

# Colonial Era 1600-1800

## The 1790's

**HAIR:** Women's hair was usually long, worn up or hanging on the neck in curls. Putting up the hair was a sign that a young girl had reached maturity.

**ACCESSORIES:** An open neck line was always covered with a shawl, called a fichu. Dresses were often worn with a long, full apron of stiff, white fabric with large pockets.

**HATS:** Tall hats with feathers or bonnets were worn outdoors, but, inside, women covered their hair with mob caps like the one shown here.

**PATTERNS:** Since fabric was hand woven, solid colors were more common than patterns. The availability of dyes limited the choice of color, with blue, purple and red being the most common.



**COVERAGE:** Necklines could be high or low, and sleeves were often three-quarter length. Skirts fell at least to the ankle and sometimes to the floor.

**SHAPE:** The bodice or top part of the dress was fitted closely, while the skirts were full and supported by petticoats or hoops. Breasts were pushed up and waists kept small with whalebone stays and corsets.

**SHOES:** Thick, wooden shoes, like clogs, were called pattens and were worn to keep the feet dry out of doors. Small slippers of leather or cloth were worn indoors or for dress.

## Colonial Era Fashion Overview

If you were able to time-travel back in to the 17th and 18th centuries in the British colonies in America, many aspects of people's dress would probably surprise you. One of the big surprises would be that men's clothes were every bit as fancy and as fussy as women's clothes.

Women were no more likely than men to wear bright colors, fancy buttons and buckles, wigs, embroidery, or ruffles. Like it is today, though, fancy clothing, whether for women or for men, was more expensive. The well-to-do could afford it; others could not.

Throughout the 1600's and 1700's, women's central article of clothing was a long dress or gown. The dress often had a close-fitting top, or bodice, with a low neckline. (Women often wore a shawl to cover up part of that open neckline.) Its bottom half, or skirt, was very full and heavy. In the earlier part of this time, women wore one or more petticoats beneath the skirt to give it the desired, wide profile. The petticoats were also for warmth — remember, a fireplace or stove that warmed up just the few feet right in front of it was the only indoor heating! Beginning in the 1700's, women began wearing hoops made of whalebone under their skirts. Hoops gave the skirts an even wider profile. Hoops of different kinds were a common feature of women's clothes for the next 200 years, until the late 1800's. Like any other fashion statement, though, they went in and out of style during this long period. Sleeves were often puffy, ending just below the elbow.

Although the basic woman's dress was widely worn, it came in many variations. Working women wore plainer dresses in wool, linen, or heavy cotton, fabrics that could hold up through the wear-and-tear of physical labor. They often covered their gowns with heavy aprons. Most working women and men had one outfit for everyday and one outfit for Sunday. Wealthier women could afford the fancier, flimsier fabrics that were in vogue: silk, satin, velvet. Even their shoes were sometimes made of silk. Outdoors, they would protect these delicate silk slippers by wearing wooden "pattens" — open foot coverings for walking through mud or dust. They are quite different from any footwear you would see today.

For colonial men, the basic outfit consisted of breeches, stockings, a waistcoat or doublet, and perhaps a coat. Let's look at each of these

items in turn. Breeches were like today's pants except that they ended at the knee. Sometimes these were full and puffy, gathered at the knee. Sometimes they were closer-fitting or padded. Stockings were more like what we would call knee-highs today: long socks that covered the legs and came up under the bottom of the breeches. The waistcoat or doublet was men's main garment from the waist up. It was something between what we would today call a shirt and a vest, and it came in many different styles and variations. Often it buttoned down the front, with pointed xxx that were meant to be worn out over the top of the breeches. Like a shirt, however, it had sleeves. Depending on a man's wealth, he might also wear a "coat" over his waistcoat, something like we would call a blazer or a suit jacket today. Coats were often shorter in front but long in the back, coming down to the backs of the knees.

