

# 2012 Big 3 Pattern Review

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One of the most frequent requests I have is for help selecting among the “historic costume” patterns published by the Big 3 companies (Simplicity, McCalls, Butterick.) Let’s take a look at some of the options, past and present, complete with my notes on how you might best use some of these patterns, and why you might like to avoid others.

## General Notes on All Big 3 Pattern Options

*On the plus side:*

- Budget-friendly: With most chain stores offering fairly regular \$2 pattern sales, Big 3 lines are accessible to even the most cash-strapped sewist. And now no one has an excuse to skip a corset!
- Widely available, in person and on-line.
- Good basic period shapes from specific designers with solid research and dressmaking skills.
- The pieces tend to fit together well (good grading.)
- Patterns can be mix-n-matched for more unique styles, if you’re already familiar with common styles for your chosen textile.

*Notable negatives:*

- Widely available—and quite easy to spot. It’s hard to get away from the cookie cutter look.
- Big 3 companies often edit in some modern techniques to the designer’s original work.
- No instruction is given in how to adjust the skirt lengths in a period fashion, leading to some very droopy, ungainly hems.
- Lack of room to share that research in the pattern sheets. You’ll need to do your own research into styles to determine what’s best for your own impression needs before starting.
- Big 3 companies will discontinue them at some point; several numbers have already gone out of print.

## **IN ALL CASES: MAKE A MUSLIN FIRST.**

You’ll need to adjust seams, darts, and bodice length at the very least. Twenty minutes and two yards of cheap cotton spent now will make all the difference.

- Replace snaps with hooks and eyes (for actual fastening) or with hand-basting (for collars).
- Do not use French seams. These are post-war. For chemises and drawers, use a flat-felled seam or plain seam; for skirts use the selvedge as a finished edge, or a plain seam; for bodices, hand-whip allowances. Do not serge or zig-zag.
- Press seam allowances together, to one side. Hand over-cast the edges together, if desired. Avoid over-finishing.
- Leave darts intact, pressed to one side.
- Use homemade self-fabric bias binding and very tiny self-fabric piping, and *wool* hem tape or braid from Wooded Hamlet ([www.woodedhamlet.com](http://www.woodedhamlet.com)), if you choose to use hem tape.
- You don’t need pattern pieces for skirts! I recommend reviewing our free skirt articles, or reading our *Dressmaker’s Guide, Second Edition*, for period appropriate, simple techniques to a beautiful skirt setting. Adjust your hem to suit, from the waist.
- Skirt plackets can be positioned along a seam, rather than slashed into the skirt breadth (both are mentioned in period manuals). This necessitates “rotating” the entire skirt to the left if an off-set closure is used.
- Use regular cotton thread and a #9 or #10 Sharps needle for gauging, and ignore the dots. See our free article Gauging Skirts, or the *Dressmaker’s Guide*.
- Skip all modern fusible or sew-in interfacings. Period clothing occasionally uses an interlining for greater fabric support, but the flatlining technique generally provides excellent support.

*For your own sanity, remember that the Big 3 companies are publishing historically-inspired **Halloween** costume patterns for modern sewists. Their goals are not the same goals as held by many living history enthusiasts. The pattern lines mentioned here are those with redeeming factors; if a line is not mentioned here, there is a reason.*

*These short reviews, coupled with your own research and study, and good resources such as the **Dressmaker’s Guide, Second Edition** and the Sewing Academy @ Home forum, will help you identify and remove some of the modern anachronisms that the Big 3 insert into the designer’s original research to reach their own goals.*

***In short: this is a de-boogering guide.***



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## Martha McCain, Fashion Historian for Simplicity

All the Martha McCain dress designs with an off-set closure do show nice, clear diagrams of the process.

These patterns are listed in roughly their publishing order.

### 9761 Basque Dress with Flounced Skirt

Dates to pre-war, about 1857. Suited to only the most delicate of sheer wools and sheer cottons, or silks with good body (not appropriate in cotton “calico”). The flounces are more full than needed. This dress has been heavily and poorly copied since it’s debut, and is one of the easiest to spot when used.

