

THE FIRST AMERICAN LACE MANUFACTURE

BY SOPHIA A. WALKER

IT appeared through Mrs. Candace Wheeler's book on Embroidery that it was not known that lace had been manufactured commercially in this country, a hundred years ago, so the writer showed some of her grandfather's lace to Miss Morris at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and was told that Mrs. John Vanderpoel was about to publish through the Yale Press a book on "American Lace and Lace Makers"; with the result that among its sumptuous plates are four from lace manufactured by Dean Walker of Medway, Mass., and owned by me. This article is intended to supplement the information available at that time.

Comfort Walker was a partner in the first power mills on the upper Charles at Medway in 1807. His son, Dean, entered into partnership with him in 1818 (the year the Stars and Stripes became the national flag), but Dean had also an independent business manufacturing machinery.

Two Englishmen were in their employ, named Bestrick: one was a skilled mechanic, the other had been a lace weaver in the old country. They talked of the wonders of a lace machine and believed they could make one; so Dean Walker financed them while they made a loom of 1260 shuttles, and Comfort Walker built, to house the new business, a stone factory on Hillside Court, Medway, still called "The Lace Shop," although it is now owned and used as a dwelling by a Polish family. Owing to an aggregation of porches and sheds no photograph made to-day would

suggest its original aspect. It is one story in front, with a door flanked by two windows on either hand, and two stories in the rear. No stream is near and foot-power must have been used.

From the Lace Shop the plain net was sent out to be embroidered in the farm houses. What a joy to bring out the embroidery frames after the morning work! Plate I shows the plain net: the footing woven with drop stitch to be cut, actual width, one and a quarter inch in the net; and purling or beading.

The dress and cap, Plate II and Plate III, are said to have been made for one of Dean Walker's babies, but, as it arrived in duplicate and Isabella and Arabella should be dressed alike, these seem to have been little used—perhaps to lend at christenings. Plate II also shows a hank of the linen thread, strong to-day: the body of another cap: purling and trimming lace—all owned by another grandchild, Miss Alice Buck of Fall River, Mass.

As Dean Walker was inventor of a sewing machine, a patented car wheel, etc., he doubtless worked with the Bestricks in perfecting the lace loom and deserved the Medal shown in the tail piece: "Reward of Skill and Ingenuity," from the standpoint of invention as well as for the display of lace he made at the Franklin Institute of Philadelphia in 1825. This medal is now in the possession of a grandson, Mr. William T. Walker of Rockland, Mass. We learn from the catalog that he showed "180 yards of lace in seven patterns. It was much admired; its texture is very good and even; its price moderate; the silver medal was awarded to the maker. Made by Dean Walker of Baltimore."

For such he was at that time, having migrated in 1824; with thirty workmen he and his family took packet from Providence, R. I., to New York; then stage coach via Philadelphia to Baltimore, sending his lathes and other machines by boat, to set up cotton mills in the vicinity of Baltimore. He returned to Medway in a few years, where the Lace Shop had been left in other hands. Its life began in 1824, as we know because James Bestrick came to Medway in 1823. In 1830 Clarissa Richardson learned at Hillside Court, the pattern shown in Mrs. Vanderpoel's book, but I cannot trace the industry further.

The "seven patterns" shown in the Franklin Institute may have included the guimps in Plate V, $\frac{7}{8}$ scale, for they were known as "coach

