

Dressing Infants

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When a baby is added to the living history family, you add a whole new wardrobe dimension. It's quite easy to dress your baby accurately for historic settings without sacrificing attention to detail, or Baby's comfort.

You will find patterns for baby items in primary resources, such as magazines and home economy books published during the mid-19th century. *The Sewing Academy: Historic Moments* pattern line from Elizabeth Stewart Clark & Company is one option in published patterns, with many style variations for infants.

Whichever route you take for patterns, keep in mind these guidelines:

- Use 100% natural fibers in all items.
- Suit the baby's clothing to his temperament and the family's economic level.
- Make more undergarments and protective clothing than any other item.
- Plan for one set of "spare" items, in case of emergency (yours, or someone else's!)
- Consider your climate and weather needs.
- Take your time and do things well, so they'll last through more than one baby (and have good re-sale value when you're done.)

From the skin out, the newborn of the mid-19th century wears a belly band or roller (to support the umbilicus), an undershirt, a stay (gives a place to fasten other undergarments), a napkin, possibly a woolen pilcher or soaker, petticoats, a gown (in many different styles), stockings, soft shoes, pinafores, and a cap. If the weather is cool, a warm hood and saccue might also be worn, along with warm wool leggings.

To translate this into modern terms for recreation, you will want to have the following things on hand for your baby.

What Does Baby Wear?

The Belly Band

Most modern newborns won't need the support of a belly band, but in cold weather, they do add a layer of warm right around the middle. These should be made of a long piece of soft cotton or wool flannel, about 6" wide, and wrapped around the baby's torso. Strategic ties fasten it without pins. It is wrapped firmly, but not tight.

You may choose to skip this layer without compromising Baby's safety or period look. In the mid-century, it seems to have been optional after the umbilicus was fully healed.

The Shirt

The shirt is worn next closest to the skin, and serves to insulate Baby and absorb perspiration.

"First" shirts are often made to open all the way down the front, as with modern newborn undershirts.

Plain, smooth white cotton should be used for baby shirts, and they should be made in quantity. Seam finishes are very important; delicate flat-felled seams, or lightly overcast plain seams, will cause the least irritation to Baby's skin.

The cut of the neckline is generous, the sleeves short and unrestricting. If it opens fully, it may or may not have fabric tapes to close the shirt; if there is no closure, it is simply overlapped across the chest.

This shirt may also be made in the form of a combination garment, which combines the shirt with a built-on petticoat. With this arrangement, the layers do not shift out of place, and the wide neckline and waist are snugged up with a drawstring to give multi-sizing as Baby grows. For most mothers, this is a convenient article of dress.

Stays

Stays are little more than a band with shoulder straps, serving as a place to fix buttons, to which petticoats are fastened round the waist.

With the use of a pettichemise combination garment, there is no real need for stays; my research does not show that stays were universally used for infants, though they are common.

Napkin & Pilcher

The diaper pin as we know it was in the process of invention during the 50s and 60s, and wouldn't be used on a regular basis for infant diapers for several more years.

Instead, if diapers were pinned, they were pinned with steel straight pins, the same sort used in sewing. This was a less convenient method of fastening a diaper than the common method of constructing diapers with strategic tapes, tying the diaper closed.

The diaper is further held in place with woolen soaker pants; some grandparents might remember soakers from before World War II, and they are available again, from modern "natural baby" suppliers. These provide a wetness barrier, and help confine any leaks. (You can also use cloth diapers without a soaker, but you'll need quite a few fresh petticoats and gowns.)

Many modern moms don't wish to give up disposable diapers during events. They do make certain aspects of life easier. If you will use them, you'll need some way to hide them, which leads us to:

Drawers

In the mid-19th century, infant drawers for the diaper crowd were often little more than



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two tubes of fabric, tied around the chubby little thighs. This allows easy access to the diaper for changes, and keeps the draft off little legs.

In recreating this, an accommodation can be found for modern diapers: making drawers in a similar style to the “after toilet training” drawers hides the modern diaper, and preserves the look of period drawers from the thighs down.

Infant drawers are usually hemmed between the knee and calf, and if they are embellished, it is typically with small, functional growth tucks at the hems.

