

A Brief Look at Colonial Attire.

Description



The Colonial period had a particular style of dress that determined the types of garments worn. Styles would vary depending on the occasions and

temperatures. Each Colonial citizen dressed according to their occupation, economic power, and social status. This is similar to other historical periods, in which your status was apparent through the appearance and style of clothing you wore.

Those with greater wealth could afford more luxurious, imported materials such as satins, silks, and brocades. Colonists with less money to spare would instead use homespun linen, cotton, or wool cloths. These farming families represent a more common standard of living in the Colonial period.

There were also more customs dictating the appropriate type of dress for different occasions. The difference between formal and casual dress was much more significant than it is in most cases today.

Fashion trends existed during the Colonial period; and relied heavily upon styles brought back from Europe, and more specially London. Still in the midst of uniting their new country, most Colonists still sought to dress in the most up-to-date styles found in the European fashion capitals.

Today, we will explore the fashion of Colonial America. It is always interesting to discover more about the past and see how remarkably different we live today (or in this case, dress!). This is a great, quick read if you are interested in sewing or assembling your our Colonial outfit to dress up in too!

Casual Menswear:



Everyday clothing had the same basic components of formal wear but were made of less elegant materials. Colonial wear for men, whether casual or formal, consisted of breeches, a shirt, a waistcoat and coat.

Men would wear a knee-length coat with fitted shoulders and narrow wrists over a high-collared shirt. A cravat, the forerunner to the modern necktie or bow tie, was tied around the neck. Breeches ended at the knee and were worn with stockings.

Informal clothing was worn by all men, regardless of their status, in order to cope with the hot summer temperatures. Linen and cotton were the fabrics of choice because of their light, airy nature. These easy to launder fabrics were perfect for everyday garments, such as stockings.



Casual unlined coats and light waistcoats were also made of cotton and linen. These were worn during the hot summer days instead of formal suits. Around the house or for casual meetings, a banyan or an informal robe was sometime worn. Although garments were made of lighter fabrics, men would still perspire a good deal. To hide any signs of perspiration, men would change their waistcoats during summer days.

Heads were typically covered in the colonial period with a hat or covering of some sort. A tricorn hat was common to wear during the day to protect their heads from the scorching sun.

Formal Menswear:



In the Colonial period, formal occasions required men to dress in suits. These suits were made of woolen broadcloth or silk, rather than breathable linen or cotton. They were embellished with accents such as ornate buttons.

Waistcoats were standard in formal attire as well. Formal menswear featured more luxurious styles that were not well-suited for everyday casual wear. These included striped breeches made of velvet, white blouses, and white stockings. These styles would have been uncomfortable in the heat, difficult to clean, and hard to maintain throughout the day.

No proper colonial man would dare forget to put on his powdered wig to complete his ensemble. After that, the only thing left to put on were your leather shoes that were, of course, gleaming with freshly polished metal buckles. Occasionally, a white linen stock was worn, tucked under the chin and fastened behind the neck.

Upper class gentlemen would order custom-tailored suits from London to keep up with the latest fashions. In this way, Colonists still look to Europe for

style trends when trying to dress sharp. â??Suits in dittoâ?• were popular imported suits that had matching pieces. Men would wear these matching breeches and coat with an appropriate shirt and waistcoat.

Casual Clothing for Women:



During the Colonial times, casual attire for women were known as bed gowns. Bed gowns were worn daily and were made of loose fabric. The gowns were practical and comfortable enough for women to wear while performing their numerous household chores.

The three-quarter length sleeves and looseness of the gowns allowed a significant amount of movement. A petticoat, and occasionally a stay (or corset), were worn underneath the gowns. Petticoats were often hooped, or incorporated a round framework, to create a fuller dress.New trends in

casual attire, such as shortening garments to end at the ankles, eventually emerged by the 1780s. This was particularly advantageous in allowing more freedom of movement.



