

FROM THE COLLECTIONS

Samuel Freeman's Waistcoat

BY JACQUELINE FIELD

For the 2004 exhibition, "Amazing Maine Stories," Maine Historical Society harnessed together a wide assortment of objects, and among them were three garments: a 1786 waistcoat; an 1800 undress naval coat; and a 1920 Chinese outfit. Placed within different clusters of diverse but in some ways related objects, each item of dress contributed to a particular narrative. Removal from storage and preparation for exhibition provided an opportunity to closely examine the garments themselves and read something of the individual tale each one had to tell. Of these, Samuel Freeman's 1786 waistcoat tells the most interesting story.

Samuel Freeman played a dynamic role helping Portland recover from the wreck and ruin wrought by Captain Mowat's bombardment during the Revolution. His efforts brought him prosperity. In 1786, on the occasion of his second marriage, forty-three-year-old Freeman donned this expensive silk waistcoat (Figure 1). Highly popular in the late eighteenth century, sleeveless embroidered waistcoats extended below the waist. Worn with close fitting cut-away coats, this style replaced long sleeved, knee length, differently ornamented versions worn under full-skirted coats during the first half of the century.

In late eighteenth century there was no American silk industry to manufacture the waistcoat fabric. Nor did embroidery workshops exist in this country, as they did in Europe, particularly in Lyons, reportedly home to over 6,000 female embroiderers in 1785. Embroidered on individual lengths of fabric, pairs of waistcoat shapes were sold all over Europe and beyond. Freeman's waistcoat perhaps reached America ready made, carried to Boston or Portland by a returning traveler. Possibly a merchant imported the finished, made-up garment, or the pair of flat embroidered panels ready to be cut out and assembled by a local tailor (by hand, in these pre-sewing machine days).

The front panels are made of cream ribbed silk, dotted with floral sprigs. A meandering trail of green leaves and small pink flowers is embroidered in silk chenille along the borders and pocket flaps. Silver metallic thread and sequins embellish the buttons, and are used in a chain-stitched pattern along the edges and for other leafy sprays (Figure 2). Several features suggest economies. Expensive embroidery is restricted to

