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Lamps for Homemakers

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Lamps for Homemakers
by Marian Weinel

If you see a Betty lamp do you im-
mediately think of Home Eco-
nomies?
Betty lamps are of special significance
as the emblem of the American Home
Economics Association. They are used
as symbols of learning and of the first
American homemakers of early Colonial
days. The Colonial homemaker used a
Betty lamp to light all her tasks.
The derivation of the name Betty lamp
is very interesting. It is thought that it
came from the German word “besser”,
meaning “better”. This new type of lamp
with its shallow, somewhat triangular
pan, covered with a hinged top that had
an opening for the wick, was much
better than the older type of oil lamps.
Even our small replicas have a chain and
hook attached to the graceful handle.
These chains are essential because they
allow the lamp to be hung up at any
desired place for illumination.
In the Plymouth Colony the first
lamps were Betty Lamps made by the
Dutchmakers, having been brought by
the Pilgrims when they came on the
Mayflower. They were of iron, either
forged from a single piece of cast or
course, gray iron. The earliest of these
lamps were known as the open Betty
or “slot lamps.” Then followed the
Betty with a top, which was usually
hinged.

Before 1680 all lamps used in the
American colonies were imported, usu-
ally from England. In that year a
tinsmith of Newbury, Massachusetts,
began the manufacture of Betty Lamps.
Some years later a few pewter and
brass lamps were made in Salem and
Providence, Rhode Island. These were
extremely heavy to carry.

Until 1743 candles were in general
use in the American colonies, the iron
Betty lamp being used in comparat-
ively few families. Betty lamps have
been found all over the eastern part
of our country, left over from the
pioneer days, and as the art of casting
iron was well developed several hun-
dred years ago many of the cruder
forms were made of that metal. Others
more elaborate, and some really ar-
tistic ones have been made of wrought
iron. Henry Ford has a notable collec-
tion in his Museum of Americana.

There are other notable collections in
museums which have American made
lamps and those from Europe.
The body of the Betty Lamps is a
pear-shaped, shallow receptacle with a
spout or opening at one end for the
wick to go through, and some form of
handle at the other end. It may hold
from a half pint to a quart of oil. Some
have a top cover and hinged lid
through which to fill the lamp. A
swivel or spindle was attached to the
handle and chain was used to hang
it from rafters or wall brackets. Often
there was a small chain with a “pick”
on the end for freeing the wick when
it became crusted with carbon.