



Webster & Co - Silversmiths for Needlework Tools

Thimble Collectors International 2018 Conference



by Susan Webster (no relation)

Logo is JPG 8997 from 2018-07-22.

The apex stamping photo is from same file, I think.

My Knitting Needle Reference Collection



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I am usually known as a knitting lady, and I usually start my talks with a picture of my alphabetical reference collection – demonstrating my bona fides, as it were. I have just over 1000 knitting needle brands catalogued with about 900 examples. Mostly UK and USA brands. But about 20 countries are represented.

This pic about 8 years old – now have 3x as many needles filed by brand name – too messy to show

- Knitter coming up to 50 years
- Always interested in history – studied at uni, etc.
- Started to combine the two in about 1990
- When you start investigating one field, you gradually drift into others.

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Susan's Journey –

Whilst searching for knitting needles on eBay, I found Webster & Co sterling silver knitting needles.

I moved to other needlework tools by Webster & Co

And eventually to collecting all the thimbles I could

And then to researching the company itself.

No. 41 in the Webster & Co 1917-18 catalogue.



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During that halcyon ten years when every attic, closet and cellar in the Northern Hemisphere was emptied onto Ebay, Ruby Lane, Craig's List, Gumtree, and many other on-line selling sites, I found a pair of sterling KN marked for Webster & Co. That introduction to the firm started my search for other tools and, then I moved onto thimbles and then I began researching the company itself.

Main references are GAR (both *American Silver Thimbles* and *An Illustrated History of Needlework Tools*), Zalkan, Rainsford, and Venable *Silver in America 1840 – 1940* – Meagre facts are trotted out by most authorities and for stand-alone articles like that in the Summer, 1977 issue of *Collectors Circle Gazette* : "The Webster Company Story".

JPG 8936 in 2018-07-01

CC 1675, appears in the 1917 Webster & Co catalogue, p. 71

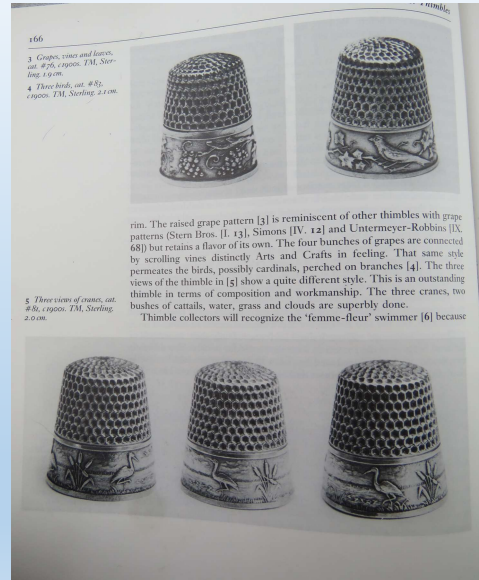
GAR

The main authority for information on the Webster & Co firm is Gay Ann Rogers' *American Silver Thimbles*, first published in 1989, and so nearly 30 years old.

This reference, is known to collectors as GAR, so I will use that reference too.

Webster & Co is one of six silversmith firms identified in GAR as significant makers of silver thimbles.

Here on the lower half of page 166, GAR shows three views of No. 81 in the Webster & Co catalogue "cranes" which she terms one of Webster & Co's most successful thimbles.



JPG 9109 in 18-08-12

“This is an outstanding thimble in terms of composition and workmanship. The three cranes, two bushes of cattails, water, grass and clouds are superbly done.”

I also used the TCI *Bulletin* index to check what had been written previously about Webster & Co.

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Evolution of the Company

Webster & Co was a significant local commercial identify for 60+ years.



JPGs on Collecting > Research > Research 2012 US >

Founded in late 1870s-early 1880s by G.K. Webster, and apparently it manufactured as a “jobber” or contractor for the first 20 years or so. Founder George K Webster oversaw all aspects of the business - manufacturing and the evolution into retailing. G.K. Webster was born in 1850 in New Hampshire; he died in 1894. George went through a number of occupations before he settled into silver manufacture. The firm was incorporated in 1904 and G.K. Webster died a few years after that.

The North Attleboro was part of the New England centres of trade, light industry, and manufacturing in the last half of the 19th century and first half of the 20th century. Various forms of expansions and take-overs, and G.K. Webster and the firm were a public benefactor, as successful industrialists often were, in those days.

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The factory / head office in its heyday



Early 2000s



6

Post card about late 1800s – early 1900s

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The End

2015 snowstorm brought the end to the building

Address was on Broadway – a prestigious address when the factory was built – clearly now an area ready for urban renewal.



7

Extract from the NORTH ATTLEBORO *Sun Chronicle* — Town officials are ordering the demolition of the remainder of the Webster building on Broadway, citing the potential hazard of continuing [collapse](#).

Town Administrator Mark Fisher said the building's owners were issued the order this afternoon.

A large portion of the roof of the abandoned, 19th century industrial building collapsed under the weight of snow Wednesday, scattering debris on the Peterson Street side of the structure.

Fisher said officials are concerned about the [partial roof collapse](#) triggering further deterioration. He said a particular worry is that a similar collapse on the Broadway side of the building could send construction debris showering onto the roadway.

Neighbors have complained about the building, once part of the town's vital jewelry industry, for years.

Last year, the owners placed the property up for sale for \$889,000 and noted that preliminary engineering had already been done to allow the construction of condos, apartments or offices.

The wood frame structure, which includes a water tower, was constructed in 1898 and was the site of G.K. Webster and Co., which made a variety of metal products from flatware to jewelry.