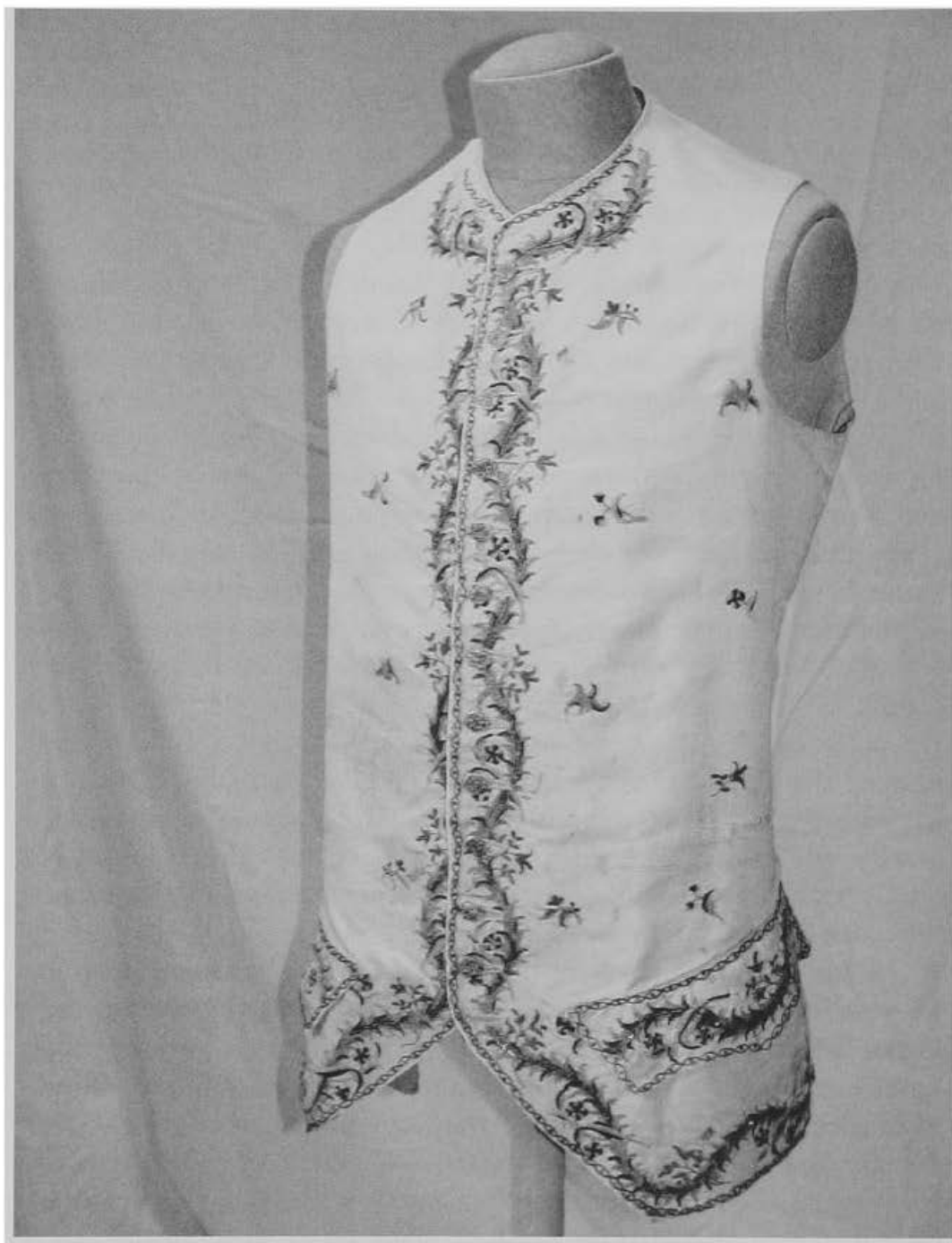


Figure 1. Samuel Freeman's waistcoat.

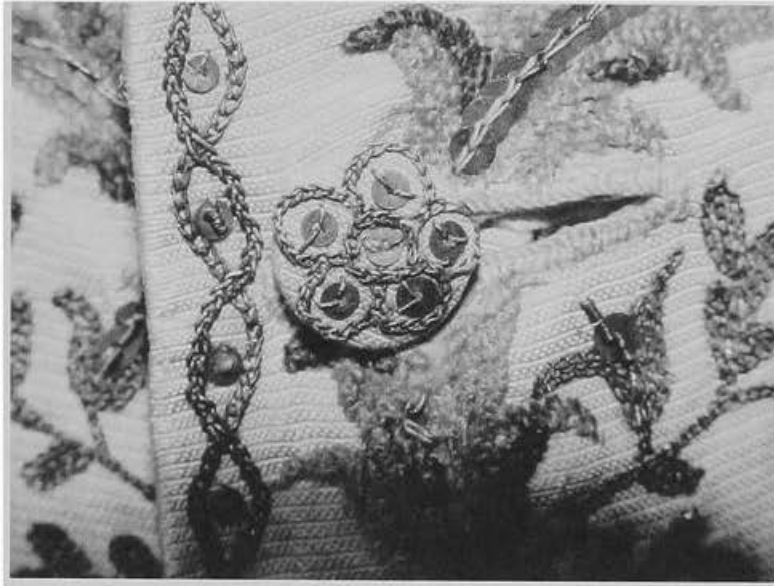


Figure 2. Silk embroidered leaves and metallic thread details.

