

Women's Clothing for the 18th Century

A Working Guide for New Members of the First New Hampshire

By Karen Hayden

Most basic clothing:

Shift: Made of cotton or linen, this white undergarment, much like a “peasant blouse” has a large open neckline and sleeves reaching just past the elbow. Some have ruffles around the neckline and on the sleeves. They can be made or purchased from sutlers like Smoke & Fire, Townsend or Druid's Oak. Cost varies based on material. For a weekend of camping, two are desired.

Petticoats: Made of cotton, linen, wool, silk or a combination of natural materials, this ankle-to-midcalf length skirt is either gathered onto a waistband or strung on a tie. Most petticoats are made from 78-105” around for fullness. Several would be worn together, particularly in cold weather. Some were quilted for extra warmth. These are so simply made!

Make a long skirt and attach it to a waistband or roll the top of the skirt into a casing. Insert lace. But again, these can be purchased from sutlers. For a weekend of camping, one or two are desired. (More when its cold!)

Cap: Made of white cotton or linen, different types of caps were always worn by ladies. Some common ones were the mobcap, round cap, lappet cap and pinner. I've only made one cap that ever came out well...I recommend purchasing this from a sutler at an event so that you can try them on and see what you like. For a weekend of camping, one is desired.

Bedjacket or Short Gown: This loose fitting work jacket was often held closed by pins or aprons. It had 3/4 length sleeves and was pleated in the back. Most of these were made of linen, wool or cotton in stripes, colors and other patterns. This is another simple item that can be cut out of one piece of cloth. Purchase a pattern from a sutler or buy one in your dress size. For a weekend of camping, one is desired.

Apron: Made of white or colored cotton or linen, an apron was a necessary item to protect the clothing while cooking or doing chores. Some were “pinafore” style attached to a jacket with pins or thorns. This is a very simple item to make; you can even make one while sitting around the camp. For a weekend of camping, two are desired.

Socks & Shoes: When it's too cold to go barefoot, cotton or wool socks that reach up to or beyond the knee in all sorts of colors and even stripes are desired. Two pairs will suffice for a weekend (three if its rainy). Correct shoes complete the look although they are expensive. Plain straight last black leather shoes to which buckles are added can cost about \$100.

Until you can add this to your wardrobe, plain black low-heeled dress shoes with either ties or buckles will do.(Often found at Payless for cheap!- Men's department if no luck in the Ladies') No sneakers or velcro please! One pair for the weekend is desired.

Next Steps

Things to gather along the campaign trail:

Stays: This very intricate piece of underclothing is best made by a professional. Some sutlers sell kits. It is the garment that gives us the proper upper body shape through boning. If it fits right, it can be fairly comfortable; if it doesn't, you won't be able to breathe. Most women had stays as proper ladies, but they were covered up with a short gown, bodice, caraco or gown.

Jumps or Bodice: This is worn in place of the short gown. It is a sleeveless jacket that can be lightly boned to achieve some support. It is often laced up the front. Patterns or finished clothing are available from sulters. These can be more comfortable in the summer heat than other jackets.

Caraco jacket: This 3/4 sleeved jacket has a long peplum that reaches almost to the knees. When made of wool, a caraco provides warmth on a cold night. It is usually closed by hook and eyes or laced. Patterns or finished clothing is available from sutlers.

Pockets: This somewhat pear-shaped white linen pocket is attached to a tape that is tied around the waist underneath the petticoat for keeping your personal effects. Since no-one will see it, you can make one or better yet a balanced set of two, but they are available for purchase.

Hat: In the summer sun, nothing protects like a straw hat. It does need to have a low crown and can be decorated with fine ribbons, silk flowers and bows. In the colder months, a wide brimmed felt hat or calash can be worn to keep the chill out.

Mittens or Gloves: There are several styles of appropriate hand wear for keeping out the cold. Knitted items and mittens made of wool cloth were used to keep hands warm. Gloves were most often fingerless.

Cloaks and Capes: Made of wool, a hooded cloak or a collared cape was worn to keep warm. Some were tied closed while others had beautiful silver clasps. Some were lined with linen or cotton while others were not. Sutlers have these available although they are very simple to make.

Gowns: There were several styles of fancy gowns seen in the late 18th century. The English round gown, the French Polonaise gown and the Sacque back gown were made of silks and brocades. All of these were worn with padded hips or bum rolls to create the proper silhouette. Patterns are available, but you may want to hire a seamstress to make this for you to insure a proper fit if you are not an experienced sewer. Some sutlers offer this service as well.

Girls Clothing in the 18th Century

Shift: Made of cotton or linen, this white undergarment, much like a “peasant blouse” has a large open neckline and sleeves reaching just past the elbow. Some have ruffles around the neckline and on the sleeves. They can be made or purchased from sutlers like Smoke & Fire, Townsend, or the Rancocous Merchant. Cost varies based on material. For a weekend of camping, two are desired.

Gown: Probably the most practical and comfortable option for a young girl to wear is the gown. Made of cotton, linen, wool or silk, it has a bodice that laces up the back with elbow-length sleeves and a skirt attached. A narrow band of fabric that was left hanging down the back was attached to

each shoulder for younger children. Something to grab onto should they stray! I have not seen these at sutlers, but they are easy to make from a pattern. It can be found in Beth Gilgun's book, "Tidings from the 18th Century". A shift is worn underneath the gown. For a weekend of camping, one or two is desired.

Frock: When made of cotton or linen, it serves the purpose of a gown. When made of wool, it serves the purpose of a coat. This ankle-to-midcalf length jacket, made similar to a women's short gown, is worn over a shift or sometimes over a shift and petticoat. With a large single pleat in the back and one on each side for fullness, a frock is often pinned closed. On younger children, the frock was worn with the opening at the back with ties to keep it closed. Check sutlers for these items although it is not hard to make from a pattern. For weekend camping, one is desired.

Petticoat: Made of cotton, linen, wool, silk or a combination of natural materials, this ankle-to-midcalf length skirt is either gathered onto a waistband or strung on a tie. Most petticoats are made very full. Several would be worn together, particularly in cold weather. Some were quilted for extra warmth. These are so simply made! Make a long skirt and attach it to a waistband or roll the top of the skirt into a casing. Insert lace. But again, these can be purchased from sutlers. For a weekend of camping, one or two are desired. (More when its cold!)

Cap: Made of white cotton or linen, different types of caps were often worn by girls. Some common ones were the mobcap, round cap, lappet cap and pinner. If a girl isn't wearing a cap, her hair should be tied up. I recommend

purchasing this from a sutler like Harvey Warren at an event so that you can try them on and see what you like. For a weekend of camping, one is desired.

Apron: Made of white or colored cotton or linen, an apron was a necessary item to protect the clothing while cooking or doing chores. Some were "pinafore" style attached to a jacket with pins or thorns. This is a very simple item to make; you can even make one while sitting around the camp. For a weekend of camping, two are desired.

Socks and Shoes: Cotton or wool knee socks in colors or stripes are acceptable. Anklets or white athletic socks are not. Two pairs for camping are desired. Plain black dress shoes with low heels are acceptable in place of authentic shoes. More often than not, a boys dress shoe will work out

better. These are almost always found at Payless. No sneakers or sandals please!