

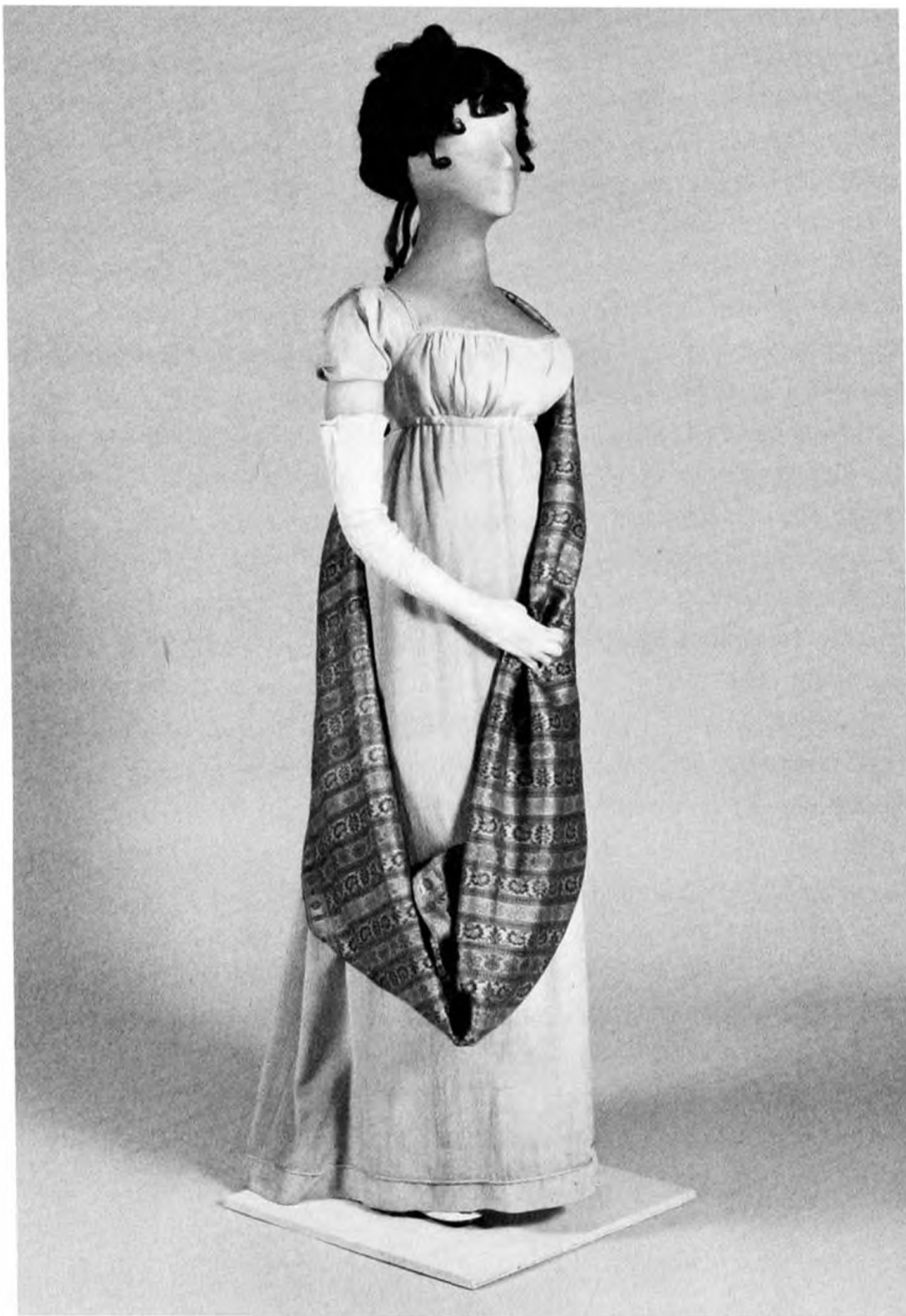
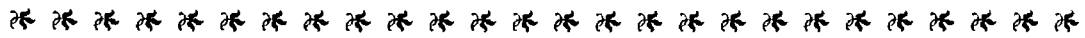


FIGURE 3. NUMBER 4.



“So Monstrous Smart”: Maine Women and Fashion, 1790–1840

Kerry A. O'Brien

When she died in 1836, Abigail Emerson of York, Maine, left her daughter, Clarissa, an intimate legacy: her clothing. In her will Mrs. Emerson itemized her “Best Wearing Apparel”:

*shimmies and drawers, caps, calash, stockings, long cotton shirt,
Merino Shawl, Black lace veil, Bombazine gown, Silk Pelise,
Muff and Tippet.*¹

Clarissa's inheritance included a dress of imported wool and silk twill, a soft wool shawl, a stylish veil, and a variety of caps, probably of thin white muslin. Outerwear also figured in Abigail Emerson's “best apparel.” A silk coat-dress called a pelisse could have been worn as an outer garment. Her silk calash, a large retractable bonnet, had been popular since the 1780s, when Mrs. Emerson was in her twenties. The muff and tippet, a long, thin scarf, were probably a matching set made of fur. Amidst the silks and Merino wool of the inheritance were more humble undergarments — a chemise or shift, underdrawers (rarely worn until the 1850s), stockings of wool, cotton, or silk, and a “long cotton shirt” which may have been a nightgown.

How did Abigail Emerson determine what her “best” apparel was? Was the gown the artful creation of a Boston dressmaker? Did the caps sport fine white embroidery? Was the calash a treasured heirloom? Was the underwear brand new? Unfortunately, Mrs. Emerson's descriptions do not indicate whether age, condition, style, material, or personal associations informed her decision. But they do reveal that she was a person who could afford imported silks as well as luxuries

like fur muffs and lace veils. They suggest that the seventy-year-old woman favored some earlier styles of dress while she adopted new habits, like wearing drawers. They also tell us that these types of garments and the materials used in their manufacture were available to a widow in south coastal Maine. Not only were Abigail Emerson's clothes an expression of her public station and personal taste, they were also important enough to her to bequeathe them — underwear and all — to her daughter. This legacy was both practical and emotional. Clarissa could use her mother's best apparel, but the garments also stood as a private memento, a souvenir of the woman who once wore them.



What does “best wearing apparel” tell us about Maine in the early nineteenth century? As commodities in a rapidly shifting market, clothing and textiles were major components of retail commerce in Maine. Changes in the economy, politics, and technology had profound effects on the world of fashion. Clothing also reflects the customs and values of nineteenth-century Maine society, its manners and etiquette. About its wearers, dress can tell us a great deal, illustrating their wealth, social standing, education, and taste. The clothing of the lower and middle classes, copied from the dress of the wealthy, speaks of aspiration and ambition as well. More than any other material possessions, clothing and jewelry broadcast an unavoidable visual statement of personal identity for all the public to observe, whether in the church, the court house, the ballroom, or the poor house.