Like the woman's gown, the man's basic outfit came in many variations. Men who could afford it and who were free from the dirt and sweat of physical labor wore satin or velvet waistcoats richly decorated with embroidery or brocade; the waistcoats might be fastened with buttons made of gold, silver, and precious stones. Above the waistcoat they might wear a ruffled linen collar decorated with lace. In the late 1600's, gentlemen also began wearing tightly curled, powdered wigs.

Some men wore plainer outfits, for one of two reasons. For working men in every part of the colonies, satin waistcoats and lace collars were unaffordable luxuries. Their breeches, stockings and doublets were made of wool or cotton canvas and unadorned. In certain places and at certain times, too, plainer clothes were adopted out of religious conviction. For example, the Puritans in New England believed that too much decoration was frivolous and wrong. In Massachusetts and some other colonies, so-called "sumptuary laws" prohibited the wearing of such fineries as gold and silver thread, lace, and silk ribbons. Over the course of this period, though, restrictions such as these eroded and the gentlewomen and gentlemen of New England shifted toward the spiffier dress of their southern neighbors.

Where and how were colonial textiles and clothing produced? The answer to this question is as complex as the worldwide trading system that had been emerging for more than 200 years when colonists from Europe began settling along the east coast of North America. At the time colonists set out for Massachusetts and Virginia from England, their home country had a large industry raising sheep and processing wool. Flax, the plant linen is made from, was also grown throughout

Europe. European traders had learned about silk in China, where “sericulture,” — raising silkworms and processing their cocoons into silk thread — had been going on for centuries. They had also encountered the cotton plant in India, where it had long been a staple crop and was used to make a whole variety of fabrics.

Sheep, flax, silkworms, and cotton were all brought to North America at different times. Right from the start, colonists brought sheep with them and produced wool. Around 1700, a large group of Scotch-Irish immigrants brought with them their skill at growing flax and making linen. So, wool and linen were the most common fabrics for the early colonists. Many families spun their own yarn and wove their own cloth, called “homespun.” There were also a few professional weavers who had the skill to make a nicer fabric called “linsey-woolsey.” As you can guess from the name, this was woven from a combination of wool and linen yarns, and it was widely used until the Civil War in the 1860’s. By the early 1700’s, the colonists were producing enough wool and flax, spinning enough yarn, and weaving enough cloth to entirely meet their own needs.

Cotton came on the scene a little bit later. In early colonial times, cotton was not grown very much in the colonies, and it was seen as an ornamental plant, not a textile resource. The cotton that was available was imported from India and from the Caribbean islands, and it was therefore more expensive than locally-produced wool and linen. It was sometimes spun together with wool into a finer thread that was used to make knitted stockings. Around 1800, cotton became much more widely used. One reason was the invention of the cotton gin, which allowed cotton from the plant to be cleaned and processed much more efficiently. One result was to end to southern planters’ experiment with sericulture. Through much of the 1700’s, planters in S. Carolina and Georgia had been trying to develop a large silk-producing industry. By the late 1700’s, though, silkworms lost out to cotton (and tobacco), which became the basis of the slave economy of the southern states. Silk continued to be available, but it was imported and thus expensive.

Raising sheep, flax, silkworms or cotton is only the first step of the long process that culminates in actual clothing to wear. Spinning, weaving, and sewing were the major steps that followed. Any of these products had to be spun into yarn or thread, which was then woven on a loom into fabric, which in turn could be cut into pieces and sewn together to

make breeches or a dress. Spinning and sewing were almost entirely women's work. Weaving on a hand-operated loom, used until mechanical looms were built in the United States starting in the 1820's, was done by both men and women. It is interesting that once large mechanical looms in factories took over the production of cloth, weaving became, for some decades, exclusively women's work. (But here we are getting ahead of the colonial period. More on this next unit!)



## Native American Dress

So far, you have been reading about the dress of the British and other Europeans who came to America, and their descendants. Of course, the native people who were already in America had a very different clothing and textile heritage. Throughout the 1600's and 1700's, although some Indians adopted European dress, most continued to make and wear their traditional kinds of clothing.