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Evolution of the silver industry in the 19th century

From the craftsman's workshop to
factory production

Elements of the transition included :



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This image is actually a medieval silver smithy, not an early 19th century one – but it illustrates the individual workmanship that made up the creativity of the business.

Source website of Shreve Crumb & Low

Over the 19th century, silver smithing – like most handicraft-based production – moved from handcraft and individual makers early in the 1800s to industrialised production, to make everything easier and cheaper.

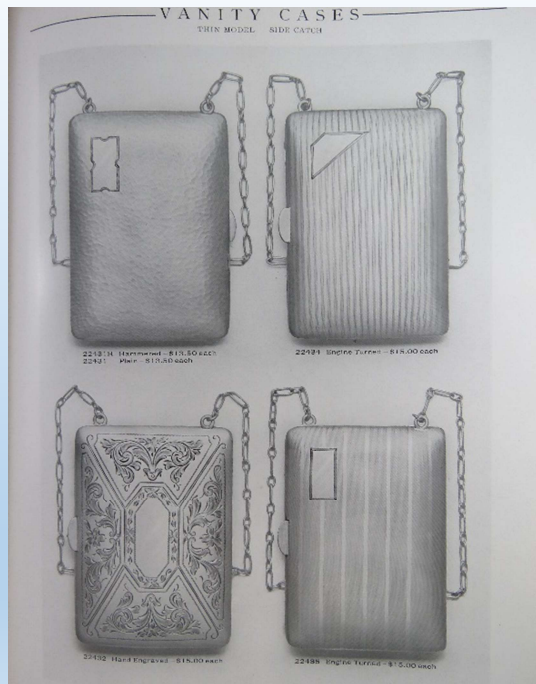
Elements of this transition included :

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- Mechanical repetition of shapes and reduction of hand-work
- Incorporation of powered tools, eg, mechanical jeweller's hammer for repousse work – "hammered" finish

Page 91 of the 1917-18 catalogue, showing vanity cases

Note the different finishes and the different prices for some finishes. "Plain" finish not shown.



9

- incorporation of powered tools, eg powered jewellers hammer for repousse work.
- Note same shape and chain with four different finishes – Clockwise from upper left, hammered (using a power jewellers hammer), two engine turned finishes, and a hand-engraved finish. Different prices were charged, depending on the amount of labour and resource to create each one (or possibly depending on what Webster & Co though the consumer would consider the most prestigious)

Plain (not shown) and hammered were \$13.50 each, while the engine turned and hand engraved were \$15.00 each.

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- Simplification of designs
- Mechanical repetition of shapes and reduction of handwork

This thimble is No 20 in the 1928-29 Webster & Co catalogue, page 61

GAR says on page 172 :

Utilitarian two-band w reeding. c 1890s - used by others to add more decoration.

The inset, far right, is the No. 20 thimble with engraving (courtesy Dicky Everton)



10

1. simplification of designs,
2. mechanical repetition of shapes and reduction of hand-work,

TCI 2018 Convention - Webster & Co

- creation of modules or components which can be applied to different articles or sizes

Thimble is No. 42 in the Webster & Co 1917-18 catalogue, p. 71

The stylised flower design is the same on the thimble and the thimble case but looks very different because of the size of the two objects and the knurling on the thimble.



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Creation of modules or components which can be applied to different article or sizes

Knurling just overlaps the top of the flower – a bit crude.

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Here is thimble No. 73 in the 1917-1918 catalogue, called "Orchids" by GAR and with a reeded background.

The same components, without the reeded background, appear on this rare manicure set, which consists of :

- Three identical cases with matching decoration. (the same cases are also presented as needle cases in the catalogues)
- Different tools inserted into each case –
 - Scissors
 - Nail clippers
 - Emery board



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I've never seen the manicure set in a Webster & Co catalogue.

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Many other items sold today did not appear in the catalogues I have examined.

Chatelaine –

Webster & Co hallmarks appear on the compact with powder puff and the notelet, both on the left side.

On the right, the compact with lip rouge and the pencil case are both un-hallmarked but both incorporate Webster motifs – see inset, a floral engraving on the lip rouge compact.



13

CC 1268

Jpeg 9041, 18-07-31

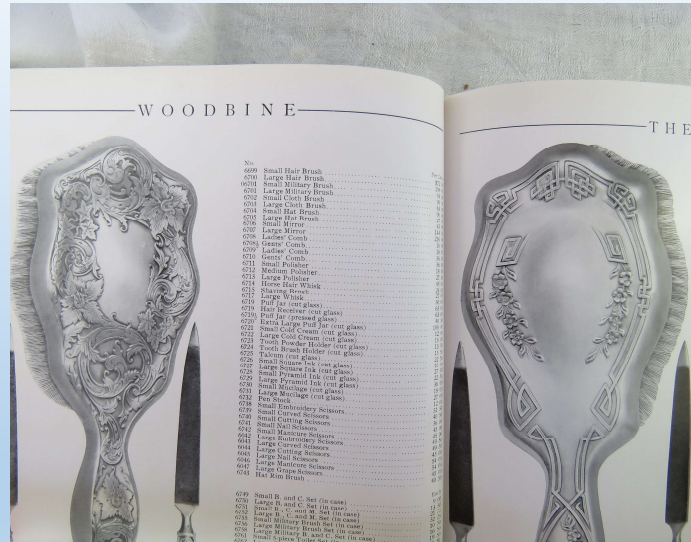
I have seen this chatelaine for sale more than once, proving that it was not personally assembled, but offered already assembled by the firm.

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- New advertising and communication channels – photography and cheaper graphic reproduction meant lots of images.