What was the social backdrop for fashion in early nineteenth-century Maine? The period from 1800 to 1840 marked an era of dramatic transition in American society. As Maine shifted its status from an outpost of Massachusetts to a separate state, the new Republic was struggling to build a national identity and political system out of a loose federation of colonies. As part of a changing economic structure, the home manufacture of goods competed with the increasing



FIGURE 4. NUMBERS 7 & 12.

momentum of factory production. The impact of the industrial revolution on American society was staggering, exaggerating class stratification while creating the expectation of and demand for democratization. The industrial revolution forged the country's first permanent working class, and it also cultivated a middle class which enjoyed, along with the established upper crust, an excess of time and money. Leisure hours and disposable income were required in

order to lead the fashionable life, and smart dressing was an emblem of that lifestyle.

Fashionable dress does not reveal the full spectrum of costume in early nineteenth-century Maine. The clothing of function — garments worn by farming folk, homesteaders, and fishing families — was an indigenous dress based on usefulness, thrift, and endurance. Work clothes were made at home of local wools and linens. Though labor-intensive to produce, the net cost of these materials was a fraction of the price of imported goods. The cut of functional garments was simple and economical, often composed of squares and rectangles which left no fabric waste. Wearers of such clothing moved with relative ease, unfettered by voluminous sleeves and tight bodices. This simple, unrestrictive style was practical and changed little over the decades.

Fashionable dress went beyond mere utility and into the lofty realm of aesthetics, personal taste, and the presentation of the wearer to the public. Complicated in cut, most high-style ball gowns were the work of professional dressmakers rather than home seamstresses. These garments were usually made of imported silks or fine cottons. Fancy styles changed with frightening speed, leaving many fashion-conscious sophisticates struggling to keep up with the trends. “Pray send me my spotted muslin by the next mail,” begged Eliza Southgate of Scarborough in a letter to her mother in 1800. Heading for the elegant town of Wiscasset, Eliza worried that her appearance would be less than stylish. “I am informed they are so monstrous smart as to take no notice of a lady that can condescend to wear calico.” It was surely not the farmers’ wives of Wiscasset who intimidated Eliza Southgate; the “monstrous smart” of whom she wrote were the well-to-do. Their clothing set them apart, not only from the farmers, but from each other as well.²

What types of dress have been preserved for study? Few examples of functional clothing survive in Maine. When Martha Ballard, a midwife from Hallowell, recorded the activities of her farming family in the 1790s, she described the work of her industrious daughters as

they cut apart old clothing to weave coverlets, a typical fate of working people's attire. Fashionable dress, on the other hand, in spite of its lack of comprehensive social scope, *has* been saved, often with sound documentation, as in the case of the Maine Historical Society's collections. Similarly, the portraits, silhouettes, and other images that survive from the early nineteenth century usually depict prosperous Mainers in their most stylish garb. Written records that provide information on dress are those of educated, middle- and upper-class women and men. Fashion also had a trickle-down effect in the period, as it does today. The highest styles, championed by the wealthy, were reinterpreted by the middle and lower classes. In their "best wearing apparel," home seamstresses and country folk aspired to the panache of their sophisticated urban counterparts, to the extent that their resources and knowledge of fashion allowed.³

Through surviving examples of fashionable dress, along with comments gleaned from letters, diaries, newspapers, and magazines of the period, we can explore the quest to be fashionable in Maine before 1840. Who were the smart dressers and what was their social milieu? How did they learn about the prevailing fashions of the day? What materials were available, and who were the manufacturers of fancy clothes? How did style take shape in nineteenth-century Maine?



FIGURE 5. NUMBER 9.

Followers of Fashion in Maine

In 1796 Abigail May reflected on the clash of the stylish and the simple when she critiqued two sisters, Anna and Phoebe Bucknam of New Casco (a rural district of Falmouth):

I pity girls that are possessed of such pleasing qualifications and have such a taste for dress and company to be obliged to live at such a doleful place as New Casco. If their father had not sent them to Mrs. Snows to Portland and allowed them to read and dress as they chose they might . . . have been happy in a plain garb carding, spinning and tending the dairy. [H]ow can they relish the uncouth clumsy appearance and behavior of their neighbors, and farming and dairy business is a poor sequel to Balls and assemblies.

Abigail, herself a visitor to Portland from Massachusetts, blamed the Bucknams' lament on the contrast between their upbringing and their education. Their father Jeremiah was a farmer with high expectations for his daughters; he wanted them to taste the sophistication of urban life. He was also wealthy enough to keep them in "the best of liquors, sweetmeats and West India delicacies." After his daughters reveled in the city, however, they were compelled to return to New Casco, where their "dress and manners excited the envy of the whole village." Anna and Phoebe became snobs; they aspired to a lifestyle that they were unable to share with anyone in New Casco.⁴

Sophisticated Mainers in the first half of the nineteenth century included an established coastal elite of professionals and landed gentry who, for generations, had dominated Maine society, religion, and politics. They were joined by members of a powerful merchant class, who made large fortunes in coastal and international commerce. In the early nineteenth century, the circle of the sophisticated widened with the arrival of a rising middle class of lawyers, doctors, and successful

artisans. Fashionable Mainers were decidedly “urban,” their ranks dominated by the residents of coastal trading centers from Kittery to Eastport, and prosperous inland towns such as Alfred, Bethel, and Augusta-Hallowell. Small farming villages in the hinterlands, such as Standish and Raymond, remained more isolated from the fashions of the moment.⁵

The middle and upper classes were linked across Maine by marriage, friendship, and professional contact. They enjoyed a wide sphere of influence, not only in government and business, but also in matters of taste. They were usually, though not always, affluent. The wealthy reaped the benefits of their station; they were highly mobile, well-traveled, and well-connected. They had considerable leisure time and educated their children in the best boarding schools. For girls, female seminaries or academies were the rule. In these institutions, academics and refinement went hand in hand.⁶

The daughters of prosperous Mainers stepped out of their home environments into a world of self-conscious style when they traveled to schools in Maine and Massachusetts. Eliza Southgate attended the famous Mrs. Rowson’s School in Medford, Massachusetts; the Kings of Saco boarded at Saunders and Beach Academy in Dorchester, and Maria Ha[w]thorne (sister of author Nathaniel Hawthorne) left her home in Raymond to attend school in Salem, Massachusetts. In 1822 Delphina Parris of Buckfield enrolled in one of Portland’s fifteen female academies. The curriculum in these schools included traditional subjects — reading, penmanship, geometry, and geography — as well as “female accomplishments” such as dancing, music, and French, which were considered essential in the cultivation of a refined young woman. Art and fancy needlework often stood as calling cards for academies; many schools remain well-known today because of the exquisite paintings, samplers, and needlework pictures produced by their students (fig. 6). The emphasis placed on accomplishments over intellectual challenge which characterized female academies drew increasing criticism during the first half of the nineteenth century. Many schools produced “showy girls rather than useful women,” and



FIGURE 6. *Sacred to the Memory of Mr. William Minott*, possibly Portland, Maine, ca. 1817. Pen and ink and watercolor on paper; H 26 in., W 34 in. Maine Historical Society; Gift of Mrs. Luther C. Gilson, 1901.

short-changed females by pluming them for advantageous marriages instead of nourishing their intellects. By the 1840s social reformers had spearheaded a new emphasis on academics in female education.

