

The Buttonhook – A Handy Victorian Era Tool

By Inga Milbauer

Victorian era buttonhooks, like the ones pictured here, were indispensable tools for everyday use. They were used to fasten jackets, waistcoats, gloves, spats, and a variety of clothing which were held together with buttons. Spats, short for spatterdashes (also called gaiters), were worn over shoes as a protection from water and mud. They were “typically made of cloth and were worn over the shoe, covering the top of the foot, the ankle and sometimes extending to the mid-calf. Spats were a popular article of clothing worn by men, and, as such, the button hook was predominately a tool used by men until the 1870s.” [1] A buttonhook was also an essential gadget to fasten the buttons on one’s shoes and boots.



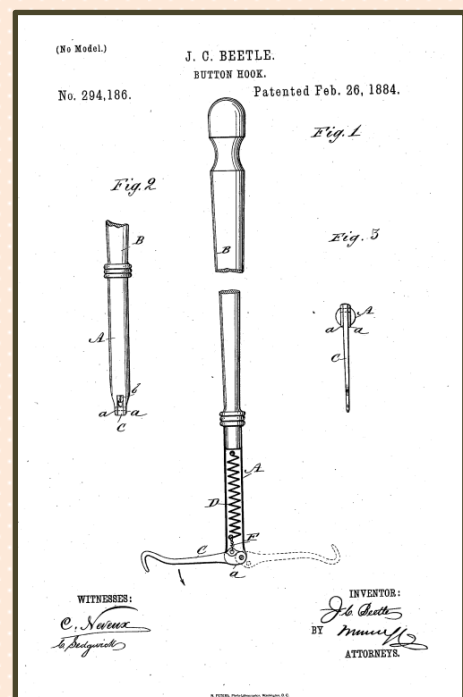
BUTTONHOOKS
BHSM Object Collection

These simple gadgets came in many shapes and sizes, and were made from materials ranging from wood, steel, brass and silver to gold, as well as bone, ivory, tortoiseshell and mother-of-pearl. More recent buttonhooks were made of rubber and plastic. The prong of the buttonhook would be inserted through the buttonhole and the hook positioned around the shank of the button, with a pull and a twist the button would be pulled through the buttonhole. The earliest known mention of a buttonhook in a French, English dictionary dates from 1611 “*Boutonneur: A Buttoner; or an instrument wherewith buttons are pulled through their o'er-strait holes.*” [2] Buttonhooks ranged in size from less than an inch to a foot or more, and some were foldable. The diameter of the hook ranged from one-quarter-inch to about three-eighths-inch. The smaller ones (also called glove-hooks) were used for buttons on dresses, sleeves, men’s stiff collars and long gloves, while the long buttonhooks were used to button boots. In the mid 1870s women’s fashion began to change and usage of buttonhooks by women increased. Long gloves extending beyond the elbow became popular. “Some glove styles were 24 inches in length and had as many as 24 buttons that would begin at the inside wrist and extend up the forearm.” [3]

A U.S. patent for a buttonhook, defined as “an instrument to facilitate the buttoning of shoes, gloves, and like purposes” was issued to Joseph A. Smith on February 1, 1876. [4] The shift from handmade shoes to factory made shoes, which began after the Civil War, increased the demand for buttonhooks. “Because sewing machines took the place of hand stitching, rather than soft leather, boot uppers were able to be made from stiff durable leather. Boot tops also were made from heavy canvas fabric. As a result, button hooks became a necessary tool to pull the buttons through the rigid buttonholes.” [5]

James Clarence Beetle of New Bedford, Massachusetts applied for a U.S. patent for his invention “to provide a new and improved button-hook, by means of which shoes can be buttoned without requiring the person to stoop. The invention consists in -a button -hook pivoted on the end of a handle. The invention further consists in the combination, with the said hook and handle of a spring for holding the hook at right angles to the handle.” [6] The patent was granted on February 26, 1884.

The buttonhooks from the collection of the Boylston Historical Society and Museum were donated by Julie Carson Woods (January 26, 1905-December 6, 1989). The longer, ornate buttonhook is made of sterling silver and measures 7 inches long, while the other buttonhook is 2.75 inches long. The latter is listed in the provenance as a silver men’s buttonhook and is an example of a foldable



buttonhook which enabled the owner to carry it with him.



Women's buttonhook
BHSM Object Collection



Men's buttonhook
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In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, buttonhooks were such a commonly used tool that they were sold at a variety of stores and through popular mail-order catalogs. They were also offered for free with the purchase of another item or as a souvenir, and some of these would have the company's name on it as an advertising tool.

While buttonhooks were intended to be used on garments, the gadgets could also be used for other purposes. Physicians of the U.S. Public Health Service at Ellis Island, NY used buttonhooks to check immigrants for trachoma, a highly contagious and, at the time, difficult to cure eye disease. To see if immigrants displayed symptoms of the disease, eyelids were turned inside out with buttonhooks. This procedure was particularly painful and terrifying for the immigrants.

A more positive use of buttonhooks was mentioned in a newspaper article published in 1901 by the Daily Herald of Biloxi. In the article *How a Button Hook Once Saved a Man's Life*, a Charleston business man stated: "Next to a hairpin, a button hook is the handiest tool in the world." The article described that the "gentleman was trapped in a variety theatre, which had caught fire, and used his button hook to pick a locked door to escape unharmed. 'It was the closest call of my life', he added 'and now you know why I value this button-hook.' " [7]

Acknowledgements:

[1] <https://www.patentlyhistorical.com/post/a-fascinating-fastener-the-button-hook--an-essential-garment-tool>

[2] <https://www.thebuttonhooksociety.com/collecting.php>

[3] <https://www.patentlyhistorical.com/post/a-fascinating-fastener-the-button-hook--an-essential-garment-tool>

[4] <https://www.patentlyhistorical.com/post/a-fascinating-fastener-the-button-hook--an-essential-garment-tool>

[5] <https://www.patentlyhistorical.com/post/a-fascinating-fastener-the-button-hook--an-essential-garment-tool>

[6] <https://patents.google.com/patent/US294186>

[7] <https://www.patentlyhistorical.com/post/a-fascinating-fastener-the-button-hook--an-essential-garment-tool>

<https://adironackgirlatheart.com/collecting-vintage-antique-button-hooks>

<https://www.history.com/topics/immigration/ellis-island>

<https://www.museumoffamilyhistory.com/imm-hai-trachoma.htm>

<https://www.thebuttonhooksociety.com>

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