

MEN'S CLOTHING OF THE 1880s.



A GUIDE TO CLOTHING ACCESSORIES, AND RESOURCES.

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What is the Purpose of Period Clothing?

For many people who are new to the world of living history, the concept of wearing wool or long dresses in the summer seems like a strange idea. On the other hand, some have the concept of it being fun to “dress up”. But what is the real purpose of period correct clothing at a living history site?

The whole concept of living history is to recreate the past to interpret in the present. This is accomplished through both verbal information and visuals. A very strong visual for a visitor is period correct clothing. In order for the interpreter to convey to the public that they are experiencing life in the past, period clothing can help set the scene. An interpreter who is accurately dressed can present quite a picture for the average visitor. This visual automatically lets the visitor know that they have been taken back in time, thus, successfully accomplishing part of our mission as a living history site. Period clothing can also encourage questions from the public, this helps satisfy some of the basic concepts of effective interpretation. We all wear clothing, and this is something that you and the visitor have in common. So, they will naturally be curious why yours looks so different.

In addition to this, it can convey quite a bit of information on our own social and economic history as well. Different period outfits can help educate the visitor on social classes and styles of the time. Thus, as a visual, a period outfit can interpret itself at times. For example, an old worn-out pair of bibbed overalls will reflect a working-class individual and a beaver skin top hat will stand out as being upper class.

In retrospect, historic clothing is part of the overall picture for the site. It helps create a period ambience and at the same time interpret everything from class to fashion.

Now that we have answered that question, we must reflect upon one more point. How accurate should we be with clothing?

Historic clothing is simply an extension of one's own interpretation. When you wear historic clothing, it becomes part of your interpretation whether you are aware of it or not. For this reason, clothing must be absolutely correct. Incorrect period clothing is no different from providing false information. For example, the battle of Gettysburg was fought in 1922! Wearing an 1830s dress with a zipper in the back! Either way, they are both incorrect. For this reason, we must make sure that our historical clothing is accurate, just like our historical information we provide. This also presents the question, “Will the visitor really know?” That is not the point, we are providing the public with correct information and they are taking our word on it. Thus, we must make sure it is true. Also, you never know, visitors will pick up on things that are not historically accurate and comment on them. Thus, wearing accurate clothing can save one from the embarrassment of a visitor pointing out that something is not period correct.

One last point to make about authentic period clothing is that sites who adhere to wearing only those garments that are accurate present a picture to the public that they are professional and take what they do seriously. The more accurate the clothing the more that this is evident.

Men's Clothing of the 1880s

Men's clothing of the 1880s saw change but in subtle ways. From the antebellum to the postbellum time-period men's everyday clothing remained mostly the same. Loose fitting sack coats and trousers were a standard. However, in the 1880s, men's clothing did start to become more fitted and flattering. The typical felt slouch hat would also see the accompaniment of the dressy wool derby. Men had more styles of clothing to choose from. One of the biggest contributing factors to this was the rise of industrialization.

The rise of mass production and ready-made clothing and kits made the production of clothing an easier matter. Ready made clothing was available and provided an easier way to obtain clothing. In addition, the production of kits greatly helped the home seamstress. These kits included the fabric, pattern, buttons, thread and accessories. The price of these kits was also quite acceptable and reasonable. Together with the number of sewing machines available, the production of fashions at home was greatly enhanced. Even folks without detailed sewing skills could still find seamstresses or tailors in their town who would produce the items at a minimal cost.

With the rise of industrialization, ready made suits of wool or seersucker could be pursued off the rack. Ready made cotton shirts, detachable collars and vests also allowed for easier access to everyday clothing. In turn, newer styles could be purchased to keep up with the times. Tighter fitting coats with a more tailored look, tailored shirts with a high shoulder and cut away jackets all made for an update style change.

Even these subtle changes filtered down to men's work clothes. More fitting coats, work pants and shirts became a standard. The introduction of commercially made bib-overalls and eventually Levi Strauss work jeans introduced clothing made specifically for work purposes.

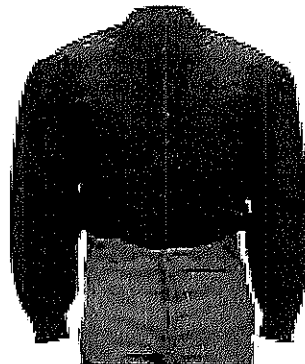
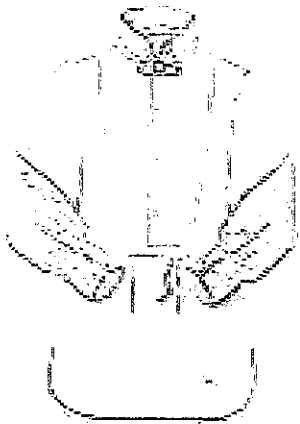
Thus, fashionable yet practical clothing was readily available whether it was factory produced or sewed from a kit. This helped contribute to the changes in the men's clothing industry in the 1880s.

