

# Assembling a "Best Bet" Wardrobe

© Elizabeth Stewart Clark 2010.

This article may be copied for personal, non-profit, and educational use. For permission for other uses, please contact us at [www.elizabethstewartclark.com](http://www.elizabethstewartclark.com).

While we all value highly our "inner selves" and disdain those who judge solely based upon the outward appearance, Living History scenarios are the one time that clothes can make or break the impression. An accurately dressed person can better convey a sense of "time travel" for other participants and for the public.

Luckily, the body of available knowledge of mid-century dress is ever expanding. This means there's always more to learn! However, taking a slow, common sense approach to assembling your historic wardrobe will ensure that you can adapt as new information is brought to light, and present an accurately dressed impression now.

Your historic wardrobe is a major investment. This is perhaps the best argument I can think of for doing things well the first time. Any budget, but especially a slim budget, cringes at the thought of replacing an entire wardrobe each year or two. This approach minimizes the replacement factor, and maximizes the potential re-sale value of your wardrobe, should you change sizes, tastes, or hobbies.

## Consider: Age

"Mutton tricked out as Lamb" can unfortunately be applied to many in the Living History world. You should endeavor to act and dress your age, with only minimal consideration given to how old you "feel". Some reenactors resort to the young fashion fads, rather than the conservative staples outlined here; this practice presents a false picture of history, and is to be avoided.

"Fashion" did not emerge, whole and complete, in 1860! Being versed in the fashions popular when you would have been a young woman, from the 1830's through the 1860's, will open up the doors to a whole new world of dress options. Not every person should copy Godey's fashion plates; not every person will be 100% up-to-date. The careful blend of "current" and "past" styles adds depth to the hobby.

## Consider: Impression

The wife of a prominent New York or Philadelphia lawyer will not dress the same way as a rural Southern farm wife. Accurate clothing is appropriate to your financial situation, activities, location, and background.

You may be unsure of the exact impression you wish to pursue when you first get into Living History. Select conservative styles appropriate for an average, working-class woman of moderate means. As you research your impression further, you'll refine your wardrobe as needed.

## Consider: Involvement

Some "do" Living History as a paying career; others volunteer at historic sites on a weekly basis; still others participate in several historic events throughout the year, while some attend only one or two functions over the course of several years. Your wardrobe needs depend on your involvement. Those who present indoors will have no problem adding fine silks; those who present primarily outdoors will need similarly durable fabrics. One complete set of clothing may be adequate for the lady who attends one or two days a season; more active participants will need more sets of clothing to keep pace with their roles.

Regardless of one's impression and level of involvement, there are certain standards that hold sway, and some things to be avoided.

### Run Away, Run Away

Whether you are constructing your own clothing, purchasing things from a merchant, or commissioning custom garments from a dressmaker, here are things to avoid on your road to a No-Farb wardrobe:

Anything with *serged seams*, *zig-zagging*, *zippers*, *snaps*, or *Velcro*.

*Synthetic fabrics* (there are very few exceptions to this). You will be much more comfortable in natural fibers, anyway. Synthetics do not breathe the way natural fibers do, and rapidly cause overheating when you're fully dressed.

Patterns found in the *Halloween section* of the pattern book. Stick with good quality historic patterns—there are very few exceptions to this.

*Anything Scarlett O'Hara wore*, though her costumes are preferable to ANY of the costuming on "The North & South"—these are Hollywood History, not Actual History. If you *must* use *Gone With The Wind* as a resource, examine Melanie's garments, with all the skirt widths reduced.

*The Ubiquitous, Iniquitous White Blouse*: this is a reenactorism, and is most often seen with a quilting calico skirt and some sort of "Zouave" jacket, with the blouse pooched over the waistband of the skirt. While there are instances of women wearing a white bodice with a contrasting skirt, these garments are constructed and worn very differently from the "make-do" outfit worn widely (and inaccurately) in the reenacting world.

*"Zouave" or "Garibaldi" outfits*: ditto the Ubiquitous, Iniquitous White Blouse... these garments are very specific designs, and wholly unsuited for most impressions. While you may



Find more free articles and projects in the Compendium at [www.thesewingacademy.com](http://www.thesewingacademy.com)  
Email for "tech support" with your historic clothing projects or research questions, or visit us on-line at [www.thesewingacademy.org](http://www.thesewingacademy.org).

eventually find that they are warranted for your age, impression, and particular event, they are best reserved for later, rather than the beginning wardrobe.

**Low or "ballgown" necklines:** while you may at some point add a high fashion evening gown, one of the most common mistakes women make with their historic wardrobe is to add a "ballgown" before they even have adequate underclothes!

