

What's Wrong with Merchant Row?

© 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.

What's Wrong with Merchant Row?

Ask most progressively-minded reenactors, and you'll hear a gasp of shock, and a quick "Everything!" If you're new to reenacting, or to the Progressive mindset, this answer isn't enough. "Everything" is a large generalization, and most generalizations are false; the answer also doesn't provide any reason, documentation, or other information to tell you *why* things on Merchant Row are incorrect.

The full answer is, of course, that many things sold on Merchant Row are incorrect for a good period impression. There is little sold that will be truly useful. Knowing *why* these things are correct or incorrect for the period will help you avoid poor purchases yourself, and also give a better answer than "Everything."

One Size Fits None

Clothing for women and children in the mid-19th century was most often made privately (at home, or by a professional), and for a specific body. The styles were often highly fitted, meaning there is no one standard "size 10."

This makes it very difficult for "ready to wear" merchants. It is impossible to anticipate every figure variation, personal preference in fabrics and colors, or impression needs. And yet, merchants want to carry things for women—who often have a good deal of spare time (and credit cards) available at the average "battle & ball" reenactment weekend.

This has led to the rise of very atypical styles, such as the wide variety of "Garibaldi" blouses (not bodices), cotton calico drawstring skirts, "Triangle Things" (wrongly marketed as "fichus") and cotton calico "Zouave" jackets, made in very general sizes. The false assumption is that these items are somewhat historically inspired, don't require a corset to be worn, and can be made cheaply, therefore these are a good alternative to actual period styles.

Unfortunately, the outfits are largely useless to the reenactor with a Progressive attitude. The construction and sizing is not up to a period standard, and the garments are not worn over the appropriate understructure, or in the appropriate conditions for the event. These one-size-fits-none items do not help a person look like they stepped out of the 1860s (my personal standard for repro clothing.)

Poisoned by Polyester

When you purchase off-the-rack, one common problem is that of inaccurate materials. Poly-cotton blends, acetate, nylon, and other man-mades are usually less expensive than good cottons, silks,

and wools; merchants often use the cut-rate goods to produce items more cheaply.

Man-made fibers and blends are not appropriate for living history settings, however, and can actually be dangerous to wear. None breathes the same way natural fibers do, which defeats the system of period clothing layers. Man-mades are also unsafe near open flame; when a cotton dress catches fire, it chars away to ash very quickly—when a poly-cotton dress catches fire, it melts... into your skin.

The other main difficulty with the majority of merchants regards the actual fabric designs. Rather than searching out period-appropriate prints, many items are made in whatever floral caught the buyer's eye, whether or not it is appropriate to the era in style and color combinations. If anticipating a purchase from a merchant, you'll want to have a good idea about fabric printing styles, in order to choose one that will be appropriate to the era.

Making Do

Related to the problems of one-size-fits-none is the "problem" of period hairstyles. Few women take the time or have access to someone to mentor them in creating a period hairstyle, though every woman, regardless of their modern "do" can accomplish something appropriate to the time (with the help of switches, swatches, and such.)

Rather than offer actual help in creating hairstyles (which would be difficult to do at a busy event setting), merchants typically stock "make do" items, including rayon hair snoods in a rainbow of colors. These snoods are worn over undressed hair, like a net for so much loose spaghetti, or are worn plopped over short hair, with empty net hanging down three inches below the neckline. (A correctly worn invisibly netted hair net is placed over styled hair, and usually includes some ornamental elements over the crown of the head. It is not a "working" style at all.)

The man-made materials are enough to avoid the purchase. We can say, without a doubt, that "they" did not have polyester or rayon in the 1860s!

Flawed Execution

Sometimes things are almost there, but miss a key element. One example is the crochet collar. Yes, women did wear crochet collars at the mid-century. If a merchant is carrying correctly reproduced collars, they may be suitable for purchase. However, most modern crochet collars are made of rather chunky, string-like crochet thread, and are done in ecru and off-white as well as white.