On the east coast of America, where British styles determined how the colonists dressed, different Native American groups lived by a combination of farming, fishing, and hunting and trapping. Their skill at hunting the plentiful deer of the eastern American forests provided their primary fabric: deerskin. Deerskin was cleaned and processed ("tanned") into a very soft, flexible material. Both women and men wore wrap-around "skirts" made of a wide strip of deerskin, the top rolled down over a belt that held it in place. This was the basic outfit. In cold weather, additional articles of deerskin were added for warmth: a large robe hanging down from the shoulders, leggings, a poncho-style top. Women usually had their heads uncovered. Men wore a close-fitting cap decorated with a few feathers. (The large feather headdresses that you may have seen in pictures or the movies were worn by Native American men in the plains regions of the mid-west and the west, not by east-coast groups.)

Like the Europeans, Native Americans used their clothing for decoration as well as for warmth and protection. And like the British we have read about, men's clothes had decorations as fancy as, and sometimes more fancy than, women's clothes. The deerskins were sometimes dyed and then ornately decorated, with designs painted on or else done in embroidery using porcupine quills, hair, or shell beads. Intricate necklaces and other jewelry were made from natural objects, including bears' teeth and claws, shell beads, and bone. Shell beads, or



wampum, were also used to make long belts whose designs used symbols to record events in the life of the group or the terms of an agreement.

Deerskin did not remain solely a Native American material. Deerskin breeches and jackets were adopted by many colonists who discovered them to be comfortable, durable, and warm.

## Timeline

1492 North America has a population of around 5 million, comprising hundreds of Native American ethnic groups in every part of the continent

1492 Christopher Columbus arrives in North America.

1500 Iroquois League is formed. This federation of five large tribes centered in upper New York State area established a representative mode of government that may have been a model for the United States. It lasted over 200 years.

1565 Spanish settle in Florida

1607 The Virginia Company establishes a settlement at Jamestown

1609 The last 60 starving Jamestown survivors sail back to England. The Jamestown settlers, many of whom were "gentlemen" back in England, did not want to do the hard work of farming, so, most died of famine.

1610 Spanish settlers establish Santa Fe

1612 Virginia settlers begin growing tobacco, their first profitable crop

1619 First ship of African laborers arrives in Virginia. These Africans had the status of indentured servants, not slaves, and were free to start their own farms after a few years of service. But by the late 1600's, the Africans who were brought to the colonies were enslaved.

1630 Puritans found the Massachusetts Bay Colony

1650 First cotton plantation established in Virginia

1653 First Indian reservations created in Virginia

1656 Each household in Massachusetts required to produce 90 pounds

of spun wool, linen, or cotton per year or else pay a fine.

1675 King Philip's War in which Wampanoag Indians led several other tribes in southeastern New England in this last stand against the English settlers. The guerilla-style war lasted a year.

1692 Salem witchcraft trials in Massachusetts

1721 Small pox epidemic strikes. Cotton Mather, a preacher from the Boston area encouraged a local doctor to inoculate as many people as possible. Benjamin Franklin, scientist of the time, spoke out against the procedure, but Mather got his way. He had learned about inoculation from a slave. Thanks to both the slave (unnamed in my source) and Mather, many people were spared.

1732 Poor Richard's Almanack published by Benjamin Franklin. This was a guidebook for how to make it in the New World, containing sayings such as, "Early to bed, and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise."

1739 Stono Rebellion, an early slave rebellion in South Carolina. carried out in South Carolina, led by about 20 slaves from the Charleston area who tried to flee to Florida. The rebels killed several plantation-owning families; all of them either died in the fighting or were executed after the rebellion was put down.

1750 Velvet fabric first manufactured in England

1754 The French & Indian War begins. It lasts until 1763. The name is confusing - this was really the final series of battles between France and England for control over eastern North America. Many Indian tribes sided with the French. The British won in the end.

1770 The torture of tarring and feathering was invented supposedly in Salem, MA

1771 Philadelphians ridiculed the use of a new device—the umbrella—to ward of sunburn. The newspapers called it “effeminate.”

