



Collecting Early Nineteenth-Century Costumes at the Maine Historical Society

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From brocaded silk dresses of the Revolutionary War era to velvet suits worn by Victorian children, the costume collection at the Maine Historical Society is a rich one. Most notable are the dresses made before 1840. They are exceptional because of their early date, fine condition, large number, and history of ownership in Maine. Costumes represent only one part of an extensive museum collection which contains objects as diverse as fine art and farming implements. Many of the historic costumes collected by the Society's members and benefactors between 1822 and 1900 were regarded as "curiosities." Limited to a few examples of Native American dress, they were seen as relics of a different culture. Not until the twentieth century was the clothing of Maine's early residents acquired. Changes in collecting activities reflect how the Maine Historical Society has broadened its definition of the historical significance of artifacts.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the advent of new manufacturing processes, the factory system, and mass production brought fundamental changes to American society. The Colonial Revival and Arts and Crafts movements, reactions to industrialization, influenced the collecting habits of historical societies and museums. The past was romanticized as healthier, more creative, and, in many ways, more noble. Maine residents saw the old way of life disappearing, so they gathered and saved relics from familiar places. These outdated personal belongings used by their ancestors assumed new importance. Cynthia Lapham described her 1895 donation of a flax hatchell owned by her mother. Although "mother used it as long as spinning flax was

in vogue,” the days of the home manufacture of linen cloth must have seemed so long past to her as to deem the item of historic importance.

Leonard Bond Chapman, publisher of the *Deering News* and respected local antiquarian, best embodies the Colonial Revival spirit. In 1900 he presented, on behalf of Emeline Hunt, household articles belonging to Sarah and Caleb Rea of Windham, Maine, Mrs. Hunt’s grandparents. Dating from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the gift included a wide range of household artifacts as well as women’s hats and personal accessories. Chapman viewed these items as relics of Maine’s past which were worth preserving for the new century.

Emeline Hunt’s possessions were not the only costumes and personal accessories donated at the turn of the century. Clothing associated with famous people was also considered meaningful for future generations. A fragment of a gown owned by Marie Antoinette, brought to this country by Abigail Adams, made its way to the Society’s collection in 1903. Brocaded silk dress fragments from three of Martha Washington’s gowns were given in 1919. Their historical associations far outweighed their intrinsic value as artifacts.



The first decade of the twentieth century brought two dramatic changes to the Society. When Anne Longfellow Pierce died in 1901 she bequeathed the family home in Portland to the Maine Historical Society. Her will included provisions that the Society open the house to the public as a shrine to her brother, the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and build a library on its grounds. For the first time in its history, the Society began to offer services to the public. Two years later the Society voted to allow women as members. This new constituency became actively involved in the museum collection. Because of the personal interests and perspectives of female members, clothing developed a greater importance within the collection. A 1909 accession record lists “one White Dress, antique,” a gift from Mrs.

Hortence Varnum Stephens. Not part of a larger group of artifacts nor with any prominent historical association, the donor clearly believed that the single dress had historical value on its own.

Between 1917 and 1922 the majority of artifacts donated to the museum collection were household and personal articles. One third were costumes. The emphasis on preserving family history came from the relationship between the Society and the Maine Genealogical Society. In 1922 when the two merged, genealogical research became an important facet of the Maine Historical Society's mission. Costumes donated during this time derived their significance from their genealogical associations. Linwood Jordan, for example, gave the parasol of his grandmother, Viana Berry, and the tortoiseshell combs of his great aunt, Sally Chamberlain. In 1924 Julia St. Felix Thaxter donated the beautiful brown silk dress worn by her grandmother, Anna Maria Maltby de St. Felix (fig. 12, no. 17). Two major groups of costumes came to the Society in 1922. Persis Nevens Andrews donated the lace, collars, and accessories made by her mother, Persis Sibley Andrews, before her marriage in 1840. Several collars remain unfinished. Still attached to their paper patterns, they offer valuable insights into nineteenth-century embroidery techniques. Beginning in 1922 Mrs. Edward McClure Peters gave costumes and personal items belonging to three generations of the Cummings-Peters family. Her gift constitutes the largest family collection of costumes and personal accessories at the Maine Historical Society.

