a slow, difficult process and it was found to be burdensome, but the term "sweat shop" had not yet been invented, so home industries were still held honorable occupation.

The peak of the comb business here came in the years 1830 to 1840. There were then thirty-two comb shops in the town of Newbury. Enoch Noyes had sons, grandsons, and great-grandsons in the comb business. One factory went to Binghamton, New York.

The comb industry thus resounds with the name of Noyes, for it proved itself a talented family, adding inventions and individual enterprise for generations. The family originally was Norman, spelling the name Noye. Before coming to this country the Reverend James Noyes and his cousin Thomas Parker taught school in Newbury, England. They came here in 1634 and it was in their honor that the House of Deputies passed the following order: "Quacocunquam is allowed to be a plantation . . . and the name

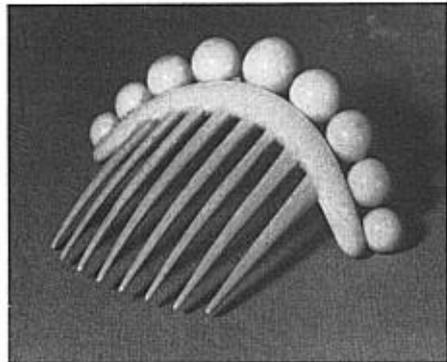


FIG. 3. LARGE IVORY COMB

of said plantation shall be changed and shall hereafter be called Newbury."

Enoch Noyes was the great-grandson of the Reverend James Noyes, born April 8, 1743. In 1766 he married Sarah L. Emery by whom he had three sons and four daughters. Ephraim, the oldest son, followed the comb business with a degree of success and Ephraim's sons, David and William, carried on with their inventive genius.

Enoch himself made an unforgettable appearance, tall, loosely built, features sharply chiseled with prominent nose and chin, deep-set eyes with thick, dark lashes. Careless in his dress and full of fun, a good storyteller and fond of jokes, his arrival was a signal for a good time. Was it then he sold his combs to advantage? His personal library was the largest in the vicinity, history being his great interest. He also pioneered in other ways than with combs for he is credited with being the first in the colonies to import fruit trees from Europe, and he made an artificial pond in which he bred fish.

In the growing feeling against the mother country Noyes remained loyal to English rule and never hesitated to express his increasingly unpopular views. So hot were the times and arguments that for sweet safety's sake he sometimes disappeared down his capacious chimney into a subcellar where he remained in hiding until the tension had subsided. His wife lowered baskets of food down to him, she alone knowing his hideout. Part of the cellar was plastered, making a clean and quiet workshop. In the fireplace for hours at a time hung the large cauldron of hot oil, simmering the horn and tortoise shell, softening for "working." The lighting was poor, little windows cut in the cellar door and covered with oiled paper. Warm weather must

have been welcome when the cellar door could stand open.

By 1774 the comb industry had become important enough for the Provincial Congress of Massachusetts to recommend to the people the encouragement of hornsmiths, the new name for comb-makers. Making combs was still slow and arduous; a fortunate journeyman might make a dollar a day, but even that was better wage than farming. In fact, many farmers took the home industry along with farming. Comb-makers usually had apprentices; apprentices were bound by legal indenture and it became near slavery in this new world.

All labor was by hand until James Carr had the idea of harnessing a horse to a treadmill and so cut and polished his combs.

Improvements came slowly, so did patents. But although a West Newbury man founded the comb industry, it is Leominster, in the same state, that became the greatest comb manufacturing center in the world. To it came Smith Hills from West Newbury in 1774. His sons, Silas and Smith, stayed after their father returned to West Newbury and established their comb industry. Evidently the reports sent back were good, for Joseph Tenny, John Chase and Edward Lowe, all comb-makers of West Newbury, moved to Leominster. Others were attracted, and soon allied industries sprang up. James Buzzell, who adorned his combs with shell and ivory, soon made comb tools and machinery.

Importation of combs, as with much else, practically ceased during the Revolutionary War, with the result that this country manufactured more and more. Boston produced combs by Graham on Charter Street in 1783. However, as early as 1759 Philadelphia had Chris-

topher Anger who advertised that he could continue to supply "wholesale or retail all sorts of combs and also powder horns and punch-spoons."

Much of the material of this comb story is taken from an attractive and exhaustive book, *Comb Making in America, An Account of the Origin and Development of the Industry for which Leominster has Become Famous, to which are added Pictures of Many of the early Comb Makers and Views of the Old Time Comb Shops, Compiled and printed for Bernard W. Doyle, President of the Viscoloid Company, Inc. In Commemoration of the One Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of the Founding of the Comb Industry in Leominster, Massachusetts, 1925.* This book was compiled, written and printed under direction of Perry Walton, Boston, Massachusetts.

The Viscoloid Company of Mr.

Doyle's interest was a growth from his business of selling horn to comb manufacturers. As the horn became scarce and celluloid products were on the market he saw the advantage of the newer material. The Viscoloid Company was the result that was later to become the DuPont factory in Leominster. The sale to DuPont a few years ago was for seven million dollars. Shades of Cook and Noyes take notice.

Other bibliography: *History of Newbury, Mass. 1635-1902*, by Currier, Boston; *Encyclopedia Americana*; *Leominster's Daily Enterprise*, October 7, 1931; *The Book of Costume*, by Millia Davenport, Vol. II, New York, Crown Publications; *Antiques*, Vol. 1, No. 6, June, 1922; *Customs of New England*, by Fell, Boston, 1853; *A Sketch of the History of Newbury, Newburyport and West Newbury from 1635-1845*, by Joshua Coffin; *Bryant's Popular History of the United States*, Vol. 3; Personal interview with manager of Viscoloid Company.

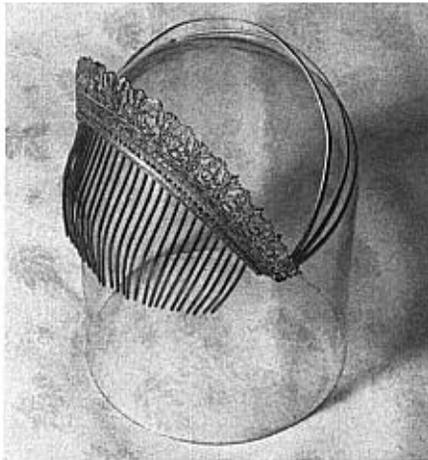


FIG. 4. GILDED COMB, NEO-CLASSIC,
WITH GREEK FILLET ATTACHMENT