1773 A man commented sadly about the new corset stay, complaining that these objects “are produced upward so high that we have scarecely

any view at all of the Ladies' Snowy Bosoms."

1775 The 1st Abolition Society was organized.

1776 Colonists declare independence. The United States is born as an independent nation.

1781 Revolutionary War ends with British surrender at Yorktown

1784 In this country, the first seed company got its start

1785 Ben Franklin invented bifocals

1786 Shay's Rebellion, a rebellion of white farmers in western Massachusetts. Farmers from western Massachusetts, burdened by debts and taxes, took up arms to block court from foreclosing on their farms. The rebellion was put down by the state government.

1788 The Constitution is ratified; George Washington elected first president

1789 First mechanical textile mill in the U.S. is built: a water-powered spinning mill in Pawtucket, RI

1792 The U.S. mail service provided three deliveries a week in winter and two in the summer from the district of Maine to Virginia

1794 Whiskey Rebellion breaks out. Farmers from western Pennsylvania rebelled against a new tax on whisky, which was their major source of income. (They grew corn, then distilled it into whisky to transport and sell.)

1795 America's first mass murderers began four years of killings in what is now Tennessee, Kentucky, Illinois, and Mississippi

1795 The first circus to appear in New York came from England.

## Sumptuary Laws

In this lesson, you are going to read about rules and regulations that were some colonists had to follow limiting their choice of clothing. These laws are sometimes referred to as “sumptuary laws.” The word “sumptuous” means lavish, magnificent, or expensive. Thus, sumptuary laws regulated the wearing of fancy clothing. In the reading you will find short quotations from the actual colonial-era laws which contain some unusual or archaic words and spellings. Don’t worry too much about these so long as you understand the overall point of each paragraph.

### Before You Read:

1. In a paragraph, discuss any rules you have ever had to abide by concerning how you dress. For example, have you ever attended a school that requires uniforms? Have you ever worked at a job where there was a dress code, formal or informal? Does your mom lay down certain rules for clothes that you can’t wear? And finally, yourself – do you have a personal guideline for how you dress? Describe any of these that apply to you.

Then, explain the reasons you think lay behind any of these rules or guidelines. In other words, if your school had a required uniform, why? What did the school hope uniforms would accomplish? If your job had a dress code, what do you think was the reason behind it?

2. Brainstorm about why you think a government might try to limit its citizens’ ability to wear fancy clothing. List as many reasons as you can. Then, as you read, you can see if these match any of the reasons discussed in the selection.

### Reading: from “Dress of the Colonists”

In 1634 the Massachusetts General Court passed restricting sumptuary

laws. These laws forbade the purchase of woolen, silk, or linen garments, with silver, gold, silk, or thread lace on them. Two years later a narrow binding of lace was permitted on linen garments. The colonists were ordered not to make or buy any slashed clothes, except those with one slash in each sleeve and another slash in the back. "Cut works, imbroidd or needle or capps bands & rayles," and gold or silver girdles, hat-bands, belts, ruffs, and beaver hats were forbidden. Liberty was thriftily given, however, to the colonists to wear out any garments they chanced to have unless in the form of inordinately slashed apparel, immoderate great sleeves and rails, and long wings, which could not possibly be endured.

In 1639 men's attire was approached and scanned, and "immoderate great breeches" were tabooed; also broad shoulder-bands, double ruffles and capes, and silk roses, which latter adornment were worn on the shoes.

In 1651 the Court again expressed its "utter detestation that men and women of meane condition, education, and calling, should take upon them the garbe of gentlemen by wearinge of gold or silver lace, or buttons or poynts at their knees, or walke in great boots, or women of the same ranke to wear silke or tiffany hoods or scarfs."

Many persons were "presented" under this law, men boot-wearers as well as women hood-wearers. In Salem, in 1652, a man was presented for "excess in bootes, ribonds, Gould and silver lace."