### 9764 Covered Crinoline & Petticoats

Good shape, but large and long on most people. It may be difficult to alter for a smaller circumference, though it’s easy to trim off lower portions to shorten and narrow in one step. For most women, daywear hoops of between 90” and 115”, and “high fashion” hoops between 100” and 120”, work well. Supplies will be pricey for this hoop, close to \$100 in supplies, as noted by the testers at [www.farthingales.on.ca](http://www.farthingales.on.ca). Petticoats are easily made without a pattern at all—see our free articles and The Dressmaker’s Guide.

### 9769: Chemise, Corset, & Drawers

Shaped seam, single-layer *corset* (repeated in 5700 series). Can be easily made double layer with sandwiched boning. Skip trims along the top edge, and be sure to test the sizing in all cases—there appears to be wearing ease added when the pattern was graded for production (not the designer’s fault.)

Cut the *chemise* of 36” fabric, or 24” fabric to recognize the utility of side gores. Cut the sleeves closer to the fold for a less-bulky shape; you might also shorten them a bit. Make the band a comfortable length for your own flexed bicep, rather than using the standard size strip. If you opt for a trimmed version of the pattern, select 100% cotton, imported Swiss embroideries. These far surpass the quality of poly-cotton eyelet in chain stores, and do a better job of mimicking the machine-made embroidered trims of the era. You may make up the pattern perfectly plain, without any of the trims and embellishments.

The *drawers* are also a good shape, similar to any other period-based pattern (including our free pattern); you will want to adjust the crutch depth/length to your own body to avoid pinching or chafing. The construction is good; similar caveats on trims apply.

### 7212: Basic Dated Dress w/ Coat Sleeves

Shown with ovoid hoop; works just as well with round foot-print. Twill tape facing at the bodice placket is different; a plain folded facing can be used instead. Instructions include a bust pad, but no notes on how/where/why to use one (see our article on Judicious Padding in the Free Patterns section). Scale of the trims are excellent, but have been used by every-

one, so they’re easily recognized. Combo of pleating and gauging is not perhaps so common as all pleated skirts, and “Divide & Conquer” is an easier method of sizing the pleats than that given in the pattern. If sleeves are not used with undersleeves, lengthen them. Base shape of collar is good. Skip modern rayon lace appliqué, and do not interface the collar. Detachable cuffs would also be a good option for this style. Apron is a basic style, easy to make, and very recognizable at this point. Half aprons are also quite common, and need no pattern.

### 7215 Chemise & Corset

Chemise repeats from 9700 series. Corset is two-layer, gusseted, with front lacing hook. Good option for a fuller figure, with decent instructions on gusset insertion. The shaping dart in front does make length alterations through the waist a bit more tricky. Use of the lacing hook is explained.

### 7216 Oval Crinoline

Tends to want to work “circular” on, will need careful re-sizing to avoid being too long for most folks (its pictured \*very\* long). Cages that end 8-12” off the ground are more common and easier to get around in.

### 5724: Ballgown

Supported by primary source material, but it’s been copied frequently, and is very recognizable. Bodice style is good, needing not much more than basic “tweaking” to yield a nice evening bodice. Use a functional cotton net tucker (basted in, easily removed) rather than the ornamental one given in the pattern. Consider combining the bodice with the flounced skirt from 9761.

### 5726: Undergarments

Corset repeats 9700 series. While I have not examined an 1860s chemise in this style, similar styles appear in The Workwoman’s Guide of 1838, so it is not an entirely improbable variation. The *petticoat*, however, can be skipped entirely. Rather, use full cotton petticoats to give loft and softness to the skirts over the cage.

### 5740: Headwear

The headwear styles in this pattern are really quite lovely. They’ve been copied a lot, so plan to augment with trimming ideas taken from original engravings, fashion plates, etc. The sunbonnet is an interesting variation; it may not be so common as a plain, non-button style of slat bonnet, but the quilted brim is a good variation to use with a “normal slat bonnet” style if you’ve been feeling claustrophobic wearing your slatted “mailbox.” Finding quality silk flowers for the evening head-dress will be the most difficult thing of any of the projects!