Here in the 1917-18 catalogue, the same shape hairbrush is used to illustrate the Woodbine and the Thetis finish – the left hand photo of the hairbrush is taken from a different angle.

Each page lists a plethora of dresser top items that can be ordered in each finish.



New advertising and communication channels – photography, cheaper graphic reproduction meant lots of pictures

Jpg 9009 in 2018-07-22

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- Decrease in the price of silver
- Increase in wealth of the middle class –
- New distribution channels

Five tape measures with the Webster & Co hallmark – note the floral elements in the lower row middle casing – once again, the very popular orchids.

The lower right tape measure has elements of the wild rose thimble No. 40a, both taken from the Thetis finish.



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- Decrease in the price of silver after 1850, due to new mineral discoveries
- Increase in wealth in the United States – increase in the middle class – more people could afford silver more often
- New distribution channels – catalogues, “drummers” or travelling salesmen, department stores – and of course larger and larger shops – plate glass, multiple floors – viz, Gorham or Tiffanies

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Distribution - 1

Webster & Co never had their own stores – like the biggest silver smithing firms of Gorham or Tiffany’s - although they did have distribution offices in New York.



ILL. 5.1. The Gorham Co. Building, Broadway and 19th St., New York, N.Y., built 1884.

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Engraving or photo-gravure of Gorham Co Bldg, Broadway & 5th Avenue – again a very prestigious address, and dwarfing the buildings around it, 1884.

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Distribution - 2

Webster & Co sold through jewellers, department stores and specialty shops.

This pair of sterling silver knitting needles carry the Webster & Co hallmark on the shaft of the needles.

The box is labelled by Shreve Crump & Low, the well-known Boston jeweller – probably from the 1950s or '60s.



17

PARDON THE STAINING !

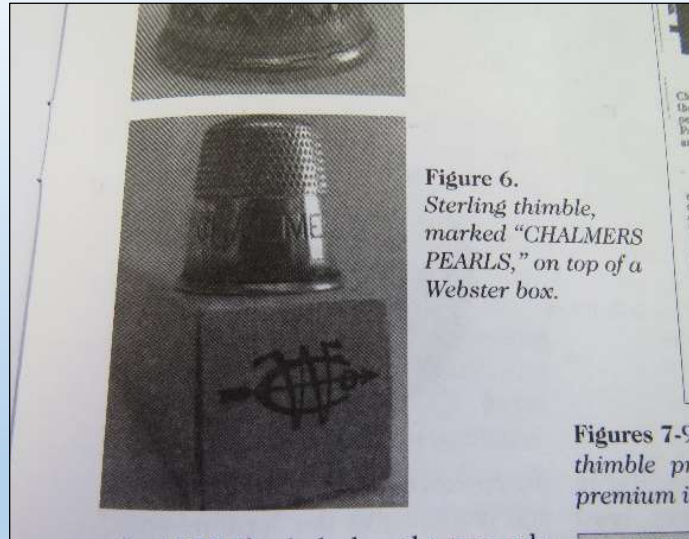
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Distribution - 3

We have evidence of Webster & Co filling orders from other retail distributors like mail order catalogue sellers Baird North and Daniel Low or producing promotional items.

In the Spring 2007 *TCI Bulletin*, an article on thimbles as premiums noted Webster thimbles were awarded in 1916 as premiums for purchases of "Chalmers Pearls" buttons.

This thimble is No. 40 in the Webster & Co 1917-18 catalogue, described by GAR as "deep plan band, rolled rim"

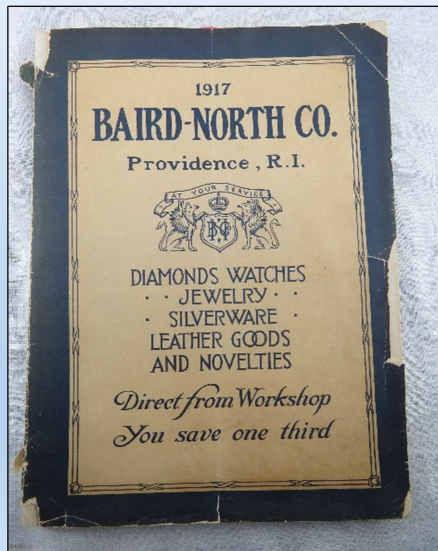


18

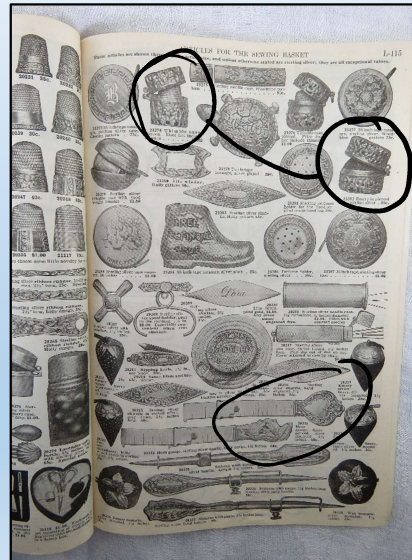
In the Spring 2007 *TCI Bulletin*, an article by Mabel Rogers and Marjorie Perkins identified Webster thimbles awarded in 1916 as premiums for purchases of "Chalmers Pearls" buttons.

Distribution – 4

Catalogue seller Baird-North's 1917 catalogue



Page 115 with several items manufactured by Webster & Co.



So what was the firm selling before that, or how did it make any money?

We have evidence of Webster & Co filling orders from other retail distributors like catalogue sellers Baird North and Daniel

This Baird North 1917 catalogue includes several pages of haberdashery and notions, only some of which were produced by Webster & Co.