In Newbury, in 1653, two women were brought up for wearing silk hoods and scarfs, but they were discharged on proof that their husbands were worth L 200 each. In Northampton, in the year 1676, a wholesale attempt was made by the magistrates to abolish "wicked apparell." Thirty-eight women of the Connecticut valley were presented at one time for various degrees of finery, and as of too small estate to wear silk. A young girl named Hannah Lyman was presented for "wearing silk in a fflaunting manner, in an offensive way and garb not only before but when she stood presented." Thirty young men were also presented for silk-wearing, long hair, and other extravagances. The calm flaunting of her silk in the very eyes of the Court by sixteen-year-old Hannah was premonitory of the waning power of the

magistrates, for similar prosecutions at a later date were quashed. . . .

Virginia fussed a little over “excess in cloathes.” Sir Francis Wyatt was enjoined not to permit any but the Council and the heads of Hundreds to wear gold on their clothes, or to wear silk till they made it – which was intended more to encourage silk-making than to discourage silk-wearing. And it provided that unmarried men should be assessed according to their apparel, and married men according to that of their family. In 1660 Virginia colonists were ordered to import no “silke stufte in garments or in peeeces except for whoods and scarfs, nor silver or gold lace, nor ribbands wrought with gold or silver in them.”

The ministers did not fail in their duty in attempting to march with the magistrates in the restriction and simplification of dress. They preached often against “intolerable pride in clothes and hair.” Even when the Pilgrims were in Holland the preachers had been deeply disturbed over the dress of their minister’s wife, Madam Johnson, who wore “lawn coives” and busks and a velvet hood, and “whalebones in her petticoat bodice,” and worst of all, “a topish hat.” One of the earliest interferences of Roger Williams was when he instructed the women of Salem parish always to wear veils in public. But John Cotton preached to them the next Sunday, and he proved to the dames and goodwives that veils were a sign and symbol of undue subjection to their husbands, and Salem women soon proved their rights by coming barefaced to meeting.

Mr. Davenport preached about men’s head-gear, that men must take off their hats, and stand up at the announcement of the text. . . .

## After You Read:

1. Quotation Hunt: For each of the following, find and copy a sentence or phrase from the reading that applies. There may be more than one possible quotation for some.

Provide a quotation that:

- (1) Shows that if you had enough money, you were permitted to wear fancy clothing.
- (2) Shows that some of the colonists produced silk themselves.
- (3) Shows that colonists disagreed about women's roles in relation to men.
- (4) Shows that colonial men sometimes wore very decorative shoes.
- (5) Shows that one defendant wore the offending clothes into court.

2. Why did some of the colonies pass sumptuary laws restricting fancy clothing? Some might say that these laws were mainly passed for moral and religious reasons. Others might argue that the main purpose of the laws was to distinguish the wealthy from the poor. Write a paragraph in which you state and explain which of these two explanations makes the most sense, using evidence from the reading.

## A Midwife's Tale

### Before Reading

In this lesson, you will read a bit of the diary of Martha Ballard. Martha lived in rural Hallowell, Maine in the late 1700's. In addition to carrying out all of the normal household duties of a woman of her time, Martha had a special profession: midwife. Her diary, which historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich has recently edited and published, reveals that she delivered 816 babies between 1785 and 1812. She was also called in by families along her stretch of the Kennebec River to treat a whole range of illnesses.

Martha's diary contains a great deal of information not only about her medical activities, but also about all aspects of daily life in her place and time. Here, you will read a few passages from her diary where she mentions making and trading textiles. Unfortunately, permission to reprint historian Ulrich's commentary was denied by the publisher. You can check out her book: *Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990* or refer to the print version of this curriculum for the excerpt. The After Reading activities except for #4 of the Multiple Choice section could still be used.

An excellent movie based on Martha Ballard's diary, *A Midwife's Tale*, is now available through PBS. If possible, arrange to see it on video.

Beware: You will find many strange and inconsistent spellings of words in Martha's diary. Try sounding words out if you're not sure what she's trying to say.

## Reading: Notes on Life in Hallowell, ME in 1788

[September 3, 1788] I have been at home.

