

Elias Howe Biography

Elias Howe

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Biography

Elias Howe invented the first practical sewing machine. Born on his parents' farm in Spencer, Massachusetts, Howe worked in his father's grist-and saw-mills as a boy. Later, he worked as an apprentice machinist in a cotton-machinery factory in Lowell, Massachusetts.

While working in Cambridge for master mechanic Ari Davis around 1841, the young Howe overheard a customer remark that the inventor of a practical sewing machine could make a fortune. Howe worked steadily from then on to perfect his design, living first with his father and then a friend, while his wife labored to support the family by taking in hand-sewing.

Howe's efforts yielded a practical sewing machine, patented in 1846, that featured an eye-pointed needle and a double-thread stitch. Howe attempted to market his machine to the clothing industry by staging and winning contests against seamstresses. When no orders resulted, however, Howe sold his invention to an English corset maker named William Thomas, who patented it in his own name and made a fortune. Nevertheless, Howe worked in England for Thomas from 1847 to 1849.

Howe sent his family back to the United States in 1849 by pawning his patent papers. After he too returned, penniless, he found his wife dying and sewing machines using his patented features selling widely. He filed a suit and, after long litigation, secured the right to receive royalties on all sewing machines manufactured in the United States from 1854 until his patent expired in 1867. In the last ten years of his life, Howe was finally able to enjoy the riches he had earned through his invention.

Recent Updates

February 11, 2004: It was announced that Howe will be inducted into the National Inventors Hall of Fame for his invention of the first practical sewing machine. The induction ceremony will be held on May 1, 2004, in Akron, Ohio. **Source:** National Inventors Hall of Fame, www.invent.org, April 8, 2004.