Here I've circled those items on page L-115 which I KNOW are from Webster & Co. Several others could be, but I wasn't sure.

NOTE the two varieties of the case, one with a post to hold a thimble and one fitted as an emery.

The chatelaine ring can just be seen at the side of each of the cases – to my mind, this ring is so small as to be almost vestigial – more for show than actually for attaching.

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Distribution - 5

Manufacturing for others –

This spool knave has the Webster & Co logo impressed on the shaft, although not on the bangle.

It does not appear in the Webster & Co catalogues.

The blue and white waisted enamel stopper also appears on knitting needles, but not with a Webster & Co logo on the needles.



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Webster & Co was part of the general componentry manufacturing chain.

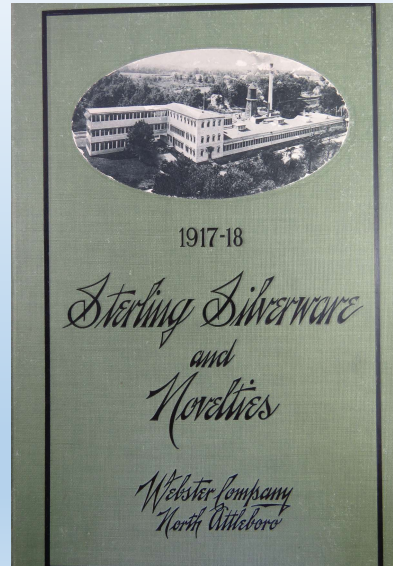
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Counter Top Catalogues

For distribution through jewellery and department stores the periodic printed counter-top catalogue was an institution.

The size and quality of the catalogue itself represented the value of the maker.

This is not a mail-order catalogue.



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Many of our members will remember, still in the 1960s, visiting the jewellery store and selecting an item or a pattern from the counter-top catalogue. As a young bride, I went through this wedding ritual; and I still use my silver service today for special occasions.

Webster & Co was one of many manufacturing jewellers who produced a annual or biennial catalogue. Jewellery and department stores ordered in sufficient stock to provide examples of patterns and/or objects and a plethora of alternatives were available – on six weeks order – through the catalogue.

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Own-name Distribution

We know the firm existed from early 1890s, but its first catalogue was only issued in 1898.



22

filed in Research US 2012

Humble beginnings, first catalogue tied with a piece of cord.

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How Did Counter-top Catalogue Distribution Work ?

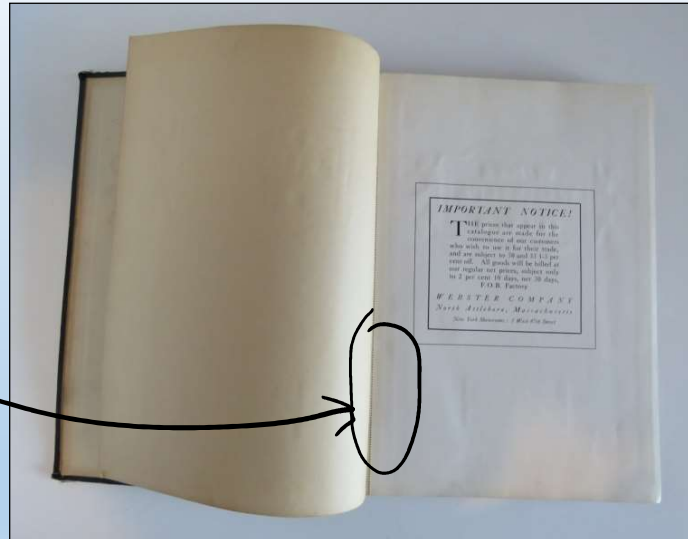
A retailer kept enough physical product in store as samples for customers to look at and handle.

Then, when the customer had developed ideas of what she wanted, the glorious catalogue provided a wealth of options

Note the perforations along the inner edge of the right hand page.

On receipt of a new catalogue, the retailer simply pulled out this page, for his own records.

The customer paid the price she saw, non the wiser to the commercial arrangement between Webster & Co as manufacturer and her local retailer.



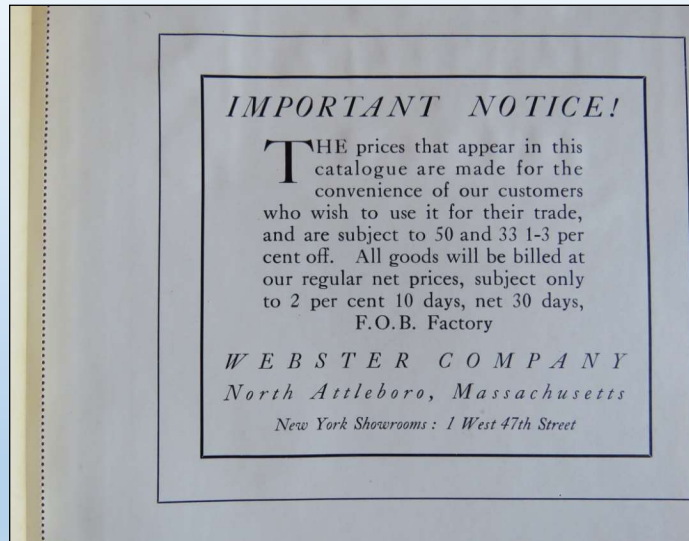
23

Webster's catalogues – in keeping with common practice at the time – showed retail prices for all items, and on a special perforated page confirmed the deal with the retailer. Webster's 1928-29 catalogue stated **<use photo of this page>** "The prices that appear in this catalogue are made for the convenience of our customers who wish to use it for their trade and are subject to 50 and 33 1-3 per cent off. All goods will be billed at our regular net prices...."