**Most things sold at "sutlers":** first off, a "sulter" is a civilian vendor of goods to the military, so a woman doesn't shop there, and they don't carry women's dresses. (This is a whole 'nother article!) Get in the habit of asking for documentation. If the merchant is able to provide it, check up on it before purchasing. If not, avoid the item and the merchant. When more of us do this, the accuracy level of the hobby as a whole will rise.

**Nylon, polyester, or other chemical laces:** lace should always be used sparingly, and then should be selected from the fine silk and cotton laces usually imported from Europe. Period laces were available in white or black; modern nylon laces will never mimic the texture, or feel of real lace.

**Snoods:** these are seen on Sutler Row in a rainbow of colors, made of chunky rayon or polyester crochet, and are often worn as a camouflage measure for modern hair. There are better options.

**Modern glasses.** Opt for contacts or your prescription lenses in repro frames. Modern frames will destroy any historic impression.

### So, What Do You Need?

That's a fairly long list of Don'ts. The Do's are simple, and follow a step-by-step process for accurate wardrobing.

#### Step 1: Chemise

**Every Woman Needs A Chemise.** The basic chemise has an open neckline, may be adjustable with a draw cord in the neckline band, and has short cap sleeves. It is fairly full, and should fall to between thigh length and knee length. White cotton or linen are preferred. Magazines of our era illustrate highly embellished chemise yokes; very plain bands and yokes also appear on surviving garments. The purpose of a chemise is to keep body oils off your corset and outer clothes, and it will be changed daily.

#### Step 2: Support

**Every Woman Needs Support.** It's not called a Foundation Garment without reason. A correctly fitted corset or stay is basic to your historic wardrobe, and there's no sense going further if you're not willing to wear one. Neither need be a torture device. The myths regarding rib-removal for the Civil War era are just that: **MYTH.** Corsets and stays give the correct posture for the era, and provide a very stable base from which to hang the rest of your clothing. Without this, your skirts will feel oppressive and cumbersome.

The words "corset" and "stays" are used quite interchangeably in the period. They are made with firmly-woven fabric, and provide figure stabilization through a wide variety of combinations of cording, quilting, steel stays, baleen, lacings, gussets, and shaped pieces. The separating front busk is in use at this point in history.

Corsets or stays can provide everything from sports-bra-like gentle support and light shaping, to WonderBra-like maximum support and fashion shaping—and everything in between!

A comfortable corset is a well-fitted corset. It is nearly impossible to buy off the rack. It should start mid-bustline, and fit smoothly throughout. When you sit, it shouldn't rub against your lap. A sign of a good fit is a completely smooth line from the underarm to the waist. Wrinkles at the waist indicate the corset may be too long from underarm to waist, or lacking in adequate flare through the hip—that makes for an uncomfortable fit, and results in Terminal Corset Creases in your flesh.

When fully laced and drawn in, there needs to be at least 2" of "spring" or gap in the back. If you can lace your corset or stay completely closed, it is too large. There are many ways to lace a corset; my favorite is with at least two laces: one from the top to the waist, and another from the bottom to the waist. This allows me to draw in firmly just the few inches surrounding my waist, without compressing my ribs. (And yes, you *can* sing in a laced corset!)

#### Step 3: Underskirts

**Every Woman Needs Underskirts.** Underskirts (also called petticoats) are vital to the correct silhouette of the mid-Nineteenth century. The illusion of a small waist is created by dropped shoulders and wide skirts. Underskirts are simply full skirts set on a narrow waistband (one inch, finished), and hemmed at the top of the foot or ankle, for ease of movement.

Generally, you will want a shorter (mid-calf) petticoat to wear under your skirt support. This may be a bit more narrow than your other underskirts (100"-120"). You'll also want one or two underskirts above your skirt support, between 140" to 180" at the hem. More narrow, 120" widths are appropriate for active work impressions. Underskirts involve straight seams, and are a perfect project to do yourself, as any mistakes will never show! Plain white cotton is best for this garment as well.

#### Side-step: Skirt Support

**Hoops, Cages, and Alternatives Thereto** Not everyone will choose to wear a cage or hoop, due to personal preference or particular impression. Prior to the reintroduction of the cage crinoline in the mid-1850s, skirt support was provided by multiple layers of underskirts, and a wonderful creature called the corded petticoat, which has cording inserted into multiple tucks around the hem (and I do mean multiple—upwards of twenty to eighty rows of very narrow, fine cotton cording!)



If you are not using a hoop, use layered petticoats under your dress. This is far safer around any fire or open flame—keep hoops out of camps and open-hearth kitchens! Two or more layers of full-gathered petticoats give a good shape, and they actually work together to keep your skirts from twisting around your knees.