Donors have given costumes to the Maine Historical Society for many different reasons over the last 170 years, but individual families typically saved only the clothing that served as mementoes of their own history. Of several family collections at the Society that of the Wadsworth-Longfellow clan offers a good case study of the types of costumes saved for their associations with specific family events. Peleg Wadsworth served as a Revolutionary War general; the tricorne hat he wore was saved by his family. In 1775 Peleg's wife, Elizabeth Bartlett Wadsworth, visited him at camp in Dorchester, Massachusetts; the family preserved the pink slippers she wore on that



FIGURE 2. Dolls (3 of a set of 8), probably Europe, 19th century. Costumed wooden figures; overall H 9 in. Maine Historical Society. Made as teaching tools, or possibly for the theater, these dolls illustrate a long-standing interest in changing fashions. Of the set, these three are dressed in early nineteenth-century styles.

occasion. After their son Henry Wadsworth was killed in the war in Tripoli in 1804, the family saved his uniform.

Because historic costumes often derive their importance from associations with milestones in life — births, marriages, and deaths — most of the apparel preserved at the Maine Historical Society is linked with such events. The Wadsworth-Longfellow family saved an extraordinary number of baby bonnets; other gifts to the Society of christening gowns and infants' clothes reveal how families cherished the births of children. Nearly all of the dresses exhibited in *My Best Wearing Apparel: Maine Women and Fashion, 1800 – 1840* recall major events in the lives of each of the wearers.

Reflecting the centrality of marriage in women's lives, many wedding dresses and trousseaux were saved by families who treasured these associations. Some were even mislabeled by descendants who assumed that any fancy white dress could be a wedding dress. Wearing

white, however, was not a widespread nuptial tradition in the United States until the late-nineteenth century. Only one outfit worn by Mercy Owen Richardson was donated to the Maine Historical Society and it does date to the time of her marriage in 1832. Her granddaughter believed it to be her wedding gown and included a pair of stockings, shawl, and handkerchief as well (fig. 12, no. 18). Mercy Richardson was Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's third cousin; this relationship must also have been a factor in this gift coming to the Maine Historical Society. Delphina Keith Parris, a Buckfield native and cousin of Maine governor Albion Keith Parris, is represented by a costume purported to be her wedding dress. Its style, however, dates to about 1811 when Delphina was just ten years old. In 1922 Mrs. Harry C. Waters donated two generations of her family's special clothing from Eastport. Although most of the Leavitt apparel is by no means formal, it was significant to Mrs. Waters because she believed it was part of a trousseau. Harriet Lamprey Leavitt was married in 1824 and two silk crepe dresses of that date may well have been part of her wardrobe (fig. 4, no. 7 & no. 8).

Mourning clothes reflect another important ceremony. An extraordinary survivor is the ensemble worn by Zilpah Wadsworth Longfellow following her brother's death in 1804 (fig. 8). Mourning jewelry for various members of the Wadsworth-Longfellow family is also found in the collection.

Fascinating design and luxurious fabrics accounted for the survival of many garments. The collection features fine examples in this category that were worn for special occasions. According to family tradition, Lucia Wadsworth wore her high-style muslin dress to a Portland assembly ball in 1799. Her family also saved some of her sister Zilpah's best dresses imported from England, and an elegant silk gown made by a French dressmaker in New York City (fig. 5 & no. 10). Two exceptional evening dresses were worn by Sally Brooks Holmes in the nation's capital where she lived with her husband, John, who served in the United States Senate (fig. 1 & no. 11).

Because costumes given to the Society memorialize the persons who wore them, they are usually fine things in good condition. Primarily nineteenth-century and largely formal, the garments tell just one part of costume history in Maine — that of the upper class. Work clothes and children's garments tended to be well-worn and made over, and were rarely preserved. The objects that do survive, however, together with written sources, can provide an intriguing view of the clothing worn in nineteenth-century Maine. To insure that the study of costume in Maine can continue, the best examples of Maine clothing from this century should also be collected and preserved in historical societies and museums.

Dress has extraordinary appeal as the fascinating early nineteenth-century garments on view in *My Best Wearing Apparel* attest. Styles, materials, and documented use reveal the tastes and values of past generations. Costumes and related personal belongings, whether preserved as relics, for their historical associations, or as links to life events, provide a tangible link to the past and demonstrate the enduring value of the Maine Historical Society museum collections.

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