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What the retail customer saw in the catalogue was the price she paid.

The jewellery store or department store paid the discounted price to Webster & Co.



24

What the retail customer saw in the catalogue was the price she paid. The jewellery store or department store paid the discounted price to Webster & Co.

You can see the perforations much better in this close-up.

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What Did Webster & Co Sell ?

- tableware or home wares (ice cream dishes, salad servers, tea spoon sets, beverage sets, picture frames)
- dresser sets (hair brushes and the plethora of jars and implements for the top of a lady's dresser (including hair holders) and vanity sets
- travelling articles and needlework articles
- personal articles like card cases, cigarette cases, and luggage tags
- children's sets and articles

Basically they seemed to sell things that would be bought as gifts, rather than bought for personal use.

Whether they did the enamelling themselves, I don't know.



25

JPG = 9069 in 2018-08-07

What Did Webster & Co Sell ?

The categories of their items evolved with time, but mainly focussed on

- tableware or home wares (ice cream dishes, salad servers, tea spoon sets, beverage sets, picture frames)
- dresser sets (hair brushes and the plethora of jars and implements for the top of a lady's dresser (including hair holders) and vanity sets
- travelling articles and needlework articles
- personal articles like card cases, cigarette cases, and luggage tags
- children's sets and articles

Some needlework tools lingered. A 1960s catalogue – about 1/3 the size of the 1920s glory days- showed the single remaining pin cushion sold by Webster & Co that year. Basically they seemed to sell things that would be bought as gifts, rather than bought for personal use.

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What did Webster and Co make ?

Over the years Webster & Co had about 20 standard patterns which they used on a wide number of items – a popular decorative theme like orchids or Greek key might appear on thimbles plus other haberdashery like tape measures or hem measures or shuttles. And, also on many non-haberdashery items too.

Here is the Greek key pattern element shown on a thimble, a tape measure, and a tatting shuttle.



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Note the flaw or damage on the lower band of the thimble and the poorly struck logo on the tape measure. The Webster & Co logo is poorly struck on many, many later (?) objects, evidence to my mind of poor quality workmanship.

Other authors have noted that Webster & Co thimbles are not quite as well defined and crisp as those of other makers. And I agree.

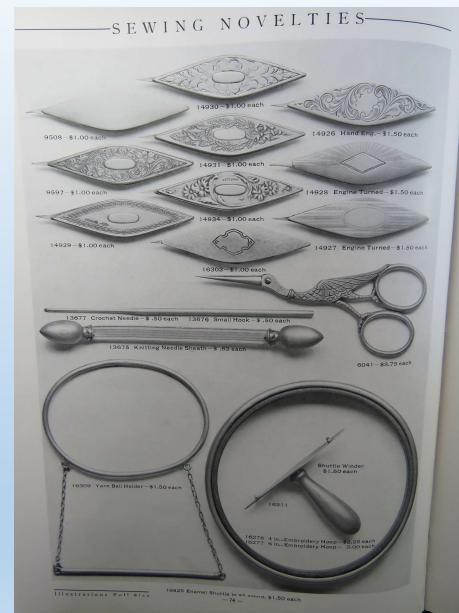
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What Needlework Tools did Webster and Co make ?

Mainly the W&Co catalogues featured :

- Tape measures
- Hem gauges
- Needle cases
- Small etuis and sewing boxes
- Ribbon threaders
- Tatting shuttles
- Thimbles

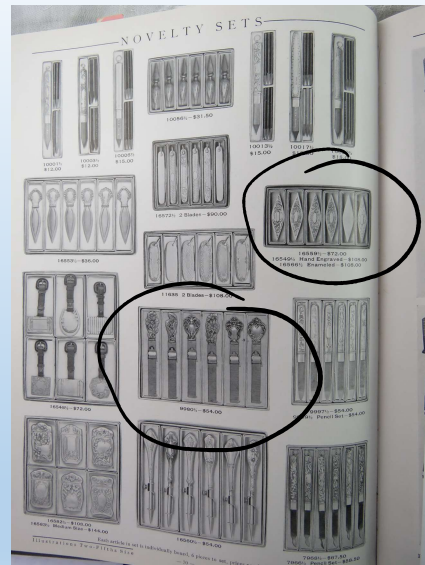
The page illustrated here also shows a lone crochet hook and a pair of knitting needle tip protectors plus other uncommon items.



TCI 2018 Convention - Webster & Co

What did Webster and Co make ?

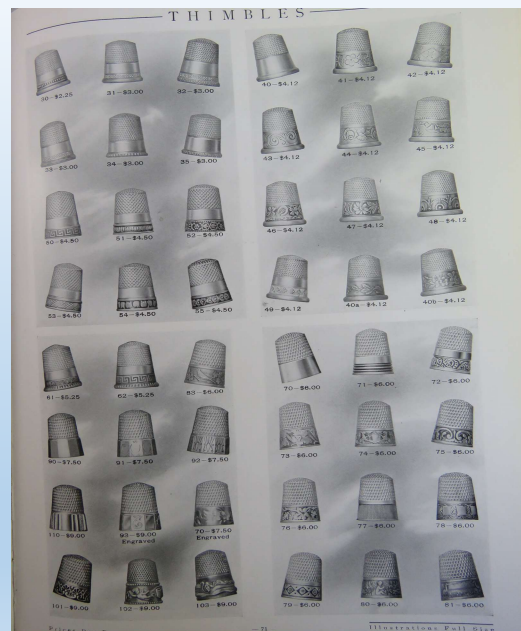
Individually boxed hem gauges and tating shuttles were also sold in sets of six boxes – the catalogue calls them “novelty sets” perhaps as party favours for a shower or hen’s night



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Thimbles

- Up to about 1928-29 Webster & Co catalogues carried a page of thimbles which, apparently, never changed.
- Samples on most other pages changed from year to year. Sometimes the same stock was re-arranged over several pages.
- The page shown here is exactly the same in the 1912 catalogue and the 1917-18 catalogue
- Shadowing on the photograph is also on the original page.
- Each of these four panels contains one or more themes.
- Numbering is not continuous – it is not clear if there were ever thimbles to match the missing numbers.
- This is page 71 in the 1917-18 catalogue.