More important to the development of fashionable young ladies than actual sewing was their competitive contact with fashion-conscious peers at school. Clothing reflected their parents' status as well as their own individual style, and academy students wrote letters home describing fashions and seeking funds for elegant acquisitions which would impress their friends. Eliza Southgate requested five dollars for a wig in 1800. "I must either cut my hair or have one, I cannot dress it at all stylish," she wrote. "At the assembly I was quite ashamed of my head, for nobody has long hair." In 1813 Hannah King of Saco instructed her husband, Cyrus, then serving in the United States

Congress, to buy “a fashionable shawl and some gloves long and short” for their daughter, Caroline, who was a student at Saunders and Beach. Elizabeth Hathorne of Raymond was pleased to learn that her daughter, studying in Salem in 1820, had a “new light blew bombazette [dress] which is the most fashionable color for young folks.”⁸

Academies prepared the daughters of the well-to-do for the rigors of a social life which consumed much of their time, while in school and thereafter. Teenagers and young, unmarried women followed dizzying social calendars, attending dances, parties, and outings. At these events young women saw their friends and schoolmates, and made the acquaintance of possible suitors and potential husbands.⁹

The latest in stylish clothing was mandatory for social success at assemblies and balls. The reigning fashion early in the nineteenth century was borrowed from ancient Greece via revolutionary France and featured extremely high-waisted, slender dresses (no. 1). Made of transparent Indian muslin, these gowns were scandalously revealing. Liberated from the confines of corsets and boning, young ladies clad in muslin were accessible and provocative. Young men ran the risk of being foolishly swept away by the gauzy veil of fashion. A Saco newspaper warned against the dangers of charm and sex appeal in 1805: “The man who chooses his wife from the assembly or drawing room, prefers *muslin* to MERIT — *form* to SUBSTANCE — and will usually be disappointed in his expectations” (fig. 3).¹⁰

Young women of means spent hours preparing for parties, and spared no expense in the process. In her diary Eliza Bryant of Portland chronicled the month-long assembly season, which began in December. At these formal and carefully staged cotillions, music and dancing were the focal activities for middle- and upper-class young women and men. In elegantly appointed rooms socializing and light dining took place, dance partners were arranged, and courtships were launched. In 1802 Eliza spent an entire day “fixing for the Assembly.” The next morning, she rated the party and listed her dance partners. Two days later she was “dressing Betseys hare for the ball.” Eliza was a skilled and feverish seamstress; her diary is saturated with bonnet

making and dressmaking. While she usually reported on her sewing with enthusiasm, she found no pleasure in the needle in January 1803 when mending her brother's clothes interfered with her social life:

*Surrounded by old clothes, of every description, and instid of going to the assembly as I should wish, I must stay at home & mend them. Here am I chained down be side my old acquaintances, such as, pantaloons, waistcoats, coats & old stockings, charming company I find them, they imploy my fingers & mind, which would otherwise be idle — I mean the former.*¹¹

Once they married, women, even of the upper classes, had less time for balls and parties because the demands of children and domestic activities often kept them close to home. When Ann King was a teenager staying with relatives in Bath, she complained of the lack of night life: "Bath is very dull — no parties — no dances — sewing and reading are my principal occupations." Sixteen years, a marriage and several children later, she described a different social life in Augusta, with occasional dinner parties, teas, and company at home. Married women frequently paid visits to one another in their leisure time. Sarah Connell Ayer of Eastport went calling in April 1833: "I left Mrs. Webster and walked over to Mrs. Whitcombs. Mrs. Clapp had returned from Boston, and I had a very pleasant visit. Mrs. Leavitt lives in the same house. She has been confined with an infant daughter she talks of naming Sarah Ayer." For her visiting, Mrs. Ayer may have worn a garment like the one which belonged to her friend Harriet Leavitt, an indigo silk dress with a matching capelet trimmed in *faux* ermine (fig. 7, no. 14).¹²

Major events provided excuses (perhaps unnecessary in some circles) to indulge in the finery of silk, lace, velvet, and feathers. The admission of Maine into the Union in 1820, and the visit of the Marquis de Lafayette in 1825 were just causes for celebration for all Maine citizens. The well-to-do, however, brought fashion and festivity together, seizing any opportunity to don their elegant plumage. In 1815 Hannah Scamman Tucker wore a silk twill gown to a Peace Ball held in Saco to celebrate the end of the War of 1812 (no. 6).¹³



FIGURE 7. NUMBERS 14 & 19.

Personal occasions required specialized dress, and the wealthier the wearer, the more specifically her clothing reflected the event. Many fancy dresses, especially white ones, have been collected over the years



FIGURE 8. NUMBER 2.

as “wedding dresses.” While dresses worn for wedding ceremonies or parties were indeed elaborate, they were not limited by color, cut, or fabric. In the early nineteenth century, when white muslin was so popular, many wedding dresses were undoubtedly white. But by the 1830s, a deep purple-brown silk was as likely a nuptial fabric as white satin.¹⁴

The dress of mourning was much more rigidly prescribed than costume for weddings. Mourning was a potent social ritual in the nineteenth century. An elaborate etiquette of dress and behavior distracted the bereaved from the pain of a recent death. From wearing memorial jewelry, complete with locks of the deceased’s hair, to attending social functions dressed in black, mourning was, for the very stylish, a consuming and costly endeavor. As a result, the practice

of mourning often became the privilege of those who could afford it. When a close relative died, female family members radically altered their dress in a public display of their grief. Full mourning required completely black or white clothing; after several months, half or second mourning permitted the introduction of other colors into the wardrobe.¹⁵

Women in mourning often made use of existing garments, but

there was a constant and immediate demand for mourning fabrics, like dull-finished crepe and bombazine, from which attire could be made in time for a funeral. Stores such as G. C. Lyford's in Portland advertised an impressive variety of "mourning articles": black silks, woolens and crepes, black gloves and hosiery, shawls, and ribbons. Because the need for mourning fabric was so often unexpected, merchants had to keep somber goods in stock, and women no doubt collaborated to complete a stylish widow's "weeds" before the funeral chaise arrived.¹⁶