Petticoats

Petticoats insulate Baby from the world, and the world from Baby (after all, soaker pants are not 100% waterproof.) They are most often made in white cotton, and can be hemmed very long (covering the feet for newborns), or as short as the knee for mobile babies.

If a mother needs to make only one set of petticoats, it is best to hem them to the newborn’s feet; the excess length is easily taken up in a tuck above the hem when Baby begins to creep. Typically, you will be well-supplied with two or three petticoats; these can be worn more than one day in most cases.

As with drawers, petticoats are most often trimmed simply. Any embellishments need to withstand heavy laundering, meaning most lace is out.

Gowns

There are dozens of different baby styles to try! Combinations of jewel and open necklines, yokes, smooth and full bodices, short or long sleeves, fabrics, and embellishments lead to almost unending variety in infant gowns. An examination of hundreds of photographic images and extant garments seems to show no “absolute” style—regardless of “advice” I’ve heard stating that “only boat neck, short sleeve dresses are worn.” While this style does prove popular, it is not an absolute.

White cotton can be a very practical gown color for first infancy, when the gowns are hemmed to cover Baby’s feet. These little dresses are subject to quite a lot of drool, spit-up, and other goo, and will need heavy laundering; prints will fade very quickly, but whites can be restored to white in most cases.

Babies are “shortened” between 4 and 8 months, when they begin to eat occasional solid foods, and creep about. At this point, colors and patterned fabrics become very practical, along with a wide assortment of pinafores and protective aprons. The patterns of the cloth hide the new sorts of smudge Baby will find to play in.

All infant gown styles are unisex; there is no differentiation in clothing until after toilet training. For modern recreation with a stubborn Daddy, dress boys in plaids and checks, in manly colors, and set all fullness in pleats for a more tailored look.

Pinafores

Pinafores are a vital protective garment; you can choose to make these simple or decorative, but they should be easily washable in

every case. Pinafores should be easy to don and remove, so they can be changed for a fresh one as needed; they are easier to rinse out at an event than is a full gown. Again, prints and patterned fabric are practical for many, as are white cotton pinafores.

Stockings & Shoes

Cotton and wool stocking, reaching to at least the knee, protect Baby’s legs from drafts, and absorb perspiration. White is again a practical color, though there was a fad for horizontally striped children’s stockings as well.

You will be able to find basic stockings that will serve well; even the “ankle sock” varieties, worn pull up rather than folded over, give a good finished appearance.

Newborns will need shoes only for decoration and warmth; older babies will need leather or cloth shoes or boots with a sole to facilitate walking. Infancy is one of the few times when finding a good-looking shoe is relatively simple! Most shoe lines have a “Mary Jane” style shoe, appropriate for boys or girls.

Outerwear

When dressing Baby, think in layers. Dressing in all the appropriate layers means you have things you can remove if the weather turns hot, and layers to add, such as a *jacket* or *sacque coat*, if things turn cool.

Jackets for infants need to be cut generously, and made in light fabrics (such as tropical-weight wool flannel) that will work in the small scale of the garment. There is some leeway in color, as jackets will not be washed frequently, and these little garments are often embellished with appliqué, braidwork, embroidery, or other fanciful things.

Cotton *caps*, cut very plainly and worn snuggled to the head with strings in the hems (rather than being solely dependent on an under-the-chin tie) are common for newborns, to keep the draft off of bald heads and delicate ears. Usually these are left off once Baby has hair—which is a sensible move, as by that point, Baby will rarely consent to leave a cap on his head.

Ornamental caps are also used by both sexes, in delicate white fabric with everything from a bit of embroidery, to ornate whitework flounces. Also worn are warm quilted hoods with long bavolets (curtains), used in cold or inclement weather. As with *sacques*, warm hoods are an ideal canvas for personal creativity.

If Mother plans an extra woolen *shawl*, it can be used as a warm wrap for any child, and often for a blanket during sleep, or a mat during play, as well. It is a very practical item to add!

Dressing your baby in period style may seem daunting at first, but take it one garment at a time, and the system makes a great deal of sense. You’ll have a lot of fun honing sewing skills as you make the needed items, and even more fun receiving the compliments about your adorable baby.

