

DRINKS WITH DEAD PEOPLE

QUARANTINE EDITION

APRIL 17, 2020:

[ELIAS HOWE](#)

This week's theme: Connecticut history, because it's my home and I'm sheltering in it. Today's story: Elias Howe, [historical hottie](#) and sewing machine inventor.

THE STORY

Elias Howe patented the idea for a sewing machine in 1846. The [mythic backstory](#) was first-rate: Howe claimed that he was stuck on the idea until one night, in a dream, he found himself kidnapped by a savage foreign king and told he had to produce a sewing machine in a day's time or suffer death. Dream-Howe panicked until he noticed that the warriors poking at him carried spears with holes in the point. Waking in a flash, he realized that the solution to his design problem was to place the eye of the machine needle at the point, not in the larger heel as with hand-stitching.

By 1856, though, the legal and financial landscape for mechanized sewing was so choked up that progress seemed impossible – inventors were fighting with each other more than they were selling machines. The president of the Grover and Baker company proposed a solution to what folks came to call the “Sewing Machine War:” the major developers and manufacturers would call a truce, pool their patents and work together to enforce their rights. The “Sewing Machine Combination” was born. Until 1877, at which time most of the inventors' patents expired, the Combination was the undisputed power in the industry – and Howe made a small fortune. He gave generously to the Connecticut infantry during the Civil War – providing horses for all of the officers of the 17th Volunteer Regiment, in which he served as a private (having [declined the offer of a colonel's rank](#), instead suggesting that his health and sense of honor better suited him to ride to and from Baltimore with war news) – and died in 1867.

Read on [at the blog](#) for more detail and resources.

DISCUSS:

How should we incentivize people to create new inventions?

Why do you think people were at first resistant to the idea of machine sewing?

What other industries would have been impacted by the rise of machine sewing?

Do you sew?

Have you [made any masks](#)?

Hi, I'm Betsy. Stuck at home? Let's learn history together, because the past helps us to understand that we are not alone. Weekday updates during #COVID19.

Questions? Comments? Say hello.

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READ MORE:

Adam Mossoff, “[The Rise and Fall of the First American Patent Thicket: The Sewing Machine War of the 1850s](#),” 53

Arizona Law Review 165 (2011)

[Howe's 1846 Sewing Machine Patent Model](#), National Museum of American History