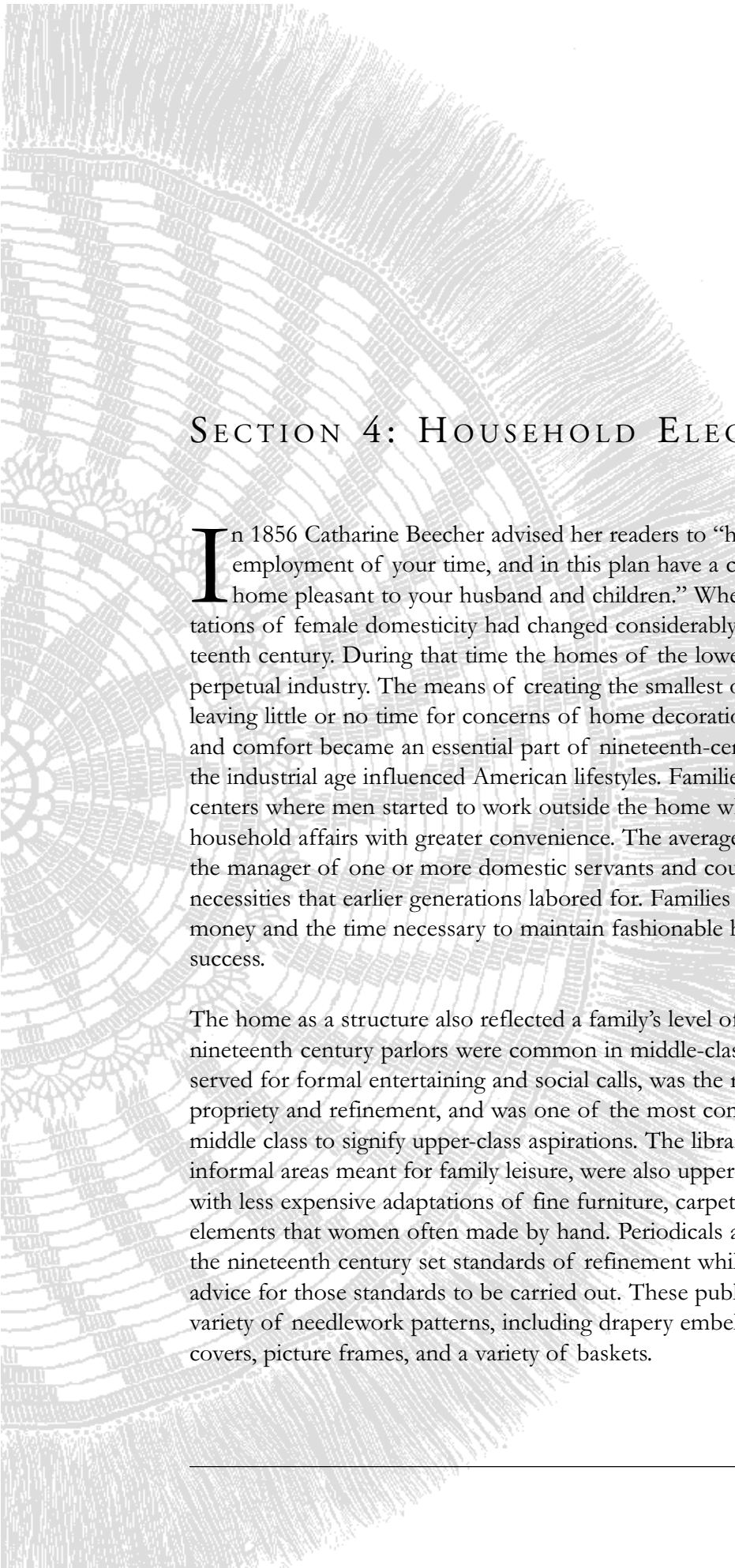




SECTION 4: HOUSEHOLD ELEGANCIES

In 1856 Catharine Beecher advised her readers to “have some regular plan for employment of your time, and in this plan have a chief reference to making home pleasant to your husband and children.” When she wrote this, the expectations of female domesticity had changed considerably from those of the eighteenth century. During that time the homes of the lower classes were centers of perpetual industry. The means of creating the smallest of necessities was arduous, leaving little or no time for concerns of home decoration. Household appearance and comfort became an essential part of nineteenth-century culture as advances of the industrial age influenced American lifestyles. Families began to move to urban centers where men started to work outside the home while women maintained household affairs with greater convenience. The average urban housewife was often the manager of one or more domestic servants and could purchase many of the necessities that earlier generations labored for. Families came to have both the money and the time necessary to maintain fashionable homes, an image of financial success.

The home as a structure also reflected a family’s level of gentility. By the mid nineteenth century parlors were common in middle-class homes. The parlor, reserved for formal entertaining and social calls, was the room that most epitomized propriety and refinement, and was one of the most common elements used by the middle class to signify upper-class aspirations. The library and sitting room, more informal areas meant for family leisure, were also upper-class affectations but filled with less expensive adaptations of fine furniture, carpets, and other decorative elements that women often made by hand. Periodicals and needlework manuals of the nineteenth century set standards of refinement while providing decorative advice for those standards to be carried out. These publications supplied a wide variety of needlework patterns, including drapery embellishments, pillows, table covers, picture frames, and a variety of baskets.