The main component of a day dress was a shift, or a garment shaped similarly to a plain long nightgown. This was made of linen or cotton so it was breathable and easy to wash. The shift was worn to sleep as a nightdress and stayed on during the day.

A pocket, similar to an apron, was tied around the waist over the shift. The pocket was fairly large, hanging down to the mid-calf or lower, and could be used to hold a range of items. Working class women would wear a linen apron, and those who could afford it had an apron made of lace.

A short gown was worn over the petticoat and was usually a contrasting color.. These had very long sleeves, buttoned or fastened in the front, and

extended down to the mid-thigh. A large handkerchief, folded into a triangle, wrapped around the neck and was worn as a shawl.

The status of a woman could be revealed through many things, including her shoes and hat. Working women wore leather tie-up shoes, whereas wealthier women wore cloth-covered shoes. Working women wore straw hats instead of the more costly fabric hats with embroidery worn by higher-income women.

Formal Clothing for Women:



Formal gowns were worn by colonial women to special occasions, such as a ball. Gowns were much more elaborately designed and crafted than casual

attire. They were typically made of silk, featuring crisp ruffles and frills along the bottom of the gown and around the elbows.

A bodice was layered over a corset for formal gowns. The corsets, known as a stay, were constructed of boning. The skirt was made of several yards of fabric which were draped and layered. The skirt was often cut to expose the bottom of the lighter skirt, called a petticoat, underneath.

Clothing Worn by Slaves:



Slaves made up a good portion of the Colonial population, and it is interesting to note the differences in their daily attire. Their arduous labor mostly consisted of working in the field and performing household tasks.

The main priority with slave clothing was for it be functional and practical for work. The garments were made from inexpensive fabrics that were imported specifically for outfitting slaves.Men wore a linen shirt paired with woolen hose and a knitted cap. Women wore things such as calico cloaks and aprons.

Plantation owners expected slaves to dress alike while working all day. To express their individuality, slaves would personalize their clothing by sewing decorative patches of fabric to their garments. Women would wear their hair in elaborate styles and wrap handkerchiefs around their head as head wraps.

Colonial plantation owners expected all slaves, whose days consisted of working in the field and performing household tasks, to dress alike. A male slaveâ??s clothing consisted of a linen shirt, woolen hose and a knitted cap. These garments were constructed from inexpensive imported fabrics purchased specifically for outfitting slaves.

Womenâ??s attire would include calico cloaks and aprons. Both male and female slaves attempted to personalize their clothing by wearing their hair in elaborate styles, using kerchiefs for head wraps and sewing decorative fabric patches to their garments.

Military Attire:



The particular style of Colonial military uniforms varied depending on the allegiance of the wearer. Those who pledged their loyalty to the British were called the Red Coats, because of the identifying red coat they wore. This ensemble also included the usual breeches, waistcoat, and tricorner hat. A lace jabot was worn around the neck and cuffs were worn around the wrists. Black spatterdashes covered the legs, protecting them from water and mud stains.



Other colonial soldiers did not wear the red coats, instead wearing fairly common everyday garments. They wore a felt-cocked hat, a black leather (or horsehair) neckstock and gaiters with matching knee straps. The gaiters served a similar function to spatterdashes and were worn over the outer pants leg and shoes.

Childrenâ??s Clothing:



Clothing for children were very restrictive earlier in the colonial period. Girls wore gowns, hoops, aprons, and a stomacher, just like adult women. Young boys were also required to wear stays because parents believed it would promote better posture. Even babies were tightly swaddled.



Eventually, around the mid-1700s, children were able to dress more freely. Frocks became the common garments worn by both boys and girls. These little dresses with sashes were worn by young boys until the transitioned into pants between the ages of 3 and 7.

That concludes our brief examination of Colonial clothing. There is so much more to cover, but hopefully this gives you a basic understanding of Colonial fashion. We know a lot of readers love re-enactment; so share some of your knowledge with us! Leave us a comment or visit our Facebook page to interact with others.

CATEGORY

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