### 5442: Sheer Dress

A pretty, basic pattern for a sheer dress with half-high lining, and the basic construction is good. Use only 100% natural fibers (sheer wool, silk, or cotton) for every part of this ensemble, or you totally defeat the “cool” part of a sheer dress. I never did figure out where seam sealant would go. The lining



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closes with the fashion fabric, and has multiple buttonholes. This could be a problem with frayable, loosely woven sheers; also, making the placket really stiffens the front opening; for a very delicate look, make the placket in the lining only, and work functional closures there; work a narrow hem along the front bodice edges of the sheer, and close it with a hook and eye at the waist, and one at the neckline (or use a brooch.)

The instructions call for machine gathering in the front of the skirt, and gauging at the back; you should gauge the whole of the skirt for the best set. There is erroneous information on how gauging works for larger or smaller waistlines. By varying the size of the gauging stitches, you can vary how densely you're able to pack pleats; larger waists use smaller stitches, not spread-out pleats! That looks skimpy and quite awful, truth to tell. Sheer fabrics can tend to "squash" more than is needed.

Carolann Schmitt, proprietress of the Genteel Arts Academy in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, shared a period fix for this: Lay a strip of white fabric, such as polished cotton, between your outer sheer fabric, and the amount turned to the wrong side during hem adjustments. Gauge through all three layers. The extra fabric "bulks up" the gauging just enough to get dense pleats, and helps the dress sit out from the waist very well, without requiring non-period skirt widths. You should be able to make your skirts in this way with 140"-170" of fabric, rather than the 270" or more needed with "non-bulked" sheer fabric.

The flounce is set on with a cording and header, which is a very nice touch; it would be lovely done in bias-cut fabric. The scale of the flounce is good; not too skimpy, which is a problem with a lot of repro dresses. The waistband is totally topstitched, and non-functional beyond adding some strength and stability. The sashes are pretty, and will be a versatile accessory item. Use buckram or cotton organdy for a stabilized interfacing, rather than modern materials, and silks for the outer layers and sashing.

#### 5444: Mantle & Garden Hat

The *mantle* is pretty, though it would be more effective in a sheer fabric. The construction is decent, though rather more complicated in the instructions than it really needs to be. Similar styles can be found in Peterson's and Godey's.

The *Garden Hat*, while based on an original item, is very limited in its applicability, and should probably be avoided by those engaged in living history; a fashion bonnet would be suitable with any of the gowns from this series, and is a much more universal item.

#### 4551: Gathered-to-fit Bodice

Three interesting sleeves will be interchangeable with any bodice in the Fashion Historian series, and can be done well in cotton fabrics, or in silks or light wools, making it quite versatile. This pattern can be a good base for everyday and "working" clothing, particularly. Accessory items could be used with any dress in the series; same notes as in 7212 apply to collars.

#### 4400/4510: Pointed Front/Back Bodice w/ Sleeve Variations

Same bodice style on each, again with interchangeable sleeves and accessory items. These are not suited to mid-weight cotton dressmaking; use silks, as the pattern specifies; some sheer wools can also make up well in these styles, but do additional research to pinpoint the combination of stylistic choices. Again, excellent scale of embellishments!

The method of collar construction, using seamed wedges of embroidered trims to mimic whitework collars of the time, is clever, and is sometimes found on original items. If you use it, consider doing miniscule hand rolled/whipped seams to cut down on their visibility, and always use top-quality imported Swiss embroidered edging as your base; the "eyelet" found in chain stores doesn't come close to the quality of original whitework, and is unsuited for this use.

If you admire the bonnet with the purple silk dress, you can find that pattern plus additional accurate shapes from Lynette Miller at [www.bonnets.com](http://www.bonnets.com).

### Wisconsin Historical Society for Simplicity

#### 3727: The Blue Basque Dress

This is another 50s style; for use in the 60s, the basque would be generally be remodeled to a round waist, skirts attached directly; the fringe removed, and the sleeves re-cut to a more current shape, such as a shaped coat sleeve. The shapes are fine, but the finishing is heavy; make the collar in a single layer, for instance, or at most, a 2-layer fine batiste collar, rather than something faced and interfaced. The basque makes a gorgeous foundation for a fall/winter coat!

