

# Boot Scraper and Polisher

By Judy Haynes

Late March means ‘Mud Season’ is here! It is a name particularly apt for those who live in many parts of New England and on dirt roads or who like to hike dirt trails. According to the Old Farmer’s Almanac<sup>1</sup> the season begins in late winter or early spring when dirt becomes muddy from the melting snow and spring rains, which is often followed by off and on freezing and thawing of the ground. When the water from snow or rain cannot seep far into the ground, which is frozen deeper down in cold country, it sits on top where it waterlogs the top soil and creates a sea of mud; thus, lending its name to the season. One solution to prevent the tracking of mud and other debris into one’s home or shop was to have a boot scraper available.

According to McGraw-Hill Dictionary of Architecture and Construction (2003), a boot scraper is: “A horizontal metal plate set in a small frame, once located near the front steps of most buildings; used to scrape dirt or muck from the bottoms of shoes or boots before entering the building; common before the advent of paved streets.”<sup>2</sup>

“Boot scrapers started to appear in major cities such as London, Paris and New York in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, first simply as a thin wrought black metal attached to two anchors and placed next to the house.”<sup>3</sup> Most were made from wrought iron until cast iron became more popular in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The simplest were a straight metal horizontal bar with two vertical prongs to secure it to the ground.



Figure 1

## Flat Book Scraper

Quarter Circle "U" Ranch, Montana

Photographer Arthur Rothstein

Library of Congress

In 18<sup>th</sup> Century Colonial America, scrapers were so ubiquitous that architects often included designs in their building plans.<sup>4</sup> Creative artisans made them in a variety of shapes; lyre-shaped, plain bar, scrolled, griffins and other animals. Some popular ones were shaped like a dachshund with the long back of the dog as the surface to scrape.<sup>5</sup> Most of those with this basic shape were secured permanently in the ground. Some had fancy curlicues and curves evocative of flowers or vines. Those both more decorative and useful implements were often found just outside the front door of a fine house. Some were even built into a stair railing that led to a front entrance. In Europe one could find scrapers built right into the wall of the building.

<sup>1</sup> www. Old Farmer’s Almanac, March, Mud Season

<sup>2</sup> www.history of boot scrapers

<sup>3</sup> Negarden.com/blog/antique-boot-scrapers

<sup>4</sup> Practicalpreservatonservices.com/tag/history-of-boot-scrapers

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.etsy.com/listing/1130418252antique-cast-iron-dachshund-bootscraper>



Figure 2

**Ornate Boot Scraper**

*Photograph Survey HABS PA-1718*

*Library of Congress*

The Boylston Historical Society and Museum has on display a uniquely designed portable boot scraper with a long wooden handle, which would enable one to move the scraper to wherever it might be needed. It was made by Star Boot and Shoe Cleaner, patented March 28, 1888. The metal base appears as a curved upward bowl with scalloped like edges where one might rub the boot or shoe for scraping. It also has the addition of a round brush that wraps around the pole, one with bristles to assist in cleaning and polishing, a handy addition.



Figure 3

**Boot Scraper & Polisher**

*with handle to allow portability*



Figure 4

**Brush and Metal Base**

*to polish boots*

In times prior to the use of an automobile in every family, walking or horse and carts were the main form of transportation, so the need to remove the filth and excrement from one's shoes before entering a home was an absolute necessity. Since Boylston in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a small agricultural town with many farm fields, dirt roads and muddy areas, it is not surprising that scrapers were a common sight found near the front doors of its buildings.

*Looking for a fun scavenger hunt idea? Head towards an Historic District and see just how many different types of boot scrapers you can find!*

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