Mourning clothing could also be purchased. Mrs. Atherton, a Portland dressmaker, had "mourning articles constantly on hand and made at the shortest notice." An Eastport milliner announced that she employed enough young women so that "all orders, particularly for Mourning, will be strictly attended to." While mourning clothes were simpler in cut and less ornamented than regular dress, they could be stylish nonetheless. Zilpah Wadsworth Longfellow's mourning ensemble is an eloquent example of the fashionable and the somber combined (fig. 8). Worn after the death of her brother, Henry, in 1804, Zilpah's transparent black gauze gown reflected the latest in French *couture*. While the sober clothes of grieving women like Zilpah set them apart from others, the mourning process did not keep them cloistered. Ironically, after an initial period of relative seclusion, women re-entered the social life they knew before their mourning began. Though their clothing expressed their stylishness at these functions, it also communicated an emotional state, an altered condition of life, a loss.¹⁷

The Language of Style: Fashion and Communication in Early Nineteenth-Century Maine

*What kind of hats do they wear your way this season? How do they make their frocks, particularly capes? And above all do tell me the last pattern for muslin collars whether round, square or how? You dislike writing anything of the kind I know and will only trouble you to write 2 or 3 lines upon the above.*¹⁸

Hannah King loved clothes and fashion, and was eager to hear about the latest styles. Writing from Saco to her sister in Geneva, New York, twenty-five-year-old Hannah pressed for the latest fashion news from that region with a barrage of questions. She knew she would have to pry the intelligence out of her sister, Caroline, who, at forty, was the pious wife of a minister and teacher. Hannah's apologetic inquiry, and Caroline's probable judgment of its frivolity, illustrate the role of personal values and inclination in determining a woman's taste. Not everyone cared what the latest fashion was, but if she did, how could the stylish Maine woman keep abreast of fashion's constantly changing contours? Fashion is a potent form of communication. It also relies heavily upon communication for its meaning. Dress speaks a language of wealth, rank, sophistication, and, as in the case of mourning attire, even personal circumstance. Fashionable dress is relative as well; only by measuring one person's dress against another's, or against a prevailing canon of taste, can comparative values like style and status gain significance. In early nineteenth-century Maine, the latest fashion news traveled through a tangled web of written, verbal, and visual communication.

The easiest way to learn about fashion was to look at it. Diary entries, travel accounts, and letters suggest that Mainers, women and men alike, were keen observers of the world of style. In diaries

fashion-watchers assessed the prevailing trends with almost anthropological clarity. William Fogg of Kittery wrote in 1815:

Fashions. Women wear straw bonnets open behind the same as before. The hair at the back of the head twisted into a large bunch and filled with hair combs; in front the hair is curled in various shapes; stays bound lightly as possible with busks and bands to keep back the shoulders; round toed shoes; short gowns and petticoats — not reaching to ankles — great coats and pelises.¹⁹

In recording their impressions of the present, and to embellish their future recollections, diarists saw dress as a prominent feature of the visual environment.

The well-honed art of letter writing provided an important platform for the dissemination of ideas about dress. Schoolgirls showed great interest in fashion, as did travelers and visitors staying with relatives within Maine and far beyond its borders. After she married, Eliza Southgate Bowne made several trips to New York City with her husband. To her sisters back in Maine she wrote careful descriptions of dress in New York, a city which, along with Philadelphia and Washington, set the pace of American fashion in the federal period: “Long sleeves are very much worn, made like mitts; crosswise, only one seam and that in the back of the arm, and a half sleeve drawn over, and a close, very short one up high, drawn up with a cord.” Such specific analysis of dress construction could be used by her sisters in creating their own versions. There was no need to travel all the way to New York to discover new styles, however. While Olive King was visiting relatives in Bath in 1819, she wrote to her sister Caroline in Saco and described the local fashions: “Their gowns here a[re] all made [with] half high [necklines] etc. figured canton Crape are worn the most, they have cuffs on the top of the sleeves” (fig. 4, no. 7).²⁰

Letters also reveal that travelers often purchased fashionable goods for their relatives in Maine. Braids and trimming, stockings and fancy accessories, from reticules to hair jewelry, were among the gifts made or orders filled. Many requests for hats and bonnets appear in letters.

In 1804 George Tate, an admiral in the Russian Navy, wrote to his brother in Portland, instructing him to expect “a small parcel containing some pieces of Mosco silk as a present to your wife and daughters.” A stunning polychrome silk shawl from the Kupavino Factory in Moscow survives in the Tate House collection (fig. 3). A most elegant parcel arrived from France for the Cony sisters of Augusta in the spring of 1807. With it came a letter from Paris describing the contents, purchased for the girls by Sarah Bowdoin, wife of James Bowdoin III, then the United States minister to Spain:

I send two gowns which I have caused to be made for you according to the present fashion, together with flowers for the head, a pr of shoes, & pr of gloves for each, of which I request your acceptance, & I hope they will please you; the one with the train is for Miss S. L. Cony, as report says that she is shortly to become a Matron, & perhaps it will arrive in time for the happy occasion — short dresses are almost altogether worn by young ladies, & indeed by all ages, except for Court dresses.²¹

It was surely an elegant treat to receive dresses directly from Paris, and the Cony girls were fortunate to be acquainted with a couple whose diplomatic appointments placed them in the unquestioned fashion capital of Europe. Many prominent Mainers found their link to the world (and to fashion trends) through the politicians who represented the region. Richard Cutts of Saco was in Congress when he met and married Anna Payne, sister of First Lady Dolley Madison, who was considered one of the country’s most fashionable women. Certainly Anna carried a smart sense of urban style back to Saco from the capital. In 1817 John Holmes of Alfred succeeded Cyrus King as a congressional representative. He later served as Maine’s first United States senator. When he was in Washington, Holmes and his wife, Sally Brooks Holmes, attended state dinners and inaugural balls and welcomed Lafayette to the capital. Several of Sally Holmes’s ball gowns have been preserved in the collections of the Maine Historical Society. Probably purchased in Washington in the 1820s, they are



FIGURE 9. NUMBERS 5 & 3.

exquisite dresses, skillfully crafted of the finest imported silks (fig. 1 & no. 11).

John Fairfield of Saco served in the United States Congress from 1835 to 1837 and in the Senate from 1843 to 1847. Of lesser means than John and Sally Holmes, Fairfield and his wife, Anna, lived apart during his tenure in Washington, but he wrote to her in Saco nearly every day. Later, when Fairfield was governor of Maine, the couple repeated this arrangement. Though he usually discussed politics and personalities with his wife, Fairfield occasionally sent her news about fashion.