### Kay Gnagey, Originals By Kay for Simplicity

#### 2881: Silk Evening Gown, 1860s

The basic lines of the bodice are very nice. The bertha/bretelles should be worn out on the shoulder, not on top of the shoulder. This one can be a good base for your own evening gown, with details taken from other period sources. Be sure to adjust the bodice length carefully at the waist, and fit over your hoop and petticoat support so the front point sits well when finished.

#### 2887: Silk Semi-Princess Line, early 1860s

If done in a more utilitarian fabric (such as wool challis), this has a great shape for a wrapper! For daywear, it really does need to be done in a good silk; it's a high-fashion shape, and deserves a high-fashion finish. Be sure to do a muslin test; adjustments for length at the waist **will not be possible** once the dress fabric is cut.



### 2890: Corset and Undergarments

The *corset* combines some shaping seams with gussets for multiple points in refining the fit; those with curvy figures can get ample “flare”, and those with modest curves can create a few, by tweaking the precise width and depth of gussets, and curvature of seams. Beware Simplicity’s tendency to add wearing ease—be sure to make a quick mock-up in sturdy waste fabric, and adjust your width and length! A plain binding, rather than a decorative frill, is also appropriate. I do recommend waiting to purchase boning until after a mock-up is tested, as individual needs will vary from the pattern notes.

The *drawers* and *chemise* are well within the norms for mid-century shaping and construction. The chemise combines a pretty yoke shape with fairly easy construction, so it’s a nice step up from the basics, without being too complex to complete! Do use a quality Swiss whitework for edgings, and be sure to avoid poly-cotton content.

**Andrea Schewe**  
*for*  
**Simplicity**

### 1818: Lapel Dress

If you already have the Martha McCain pointed daywear bodice, you can skip this pattern. Create the lapels by folding back the upper portion of the bodice opening. But, if you want to collect the pattern, it does have decent shaping, and a very nice open coat sleeve. Follow the standard caveats with the bodice construction, skirt construction, and finishing. It also appears to be highly upholstered in the chest area (not necessary!). Appropriate for wools or good silk, \*not\* cotton prints, cotton solids, or sheer cottons (though, you will want fine sheer and semi-sheer white cottons for the chemisette and undersleeves). Do not over-finish the dress itself or the accessory items. Please skip the appliqué design version. It’s very recognizable, and not as graceful as some.

**Nancy Ferris-Thee**  
*for*  
**Butterick**

### 5266: Ladies Coat

Buy this number for the *coat* alone; the other pieces are good for theater or dress-up, but lack the detailing needed for the living history use. The coat, however, has a generous fit over a hooped skirt, and employs very nice shapes. I would suggest both increasing and decreasing the scale of the trim pattern. Use a fine soutache instead of heavier upholstery braid (decreasing scale of the braid itself), but do an echoed repeat of the braiding pattern, with 3 to 5 rows of narrow soutache spaced about 1/8” to a scant 1/4” apart (increasing the overall look of complexity and size.) You might also use an entirely different braidwork pattern; look at originals and original magazines for ideas. Geometrics, waves, Greek keys—all

would be nice changes to the design.

The style could be done in a fine silk for a lighter weight fall wrap. Also keep in mind that the open sleeves will not be terribly warm in cold weather; wear this over a wool dress, or alter the sleeves to a more close-fitting coat style.

### 5543: Polonaise with Bows

This one is very high fashion for the 60s! Best done in a silk for fashionable daywear or a dinner dress, or in silk and wool for a fine wrapper, the shapes will need careful fitting over a good corset, as the bodice should be smooth to the figure (the dress is a bit large on the model—not the designer’s fault!)

### 5563: Hair Accessories

The various shapes of caps and other ornaments are really quite lovely! Done with accurate materials (real cotton lace, cotton netting, point d’esprit, good imported whitework, finest batistes, matte silk satin ribbons, etc), and lightly finished, these can be gorgeous.

To nag, very gently:  
Regardless of the pattern you use...

- Always, Always, Always make a muslin test first.
- Always work over appropriate foundation garments, including a well-fitted corset.
- Always adjust seam positions, dart depth, shape, and placement, and bodice length.
- Always use period construction techniques, and trust your work!
- If you need any additional help, please do let me know! I’m always glad to help diagnose fitting woes, hold a hand, or give some advice on fabrics and trim!



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