A. Shirts:

The most practical and common everyday item for men was the shirt. However, shirts still came in different styles and fabrics depending on the purpose it was worn for. In the 1880s, the traditional mid-19th century style of shirt had changed. The baggy look and fit of shirts in the civil war era was replaced with a more fitted shirt with tighter sleeves and several styles of collars. Industrialization and the idea of ready-made clothing directly affected shirts. Ready made shirts could now be purchased at a store off the rack. This led to more men's clothing becoming readily available.

Shirts of this era were still primarily pull over with a placket with three to six buttons. The modern button-down style of dress shirt was starting to appear, but for dress purposes only. Most men's shirts were still pullover. Shirts essentially fell into two categories, work shirts and dress shirts. Typical work shirts were usually made from cotton and would have been white, colored, or printed fabric. However, wool, or wool flannel work type shirts were still in favor for colder weather. Popular fabrics were solids, checks and some patterns. They would have featured mostly machine stitching and some hand stitching if needed. Buttons used for shirts were typically bone, porcelain/China, or mother of pearl.

Collars of 1880s shirts varied quite a bit. Typically, the regular fold down collar would have been common. Collarless shirts, with a small stand-up collar, were also popular. Usually dress shirts featured a small stand-up collar with buttonholes sewed in. The purpose of this was for detachable collars or paper collars. Paper collars would be purchased by the box and featured crisp, white stiff starched collars that could be attached to the shirt. The idea was that once the collar wore out, you would simply detach it and put on a new one. This helped preserve collars on dress shirts from wearing out or getting soiled quickly.



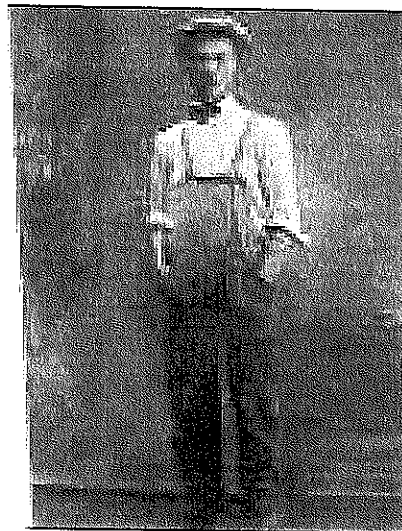
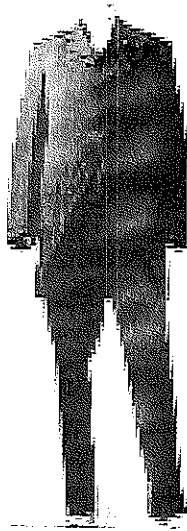
B. Pants and Overalls:

The most practical and common everyday item besides the shirt were trousers. Men's trousers were relatively unchanged in the mid to late 19th century. However, the advent of the industrial revolution and the further development of the sewing machine resulted in pants being produced at an incredible rate. This led to trousers being sold commercially through stores. However, did the style of men's trousers change at all?

The overall shape of the men's trousers remained consistent. Sitting at the natural waist and not on the hips, trousers were worn high. They featured a straight front and a rise on the back part of the waist. The biggest difference in the 1880s was that trousers now had a more fitted look compared to the bagginess of the 1850s-60s. However, construction remained the same with them featuring a button fly and buttons for suspenders to be attached to.

Fabrics for trousers varied quite a bit. Wool would be the most commonly worn fabric due to its durability and usefulness. Wool clothing would be worn year-round and not just in the colder months. However, other fabrics like cotton and linen were found for more light weight trousers in hot months. For work purposes, durable fabrics like duck, hemp or jean cloth were also found for their cheapness and durability. Buttons commonly found on trousers included bone, porcelain utility, and metal.

Bib-overalls were a commonly found piece of work clothing. As early as the 1850s, the idea of a garment to be worn over one's trousers was common. Initially, overalls simply covered the trousers and fastened at the waste. Eventually the addition of a bib sewn onto the trouser part allowed one's shirt to remain clean as well. By the 1880s, bibs became more durable with the addition of a front pocket and metal fasteners for the straps. The most common fabric for overalls was cotton duck.



C. Shoes and Socks:

In the 1880s, men had several different options for footwear. The two most commonly found styles were the shoe and boot. Not much had changed on shoe construction and style in the late 19th century. Based on usage and purpose, a shoe or boot was made for every occasion.