Once he even included a sketch of a well-dressed Washington woman, along with a lengthy lament about the voluminous sleeves of the 1830s. Fairfield attended a party in Washington in 1838, where he observed a number of “elegantly dressed” ladies. He noted Dolley Madison’s garb, a black dress with a high neck ruff and a turban, “resembling what I have seen in the [fashion] prints as the turban of the Turks.” He was struck by one woman’s “purple silk velvet head-dress, ornamented with a bird of paradise. Not the tail merely, but the whole bird, and a beautiful ornament it was.”²²

For Maine women, magazines — French, English, and American — conveyed in both text and pictures the latest in clothing design. For over thirty years, Mrs. Bell, an English designer and publisher, provided Americans with English versions of Parisian styles in the pages of her magazines, *La belle assemblée* and *The Court Magazine and Monthly Critic*. These English periodicals were joined by American publications including *Port Folio*, published in Philadelphia from 1800 to 1805, and *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, founded in 1830. According to historian Jack Larkin, ideas about style reported through magazines and their fashion plates traveled from Europe to New York in about a month. From there, news spread to the rest of the country, making it possible for the most remote villages to be filled with fashionable ladies.²³

Did Maine women have access to magazines and their fashion plates? Availability is difficult to measure, because magazine titles do not appear in booksellers’ advertisements. References in letters and diaries, however, suggest that women did see such periodicals. In November 1801, Eliza Bryant of Portland spent an evening “reading a magazin.” She “went to the book store after [a] magazine” a few weeks later. Elizabeth King of Saco received a package in April 1833: “it contained a present of a French print, for a gown, from Hannah Bridge, as I assisted her some, when she was preparing to be married.” For those who did not purchase ladies’ magazines, Portland’s newspaper, the *Argus Semi-Weekly*, quoted directly from periodicals such as *La belle assemblée*.²⁴

While fashion plates offer much information on the cut of dresses

FIGURE 10. Charles Bird King, *Julia Cascaline Dearborn Wingate* (1781 – 1867), Washington, D.C., ca. 1825. Oil on canvas; H 30 7/16, W 25 1/2. Maine Historical Society; Gift of Annie F. H. Boyd, 1970.



and how accessories were used, it is important to remember that these were the imaginative products of designers and publishers and *not* actual ensembles (fig. 13). Just as today's fashion magazines often show apparel which is rarely worn by the general public, so magazines of the early nineteenth century suggested the zenith of fashion. Stylized drawings exaggerated to almost preposterous extremes the slenderness of neo-classical gowns of the 1800s and the bulbous quality of hats and dresses of the 1830s. Proportion and perspective were not the chief concerns of fashion illustrators. Painters, miniaturists, and silhouettists, on the other hand, were more apt to present the human figure naturalistically in their depictions of well-dressed Maine women. These images, which survive in great number, offer more realistic information about the actual styles of dress in nineteenth-century Maine than do the fashion plates of the period. When Julia Cascaline Dearborn Wingate of Hallowell had her portrait painted in Washington in 1825, she wore a stylish but sedate white dress with a high waist and lace trim. A red and gold striped shawl and matching turban completed an outfit which was clearly more elegant than outrageous (fig. 10).

A Fresh Assortment of Fashionable Goods

In 1808 Stephen Longfellow, a Portland lawyer (and father of poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow), settled his account with merchants Thomas and Abel Vinton. Over the year Longfellow, or his wife, Zilpah, had purchased a Morocco leather purse, two shawls, Indian cotton, and a hair comb. Even in the midst of Jefferson's trade embargo, merchants on Mussey's Row, near Middle Street, offered a wide array of imported goods. Henry Smith sold angora and damask shawls, Paris gauze, and dove-colored English and French kid gloves. John Dix ran "the Cheap Store" and carried "fashionable French Ribbons, some of which are very rich," red kid shoes of the latest London patterns, Indian and Italian silks, and cases of calico "of the newest fashionable style." Joseph Barbour featured muffs and tippets made of pole cat, elk, bear, and mock sable.²⁵

Newspapers, business records, and personal papers document an impressive variety of fabrics, trims, accessories, and even ready-made clothing that was available to Mainers in coastal trading towns. While those who lived in busy ports like Biddeford could buy goods "just in from Boston," the residents of inland towns like Alfred were invited to travel to Kennebunk or Portland to shop. Augusta's location at the head of navigation on the Kennebec River made it a commercial center; Ann Bridge concluded that it was a much better place to buy fabric than land-locked Waterville, twenty-five miles upstream. Parker Cleaveland, a scientist at Bowdoin College and a librarian of the Maine Historical Society, traded with dozens of merchants in the Brunswick area. During the 1820s and 1830s he purchased an extraordinary amount of fabrics, trims, shoes, and bonnets for his family. He bought parasols and fans, had dresses dyed, and acquired a great deal of fabric at auction.²⁶

Harriet Leavitt shopped in Eastport, located some 350 miles from Boston, but stocked nonetheless with plenty of fancy goods from that

city and beyond. A town of 3,900 inhabitants by 1830, Eastport supported many merchants, dressmakers, and milliners. Chinese silks, crepe dresses, silk shawls, and French yard goods were sold by Levi Ingols in 1820, while in nearby Lubec, Burton and Ilsley carried cashmere, black nankin and bombazine (for mourning), iridescent silks, and crepes. D. K. Chace sold fabrics, leghorn bonnets, Merino wool shawls, and mirabou scarves, all shipped from New York. Ostrich plumes, lace pelerines, rubber shoes, silk velvets, hair combs, and buffalo robes were also available. Harriet Leavitt was able to purchase fancy imported braid for her green crepe dress, made in the mid-1820s, but she had to improvise on the cape which matched an indigo dress in the 1830s. Whether due to prohibitive cost, or unavailability, Harriet could not trim her cape with real ermine, so she invented an imitation version from white flannel dotted with bits of dark felt (fig. 7, no. 14).²⁷

In the arena of dress goods and textiles, Maine was very much a part of an international trade network. Silks from Italy, fans from China, hats from Bolivia, and even richly-woven shawls from Russia attest to the global nature of the fashion business in Maine (fig. 3). Nonetheless, Maine's own contribution to the world textile market was taking shape as early as 1830, when the York Manufacturing Company of Saco was producing, by the labor of eight hundred female operatives, high-quality cotton shirting and dress fabrics. York plaids and stripes, known collectively as "ginghams," would earn the mill an international reputation by mid-century, when Maine emerged as a major textile-producing state.

