

# HOG RIVER JOURNAL

## A Century of Connecticut Inventions

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President George Washington in 1790 signed America's first patent law "to promote the progress of science and useful arts, by securing for limited times to authors and inventors the exclusive right to their respective writings and discoveries." Inspired by the new law and its opportunities, Connecticut's residents headed for their workbenches and a century later had been awarded more than 20,000 patents. From 1876 through 1890 the United States Patent Office saluted Connecticut as first in inventions per capita every year but three, when Nutmeggers came in second. To provide a unique, fascinating and easy way for identifying and better understanding Connecticut's extraordinary phenomena of innovation, the Museum of Connecticut History has created the Connecticut Patents Database. Six years in the works and counting, it encourages forays into the state's industrial legacy beyond the anecdotal and the glare of celebrity collectibles, in ways limited only by the imagination.

Top 10 Inventive Towns, 1790-1890		
1	New Haven	3,180
2	Hartford	2,060
3	Bridgeport	1,916
4	Meriden	1,155
5	Waterbury	1,096
6	New Britain	849
7	Norwich	624
8	Middletown	516
9	Danbury	334
10	New London	312

This searchable online database indexes the more than 20,000 pre-1891 Connecticut inventions (from the abdominal corset to the zinc tinning table) by 5,578 inventors (including 44 women) in all state towns. It includes patent date; the all-important patent number; inventors' assignments of patents to manufacturers; and 44 convenient "subject code" categories such as "metal forming," "nautical," and "lighting devices." Anyone, from the serious researcher to the casually curious, can access the database at [www.cslib.org/patent.htm](http://www.cslib.org/patent.htm) to run your own patent list queries. Then by searching the patent numbers, online drawings (regrettably, without text) can be found at the United States Patent Office Web site [www.uspto.gov/patft](http://www.uspto.gov/patft). Researchers can also visit the Connecticut State Library's Government and Information Services Unit to use the United States Patent microfilm on reader-printers for full text and drawings through 1871 and summaries and sample drawings thereafter. The full texts explain in detail what is special about a particular patent. An unusual exception, Mark Twain, perhaps due to his fame, slipped his 1871 adjustable garment strap through U.S. Patent Office strictures with his declaration "The advantages of such an adjustable and detachable elastic strap are so obvious that they need no explanation" as the official approved narrative.

Many of Connecticut's inventions and manufactures found ready and widespread markets, producing wealth and reasonable living standards of living for management and most workers throughout the 19th century. Other patents might have seemed useful on paper, but never did make it into production or gain consumer appeal. A high percentage of patented items actually made in the 19th century bear the patent date only and lack marks to identify maker or origin. Other objects may only include the inventor's name.

The Connecticut Patent database provides a "collector's edge" by making it possible to quickly check dates or inventors' names against the index to determine if a Connecticut connection puts something on a museum or private collector's "must have" list. Schools can use the database as a springboard to examine early invention, inventors, and manufactures in their towns. Likewise, historical societies can develop custom patent reference binders to know local innovations and be aware of the possibilities and on the lookout for such things.

The Museum of Connecticut History looks forward to updating the list and posting online all drawings, full texts, new photos and even motion graphics of select collected inventions in operation. For more information on the Museum of Connecticut History, see page 54.

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Dean Nelson is administrator of the Museum of Connecticut History. He has a special interest in the everyday objects of America's past.

<b>Top 10 Patent Categories, 1790-1890</b>		
1	Hardware	2,363
2	Metal Working Machinery	1,733
3	Clothing	1,529
4	Hand tools	1,409
5	Household Goods	1,096
6	Firearms	900
7	Lighting Devices	878
8	Carriages	807
9	Textile Processing	798
10	Agricultural Equipment	768