

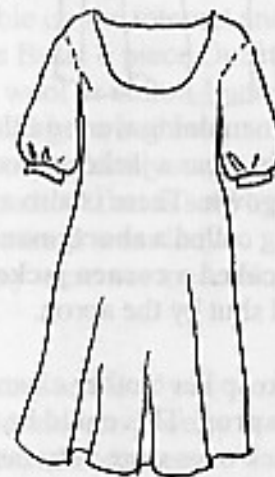
2nd Albany County Militia

WOMEN'S CLOTHING in the 18th CENTURY

In the 2nd Regiment of the Albany County Militia, we are portraying middle and working class people of primarily Dutch and German decent. The Hudson Valley was first settled by the Dutch. About 1712, there was an influx of Palatine-German refugees. After the French and Indian War some Scots and Irish came to the Albany area. Think about what type of person you want to portray - a well-to-do Dutch farm wife, a working class farm wife, a destitute war widow, a bound servant? It saves you cash in the long run to think about your persona first, then get clothes appropriate to the station you want to portray. This pamphlet is geared to give you a basic introduction to women's 18th century clothes and anyone in the unit will be glad to go into specifics such as ethnic details.

The basic under wear of all 18th cen. women was a one-piece linen shift. This is something like a nightgown that covered her from neck to below the knees. It was also used as a nightgown and was a sort of washable liner for the rest of her attire. Sometimes it had a small ruffle at the neck and cuffs, but it did not really show much above the neckline. It is not difficult to sew. The other piece of underwear is a pair of long stockings held up by tie on garters.

Over this she wore an under petticoat, perhaps several depending on the weather. Women's petticoats (skirts) did not have sewn in pockets. To keep her personal gear handy, she tied one or two bag like pockets around her waist. These were about 20" long and about 10 or 12" wide with a slit in the front. Sometimes they were embroidered, or sewn out of pretty scrap fabric. Many were plain white.



In the 18th cen, fashion decreed the torso have a cone like shape. To give this shape and to support the breasts, women wore a set of strapless stays, a sort of corset-like garment that also supports the back. It was made of linen canvas and had wooden or whalebone stiffening and laced up the back. Since these are rather expensive to buy and need custom fitting, everyone has to decide for herself if she wants to get them. Patterns and kits are available to make them yourself but they are not a beginner project.



Over the shift, stays and under petticoat, she put on a top petticoat. This comes to a few inches above the ankle for working women and is just below the ankle for fine ladies. It can have a simple drawstring waist, or a tie waistband. They were often a solid color or striped. We have documentation from the memoirs of a refugee from the French Revolution that local farmwives in the 1790's wore black and blue striped wool petticoats and flowered jackets.



Her top garment would be either a long gown or some kind of 'short' gown. All of these go on like a coat and fasten in the front. By the 1770's the gown bodice met in the front, but some older women preferred the lapel-like robings and a filler piece called a stomacher, from the 1750's and '60's. The gown closed by hooks and eyes, straight pins or was sewn shut.

Women doing work on the farm or in the dairy might wear a jacket or loose garment called a bedgown. There is also a sort of fitted, sleeved thing called a shortgown and a ¾ length fashionable top called a curaco jacket. These can pin shut or be held shut by the apron.



Bedgown

To keep her clothes clean while working, she wore an apron. This could be a solid color or small check. Black ones were very fashionable. Working class English women often wore indigo aprons.



To protect herself from sunburn and for modesty, women wore a large (about 36") square kerchief around her neck, tucked into the front of her gown. This was usually white linen, fine lawn or silk.

To keep her hair clean and because all women covered their hair, she wore a white linen cap. There are several kinds of caps – English, Dutch, German. Caps also got larger as the century went on. When she went out, she put a straw or wool hat over the cap. Don't bother with the round drawstring cap that is incorrectly called a mobcap. There is no documentation for it and it's nearly impossible to keep on. There are many patterns for caps and sutlers sell quite a variety.



Where to get the Clothes: Everything described above, except the stockings and the hats, can be sewn at home. There are a number of good patterns available on the internet and at events. An excellent one for beginners is the JP Ryan Women's Basic 6 piece Outfit. Always use 100% natural fiber cloth! This means cotton, linen, wool or cotton-linen blends. If a spark from the fire lands on a polyester blend, you could get a bad burn. Artificial fabrics are not safe. Stick with solid colors and woven stripes until you get an eye for 18th century patterns. Please do not buy the sleeveless 'bodice' that is sold by some sutlers. It is incorrect as an outer layer. 18c women did sometimes wear lady's padded waistcoats for extra warmth underneath their gown, but they were not made like these.

We are trying to re-create the life, look and feeling of the 18th century as closely as we can. This means leaving modern accessories at home. Please avoid modern jewelry (except wedding rings), wristwatches, nail polish, and makeup except for discreet foundation, if you must. However, sunscreen is always a good idea.

Glasses and Shoes: Plain black flats or tie shoes are fine for your first year. Since shoes are something of an investment, we don't require period shoes right away. It is also a good idea to try different brands and sizes on at an event. Reproduction glasses can be obtained from a couple of sutlers. Optometrists should put your own prescription in them on request. Please try to get period frames by your second year. We understand that that can be difficult with some prescriptions and may take longer.

We hope you enjoy your living history experience! If you have any questions about what accessories to buy or anything in general, feel free to ask another member. Those of us who have been doing this a long time have closets full of stuff that is not correct, but we thought it was when we bought it! We want to save you from wasting your hard-earned cash, so ask first if something is correct. That is one reason why we have the Yahoo Group list.

Recommended Reading:

Gilgun, Beth. *Tidings From the Eighteenth Century*

Riley, Mara. *Whatever Shall I Wear? A Guide to Assembling a Women's Basic 18th Century Wardrobe*

The Lady's Guide to Plain Sewing, Vol. 1 & 2 (from Kannick's Korner)

Recommended Patterns: J.P. Ryan, Kannick's Korner, Mill Farm Patterns
There are links to these on the 2nd Albany website and on the Schuyler's / 2nd Albany Yahoo Group page. They are also available at events from various sutlers and merchants.



Shortgown
front



Pleated
Shortgown
back



*Basic Six Piece
Wardrobe*