Once designs and fabrics were obtained, who actually made the fashionable garments worn by Maine women? Many were sewn by the wearers themselves, their friends, or relatives. Regardless of social station, all women were trained in sewing and clothing construction; the educated, prosperous members of the upper classes also learned fancy needlework, embroidery, and painting on fabric. Abigail May, visiting Portland in 1796, made a tiffany flounce, an elegant painted silk dress border: "I carried home a flounce I have been painting for Matty, the



FIGURE 11. Unidentified artist, *Sarah Hudson Mellen Gilman* (1803 – 1874), possibly Portland, Maine, ca. 1824. Watercolor on ivory; H 3 ⅜ in., W 2 ⅝ in. Maine Historical Society; Gift of Mary Persis Mellen Bailey, 1931. Conserved with Society funds matched by Mr. and Mrs. Seth Sprague.

same pattern as that which Miss Elliott sent me from Washington. She appears much pleased and says it shall grace the first ball we have.” A most productive young seamstress was Eliza Bryant. She sewed nearly every day between 1801 and 1803. In three weeks in June 1801 she made five bonnets, finished a quilt, and mended stockings, in addition to spinning, knitting, and a great deal of ironing. In 1802 she made herself a “tiffany bonnet,” a van dyke collar (which her friend Nancy Chadwick copied), shoe bows, and petticoats of dimity, flannel, and white satin. She added trim to a black muslin gown and a shawl, mended her black silk gloves, and altered a gown and a riding habit.²⁸

In 1815 John Neal visited Mrs. Murphy’s Wholesale and Retail Variety Store in Boston on behalf of his sister in Portland. In a letter to her, Neal reported cautiously on what was clearly foreign territory for a man. After purchasing trimming and stockings, he discussed with Mrs. Murphy the crepe and cambric gown she was making in the shop “with the sleeves from the latest London pattern universally admired here and in my opinion the most elegant fancy, when on, that I ever saw.” Neal was so taken with Mrs. Murphy’s dress that he purchased silk for his sister and a “pattern,” then carefully instructed her to cut the dress very low in the back and “make the sleeves after this pattern proportioned in the same manner.”²⁹

Alterations were an important facet of home sewing, not only to

repair and change the size of garments, but to update them for greater stylishness. "I have ripped it apart, and turned it and partly made it," Hannah King confessed to her daughter, Caroline, about her great coat. Writing from Gardiner in 1823, Caroline had asked her mother to send her winter coat. Hannah, having found the coat stuffed into a bandbox, and needing a new one herself, assumed Caroline had abandoned it and started to re-style it. "I can do without it," Hannah declared, and "if I have injured it I will make it up to you in some way or other." In Augusta, Sarah Williams had the foresight to plan for future alterations. She was thrilled with the silk her husband sent to their daughter, Susan, from Boston, but urged him to buy more:

*The silk is a very rich handsome thing I think; but had there been an inch less, there would not have been enough for the gown, and as it will probably last for a number of years, and fashion is so capricious, will thank you if there is any to be had to purchase of the same kind of silk for the purpose of altering and enlarging it.*³⁰

There were also professionals whose talents were available to Maine women. Elijah Field, a "Tailor and Ladies' Habitmaker" in Eastport, could make "the first and most correct fashions from Europe and the principal cities of America." For "those who wish their garments in a medium way," Field could produce a dress with the customer's suggestions alone. He also advertised "clothing cut out and basted for others to make up with directions." Elijah Field was a clever businessman, offering a comprehensive range of services which appealed to all social ranks and pocketbooks. To home seamstresses, he dispensed a skill which set the tailor, dressmaker, or "mantuamaker" apart from the seamstress: he understood cut. A knowledge of cut enabled the tailor or dressmaker to make a well-contoured, fashionable garment from a mysterious array of peculiar shapes.³¹

The same style of dress might look very different when made by a dressmaker rather than a seamstress. Harriet Leavitt's charming silk dresses were probably wrought by her own hand (nos. 7 & 8). A plain

dress of pale blue crepe features tiny puffs at the top of long sleeves, a plain, shallow neckline, and a bodice gently gathered into a high waistline (fig. 4, no. 7). Zilpah Wadsworth Longfellow of Portland, on the other hand, had a dress of similar design, but she purchased it in New York City from a "French Modiste," a dressmaker well-acquainted not only with the latest styles, but also with techniques of cut and finishing (no. 10). Zilpah's silk jacquard gown, though contemporary with Harriet Leavitt's dress, is far more sculptural in form and elaborate in detailing. The high waist is accented with a piped belt adorned with a bow at the center back. Pierced upper sleeves, called *mancherons*, are ornamented with imported braid. The skirt falls gracefully in an intricate assembly of pleats, and the hem is trimmed with piped silk appliqué.³²

Dressmakers in Maine were capable of nearly the same artistry as the "French Modiste." Many, like Miss Burnham of Kennebunk and Charlotte Green of Portland, sold hats and fabrics in addition to providing dressmaking services. Miss Green advertised beaver hats and bonnets made of plush, velvet, satin, and crepe. In Lubec, Mrs. Clapp was engaged in "millinery and mantuamaking" and "has the pleasure to inform the Ladies of Quoddy and its precinct that she has spared no exertions on her part to obtain patterns of the most recent mode." She also sold bonnets and fabric.³³

When Josiah Pierce traveled by coach from Salem, Massachusetts, to New York in 1822, he noted that the large leghorn bonnets of the women riding in the vehicle with him "appeared like a rough *sea* of *straw* waves." Millinery was an important and often expensive component of fashion. With the exception of talented seamstresses like Eliza Bryant of Portland, women did not usually make their own hats. Milliners made bonnets, mantillas, veils, and sometimes made or decorated dresses. From the simple, close-fitting straw bonnets of the early 1800s to the bombastic hats of the 1830s, Maine milliners produced headgear "executed in fashionable style." For winter wear, beaver hats were desirable and practical; Eastport hatter and fur trader Jonas Green sold Boston beaver bonnets as well as plumes and beaver,

muskrat, sable, raccoon, and rabbit furs, adornments doubtless acquired from local trappers. Interest in headwear extended to hair, caps, veils, and combs. Simple, short haircuts and wigs popular in the early 1800s were eventually eclipsed by outlandishly high, busy coiffures in the 1830s, embellished with false curls, frizzles, braids, feathers, and flowers like those sold by a Mr. Delville on Exchange Street in Portland in 1834.³⁴



“Mrs. Lowell is a fine ladylike woman,” Eliza Southgate wrote in 1800, “yet her manners are such as would have been admired fifty years ago, there is too much appearance of whalebone and buckram to please the depraved taste of the present age.” Eliza Southgate described a cultural phenomenon which exists to this day: generational differences of opinion regarding fashion, manners, and behavior. Mrs. Lowell probably thought the “present age” *was* depraved; in 1800 the transparent *neo-grecque* fashions of Napoleonic France had just crossed the Atlantic. Dresses were thin and clinging; few undergarments were worn. Hair was cut short, then befeathered and turbaned. Tiny flat slippers of kid or satin offered little protection against the New England winter. A complete break was made with the heavy brocades and boning of the eighteenth century (fig. 3 & nos. 1 – 3).³⁵

This radical change in style championed by the French Empire lingered for twenty-five years. The basic silhouette of these unconstructed garments formed the model of dress until the mid-1820s, with only a gradual relaxation of narrow hems and high waists (fig. 5 & nos. 5 – 13). The moderation of the early 1820s was abandoned after 1825, when corsets and petticoats returned with a vengeance to re-shape the female body. Cumbersome leg-o’-mutton sleeves, short, wide hemlines, and a broad shoulder silhouette were offset by towering hairdos and mammoth bonnets (fig. 12 & nos. 14 – 16). As dresses became more extreme in their proportions, they grew more restrictive, and the women who wore them were more limited in their movements.