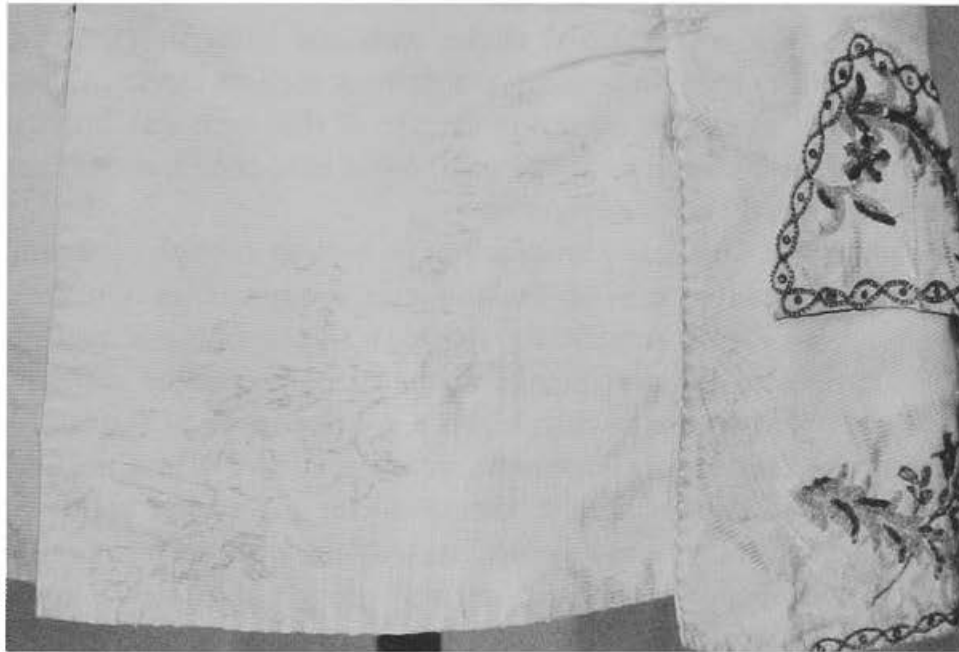


Figure 3. The design outline left unembroidered at the lower borders at both sides. There are also unembroidered design outlines at the far right and left sides of the neck / shoulder areas.

visible areas, leaving the design outlined, but not stitched on the parts hidden by a coat—the side neck and lower side borders (Figure 3). Chenille embroidery may have been less expensive than the more often seen type of embroidery with glossy, sharply defined shapes, skillfully worked in smooth silk floss and satin stitch. Here, embroidery is less lustrous and the fuzzy chenille creates less precise shapes—more quickly and easily worked by less skilled fingers. While costs accrued more from materials than labor, the embroidery quality hints of origins in a minor workshop producing somewhat lower-priced goods. The inside edges are lined with deteriorated twilled silk. Other lining is made of a coarse cotton fabric, as is the entire waistcoat back, with the part always covered by the wearer's coat (an economy found in many waistcoats).

At the front, opening design symmetry is interrupted because the buttonhole side overlaps a little too far, suggesting that buttons may have been moved to improve fit. Further, there are signs that this waistcoat was possibly made down from a larger garment. The inside side and back flap seams do not align, and there is a strip of lining on the buttonhole side that is difficult to explain. Discarded older styles of waistcoat were very likely available on the market, since already by the mid-1780s, men in the most sophisticated circles wore the latest short, straight-across-the-waist style. Nevertheless, variations such as Freeman's waistcoat remained modish for another decade. If this item was purchased second-hand and altered to fit, the cost would have been less than a new waistcoat—but still not inexpensive.

His marriage was clearly an occasion important enough for Freeman to spend a substantial sum on making a good appearance. On the one hand, as an outward statement, the waistcoat signifies his not insubstantial financial status. On the other hand, the economies noted above show he was not prone to undue extravagance, as they speak of restraint and moderation. Furthermore, Freeman's wedding waistcoat, and the quality of suit required to wear with it, communicate something about Portland's society of the day, as a genteel metropolis with professionals and successful businessmen and their families—people able to read and understand this sartorial message.

From the waistcoat it might be assumed that Freeman took an interest in fashion, but other documentation shows quite the reverse: he was a creature of habit. Demonstrating self-assurance, and perhaps just basic economy, for decades into the nineteenth century he still went about his business in Portland clad in his comfortable old eighteenth-century style breeches and coats—but, to judge from the lack of signs of wear, not this

waistcoat. Put away either for sentimental reasons, or in a nod to fashion change, Samuel Freeman's decorative waistcoat, and others found in collections today, most likely owe their survival to the 1790s shift to plain male dress that marked the beginning of modern male attire.

Jacqueline Field is an independent researcher, working on a history of the American silk industry.