29

JPG 9028 in 2018-07-22

I own catalogues for 1917-1918 and for 1928-29, and have examined a few others. Earliest I have handled is 1912. Thimble page in the 1912 catalogue is the exact same plate as that in the 1917-18 catalogue. So, evidently, once the thimble line had been established, then Webster and Co did not bother to change or enhance it.

GAR says that Webster & Co also occasionally issued sewing items catalogues (or other specialty items).

The 1927 catalogue includes thimbles <pick this up from my earlier notes>.

The firm's catalogues included pages or sections of thimbles, tatting shuttles, hemming gauges. Then they featured groupings of needlework tools. Kits and small boxes were provisioned with a selection of tools. They also offered small cases with matching sets of tools – ribbon threaders, etc.

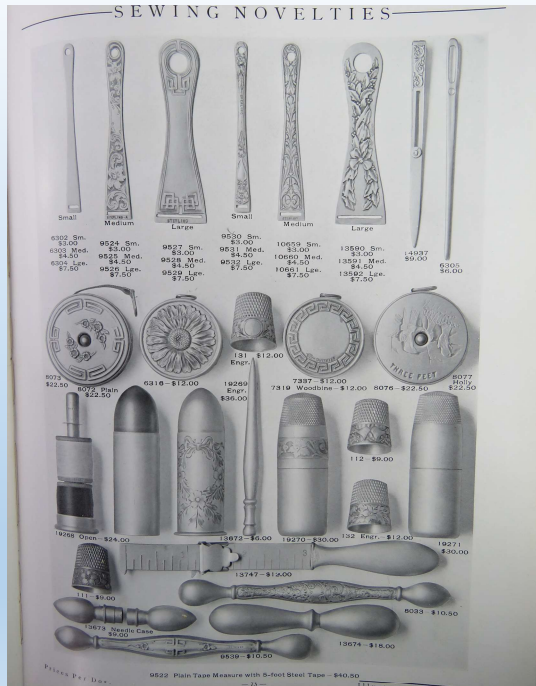
The 1927 catalogue seems to be the last one with the thimbles featured on their own page. The 1928 catalogue doesn't have a page of thimbles

<pick this up from my earlier notes>

GAR says that in 1932 Simons bought the thimble dies and lasts, so presumably Webster ceased making and selling thimbles, although they kept going with many other fancy goods until 1950 <?> when the firm was sold to Reed Barton.

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Page 73 in the 1917-18 catalogue. In addition to a number of needlework tools, there are four more thimbles, not shown on the four-quadrant thimble page on page 71.



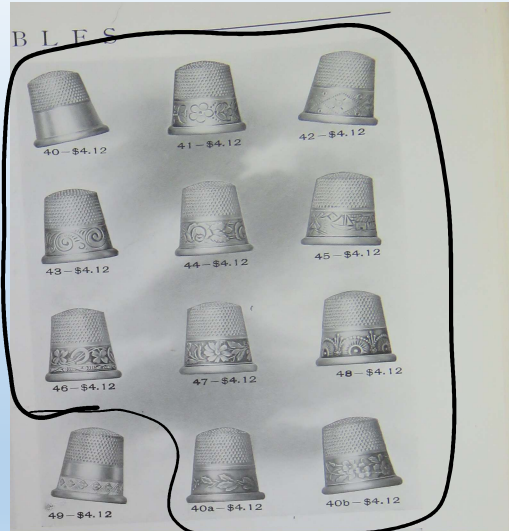
Shapes and Themes

Each of the four quadrants seemed to contain one or more basic shapes and themes, with the most basic example in each shape being the numbered thimble ending in zero.

Here the upper right quadrant shows the plain version No. 40 as the first thimble in the upper left.

Every other thimble in this quadrant is a variation on No. 40, with the exception of No. 49. I have never found an example of No. 49.

Note Nos. 40a and 40b on the bottom row of this quadrant – clearly based on No. 40. Why is the numbering sequence broken here?

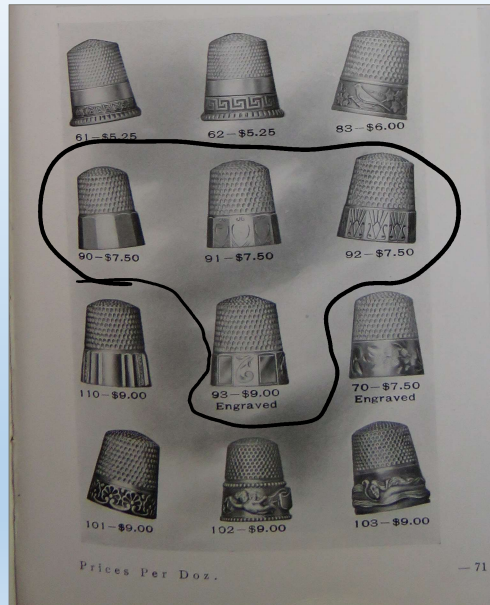


This pages of thimbles reflect the changes in thimble manufacture noted earlier – repetitive themes and placement of design elements on a basic shape.

