

## Clothing in 1840

- Although people on the frontier or in some rural areas still raised sheep, spun thread, and wove cloth, most Americans purchased fabric for their clothing by the 1800s. The Erie Canal made almost any kind of fabric available in Geneva by 1840.
- All fabrics were natural. There was no polyester, spandex, elastic or vinyl. The most commonly used fabrics were cotton, linen, wool. Silk was available, but very expensive. There were no zippers, snaps, safety pins or Velcro, and buttons were mostly for decoration. Hooks, straight pins and laces were the most common fastenings.
- Almost all clothing was made by hand at home by the women of the house.
- The sewing machine was not invented until 1846 and not widely used until the late 1860s.
- Wealthy families would hire a seamstress or tailor to make women's dresses and men's suits. They might have servants to help with other sewing.
- Sewing was an important female occupation and even wealthy women did much of their own mending and sewing of simple garments, like aprons, shirts, sheets, table linens, and baby clothes.
- Most ordinary people had only a few clothes: an everyday outfit or two—a dress for women/girls and a suit or coat and trousers for boys and men—and a Sunday “best” outfit. Wealthy people might have a few more outfits, but not as many as most people today.
- Washing clothes was very hard work and dresses and coats would not be washed very often. Instead, undergarments would be washed regularly. Collars and cuffs for both shirts and dresses were removable, so they could be changed for fashion or for cleanliness. Girls and little children wore large aprons or pinafores that covered their dresses to keep them clean. Men's shirts and women's chemises or shifts were washed regularly.
- Everyday men's clothing included a shirt, pants, waistcoat (vest), tie and coat. The shirt was made of linen and pulled over the head (no button-up shirts). It hung down the thighs and was used as a nightshirt to sleep in. Men did not wear underwear, but tucked the long shirt into their trousers. Their pants had straight legs and a front flap, which buttoned to the waistband in front. The tie, called a cravat, was like a scarf wrapped around the collar and tied in front. A waistcoat was always worn, whether or not a coat went over it. Trousers were held up with suspenders. Stockings were hand-knit or bought at the store and held up with tied garters.
- Most men wore their hair parted on the side and combed around their faces and long enough to cover their ears. Beards and mustaches were not fashionable. Outside, men wore wide-brimmed or tall hats made of fur, silk or straw.



- Women wore ankle to floor-length dresses of wool, silk or cotton. Sleeves were almost always long (unless the gown was for evening wear) and often very tight from the elbow to the wrist. Skirts were very full and bell-shaped, with more fullness in the back than the front. Sometimes women wore small bustle pads to increase the fullness in the back of the skirt. Removable collars and small capes (capelets or pelerines) were worn about the neck. Under the dress, women and girls wore a shift or chemise, which was a simple gown with short sleeves and no waist, like a nightgown. This was the only underwear worn. Drawers (underwear, bloomers, etc.) were not yet commonly worn. Over the chemise a woman wore a “stay” or corset for support. These were



made of heavy cotton and had either whalebones or cotton cording for stiffening and shaping. They laced up the back and had a long wooden or ivory stick called a busk inserted in the front. The stay gave a woman the proper shape and no woman would feel dressed without it. Over the stay and chemise women wore petticoats, usually at least three. Often at least one petticoat would be stiffened with cording or horsehair to make the skirt stand out. Women wore homemade or store-bought stockings held up by garters tied above the knees.