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

This is a classic case of flawed execution. Yes, crochet collars were done—but they were done in white, and with thread-weight materials, on the finest hooks, in order to mimic bobbin and “true” lace. They were very delicate, as narrow as cloth collars, and set on a cotton bias band, allowing them to be basted to the inner neckline. By missing these steps, making them off-white or other shades, and leaving them free of any binding, the collars are rendered inaccurate in execution.

Document It?

If you see something that looks atypical to your eye, or want to put some “standard” item to the test, ask the merchant for documentation. If the item is documentable, the merchant should be willing to share some research references supporting the item.

Statements such as “Everyone has been using these for years,” “These are a very popular seller,” and “I saw a picture in Citizen’s Companion” are not of themselves documentation. The last statement has the potential to be documentation—once you’ve viewed the specific article for yourself, and compared the “repro” with the research in Citizen’s Companion to see how closely they agree.

Merchants who carry accurate items are usually eager to share their information. They are excited to show how closely their reproduction items match originals, and are interested in helping customers find things that will be well-suited to their personal impressions. A merchant who is reluctant to share any information, defensive of the items, or pushy with sales, calls into question the validity of their items.

Beware: Licensing Issues

Not all who sew period or quasi-period clothing have the skills or inclination to draft their own patterns. They instead rely on the work of others, using published patterns to make ready-to-wear items. For an overview of the licensing rights issues related to historic clothing construction, see our article “*Ethical Dressmaking*.” In general, look for sellers who cheerfully disclose their licensed use of specialty historic patterns. Avoid those making multiple, generic-sized versions of Simplicity patterns.

Beware: Cookie Cutters!

Some styles, such as Period Impressions “Tea Bodice”, and the Simplicity styles, are distinctive. When these patterns are copied exactly (with only the fabric or minor trim differences) the dresses look astonishingly alike... not something period women would want.

Though the look of the day had similar elements no matter the outfit, because mass-industrialization of women’s clothing was still over a decade away, women did not expect to have a dress made exactly like their neighbors. Every woman had the chance to customize her clothing through sleeves, trims and placement, and the precise cut of the garments.

Is Anything Safe?

Happily, yes!

Merchants often carry patterns for historic clothing, reference books, and other non-clothing items; these are pleasant and helpful purchases, and buying them at events usually mean saving the shipping costs.

Past Patterns, Fig Leaf, and Homespun Patterns are three I generally recommend to home sewist for women’s things. Our Sewing Academy/Historic Moments patterns are ideal for those dressing children, as are the For The Little Ones At Home patterns by Karen Crocker.

(Beware the merchant who carries good reference books, but does not carry clothing to match the information presented there!)

Some items can be found ready-to-wear from an average event merchant. 100% cotton chemises, minimally trimmed, or basic petticoats on a set band, without poly-cotton eyelet trimming can be safe purchases; expect to pay at least \$20-40 more than it would cost to make each item at home (chemises can be made for \$2, petticoats for \$5).

White stockings and white cotton handkerchiefs are generally “safe” to buy at events. (Avoid the round elastic garters, however—these are not documentable to the period, and cause varicosities. Look for the wider, flat elastic, buckling variety.)

Slat bonnets that conform to the period shape (long straight front, rather than the cut-away “Holly Hobby” version) and are made in a period fabric, can often be a good merchant row purchase. It can be a challenge to find appropriate fabric and cut, however.

Occasionally, specialty merchants will set up at even mainstream events. These merchants do not cater to “everything for everyone”, but tend to specialize on women’s things, bonnets, or some other niche. While you still need to ask about documentation, visiting specialty merchants is often a little safer than visiting a “Wal-Mart” style merchant tent. You can expect to see higher prices, but the higher quality makes the difference.

If you have the opportunity to attend an event wherein the vendors are juried, so much the better! This means that every merchant has been vetted for accuracy; so long as the advisory board has accuracy top-most in mind (such as at the *Citizens of the 1860s Conference* in Harrisburg Pennsylvania each year), you can purchase with confidence.



© 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. Find more free articles and projects in the Compendium at www.thesewingacademy.com Email for “tech support” with your historic clothing projects or research questions, or visit us on-line at www.thesewingacademy.org.