

Knitting Needle Point Protectors:
An American Version

By

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What is the history of those little things that knitters buy at the local yarn shop or a haberdashery counter and put on the ends of their knitting needles? Alternative names are tip guards, needle caps, point protectors, and needle sheaths. Do people really use them? Do they work?

The history of these devices as crafted objects seems to go back, about 300 years. Before that time, the utilitarian end of hand knitting, making caps, beanies, gloves, and stockings for the masses, was mainly a home-based industry. Distribution of raw materials, pickup of finished products, and payment in cash or in kind was well organised through local inns or village general shops.

Industrious knitters used whatever was available to cap the ends of their double-pointed needles when live stitches were still on the shaft (Fig. 1). Wax was a favourite; cork ends also provided security and spared “needle stabs” for those carrying their knitting around the house or in a pocket.

European ladies in the eighteenth century began using silver or other metal “caps” for their double-pointed knitting needles to keep the needles together, prevent stitches from sliding off, or prevent a needle from rolling onto the floor and under the skirts. The earliest dated pair in my collection carries a Dutch hallmark for 1791. The middle-class fashion for using point protectors seems to have moved

into England by mid-nineteenth century.

In the nineteenth century, with industrialisation creating new markets and looking for new customers, a vast array of point protector styles and substances was developed, from the middle-class lady’s silver to humble bone or resin-based items like “pig’s trotters.” Other materials for making point protectors included wood, horn, leather, ivory, and gold; and tiny caps could be sewn, knitted, or crocheted and then stuffed with wool or felt. Nuts, shells, and dried husks could also be used. Some years ago, the Needlework Tool Collectors Society of Australia distributed a set of point protectors made of dried gum nuts as a conference commemorative.

Point protectors continue to be sold today, mainly made industrially for some of the big haberdashery brands like Birch in Australia or Boye in the United States, or made by craftswomen /men in small lots in wood or ceramic. Related to point protectors is the knitter’s chatelaine. All of these aspects of point protectors, including the dimensions, material, and craftsmanship, would have been used in the design of a chatelaine.

Most point protectors were made to hold or restrain “sock” needles, sets of four or five double-pointed needles used for knitting in the round. Here knitted fabric had the advantage over woven cloth, moulding to the three-dimensional shape of our body parts - head, hands, feet, and limbs.

In the United States, silversmiths also developed a sterling chevron-shaped point protector that does not seem to have been available from overseas sellers. No evidence is

known of this style being made or retailed outside the United States.

Chevron-shaped and modified chevron-shaped point protectors seem to have been made only for single-point needles with a cap on one end (Fig. 2). The openings for insertion of the needle are wider than most finer-gauge sock needles. Use of the single-point knitting needle with a stopper migrated to England from Europe in about the second quarter of the nineteenth century.

So, when did these delightful chevrons appear on the retailing scene, and from where did they come? Research shows that these were being distributed through mail-order catalogues and, probably, through jewellery and department stores in the early twentieth century. The small size and moderate value meant they could be easily and safely transported through another great nineteenth-century invention, the postal service.

These trinkets also reflected the nineteenth-century penchant for sentimental friendships and gift-giving and the increasing material prosperity of the United States. Silver was especially plentiful after the mining boom in the mid-nineteenth century in the western United States and elsewhere.

The Daniel Lowe & Company’s mail-order catalogue of 1918 (page provided by Christina Bertrand) features a whole page of knitting tools, including needles, point protectors for double-pointed and single-pointed needles, clasps, stitch holders, and a bangle yarn-holder, all adorned in silver or enamelled silver (Fig. 3). The firm specialised in small homewares and gift items, mainly in silver. This whole page offers knitting-related

silver tools, with the chevron and modified-chevron point protectors for single point needles at the bottom.

The text on the page notes that each chevron item would have been sold as a set with a pair of celluloid or resin-based single-point needles, described on the sales literature of that era as “amber” because of their range of shades

Other styles of point protectors are shown in the middle of the page. They were sets of two smaller point protectors connected by elastic. These point protectors were for double-pointed or “sock” needles.

The page also offers the Red Cross Navy League point protectors. They are the only example that was silver-plated, a reference to World War I, with United States troops then fighting in the war and needing silver for parts and supplies. The chevron shapes are at the bottom of the page. Retail prices for the chevron sets shown on the catalogue page range from \$0.75 to \$3.25 per set.

Figures 4 through 10 show seven chevron and modified-chevron shaped point protectors, all marked sterling. Figures 6 and 7 have the Webster Company mark and the word sterling. Figure 8 is much lighter in weight, much cruder in finish, and poorly stamped with the word sterling so that it is very difficult to read. The very rare Webster Company items do not appear in any of that firm’s recently-examined catalogues, so perhaps they were made to fulfill outside orders of other distributors or mail order firms. They are the only ones I have ever seen. Figure 9 is badly struck, apparently for Simons Brothers Co. The makers mark for Unger Bros has been identified (with the assistance of

Irene Schwall) on other chevron point protectors. Indeed, the quality of work on most of these items reflects their mail-order origins; they look lovely from a distance, but the workmanship is a bit sloppy up close.

There is no way of securing the needle tip inside the chevron, aside from a felt or chamois insert, so the needles can easily fall back out. The two-toned blue example in Figure 9 and 11 has a poorly struck makers mark, probably Simons, and a very small hole drilled near the bottom rim.

One suggestion is that two of these tip guards could be used together, with one on each end of two large double-pointed needles and the hole allowing attachment of a thread, chain, or string to secure the needles and the two point protectors together tightly. See Figure 12 for an example of this use of a ribbon and gum nut protectors.