- Women wore their hair long, with a center part, and pulled into a knot at the back of the head. The sides were shorter and smoothed back over the ears or left to hang in ringlets. They wore hats inside and out. Inside they wore white cotton and lace caps. Outside they wore bonnets, which were often decorated with ribbons, lace, flowers, ruffles and feathers.
- Both boys and girls under 5 years of age wore the same clothes. All babies wore long white cotton gowns over cloth diapers. Babies wore caps on their heads to keep them warm. When they learned to walk, children wore short dresses, often with short white trousers underneath.
- Girls wore clothing similar to their mothers, but with a few differences. Their stays were lighter, shorter, and not laced tightly. Their skirts were shorter, ending from just below the knee to the lower calf. As girls got older, their skirts got progressively longer, until they were the same length as a woman's, at about 16-18 years. Girls from wealthier families wore pantalettes under their skirts. These were leggings with laced and ruffled hems, which hung down below their dresses to the ankle. They were not one-piece garments, but two separate pieces tied to the leg above the knee or buttoned to the stays.
- Little girls usually wore their hair loose, short to shoulder length, with a middle part. Older girls sometimes wore their hair in ringlets around their ears or pulled back in a knot, similar to their mothers'. All girls wore hats out of doors.
- After boys reached about 5 or 6 years old, they started wearing trousers and wide, ruffle-collared shirts with short jackets that buttoned up the front. At about 12 years old they started wearing waistcoats, stiff collars and cravats like their fathers. Their hair was short and usually side-parted.

### **Clothing in 1890**

- By 1890 only the poorest and most rural people would spin their own thread or weave cloth. They would also still hand sew many of their own clothes. Most people in the cities or with a good income would buy or make their clothes using a sewing machine. The wealthy still had clothes custom made by a seamstress or tailor, but many garments could be purchased ready made, including most men's and children's clothes, underwear, stockings, corsets, gloves and hats. Some women's clothes were available, but since sizes were not standardized and the clothes did not always fit well, many women found it was easier and cheaper to make their own clothes.
- Washing clothes was still difficult work, but more and more families in the cities could afford a laundry woman or to send their clothes out to be washed at large commercial laundries. As more fabric and clothes were made in factories, the prices dropped and people began to own more clothing. Many women no longer sewed at home, except to mend things or make small gifts or decorative items.
- A man's clothing depended largely on his work. Working class men wore sturdy trousers or overalls with shirts and coats, while businessmen wore suits similar to the 3-piece suit of today. They were usually black or grey, but sportswear included plaid and colorful trousers or jackets. The shirt buttoned up the front



and was worn with drawers or a union suit (long johns). Shirts were stiffly starched, as were the detachable collars, which stood up around the neck. Ties were also similar to those of today. Socks were worn and held up by garters around the calves. Most men wore their hair fairly short and often had a mustache and sideburns. Silk top hats, bowler hats, caps and straw boater hats were popular and always worn when outside.

- Women wore ankle to floor-length dresses, but with less fullness than earlier in the 1800s.



1890

The “hourglass” figure was in fashion, with small waists and rounded hips and chest. Separate blouses (called shirtwaists) and skirts were also very popular, especially among women working in libraries, schools, stores and offices. Dresses and shirts had high collars and puffed sleeves at the shoulder that became narrow around the wrists. Divided skirts and “bloomers” caught on among women who enjoyed sports and were worn for activities like tennis, bicycling and riding.

- Many women wore chemises and drawers for underwear, but “combinations” were becoming popular. This was an undergarment that combined the top of a chemise and the drawers into one garment. Over the combinations a woman wore a corset made of steel “bones” and elastic. Over this they wore a corset cover (like a camisole). Women still wore petticoats and sometimes small bustle pads to shape their skirts.

Stockings were held up with elastic garters or attached to the corset or a garter belt. Shoes were leather slippers for indoors and dress, while ankle boots with buttons up the side were worn out of the house.

- Women wore their hair long and pulled up into a loose topknot or bun at the top of the head. Loose, wispy bangs were also worn. Small hats decorated with lace, ribbons, feathers and artificial flowers were worn high on the back of the head when outside the house.
- Clothes for children under 5 years were very much the same throughout the 1800s. In the 1890s sailor suits for boys and girls were very popular. Girls’ dresses were very frilly, often covered with lace and ribbons and were often white. Girls wore light corsets and drawers or combinations, like their mothers. Their skirts were shorter than a woman’s, ending just below the knee on young girls and just above the ankle for adolescents. Girls wore aprons or pinafores over their dresses to protect them from dirt and wear. Younger girls wore their hair long, sometimes loose with the front pulled back into ribbons, or braided. Boys wore short pants (knickers) over stockings, a shirt, and coat or jacket, sometimes with a waistcoat. Out of doors boys and girls always wore hats or caps.