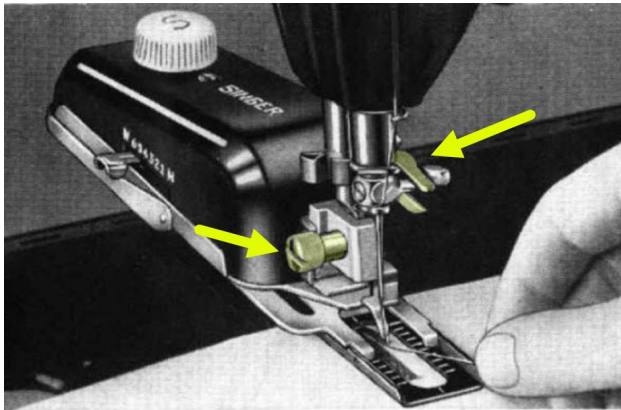


Vintage Buttonholers

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Posted 2026 February 27

Back in the early years of the last century, when sewing machines were all straight-sew only, a little mechanical marvel known as a buttonholer extended the capabilities of these machines, freeing sewists from the tedious task of hand-finishing buttonholes.



The buttonholer screws onto the presser bar just like any standard attachment; the fork fits over the needle clamp. Thus installed, it forms a buttonhole by moving the fabric forward, backward, and side to side, using templates (jigs)



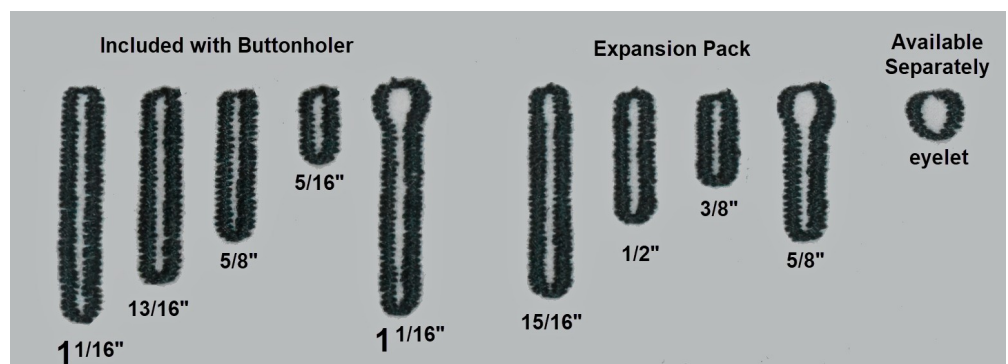
to create very nice buttonholes in straight or keyhole styles.

These mechanical devices were designed by John M. Greist, who was originally employed by Singer in the late 1800s to create sewing machine attachments. Later, his own company produced attachments, including the buttonholer, both under the Greist name and badged for many other brands, including Singer, White, Morse, Domestic, and Kenmore.



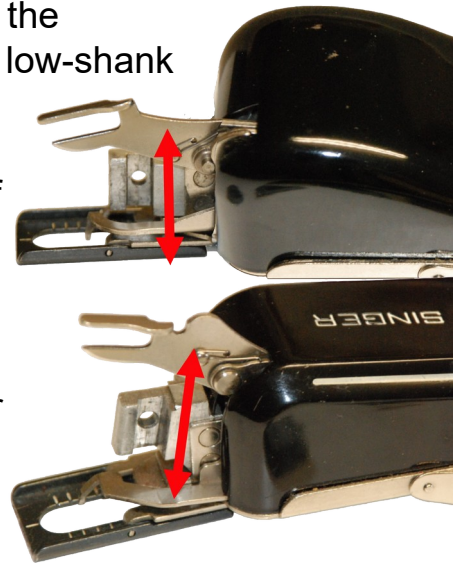
The buttonholer kit came with five templates, or cams, for making straight or keyhole-shaped buttonholes. An additional four were available in an "expansion pack". An eyelet template – quite rare these days -- was sold separately.

I stitched my samples with contrasting thread, to show how well formed the buttonholes are. (I used a width setting of 4, and went around each one twice.)





