

My Best Wearing Apparel

Maine Women and Fashion, 1800 – 1840



MAINE HISTORICAL SOCIETY QUARTERLY

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My Best Wearing Apparel

Maine Women and Fashion, 1800–1840

*An exhibition featuring
the collection of the Maine Historical Society
at the York Institute Museum, Saco, Maine*

May 3–September 6, 1991

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FIGURE 1. NUMBER 13.

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Front cover: Checklist numbers 18 and 17.

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Edited by Laura Fecych Sprague. Mannequins dressed by Lisa J. Blinn.

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Photography and book design by Bruce Kennett.

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Preface

We are pleased to publish this special edition of the *Maine Historical Society Quarterly* to celebrate the exhibition, *My Best Wearing Apparel: Maine Women and Fashion, 1800 – 1840*. Held at the York Institute Museum in Saco, the exhibition marks several firsts for the Society. The finest of our remarkable collection of women's costumes from the early nineteenth century will be on view for the first time. By collaborating with the York Institute, we are able to combine forces to offer exceptional programs to the public.

This issue of the *Quarterly* serves as the exhibition catalogue. It includes an introduction to the Society's costume collection by Nan Cumming, our curator of museum collections; an essay on the meaning of dress in early Maine by Kerry A. O'Brien, curator of collections, York Institute Museum; and a checklist.

This collaborative project is the result of the dedicated efforts of many. In 1987 Nancy Rexford surveyed the holdings of the Society and brought the significance of these exquisite costumes to our attention. She has continued to lend her expertise to the Society for this project. We extend our gratitude to Lisa J. Blinn, exhibition designer, for her expert dressing of the mannequins. The Brick Store Museum kindly lent mannequins, and staff members Kathryn A. Hussey and Harry Andrews advised on the construction of additional dress forms. Jane K. Rockwell at the Exeter Handkerchief Company generously supplied fabrics for the installation. West Point-Pepperell, Inc., and H. J. Nielson, Florist, provided additional materials.

The success and splendid appearance of the exhibition is also due to generous loans by the following public institutions and private collectors: The Brick Store Museum, Old York Historical Society, Pejepscot Historical Society, Mr. and Mrs. W. M. Schwind, Jr., Tate House-National Society of Colonial Dames of America in the State of Maine, and the Victoria Society of Maine.

Staff members at both institutions assisted with myriad research questions and eased the installation process. We are grateful to the staff

of the York Institute Museum, Emerson W. Baker, Jade Elliott, Richard Havey, Audrey G. Milne, Kerry A. O'Brien, and Tina Toomey, and to Maine Historical Society staff members, Kathryn Blake, Nan Cumming, Marilee Konczal, Cynthia Murphy, Nicholas Noyes, and Stephen T. Seames. Mrs. George Damerel kindly helped trace family histories for the checklist. Bruce Kennett undertook all the photography and provided the handsome catalogue design. Society trustee Laura Fecych Sprague conceived the idea for the exhibition and publication; she served as editor and oversaw the production of this volume. Arlene Palmer Schwind offered additional editorial expertise.

The exhibition would not have been possible without the generous support of the Libra Foundation. We are grateful to Joseph Redman of Joseph's for his support. Amaryllis Clothing Company, Lucky Strike Clothing, Serendipity, Tavecchia, and the Whip & Spoon have also helped sponsor the exhibition. We sincerely thank Robert and Elizabeth Carroll, Jeanette H. Sprague, and Seth and Laura Sprague for their contributions.

Since 1822 and 1867 the Maine Historical Society and the York Institute Museum, respectively, have devoted their resources to the acquisition and preservation of historical materials. Over the generations the definition of "historical significance" has varied, influencing research approaches, collecting policies, and exhibition philosophies. Today costumes are considered far more than curiosities of "ye olden days." What women wore reveals many aspects of social, economic, and cultural history. Clothing and personal accessories preserved by subsequent generations come to us with meanings well beyond their original function.

We hope this project will spur deeper appreciation of the value of material culture to the study of regional history and encourage further investigations of the Maine Historical Society's extraordinary resources. We look forward to future collaborative endeavors which will bring the history of Maine closer to the public.

Elizabeth J. Miller, *executive director*
Maine Historical Society