Most participants in Living History start off with a bridal hoop purchased from an event merchant. These are usually worn much too wide; adjust the width to about 90-110" for daywear, maximum! Also, be sure the lowest hoop is about 8" to 10" off the ground; this prevents tripping. You can often shorten and narrow in one step by removing a rung or two from the bottom of a bridal hoop. Your underskirts should be worn over the hoop to prevent the boning from showing through.

The round footprint of a hoop was changing during the mid-War years, moving toward the oval footprint seen post-War and during the 1870's Bustle phase. For your first outfits, use a round footprint. As skirts are set differently with truly oval cages, you would not be able to use the skirts interchangeably, or for pre-war events. (However, you *can* "fake" an oval look with a round cage through the use of bustle pads and setting skirts and petticoats with more pronounced fullness at the rear.)

Several reputable merchants offer cage crinoline kits, classes, and finished items. These should be individually made for an accurate fit.

#### Step 4: A Dress

*Every Woman Needs a Staple Dress.* While there are many different styles illustrated in period fashion plates and advertisements, the best bet when assembling your first wardrobe is to opt for conservative pieces

that convey the norm of dressing, rather than the high-fashion styles. For your first dress, look for:

- ☞ *High neckline* ("jewel" neck in modern terms), resting just at the base of the neck
- ☞ Full Bishop *sleeves*, with a cuff at the wrist, or shaped Coat sleeves (these look like they are "shaking hands" with each other, curving toward the body). Either of these works well for the 1860s; for the 1840s and 1850s, there exist a wide variety of narrow and wider bias-cut sleeves to explore.
- ☞ *Armscye dropped* over the shoulder onto the arm several inches; it should appear as though it's nearly horizontal. This is paired with a slanted shoulder seam in the bodice, beginning just below the earlobe, and slanting to the back of the arm. From the rear, this diagonal line creates the illusion of smooth, sloping shoulders; the diagonal also emphasizes the waist.
- ☞ A *bodice fitted* with smooth darts from the waist (wools or silks), or a "gathered" bodice (cottons), where the fashion fabric is finely pleated or hand-gathered to ease in the otherwise-darted fabric; the lining is often smoothly fitted.

☞ *Front closure* with hidden hooks/eyes, or closely-spaced functional buttons.

☞ The *side seam* begins just under the arm, angling back to end a few inches behind the "waist horizon" at the waist in back.

Fitted bodices (and indeed, any period bodice!) should be worn only over a supportive undergarment.

For the *skirt* of your dress, you'll want a pleated or gauged skirt whip-stitched by hand *onto* a waistband, rather than machine gathered or sewn by machine into an enclosed band. The skirt should have between 140"-180" of fabric. It may be hemmed at least 1", and as much as 3" off the floor in the front.

Skirt length should be adjusted from the waist, rather than at the floor. A skirt is essentially rectangular panels of fabric hemmed at the bottom and controlled at the waist. (Gored skirts come in during the late War years and early 1870's.) Skirts need to be a few inches longer in the back than in the front, to avoid them hiking up in the back during movement.

Look for or construct them with a deep (8-10") hem facing. This takes the abuse of wearing and can be replaced when worn, as well as giving the skirt enough weight at the hem to drape nicely.

A common "reenactorism" is a contrasting bodice and skirt. While separates were worn by some, the most common styles for the Civil War era are one-piece dresses, or matching bodice/skirt combinations. For your first outfits, you'll be best off to choose the same fabric for skirt and bodice. Do some research into reproduction prints before purchasing your fabric, if you wish to use a floral or other print. Print or patterned cotton is a good choice, and can be found quite inexpensively, but don't overlook a lightweight, solid color wool broadcloth. Cottons are easy to launder, but fade quickly in frequent sun exposure; wools hold color extremely well, and with airing and spot cleaning, require laundering less frequently (as in, once a year!)

If you are sewing for yourself, it is entirely reasonable to be able to construct your first dress of cotton for under \$50, including a good historic pattern. Subsequent dresses made on the same pattern can be made for \$25 to \$35. If you have things made for you, expect to pay at least \$150 in labor costs, with materials extra. Good work takes time, whether yours or another's.

#### Step 5: Footwear

*Every Woman Needs Footwear.* Take the time to find good reproduction leather boots. The investment will serve you well. If you must get a "make-do" pair, look for a leather ankle boot with a squared toe, very low stacked heel, leather soles, and laces, buttons, or elastic gussets. You can get fully custom, highly-accurate leather boots or shoes in the \$90-\$120 range from reputable



© Elizabeth Stewart Clark 2010.