Another suggestion is that such a hole allows the point protector to be attached to a chatelaine via a metal or crocheted chain. Unfortunately, no example of point protectors attached to a chatelaine has been found.

Additional detail about retailing these chevron sets became known in 2009 during the dispersal of the Anne Powell collection. Two boxed sets of chevron point protectors with amber needles (Fig. 13) were included. Such a set would have been an exquisite gift. In addition to the chevron point protector, the needles had enamelled stoppers (Fig. 14). The stoppers on these needles gave the boxed set real luxury with enamel at each end of what is a pretty ordinary item, the knitting needles.

Were these sets ever used? The answer would appear to be not often based on the lack of wear in the box. Usually, the silk restraint straps to hold needles or other tools in place are the first thing to perish in any workbox. The straps in these boxes are undamaged.

The upper set of the boxed knitting needles in Figure 13 also includes the Greek letters “delta tau” in a gold metal pinned to the shaft of the needle (Figure 15). No specific sorority providing these needle sets has been located, but multiple examples with the delta tau pin are known. This set may not be an individual commission; perhaps the lucky recipients were not so interested in knitting.

Five years after the sale of Anne Powell collection, a third boxed set of amber needles with enamelled chevron point protector and stoppers with the delta tau letters was sold on eBay. It is an exact match for one of the Anne Powell boxed sets.

Examination of these delta tau sets gives us other interesting facts. For example, the underside of both boxes has a label with the maker’s mark, and details for manufacturing jeweller James E. Blake Co of Attleboro, Massachusetts (Fig. 16). Attleboro is in the nineteenth-century heart of the New England states’ jewellery and light industrial centres. The company specialised in sterling and plated novelties, vanity, and small table items; it operated from 1859 to 1936. It is not known whether the boxed sets were originally purchased from a mail-order catalogue or through a jewellery store.

As for the other chevron point protectors, we await further research to identify makers,

distribution methods, retailers, and special qualities.

Sources

Rutt, Richard. *A History of Hand Knitting*. Batsford Ltd. London. 1987.



Figure 1. Double-pointed knitting needles with “caps” made of wax and cork. The wax examples here are very hard wax, so difficult to remove, essentially making these into single-point needles. But a softer wax could also be used, such as the bees wax included with sewing boxes to strengthen thread in the pre-mercerised days.



Figure 2. A modified chevron-style point protector, with no maker’s mark but stamped sterling and still containing a chamois insert to help keep the needles from sliding out.

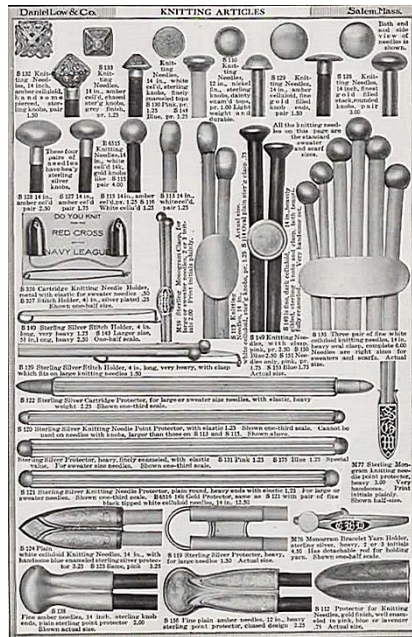


Figure 3 - A page in the 1918 Daniel Low mail order catalogue.



Figure 4. Enamelled on both sides. No mark.



Figure 5. Enamelled on both sides. No mark.



Figure 6. Webster Company mark.



Figure 7. Has Webster Company mark.



Figure 8. No Mark.



Figure 9. Simons Bros. example from the Ruth Mann collection.



Figure 10. Enamelled on both sides. No mark.



Figure 11. Close-ups of the Simons two-tone enamelled chevron - (a) the hole drilled near the needle insertion point so that a ribbon or fine chain could be attached and (b) the STERLING and Simons' marks, slightly mis-stamped. Both

close-ups also show the rather haphazard character of the enamelling.



Figure 12. Painted Australian gum nuts as point protectors on the ends of four-inch-long knitting pins. A tape is glued inside each nut. When the needles have been inserted, the gum nuts are twisted in opposite directions to wind the tape along the needles and secure them tightly inside the gumnuts. This method of winding a tape or ribbon along the needles was also used commercially in the nineteenth century to sell new sets of double or single points.



Figure 13. Two boxes of amber knitting needles fitted with silver stoppers and blue chevron point protectors.



Figure 14. The enamelled stopper on each amber single-point knitting needles (image is larger than life-size). Background colour is sufficient to "match" the blue of the chevron-shaped tip guard. The flower and leaves have been "daubed" in enamel onto the blue background before the final firing for a very soft impression.

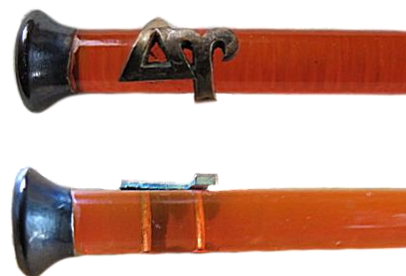


Figure 15. Two views of the delta tau pin near the stoppers of two of the boxed sets. Above is the of the delta tau's, a close-up, and, below, the reverse view shows the pins of the Greek letters going through the resin of the shafts.



Figure 16. Labels on the bottom of boxes with delta tau needles – these labels carry an inventory mark or dispatch of 4968 and 4969. The sequential stock numbers perhaps indicate that these were part of the special delta tau commission. A third box with no delta tau pins does not have a label on the bottom of the box.