Clear. I have been at home. Old Mr Smily here. Mrs Savage warpt a piece here.

[Sept. 5] Death of Doctor Colmans infant. I was there. Dolly finisht her web 4 1/2 yds. Beriah Ingerham had a son born.

Clear. I went to Doct Colmans at 1 hour pm. His Child Expird at 4. I put on the grave Cloaths and tarried till 7. Colo North and Lady there. I found Mrs Williams & Mrs Harris here at my return. I sett up till very late to finish Hannahs stockins.

[Sept. 9] Town Meeting. I have been at home. Mrs Savage here.

Clear day. Thee Town Mett to hear Reverend Mr Fosters Proposals but did not except them. Dolly & Parthena went to see Mrs Hamlin. Mrs Savage here. Shee has spun 40 double skeins for me since April 15th and had 2 Bushl of ashes & some phisic for James, & Dolly wove her 7 yds of Diaper. I let her have 1 skein of lining warp. The whole is 6/ X.

[Sept. 10] I was at Wido Willimss. Voce here. Clarisa Barton is 18 years old this Day.

Clear. Mr Voce & Parmer Laying Shingles on our house. We Brewed. I went to see wido Williams. Shee is Better. Dolly winding the warp for Check.

[Sept. 11] I have been at home. Cyrus is 32 years old.

Cloudy part of the day. Cyrus is gone to Gardners mill. He is 32 years old this day. I have been at home. Dolly warpt a piece for Mrs Pollard of 39 yards.

[Sept. 12] At home.

Clear. Dolly warpt & drawd in a piece for Check. Laid 45 yds. I have been at home knitting. Mrs Harris here at Eving.

[Sept. 13] Mr Voce & son here shingleing the house. I have been at wido Williamss

Clear & pleasant. We spread the diaper out for whitening.

## After You Read

### Writing Activity

Today, most families no longer work together to produce essentials such as food and clothing. It is typical for most adults to work outside the home, and for each family member who works outside the home to work in a separate place for a different employer. So, today there is a lot of talk about “work/family conflicts.” People find it hard to meet the demands of both their jobs and their families. They fear that they are not spending enough time with their children, or that if they stay home to tend a sick child their boss at work will be displeased. Obviously, in Martha Ballard’s time, the “work/family conflicts” that might have happened would have been of a very different nature. Imagine yourself as one of Martha Ballard’s daughters, Hannah and Dolly. Weave a story about a conflict that you are finding yourself in—a conflict that in some way has to do with both your work producing textiles and your family relationships. Tell your story with detail and emotion.

### Multiple Choice Practice

1. The tone of Martha Ballard’s journal entries is best described as:
  - (1) dramatic and suspenseful
  - (2) self-pitying and complaining
  - (3) factual and objective
  - (4) depressing and monotonous
  - (5) gruesome and bloody
  
2. The purpose of Martha Ballard’s journal was probably
  - (1) to give her daughters a model for how to spend their time as housewives.
  - (2) to give her grandchildren and great-grandchildren a record of their family history.
  - (3) to give her husband a record of her activities should he be suspicious
  - (4) to prompt her own memory of events as the years went by
  - (5) to keep track of patterns in the weather and in births to help her midwife practice.

3. The details in these entries that characterize the time as the late 1700's as opposed to the late 1800's and 1900's are all *except*

- (1) the irregular spellings
- (2) the focus on weaving in the home
- (3) the fact that women give birth at home with the help of a mid-wife
- (4) the fact that there are town meetings
- (5) most of life happens at home rather than in the workplace

4. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's thesis seems to be that "the production of cloth wove a social web." Which of the following statements does not support her thesis.

- (1) Martha Ballard grew her own flax, but she got wool and cotton by trading with her neighbors.
- (2) Martha Ballard's two daughters did gardening and animal care while Martha focused on weaving.
- (3) Martha Ballard relied on neighbors to teach her daughters finer points in weaving.
- (4) Martha Ballard relied on neighbors to lend her weaving tools she didn't have.
- (5) The cloth or web produced could be given away as well as used in the home.