Shapes and Themes

Here the lower left quadrant has four thimbles with 10 panels – No. 90, and its variants Nos 91, 92, and 93 – even though they are not placed in exact sequence.

Note that No. 93 is marked as “engraved”. Presumably the others in this group were mechanically impressed.



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Susan's catalogue of Webster & Co needlework tools includes **67** thimbles

- **55** appear in the Webster & Co catalogues
- **12** are hallmarked with the Webster & Co logo but not in the catalogues I have seen
- **38** photographs appear in GAR . The GAR photos are all in the Webster & Co catalogue
- Some of the 38 are varieties of the same thimble, eg, three different varieties of the same Webster & Co catalogue No. 55 Daisies. I only have one.
- There are **12** thimbles in the Webster & Co catalogues I have never been able to find. Here are 6 of them, clockwise from top left Nos. 30, 31, 43, 61, 48, and 45.

Thimbles I cannot find

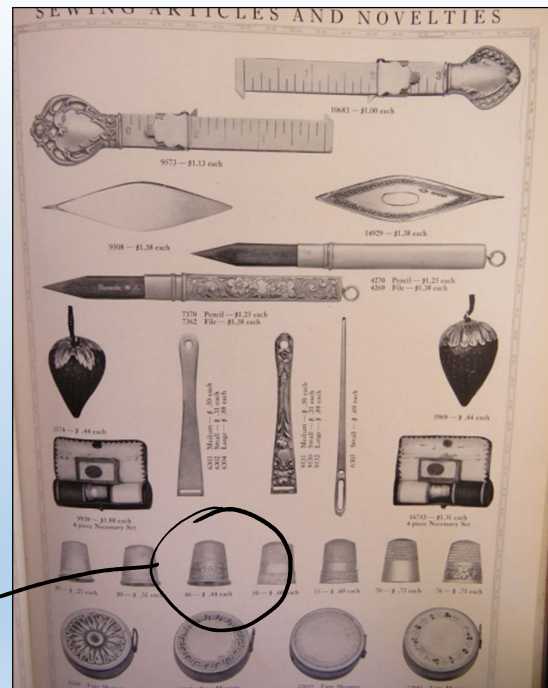


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1928-29 catalogue

This is the first catalogue I have seen without the full-page four-quadrant display of thimbles. Instead, page 61 shows a sample of needlework tools, including 7 thimbles, most of which were in the four-quadrant page in earlier catalogues.

Below is No. 46 in the Webster & Co 1917-18 catalogue, described by GAR on her page 167 as "Horseshoes and four-leaf clovers"



34

JPG 9001

Most of these thimbles were in the four-quadrant page in earlier catalogues.

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Confusing Thimbles

The decoration on some Webster & Co thimbles appears to come from two different designers – one side of the thimble is completely different from the other.

Right photo shows the two sides of thimble No. 75 in the Webster & Co catalogue, also shown in GAR on page 167 and called “raised scrolls”.

The inset below is the actual picture in the 1917-18 catalogue.



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Confusing Thimbles

The inset below is the actual picture in the 1917-18 catalogue of No. 131. At right is the Dickey Everton photo showing that the floral elements predominant around the engraved band.



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Which Came First ?

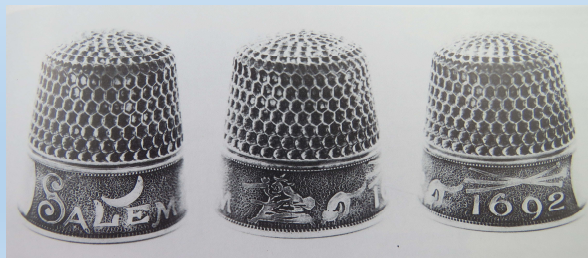
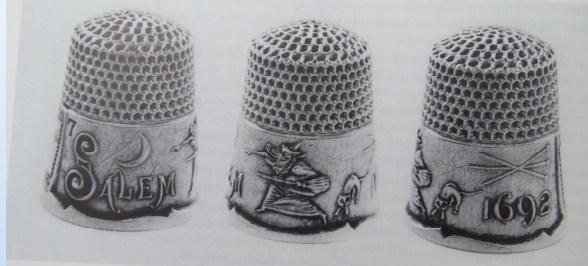
Many thimble makers seemed to make the same thimbles.

Here we see, top, the famous Salem Witch thimble, first commissioned in 1881 from Ketcham & McDougall by Daniel Low for his mail order catalogue.

As second run was commissioned in about 1910 from Webster & Co, below. The thimble does not appear in Webster & Co catalogues.

Although the design elements of the two thimbles are very similar, the stippled background on the Webster and the taller, plain band on the K&McD distinguishes the two.

These two photo sequences are from GAR, p 58 and 169.



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Which Came First ?

Waite Thresher



Webster & Co's fluted band, No. 110 in the 1917-18 catalogue.



38

Many Webster & Co thimbles are very similar to those manufactured by other silversmith firms.

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Which Came First ?

Ketcham and McDougall



Webster & Co's two-band daisies No. 55 in the 1917-18 catalogue.



39

Many Webster & Co thimbles are very similar to those manufactured by other silversmith firms.

