



Lunchtime Conversation: Historic Clothing & Textiles

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We ran out of time to respond to these questions during the program, but textile conservator Kathryn Tarleton graciously provided the following answers:

When did brides start using white for wedding dresses?

While white was worn by brides prior to Queen Victoria's wedding to Prince Albert in 1840, Victoria's dress (images of which were widely shared by the media of the day) increased the popularity of brides wearing white. See <https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/1840-queen-victorias-wedding-dress/>. Most 19th-century women re-purposed their wedding dresses, and needed a color that was suitable for other occasions.

Do you know if Arthur Lord and Sarah Shippen were married in Plymouth?

Although they registered their marriage in Plymouth, the couple was married in the Jamaica Plain neighborhood of Boston on October 2, 1878. The officiant was the bride's father, Rev. Rush R. Shippen, a Unitarian clergyman.

Any idea who originally created the blue wedding outfit worn by Sarah Shippen in 1878?

Unfortunately, the dress has no maker's label, so we cannot identify the dressmaker. It is a complex pattern and very finely stitched, so it is likely the work of a professional dressmaker.

Did they iron dresses in 1870, and if they did, how? When was the ironing board invented? Wouldn't a hot iron destroy the delicate fabrics?

Ironing in the 19th century was a matter of both skill and strength. One had to use a heavy metal iron which was heated on the stove or fire, a padded ironing table and damp press cloths to protect the garment being ironed. Folding ironing boards came into use by the 1860s, but electric irons were not commonly available until about 1900.

What type of lace was used on the sleeves of Alice Walker's 1880 dress?

Cotton bobbin lace

Was the sampler pattern drawn on the fabric first? The lettering is so even.

I found no evidence of pattern lines on the PAS sampler, but drawing the design directly onto the linen was done in the 19th century. Another method was to place the pattern (drawn on tissue paper) behind the linen. This was torn away after the embroidery was finished.

What do I do with a 1901 trousseau group of slips and tops and bed linens? Also two man's linen vests?

These are best stored wrapped in acid free tissue, layered in an archival box with the heaviest items on the bottom.

Wonder if DNA can still be extracted from old clothing stains...

I am not an expert on that, but it sounds like an interesting idea!

I am a weaver and understand that there were weavers among the Pilgrims. Interested to hear about any weaving that was going on in the New World.

Imported cloth from England & Europe supplied most of the clothing needs of the earliest European settlers in New England, but by 1640 imports slowed along with migration from Europe. Therefore, settlers began producing more 'homespun' textiles to make up for the shortfall.

Where did they source fabric/patterns for dresses in the 19th century?

Machine woven & printed fabrics from dry goods suppliers & specialty shops; patterns from women's magazines (Godey's Lady's Book & The Delineator are two).

Who did most of the sewing/dressmaking in the family?

Female head of household was responsible for dressing the family.

What was the impact of sewing machines?

Trims became more complex (pleats, frills, layers).

How many dresses did a wealthy woman own? A middle-class woman?

Depends upon circumstances. Wealthy changed clothes several times a day, depending on activity. Middle-class woman would have one or two 'best' dresses for church and special occasions.

What can dresses, jewelry, hats, shoes, etc. tell us about class and status?

Generally, the more lux the fabric, the wealthier the woman. Conspicuous fashion was a way of signaling membership in the leisure class.