Hand constructed out of leather, men's shoes or boots came in quite a few styles. The most common color found would be black. However, russet and even red leather could be found as well. Men's shoes and boots still featured a soft leather upper and hard leather soles with stitching. For work purposes, they could also include hobnails or heel plates to maintain ones heal. Laces would simply be strips of leather dyed the same color.

For men's shoes, a lowcut style was common, or a higher up style that reached the ankle. In addition to having laces, quite often men's shoes featured an elastic strip so that they could be pulled on. Work shoes were often rough side out and left plain colored or dyed.

Boots were one of the most common types of footwear for the period. Boots varied from those that were calf-high to those that came up to the knees. They were made of leather and the toes were broad and squared off with rounded corners and broad heels. Quite often, the top of the upper part of the boot might have a contrasting color of leather like red or blue. All boots were made to be pulled on with tabs. Work boots were often rough side out and utilitarian in nature.

Men's socks in the 1880s varied quite a bit. Socks were both constructed by hand and by knitting machines. Typical materials used were cotton and various qualities of wool. However, silk socks could be found for more formal dress wear. Colors for socks varied from natural to dyed. Patterned socks like stripes or plaid would also be found.

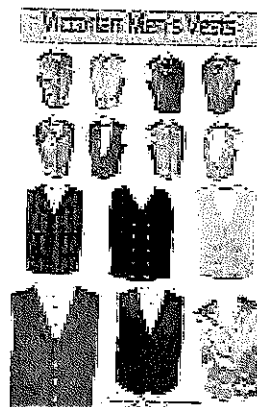
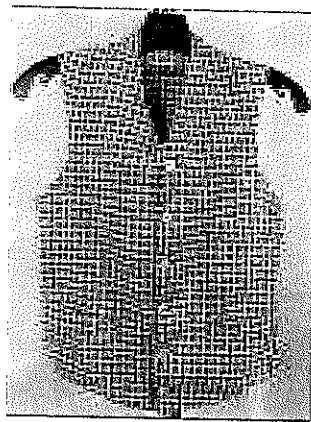


D. Vests:

Vests were a common everyday item worn by all men. The vest was meant to protect the shirt and to be worn under one's coat. Very little changed with vest construction and look in the late 19th century. Vests would be worn by both laborers and upper-class gentlemen.

Men's vests in the 1880s, were primarily constructed of wool, cotton, or linen. However, some fancier vests would be made of silk. They would also feature a backing made of polished cotton, usually in black. The construction of vests varied quite a bit, with some having a straight bottom and some with a tapered bottom. The number of pockets on vests varied from two to four. Some vest would feature lapels of various shape whereas some had no collar or lapels. The number buttons on a vest varied from four to six or more.

Button types found on vests were ornate metal, porcelain, or fabric covered. All vests would also feature a fastener buckle and straps on the back to tighten up the vest to the wearer. The buckle varied quite a bit in shape and style but would be constructed out of metal.

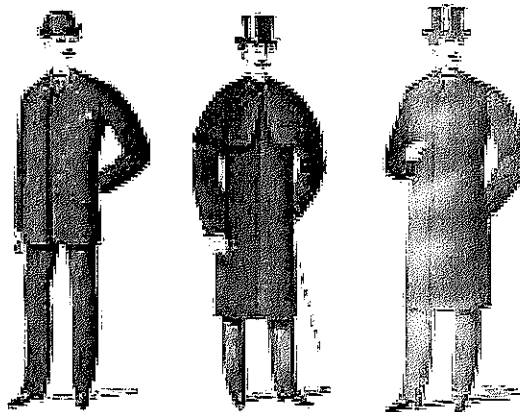


E. Coats:

By 1880 all vestiges of the old, oversized, loose sack coat had disappeared from favor, and short sacks were much more narrowly fitted, with narrow sleeves set high on the shoulder. A few styles of sack coat, for older men, were cut longer, but even they were narrow. Lapels were extremely narrow and small, as the coat was made to be closed high at the throat, barely showing the necktie. Even a photograph of a poor, elderly man no longer shows the oversize coat style. During the decade, a cut-away jacket front was introduced that allowed the bottom of the vest, and therefore the watch chain, to be exposed to view even when the jacket was fully buttoned. This jacket had only three or four buttons and was intended to be buttoned all the way to the top.

All varieties of coats were still made, and a man could purchase frock coats and long morning coats in the more expensive lines, but the sack is virtually the only style seen in photographs and therefore must be taken to have been universally accepted as day wear. Most appear to be black, although some pattern occasionally shows, and other dark colors were certainly worn.

Men's coats were typically made from wool. However, other fabrics were used for work coats like cotton duck or wool flannel. For summer-weight coats, cotton or linen were frequently seen. Linings were commonly made from silk or cotton. Buttons featured on coats were ornate metal, fabric covered, or even horn.