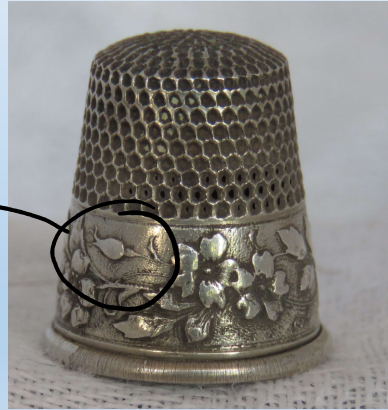
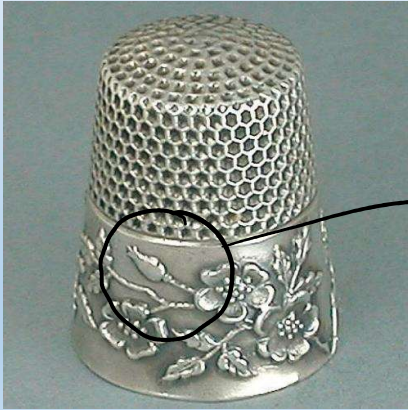
K&McD photo supplied by Carolyn Meacham

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Which Came First ?

Ketcham & McDougall "wild roses"

Webster & Co. No. 40b in the 1917-18 catalogue



40

Photo of K&McD courtesy of Carolyn Meacham

Wild roses

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Variations Within a Stock Number

Hand-engraved thimbles and other tools display a wide range of variations.

Sometimes this was necessitated by the size differences in the thimbles. As the thimble grew smaller in size, the "palette" for displaying the design elements also grew smaller.

But here the stack of three No. 47 Shasta Daisy thimbles shows the variations just resulting from different production runs or even different engravers.



41

JPG 9083 in 18-08-07

Thimble sizes in this photo range between 7 and 10, so not a huge difference.

TCI 2018 Convention - Webster & Co

Here are two examples of No. 83 in the Webster & Co catalogue. GAR on page 166 calls this thimble "Three birds c 1900s".

But these two thimbles have two birds, although the foliage has many elements similar to GAR.



42

CC 1883, and 1922
JPG 8954 in 18-07-01

TCI 2018 Convention - Webster & Co

Not in the Webster & Co catalogue

clockwise from upper left :

- owned by Melanie Gallagher
- Described by GAR as “pierced band”
- An Arts and Crafts floral
- Undocumented but hallmarked in the apex



From upper left :

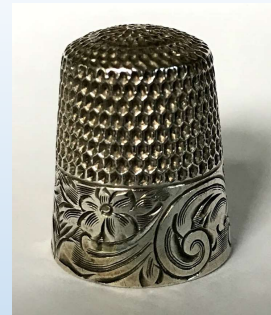
- Bought from Melanie Gallagher
- GAR shows this thimble on page 619 but gives no name, just describing it as “pierced band” CC 2400
- CC 1921 JPG 8965 in 18-07-01
- CC 1923

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Clockwise from top left :

- Another thimble with triangular piercings, this one a pierced version of No. 79
- Owned by Rachel Lendt
- Owned by Rachel Lendt
- A version of No. 20 where the knurling fades towards the band, I have seen more than one example of this thimble.



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- CC3068 - See also W&Co No. 79 which is a very similar thimble without the triangle piercings.
- Owned by Rachel Lendt
- Owned by Rachel Lendt
- CC 3384 – variation on No. 20 !

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**Not in the Webster & Co Catalogue
- Enamelled Thimbles**

I've only ever seen three of these, and I lost
the photo of the third one !

No catalogue numbers nor suggestions as to
where they were made.

Left, published in *TCI Bulletin*, Spring 2015,
owned by Rachel Lent.

Right, published by Carolyn Meacham, 2010



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Left, published in *TCI Bulletin*, Spring 2015, owned by Rachel Lent.

Right, published by Carolyn Meacham, 2010

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Many, many thanks to all those who helped me develop this presentation and who contributed photos - some people don't know they helped me !

- Christina Bertrand
- Dickey Everton
- Melanie Gallagher
- Nina Harby
- Rachel Lent
- Carolyn Meacham
- Dan and Mickey Walbrun



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Didn't get to include all the photos, but I am very grateful for them.

Especially grateful to those who responded to my little classad in the *Bulletin* earlier this year.

You all have helped enlarge my knowledge.

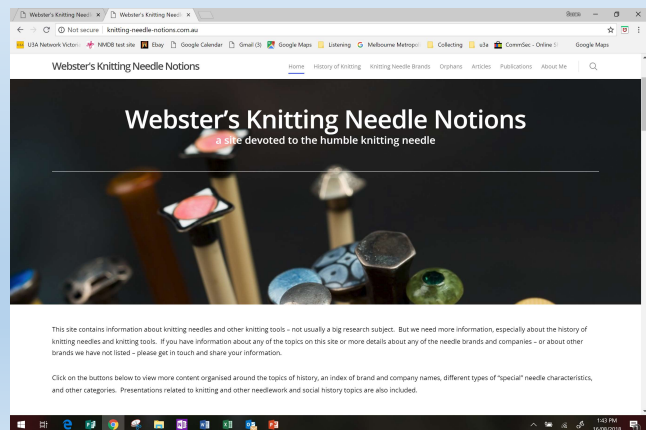
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References

- Gay Anne Rogers – *American Silver Thimbles*
- Charles Venables – *Silver in America, 1840-1940 : A Century of Splendor*
- No Attleboro Historical Society

Go to my website www.knitting-needle-notions.com.au
for a

- Copy of this presentation
- Copy of my own Webster & Co thimble catalogue



Didn't get to include all the photos, but I am very grateful for them. They helped enlarge my knowledge.

NOTICE pink enamel stoppers on the celluloid KN.