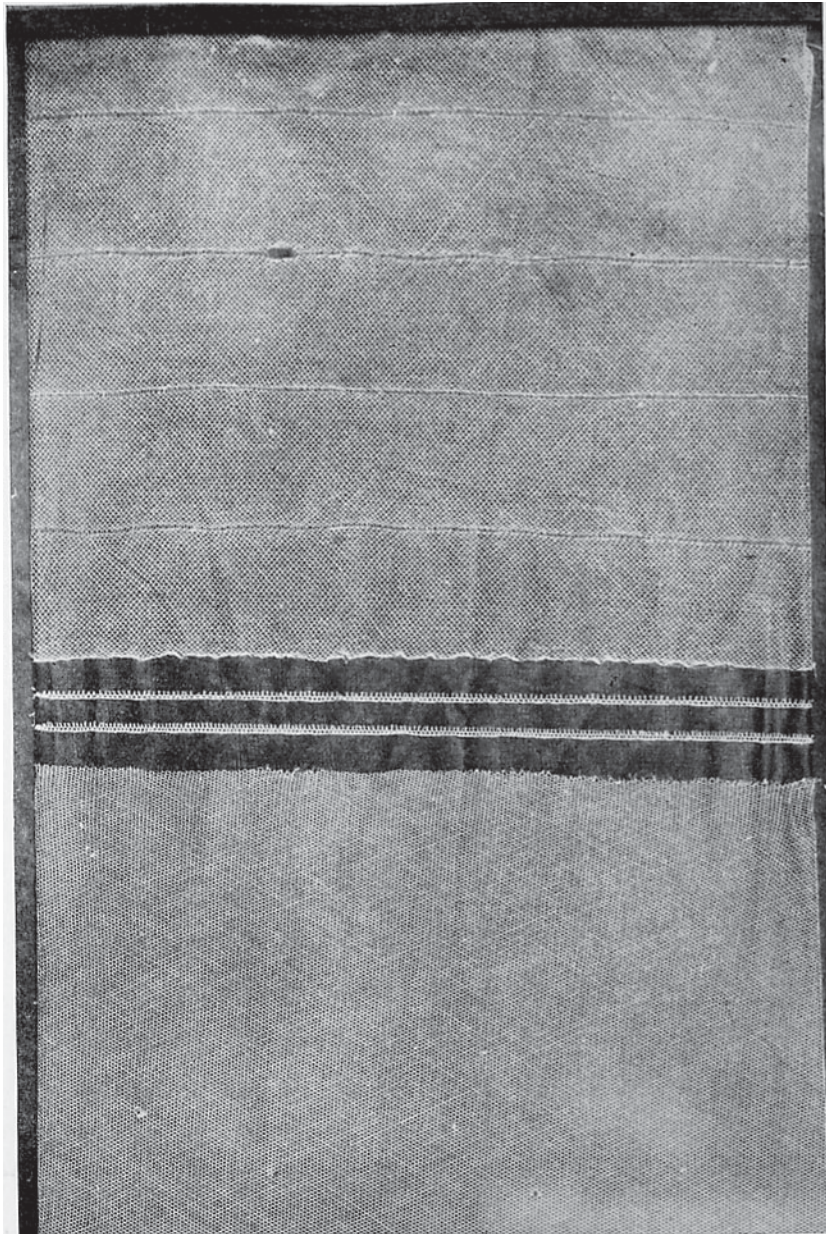


PLATE I
NET, FOOTING, PURLING MANUFACTURED BY DEAN WALKER.
THE FOOTING IS $1\frac{1}{4}$ " WIDE (IN ORIGINAL.)



PLATE II

HANK OF LINEN THREAD: BABY CAP WITH BODY OF ANOTHER; FOOTING, PLAIN AND EMBROIDERED; PURLING. MADE BY DEAN WALKER.

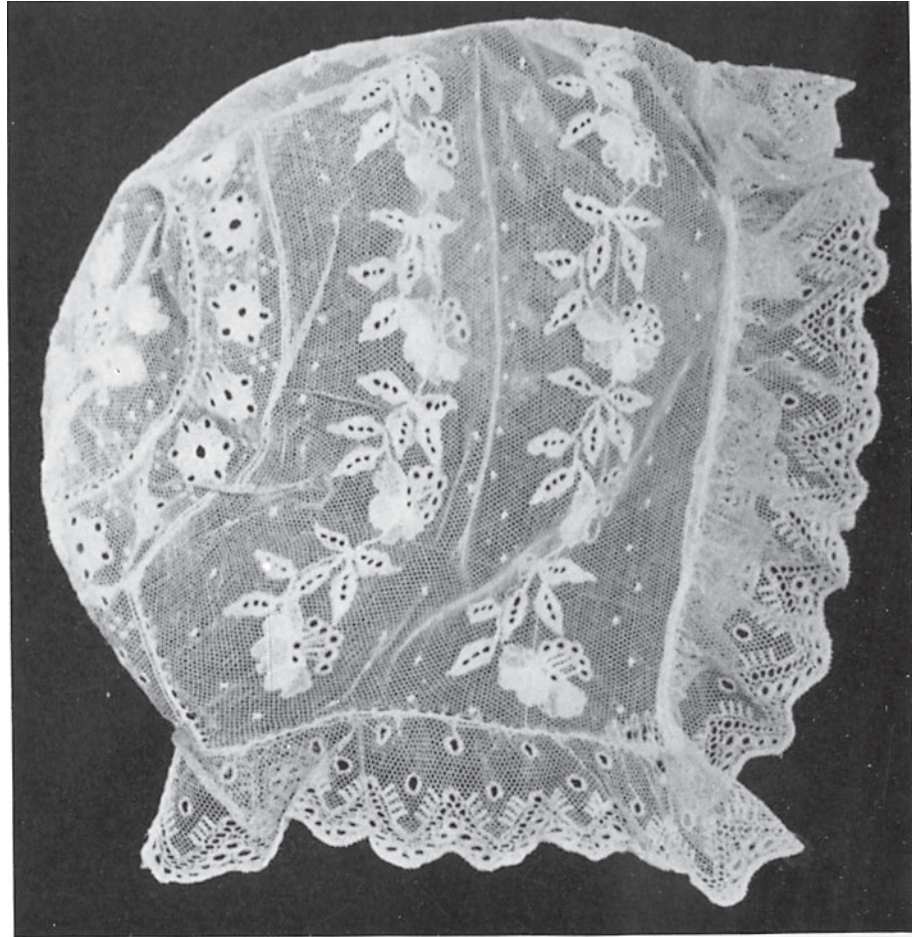


PLATE III
BABY CAP.

