

United States, was fraught with problems and controversies. The beauty of lace masked the grim realities of how it was produced. Families who made lace in their homes, in the form of piecework, would often enlist the labor of children as young as three. Families survived on the meager wages provided by their employers through collaboration, but the individual pieceworker could barely make a living. To broaden awareness of the problems surrounding the needlework trade, a proliferation of compelling tales portraying the hardships of needlewomen emerged in the nineteenth century.

The “frugal housewife” of the nineteenth century found she could economically maintain a fashionable home with crocheted laces of her own creation. Women such as Catharine Beecher and Lydia Maria Child promoted domestic economy through their vast number of instructional books and often included needlework as part of that philosophy. At the same time, pattern books for crochet had also secured themselves in the publishing market. American authors often applied popular European lace styles to crochet patterns which were adaptations of such designs as Honiton and Brussels lace. Crochet borrowed the continuous line of loose button hole stitches found in Brussels lace and the heavy guipure bars of Honiton lace, allowing women the ability to create the intricate designs they admired without needing years of training or inordinate amounts of time. The laces these women crafted had an array of uses. They embellished table linens, dress collars, cuffs, hats, draperies, towels, and napkins.

Anything that could be “improved” by a touch of lace had it duly applied. Collars and cuffs, for example, were objects of both beauty and necessity during the nineteenth century. Infrequent bathing and the arduous, even damaging, task of washing clothes required these protective and versatile adornments for women’s and children’s clothing. Primarily white to avoid the risk of fading caused by frequent bleaching and starching, they were made in crochet, knitting, tatting, and whitework. (Men, in contrast, wore plain cotton or disposable paper collars which required less care.) By 1849 collars and cuffs appeared as a common staple of everyday fashion. Domestic advisors recommended that collars be changed daily, and according to the *Household Cyclopedia of Practical Receipts and Daily Wants* of 1874, they were to be washed in the following manner: “Plain collars, cuffs, wristbands, should be strung through the button-holes on a piece of bobbin long enough to enable the articles to be easily divided for rubbing, starching, &c.” Collars worn by women and children of the early 1840s fit tightly around the neck with the ends meeting in front. This changed by the 1850s, when collars, now available as wide as three inches, were worn laying flat on the shoulders with the ends no longer meeting at