For about ten years, the style outdid itself, much to the dismay and ridicule of many onlookers. A Kennebunk newspaper reported in 1831 that a young woman had perished at a ball, the victim of “excessive lacing” of a corset. British critic Frances Trollope condemned American dress as tasteless, impractical, and altogether “too French.” Social reformers such as Catherine Beecher warned with pseudo-scientific authority against the dangers of fashion:

so long as it is the fashion to admire, as models of elegance, the wasp-like figures which are presented at the rooms of mantua makers and milliners, there will be hundreds of foolish women, who will risk their lives and health to secure some resemblance to these deformities of the human frame.

For Catherine Beecher and her peers, who saw education and the institutionalization of domestic life as far more noble pursuits than fashion, women who did not dress according to their age, station, financial means, and even meteorological climate, were dressed *inappropriately* and, therefore, lacked beauty.³⁶

By 1840 technological and cultural developments had begun to democratize American clothing (fig. 7, no. 19 & no. 16). While the wealthiest women still wore exquisite silk gowns created by skilled dressmakers, those of lesser means now enjoyed more “fashionable” (though not extraordinary) garments than they had in 1800. The industrialization of domestic cotton textile manufacture introduced attractive fabrics at very low prices. The invention which revolutionized women’s lives — the sewing machine — became increasingly available after 1850, replacing hours of tedious handstitching and paving the way for the expansion of the ready-made garment industry. Magazines like *Godey’s Lady’s Book* offered a broad spectrum of American women, even those in the hinterlands, a glimpse of the fashionable dresses which could be theirs with considerable time and effort. The entry of teenage girls and young women into the work force, particularly as textile mill operatives, gave them cash wages, more buying power, and the chance to pursue fashion like their middle- and upper-class counterparts.



FIGURE 12. NUMBERS 18 & 17.

The fashionable clothing worn by Maine women in the first half of the nineteenth century was as varied as personal taste and circumstance. With elegant materials at their disposal in trading towns, and with access to the latest styles through travel, correspondence, and magazines, Maine women were able to create clothes which reflected the prevailing trends of the day. Fashionable dress was an important component of the well-to-do lifestyle. Not only was a great deal of

time and expense lavished on one's "best wearing apparel," but smart dressing conveyed a strong message about the wealth and status of its wearers. No homespun backwater, Maine was a region dotted with fashionable towns and stylish people, who could vie with the most elegant Americans. When she left Hallowell in 1846 to attend school in New York City, Virginia Hubbard, like hundreds of Maine girls before her, ventured into a new world of style. She wrote with confidence to her mother, however, once she arrived: "You ask how my dresses appear in New York. Very well, indeed, and Aunt E. says they are a great deal more fashionable and better made than hers that are bought and made in the city."³⁷

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Notes

¹ Abigail Emerson, will, cited in Edward Emerson, "The Emerson Family," typescript, Old York Historical Society, York, Maine, 2:196.

² Eliza Southgate Bowne, *A Girl's Life Eighty Years Ago: Selections from the Letters of Eliza Southgate Bowne* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1888), 28.

³ Martha Moore Ballard, diary, cited in Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on her Diary, 1785 – 1812* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 131.

⁴ Abigail May, journal, 1796, Maine Historical Society (hereafter MHS).

⁵ Mary Caroline King of Saco wrote that Standish "would be a pleasant town to visit if the society was a little more refined." (M. Caroline King to Benjamin Hale, Saco, June 30, 1820, Hale-King Papers, Special Collections, Bowdoin College Library).

Nathaniel Hawthorne's mother, Elizabeth Manning Hathorne (Nathaniel changed the spelling of the family name), was recently widowed when she left Salem, Massachusetts, to live in Raymond, Maine. She "lamented that so pleasant a place should be inhabited by people so rude and uncultivated. . . . There are some *decent* families in the town, but the best of them are merely *decent*." (Elizabeth M. Hathorne to Priscilla M. Dike, Raymond, December 15, 1818, Manning Hawthorne Papers, Special Collections, Bowdoin College Library); see Richard M. Candee, "Maine Towns, Maine People: Architecture and Community, 1783 – 1820," in Charles E. Clark, James S. Leamon, and Karen Bowden, eds., *Maine in the Early Republic* (Hanover, N. H.: University Press of New England, 1988), 26 – 61; and Richard M. Candee, "'The Appearance of Enterprise and Improvement': Architecture and the Coastal Elite in Southern Maine," in Laura Fecych Sprague, ed., *Agreeable Situations: Society, Commerce, and Art in Southern Maine, 1780 – 1830* (Kennebunk, Me. The Brick Store Museum, 1987), 67 – 87.

⁶ Hannah King, the widow of United States Congressman Cyrus King, was a member of one of Maine's leading families; nevertheless, she was obliged to take in boarders in her later years (Hale-King Papers, Special Collections, Bowdoin College Library); see Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "'From the Fair to the Brave': Spheres of Womanhood in Federal Maine," in Sprague, ed., *Agreeable Situations*, 215 – 225.

⁷ Sprague, ed., *Agreeable Situations*, cat. 145; *Boston Weekly Magazine and Ladies' Miscellany*, February 18, 1818, cited in Davida Tenenbaum Deutsch, "The Polite Lady: Portraits of American Schoolgirls and their Accomplishments, 1725 – 1830," *Antiques* 135, no. 3 (March 1989): 749.

⁸ Mary Manning to Elizabeth M. Hathorne, Salem, Mass., November 27, 1820, Manning Hawthorne Papers, Special Collections, Bowdoin College Library; Bowne, *A Girl's Life*, 23; Hannah S. King to Cyrus King, Saco, June 30, 1813, Hale-King Papers, Special Collections, Bowdoin College Library.

⁹ Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977), 51–52.

¹⁰ *Freeman's Friend* (Saco, Maine), October 16, 1805.

¹¹ Eliza Bryant, diary, December 16–19, 1802; January 13, 1803, MHS.

¹² Ann Frazier King to a sister, Bath, December 18, 1816; Ann F. King Bridge to M. Caroline King Hale, Augusta, May 15, 1832, Hale-King Papers, Special Collections, Bowdoin College Library; Sarah Connell Ayer, *Diary of Sarah Connell Ayer* (Portland, Me.: Lefavor-Tower Company, 1910), 348.

