Nail Encyclopedia Article

Nail

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The earliest nails were probably made in the Middle East about 5,000 years ago. Metal was heated and then pounded into the desired shape.

Making nails by hand, one nail at a time, continued as the method of production until the 1700s. The only slight improvement was the machine patented in 1606 by the Englishman Bevis Bulmer, which cut the iron from which nails were fashioned into rods of various thickness. Hammering out nails by hand from strips of iron was a common household task for pre-Revolutionary American colonists. About 1775, Jeremiah Wilkinson, a Rhode Island inventor, devised a machine that cut nails from a sheet of cold iron. In 1786, Ezekiel Reed of Massachusetts invented a nail-making machine, and in 1795, another Massachusetts inventor, Jacob Perkins, patented a nail-making machine that could cut and head nails in a single operation. This machine, which produced up to 200,000 nails per day, made mass manufacture of nails possible for the first time. Nails became widely available and affordable; by 1842, the price had dropped to 3 cents a pound, down from 25 cents a pound in 1795.

Around 1851 a New York machinist named William Hassall (or Hersell) produced the first machine for making nails out of wire. The availability and affordability of nails made possible a revolutionary new way to construct houses: the basket-frame or balloon frame method. Traditionally, the framework of a house was made of thick, heavy wooden beams fitted together at the end with notches and pegs. Such construction was slow and required skilled carpenters. The balloon or basket frame, introduced in Chicago, Illinois, in 1833, used thin sawed timbers instead, held together with nails. This type of construction could be accomplished quickly and economically, with minimally skilled labor.

Most nails today are made from wire on machines that turn out 500 a minute. Around 300 varieties of nails are available, each suited for a different purpose.