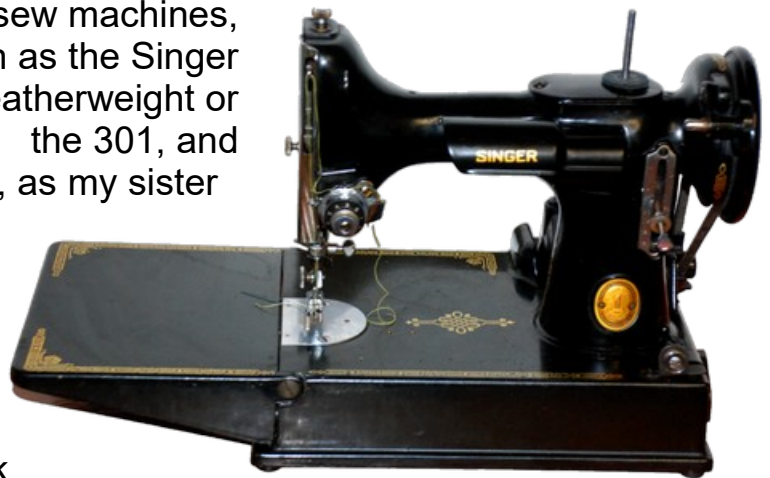
Singer sold two versions of the buttonholer, one to fit their low-shank machines and one for the slants (400, 500, and 600 series). Every collector of vintage machines has seen these in their plastic "treasure chest" cases: green for low-shank and burgundy for the slants.



If you own any vintage straight-sew machines, such as the Singer featherweight or the 301, and

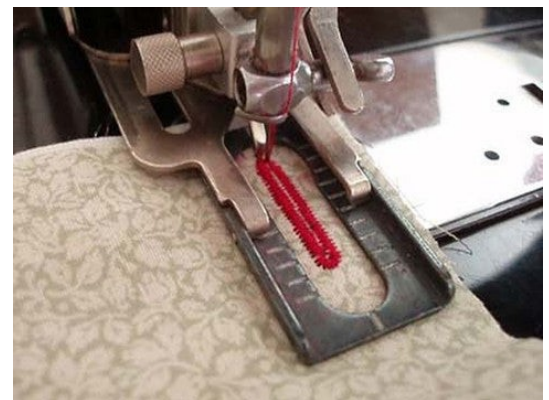
especially if you actually sew on them, as my sister and I do, it's immediately obvious why you might want this attachment.

But even if you don't own a vintage machine, you might still want to try one of these. (The one in the green box will fit almost any low-shank, centre-homing machine, including most mid-century zigzaggers, and many of today's computerized machines.)



They are not only nifty gadgets, but they also make nice buttonholes. Some sewists claim that they make better buttonholes than are produced by the built-in functions on their modern machines.

I first heard this claim from my friend Nancy, who since high school has sewn everything from formal gowns to tailored garments and sports wear. Nancy insists that no electronic machine she's ever had can match the quality of buttonholes she achieved with this attachment and her mom's old Singer 15, way back when she was a teenager. I've even read testimonies from sewists who use these attachments on their contemporary machines, by-passing the built-in buttonholer, because they prefer the results they get with these vintage gadgets.



Buttonholers were produced by the millions, so are still easy to find at yard sales and thrift stores. Prices vary from \$5-\$20; the slant versions are rarer, so may command a slightly higher price, but they work only on the Singer slant machines.

In the late 1950s, Singer's treasure chest style cases were replaced by these iconic space-age inspired "Jetson" cases, still with the same colour coding: green for low-shank, pink for slants. They're eye candy for sure, though their shape makes them a bit of a pain to store.



Greist was still producing buttonholers well into the 1970s, in fact right up until the advent of electronic machines and their built-in buttonhole functions.

The early buttonholers, marketed under various brand names, featured a metal housing and metal cams.



On later models, a plastic housing replaced the metal, and the cases gave way to cardboard boxes. Eventually the cams would be made of plastic as well.

Despite their more colourful "updated" plastic housings, these more recent buttonholers were still metal inside, and were mechanically identical to their predecessors. They attach to the machine in the same way and use the same style of cams.



Singer later released a buttonholer designed for zigzag machines, which made use of the machine's zigzag stitch function. Like the earlier buttonholers, it came in both low-shank and slant types, and attached to the machine in the same manner. It included a larger number of templates, which by then were made from plastic rather than metal.

Though not quite as ubiquitous, these too are still around and can be found in thrift stores and at garage sales. Unfortunately, the cams for these do not fit the older style buttonholers.

I think I just might be Queen of the Vintage Buttonholers. At last count I own more than two dozen, branded not only by Singer, but by a host of other companies as well. They are still functional and make lovely buttonholes.



Since most of my machines are vintage ones, and I no longer own an electronic machine with an automated buttonholer, I find these ingenious devices to be pretty indispensable. So does my sister, who uses her Featherweight for many of her projects. In fact, she and I both still regularly use one of these attachments to make buttonholes on our gift bags and other projects.

There's still no explanation as to why I felt the need to own so many of the darned things. One for every sewing machine, maybe.