¹³ See Sprague, ed., *Agreeable Situations*, cats. 162 & 166.

¹⁴ See Sarah Bowdoin to Paulina and Sarah Cony, Paris, France, April 20, 1807, Reuel Williams Papers, MHS; Louisa Caroline Wilcox Putnam wore a purple-brown silk jacquard dress and capelet to her wedding in the 1840s; her dress is in the collection of the Old York Historical Society.

¹⁵ Barbara Dodd Hellernan, "Chrysallis of Gloom: Nineteenth Century American Mourning Costume," in Martha V. Pike and Janice Gray Armstrong, *A Time to Mourn: Expressions of Grief in Nineteenth Century America* (Stony Brook, N. Y: The Museums at Stony Brook, 1980), 92, 95.

¹⁶ *Eastern Argus* (Portland, Maine), August 10, 1824.

¹⁷ *Portland Directory* (Portland, Me.: n.p., 1834); *Eastern Sentinel* (Eastport, Maine), March 27, 1824; see Sprague, ed., *Agreeable Situations*, cat. 174.

¹⁸ Hannah King to M. Caroline King Hale, Saco, May 22, 1840, Hale-King Papers, Special Collections, Bowdoin College Library.

¹⁹ William Fogg, diary, November 15, 1815, cited in *Old Eliot* 3, no. 5 (May 1899): 78.

²⁰ Bowne, *A Girl's Life*, 167, 157; a "half high" neckline would be at collarbone level, Olive S. King to M. Caroline King, Bath, August 18, 1819, Hale-King Papers, Special Collections, Bowdoin College Library; see Sprague, ed., *Agreeable Situations*, cat. 87, for a similar dress in the 1818 portrait of Rebecca McCobb of Phippsburg, Maine.

²¹ George Tate to Robert Tate, Cronstadt, Russia, June 13, 1804, cited in William David Barry and Frances W. Peabody, *Tate House: Crown of the Maine Mast Trade* (Portland, Me.: National Society of Colonial Dames of America in the State of Maine, 1982), 90; Sarah Bowdoin to Paulina and Sarah Cony, Paris, France, April 20, 1807, Reuel Williams Papers, MHS; Sarah Bowdoin's fashionable portrait by Gilbert Stuart, in the collection of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, is illustrated in Gertrud A. Mellen and Elizabeth F. Wilder, eds., *Maine and its Role in American Art, 1740 – 1963* (New York: Viking, 1963), 24.

²² Arthur G. Staples, ed., *The Letters of John Fairfield* (Lewiston, Me.: Lewiston Journal Company, 1922), 116, 187.

²³ Elizabeth McClellan, *History of American Costume, 1607 – 1870* (1904. Reprint. New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1969), 273, 274, 284, 356; Claudia Kidwell, *Cutting a Fashionable Fit: Dressmakers' Drafting Systems in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1979), 13; Jack Larkin, *The Reshaping of Everyday Life, 1790 – 1840* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 190.

²⁴ Eliza Bryant, diary, November 13, 1801; December 19, 1801; December 26, 1801, MHS; Elizabeth P. King to an unknown reader, Ipswich, Mass., April 13, 1833, Hale-King Papers, Special Collections, Bowdoin College Library; *Argus Semi-Weekly* (Portland, Maine), September 28, 1827.

²⁵ Receipt, Thomas and Abel Vinton to Stephen Longfellow, Portland, 1808, Wadsworth-Longfellow Papers, MHS; *Freeman's Friend* (Portland, Maine), October 17, 1807; December 19, 1807; November 28, 1807.

²⁶ *Freeman's Friend* (Saco, Maine), 1805 – 1807, passim; *Columbian Sentinel* (Alfred, Maine), 1824 – 1825, passim; Ann F. King Bridge to M. Caroline King Hale, Augusta, October 5, 1827, Hale-King Papers, Special Collections, Bowdoin College

Library; account book and invoices, 1819 – 1837, passim, Parker Cleaveland Scientific and Financial Papers, Special Collections, Bowdoin College Library. Cleaveland purchased the following at auction from John Rogers in 1837: forty yards of calico, eight yards of changeable silk, broadcloth, cashmere, shirting, muslin, velvet ribbon, striped muslin, blue crepe, thin lace, and three fancy wallets.

²⁷ *Eastern Sentinel* (Eastport, Maine), July 1, 1820; June 5, 1831.

²⁸ Abigail May, journal, 1796, MHS; see Sprague, ed., *Agreeable Situations*, cat. 141, for a tiffany flounce in the collection of the York Institute Museum, Saco, Maine; Eliza Bryant, diary, June 1 – 20, 1801; February 2, 1802; June 2, 1802; July 15, 1802; August 18 – 20, 1802; September 4 – 7, 1802; October 16, 1802, MHS.

²⁹ John Neal to Miss R. W. Neal, Boston, Mass., 1815, MHS.

³⁰ Hannah S. King to M. Caroline King Hale, Saco, November 4, 1823, Hale-King Papers, Special Collections, Bowdoin College Library; Sarah Cony Williams to Reuel Williams, Augusta, February 16, 1826, Reuel Williams Papers, MHS.

³¹ *Eastern Sentinel* (Eastport, Maine), June 16, 1827; see Kidwell, *Cutting a Fashionable Fit*.

³² Sprague, ed., *Agreeable Situations*, cat. 170.

³³ *Kennebunk Gazette and Maine Palladium*, June 4, 1831; *Eastern Argus* (Portland, Maine), February 5, 1807; *Eastern Sentinel* (Eastport, Maine), January 1, 1820.

³⁴ William C. Pierce, “1792 – 1866 as a Western Maine Lawyer Saw It,” typescript, MHS; Ruth Turner Wilcox, *The Mode in Hats and Headdress* (New York: Scribner’s, 1945), 160; *Portland Directory* (Portland, Me.: Arthur Shirley and Son, 1841); *Eastern Sentinel* (Eastport, Maine), September 15, 1827; October 10, 1829; January 15, 1820; *Portland Directory* (Portland, Me.: n.p., 1834), 21. Nancy F. Cott points out in *The Bonds of Womanhood* (39, 40), that an excessive duty placed on imported leghorn in 1826 led to a thriving cottage industry in New England, in which farm girls plaited Cuban palm leaves as an alternative to the more expensive material; she adds that women who kept schools often supplemented their incomes by selling bonnets.

³⁵ Bowne, *A Girl’s Life*, 33.

³⁶ *Kennebunk Gazette and Maine Palladium*, July 23, 1831; Frances Milton Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832. Reprint. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1927), 310; Catharine E. Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School* (1841. Reprint. New York: Source Books Press, 1910), 97 – 98.

³⁷ Virginia Hubbard to Sarah Hubbard, New York City, November 22, 1846, Hubbard Papers, Special Collections, Bowdoin College Library.