This article may be copied for personal, non-profit, and educational use. For permission for other uses, please contact us at [www.elizabethstewartclark.com](http://www.elizabethstewartclark.com). Find more free articles and projects in the Compendium at [www.thesewingacademy.com](http://www.thesewingacademy.com) Email for "tech support" with your historic clothing projects or research questions, or visit us on-line at [www.thesewingacademy.org](http://www.thesewingacademy.org).

sellers—it can be worth the expense! More shoemakers are coming onto the scene each year, and more are willing to cater to the Progressive Citizen movement in Living History.

A safe choice in stockings are black or white cotton stockings, in a knee-length style, gartered just below or above the knee. The round "ponytail" elastic garters sold by event merchants are incorrect and uncomfortable. Several merchants make accurate reproduction garters and will provide their documentation upon request. The cost is modest, the results, wonderful!

### Step 6: Outerwear

*Every Woman Needs Wraps & a Bonnet.*

You will want some sort of wrap and head wear if you will be "going out of your home" during the Living History event.

The simplest wrap is a 60" square woolen shawl, folded to a triangle. Other good choices are paletots (pronounced pal-ih-toe) and such coat-like wraps. Capes and cloaks are next in preference; look for a smooth fit at the neck, rather than a heavily gathered garment, and a separate hood. In all wraps, look for good, lightweight wool with a smooth, firmly-woven lining.

A fabric "slat" bonnet is perfectly acceptable for most working-class impressions. Corded and quilted "utility"-type bonnets are also good options. These do not need to match your dress or other outerwear, and can be made in sheer, light fabrics for summer use, or warm fabrics for fall/winter use.

Researching and purchasing a fashion bonnet will take time. It is actually better, in my opinion, to wear nothing on your head than to wear a "Scarlett at the Barbeque" straw hat or similar make-do bonnets and hats.

### Step 7: Little Details

*Every Woman Needs the Little Details.*

Add a little white collar to your dress: white fabric (linen, cotton organdy, or plain cotton are good choices), no wider than 2", with rounded or pointed ends. It is set on a bias band, which is whipstitched to the inside neck of your bodice before wearing. The ends do not need to meet at the middle. Accent with a small brooch or a pinned-on silk ribbon "bow" at the center neck. Crocheted collars are generally inappropriate for the era, as are those in the dress fashion fabric.

White cuffs made in the same detachable fashion will add another little bit of splash to your staple dress. Collars and cuffs should be changed frequently enough to keep them fresh and clean; slovenly personal habits were often seen as a sign of a degenerate moral character in the mid-century.

A full apron, made of white for fine, clean activities, or of print fabric for regular wear, can be made with a waistband that ties or buttons in back, and should cover most of your skirts. The "Pinner" style has a bib that is secured to the front of your bodice with straight pins. Even for your first round of clothing,

consider making more than one of these handy articles; you can change them frequently to keep a fresh appearance, and they greatly extend the wearing-time of your clothing by protecting you from grime and stains.

### Step 8: Hairstyle

*Every Woman Needs a Basic Hairstyle.*

Here's where I will use broad, sweeping generalizations and kick up a stir among the general Living History community. I feel these are fair generalizations, and do not want to see an original ambrotype of your Ever-So-Great Auntie Maude with poofy bangs.

A good, basic hairstyle is parted in the center, with the front hair pulled or rolled smoothly back, and the back hair pinned into a bun or chignon at the base of the neck.

You should not wear bangs, fringes, or wisps, and certainly *must* avoid the "curled and sprayed Mall Claw" that is still seen, despite it having died out of modern fashion over a decade ago! If you plan to do Living History as a regular thing, consider growing out your bangs and hair to a length that will allow for a good period "do". If you will be participating only a few times, confine and blend your bangs into the rest of your hair as best you can.

Taking the trouble to develop a good hairstyle can do wonders for your overall impression. It really does make a difference!

With this first round complete, you are accurately and conservatively dressed in basic daywear for the mid-Nineteenth Century. You now enter the

### Expansion Phase

#### Expand 1: Corset (I Mean It)

If you haven't purchased or made one by this point, you might as well not make any more clothing. Go back and re-read the first section until you are penitent and converted.

#### Expand 2: More Undies

You will want multiple sets of chemises and drawers. Drawers are still an optional garment during the War years, but you will be very comfortable in them, and can be dressed completely appropriately from the skin out.

Plan for one set of undergarments for each day of your longest Living History event, with one extra set just in case.