E. Hats:

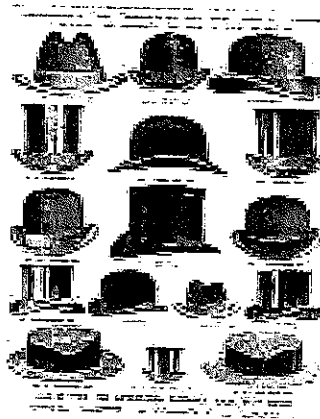
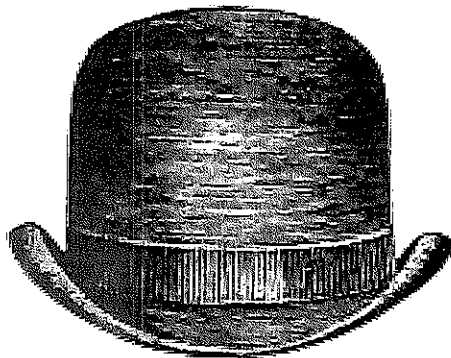
A youthful-style hat, resembling the shallow crowned felt derby worn by schoolboys, with both side brims curved smartly up and a dip over the forehead, is seen on quite a few young men throughout the eighties. The soft felt hat is frequently seen in photographs in gray, beige, as well as black, and shaped with a crease and with the soft brim variously bent. A stiff, deep crowned black homburg was extremely popular with dressier daytime suits. The straw sailor shows up in leisure time photos, and a full range of caps is shown for casual dress.

For the working class or laborer, a variety of straw hats were worn during the period. From a high crown to a rounded crown, both styles would be popular. The size of the brim varied quite a bit to provide shade from the sun. In addition, wool caps like mechanics caps were frequently worn. These varied in shape and style but were small round caps made of wool and featured a brim.

Any good felt hat should have had a nice stitching or tape around the edge of the brim. This was used to basically keep the hat from coming unwound or frayed. A simple tape can be used to apply a nice edge. Center the tape on the edge of the brim, fold over and sew in place with a running stitch. The tape can be the same color or a common contrasting color.

Another nice addition to a good felt hat was a ribbon around the crown. A $\frac{1}{2}$ " to $\frac{3}{4}$ " silk ribbon was wrapped around the crown and sewn into a bow on the side. The ribbon was then stitched to hold it into place.

On the inside of a hat, one would find a sweat band. A nice thin leather strip was measured to the diameter of the inside of the hat. They were then cut to a width of $1\frac{1}{2}$ " to 2", or whatever the preference was. Lastly, the strip is placed inside the hat and stitched into place using a whip stitch.



Period Clothing and Sewing Resources

This is a compilation of sources for period clothing, fabrics, patterns and goods. I am not endorsing the quality or workmanship of any item or materials or recommending any particular supplier or manufacturer over another. However, the following merchants have been listed for your convenience.

Suppliers of Fabric, Patterns and Textiles:

Amazon Vinegar and Pickling Works/Dry Goods (a wide variety of items)
1-812-852-1780 <https://www.amazondrygoods.com/>

G. Gedney Godwin, Sutler of Mount Misery
P.O. Box 100 Valley Forge, PA. 19481 (215) 783-0670 <https://www.gggodwin.com/>

Kannik's Korner, Fritz and Kathleen Kannik-Books on Plain Sewing
<http://www.kannikskorner.com/>

Past Patterns (a wide variety of period patterns)
Dayton, Ohio <https://www.pastpatterns.com/>

P & B Textiles (colonial, 1830s, and 1880s reproduction fabric lines sold)
www.pbtex.com

Vintage and Vogue- Carries a full line of historic fabrics. Check the fabrics for the Cochecho Line from P+B Textiles.
<http://www.shopvintageandvogue.com/>

Ready Made Goods

Blockade Runner
1027 Bell Buckle/Wartrace Rd. Wartrace Tn. 37183 (931-389-6294) <http://blockaderunner.com/>

Dirty Billy's Hats (reproduction hats)
<http://www.dirtybillyshats.com/>

Jas. Townsend and Son (ready made goods)
<https://www.townsend.us/>

River Junction Trade Company
312 Main Street, McGregor, Iowa. 52157 1-866-259-9172
<https://www.riverjunction.com/>

Smoke and Fire Trading Co.(ready made goods and books)
<https://www.smoke-fire.com/>

Gentleman's Emporium (Wide variety of clothing and accessories)
<https://www.historicalemporium.com/victorian.php>

Period Shoes

Fugawee (Men's and Women's Shoes and Boots)
<https://www.fugawee.com/>

Period Buttons and Accessories

Wooded Hamlet Designs (ribbons, thread, trims)
<http://www.woodedhamlet.com/>

Burnley and Trowbridge (Historic reproduction notions)
<https://burnleyandtrowbridge.com/>