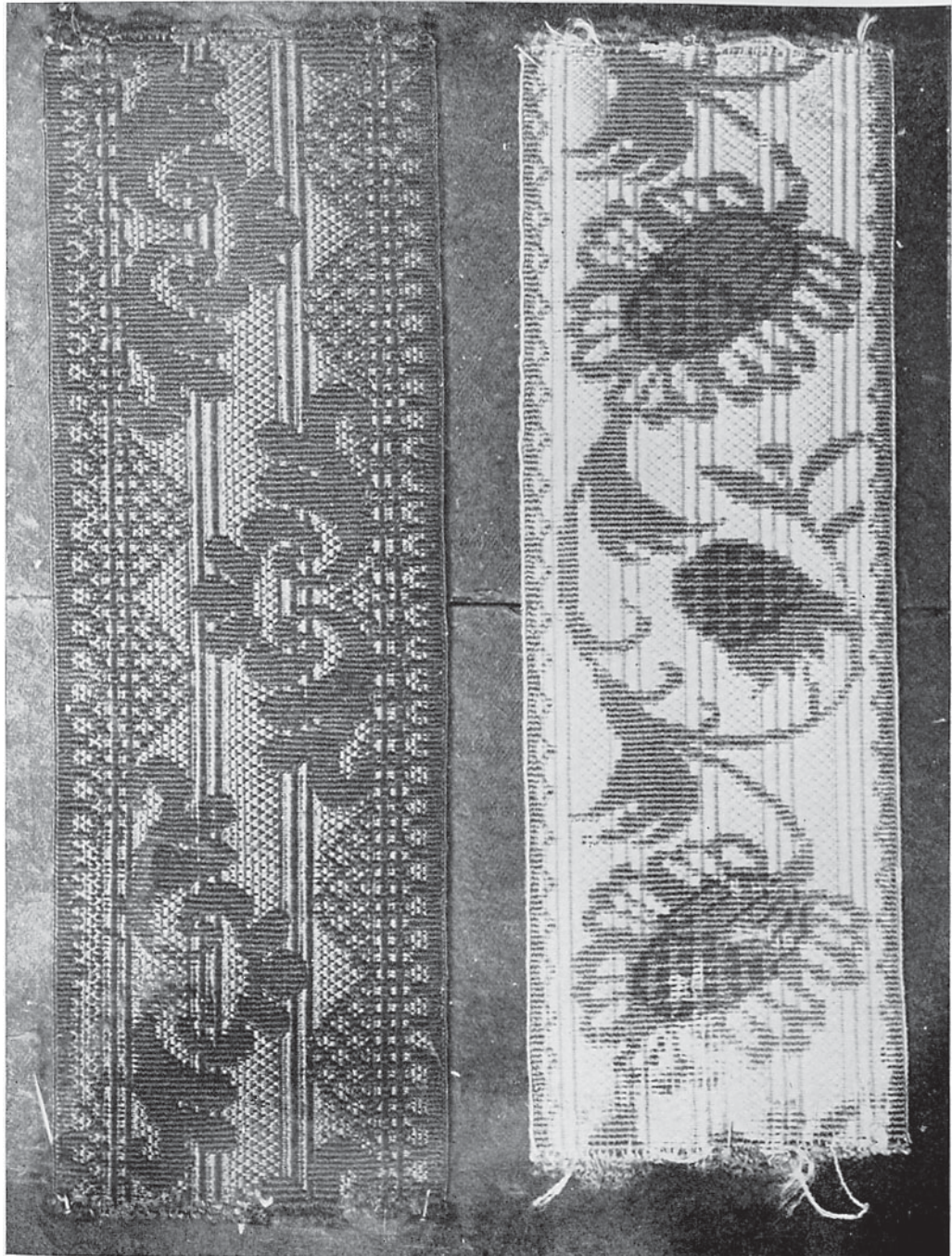


PLATE IV "COACH LACE"
MANUFACTURED BY DEAN WALKER. SCALE $\frac{7}{8}$

lace." The historian of Medway township, Mr. Orion Mason, assured me "it was a kind of coarse lace used to trim hacks and coaches," but later he succeeded in getting for me two of the half dozen patterns owned by the daughter of the weaver at the Lace Shop, who knows them as "coach lace." They are of excellent coloring. The lighter has a mauve-gray pattern, flecked with vermilion, on a silver-gray ground; the darker has a rich green background with mahogany over-pattern, while the back of the material is dark blue.

I have been unable to find a foundation for the family tradition that this infant industry was ruined by the removal of the tariff. These are the dates of changes: in 1792, 15%; in 1812, 30%; in 1816, 7%; in 1824, 12½%; in 1842, between 15-20%. It would seem from these figures that the reason for the decline might have been, rather, a tariff insufficient to offset the increasing cheapness of the machine-patterned Nottingham laces—and the higher tariff wall of 1842 may have been raised too late.



PLATE V
MEDAL AWARDED TO DEAN WALKER
FOR 180 YARDS LACE IN SEVEN PATTERNS