Accurate drawers have an open crotch seam. While this may seem "racy" to our modern sensibilities, you will appreciate the convenience when attempting to use the facilities wearing a full complement of historic clothing! In reality, the back of the drawers are overlapped quite a bit and provide good coverage. Drawers are hemmed from just below the knee to upper calf, and can be accented with tucks, whitework, and hand embroi-



© Elizabeth Stewart Clark 2010.

This article may be copied for personal, non-profit, and educational use. For permission for other uses, please contact us at [www.elizabethstewartclark.com](http://www.elizabethstewartclark.com). Find more free articles and projects in the Compendium at [www.thesewingacademy.com](http://www.thesewingacademy.com) Email for "tech support" with your historic clothing projects or research questions, or visit us on-line at [www.thesewingacademy.org](http://www.thesewingacademy.org).

dery. The very long or extremely full, highly decorated "pantalets" and "bloomers" belong to earlier and later in the century.

White cotton or fine linen is very appropriate for these undergarments. If there are several adult females in the same household, you will want to embroider or use indelible ink to add your initials or other identifying mark in each, for ease in laundry sorting.

### Expand 3: More Dresses

You've now had a chance to do some research into fabrics and styles you particularly like. Add two or three new dresses, varying trims, sleeve styles, and other details.

### Side-step: Accessories

Additional cuffs and collar sets, reticules, fans, sewing workboxes, and other accessories particular to your chosen impression can be added once you have the basics provided. This also gives you the

time you need to find the best reproduction items when necessary. It is always preferable to use an accurate reproduction than to use an original item!

### Expand 4: Headwear

Add a good fashion bonnet, the staple head fashion of the War Years. Hats should be reserved for post-War events and the very young and trendy. You might also add a warm or water-repellent

hood, an umbrella, a parasol, or other weather-related accessories that are accurate for your impression.

### Expand 5: Nightwear

Personally, I place nightclothes above many of the Expansion Phase garments. A long, full nightgown and warm nightcap reduce the amount of modern clothing you'll need to carry, and will preserve the "time travel" aspect of the hobby very well. White cotton or white flannel work for these garments. The sleeping cap holds your body heat very well, and also keeps your hair oils off your pillow and face.

### Fashion & Perfection

Once you have a decent wardrobe of staples, and you've had the chance to research what sorts of "fashion" ensembles are appropriate for your impression and tastes.

If you are copying a plate from Godey's, Peterson's or Demorest's, you are likely constructing a higher-fashion garment. While some argue that Godey's and other ladies publications can be compared directly to "Glamour" and "Cosmo" today, I do not feel this is the best comparison. I prefer comparing them to "Woman's Day" and "Family Circle", articles with some fashion, but lots of other content.

An "average" woman may or may not have had occasion to construct the lovely styles in her magazines. You do... within reason! Keep in mind that there were subtle fashion "rules" well-known to women of the period, but new to us. For instance, while it might make sense to think of duplicating a high fashion silk ensemble in inexpensive cotton (to suit the budget), a period woman would not make that substitution, knowing it would mark her as declass  and decidedly out of fashion. Always consider your age, impression, and level of involvement when adding garments to your historic wardrobe.

Many women make the Ballgown Mistake. Yes, ballgowns are the "glam" portion of the era. But is a good reproduction ballgown really what you need to be beautifully dressed at most Living History events? And, unfortunately, bad "ballgowns" are more common than good in many areas. What does the conservative, budget and accuracy minded woman look toward instead?

Dances and parties are the perfect place to show off a beautiful reproduction of a "high fashion" style; something with a delicious trim, made in whispery silk taffeta, with open sleeves, decorated undersleeves, a finely worked collar, and delicate combs in the hair. Your "best dress" can be worn to church, teas, fundraisers, historic homes, dances, balls, parties, and other formal events—a much more useful garment than a ballgown.

The choice of which fashion ensembles you will incorporate is always up to you; with good research, good taste, and good planning, you'll make the best choice.

### Final Thoughts

The presentation of history through living interpreters is a wonderful hobby! We owe it to ourselves, and to those who will take our presentation to heart, to do everything we can in portraying accurately the lives of our mid-century sisters, from our bonnets, right down to our chemises!

### *When Money Is Tight, Do It Right!*

You can't afford to spend on "make-do" and then replace it all later!



© Elizabeth Stewart Clark 2010.

This article may be copied for personal, non-profit, and educational use. For permission for other uses, please contact us at [www.elizabethstewartclark.com](http://www.elizabethstewartclark.com). Find more free articles and projects in the Compendium at [www.thesewingacademy.com](http://www.thesewingacademy.com) Email for "tech support" with your historic clothing projects or research questions, or visit us on-line at [www.thesewingacademy.org](http://www.thesewingacademy.org).