



Dress

The Journal of the Costume Society of America

ISSN: 0361-2112 (Print) 2042-1729 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ydre20>

Altered Historical Clothing

Linda Baumgarten

To cite this article: Linda Baumgarten (1998) Altered Historical Clothing, *Dress*, 25:1, 42-57, DOI: [10.1179/036121198805297936](https://doi.org/10.1179/036121198805297936)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1179/036121198805297936>



Published online: 18 Jul 2013.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 206



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

Altered Historical Clothing

Collectors and museum curators have traditionally valued antiques that are in unaltered, “mint” condition. Objects with original color, finish, and workmanship—seemingly unchanged by history—command the highest prices in sales-rooms. There are good reasons for this. Unaltered historical artifacts give us standards by which to analyze the remaining examples. Only by knowing what is “right” about objects can we detect what is “wrong” with a particular example. While many museums and collectors place great value on the “perfect” costumes that are unfaded, unchanged, and as fresh as when they were first donned by someone, achieving such a pristine collection is not always possible or even—I would argue—desirable. If we were to reject all altered clothing, we would miss valuable, instructive and important documents of the past.

Increasingly, museum curators accept altered garments, not just grudgingly, but enthusiastically, using them as an opportunity to educate the public about the expense of textiles before widespread industrialization.¹ They recognize that many incomparable masterpieces remain masterful in spite of alterations (Figures 1-2), and important historical documents remain compelling. A surviving artifact is full of evidence, not just about its original manufacture, but about its continuing history, as well. As Cora Ginsburg once said of a gown bearing old creases from previous re-styling, “it has past life lines.”² Altered clothing has value because it speaks eloquently about the nature of human history as a continuum, as past life lived out from day to day, rather than as a succession of isolated grand events occurring at one particular date in the past.

The human spirit has long connected with its past through the legacy of surviving material culture—collecting, categorizing, and studying antiques.

Historian and author David Lowenthal points out that we need a stable past to validate traditions, confirm our own identity, and help us make sense of the present. Yet, continues Lowenthal, we are constantly changing, altering, and “improving” the past, even without conscious knowledge. Sometimes our very attempts at preserving the past cause its alteration:

We also remould the past to our expectations by embellishing its relics. Although revision is seldom the ostensible motive, removing dirt or rust, reconstructing a ruin, restoring an old building to what it might or should have been, and adding to extant remains all in fact aim at improving on what has survived. That improving the past meant changing it long went unrecognized.³

Although he was using the examples of architecture, Lowenthal’s insights may be applied to surviving costume, as well. The people who altered the clothing in this study acted largely unconsciously, unaware that their actions would ever be noticed or analyzed by a community of costume historians bent on understanding every thread and stitch. Now, two hundred years later, their altered clothing tells of changes over time—changes in body shape or size, evolution of fashion, developments in technology or construction, changing availability of materials, and the changing realities of peoples’ lives within a social setting.

We can forgive our ancestors for altering the clothing passed down to them. After all, we still share an impulse to alter old things with which we live. We might re-upholster antique chairs and sofas to use them in our colonial living rooms; we may restore an antique keyboard instrument to hear its musical voice;⁴ we add new kitchens and bathrooms to our old houses; we repair and restyle christening and wedding dresses to wear at special family events. We live out our lives largely unaware that every day

Linda Baumgarten is Curator of Textiles and Costumes at The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Williamsburg, Virginia.



(left) Figure 1. Woman's sack back gown, silk brocaded with silk and metal threads. England, textile 1745-1750, altered ca. 1770. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1968-646.



(above) Figure 2. Detail of alterations on the lower back skirt of Figure 1. The gown skirt was apparently repaired and pieced out with material from the original petticoat. Old fold lines from pleats are visible.

constitutes "history." Every time we take up a hem or let out a skirt we are making an alteration and also saying something about ourselves. (I am not condoning the wearing of antique costumes that are intended for preservation, but I am aware of the seductive nature of old clothing and its ability to engage the imagination about past events.)

We might examine our own responses to things that have changed from our past. Lowenthal says that we tend to respond to changes in the past in one of four ways. Some people remain unaware of past changes; some may think that alterations are inconsequential; some believe in their ability to rectify previous changes "like science-fiction time wardens

restoring traces and relics to their original state"; and some "accept alterations as necessary evils, conserving past remains against still worst erosion and despoliation."⁵ I believe we should accept alterations—not as "necessary evils"—but as valuable survivals, mining them for the information that resides within each tuck and stitch. If a pristine garment is a valuable snapshot of a person, place, or time, then an altered garment is a motion picture with another compelling story to tell—a story worthy of careful preservation.

Acknowledging their value has implications for how we treat altered clothes. Should we, for example, take them apart (again) to restore them to their original time period, in the process risking the loss of subsequent historical

evidence? In some cases, the importance of the original garment warrants such action, but it should not be done without full consideration of what might be lost.⁶ We may explore “reconstructing” an altered garment using advanced imaging technology, rather than physically remaking the surviving artifact.

The changes evident in surviving antique clothing generally fall into one of four categories:

- In-use alterations during the daily life of the piece, including making over hand-me-downs, fine-tuning the fit of new clothes, repairing, turning, replacing worn parts, changing the size, and changing the fashion. This category might also include altering a wedding dress for a daughter or grand-daughter, even if it has been put away unused for 20 or 30 years.
- Recycling the materials from one textile into an object of a different type—woman’s gown to man’s garment, linen sheets to baby diapers, or window draperies to woman’s gown.
- Remaking a costume for revival and fancy dress; remodeling for wear at a party or special historical commemoration.
- Restoration back to an earlier, usually original, period by removing subsequent alterations.

This paper treats the first three categories of changes, concentrating primarily on clothing from the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries.

It is not surprising that so much early clothing has been changed over time. Textiles were more expensive than labor, and the responsible householder did not allow perfectly useful cloth to go to waste. Period references document the

widespread practice of altering clothing, presenting to us a picture of handing down, reusing, mending, remaking for children to wear, trying to keep up with fashion’s changes, and celebrating the past by dressing up in old styles.

In-Use Alterations

Clothing was routinely left in wills to survivors who presumably made it over for themselves or their family members. In January of 1763, John Johnson of Norfolk County, Virginia willed the remaining clothing of his deceased wife to five different women, probably family members. To Sarah Simmons he gave “one Camblet Gown”; to Mary Cills, “One white Sattin Gown, [and] One pair of gold Laced Shoes”; to Ann Wood a “worked Mantle”; to Whitey Nisbet, “One Brocade Gown [and] one white Satton Petticoat”; and to Mary Drury a “printed Linen Gown.”⁷ Anne Buck offers the example of Nancy Woodford who, in 1782, received a brown silk gown that had belonged to a relative who died eleven years before. Although the dress was described as “old,” it was pronounced “very good nevertheless,” and Nancy had it remade by a mantua-maker in Norwich, England. Some years later, in 1790, Nancy received a green silk gown from the same source. By now this green silk damask gown would have been almost 20 years old, but Nancy remade it to wear.⁸

The relatively lower cost of labor in relationship to the textiles meant that it was often cost-effective to take apart a garment—or any textile furnishing—for cleaning. Thomas Chippendale did just that for an entire set of cotton bed furniture in 1771. Chippendale charged £1. 5. 0 for “Scowering & Calendring,” and another £1.14.0 for “ripping the furniture entirely & making up afterwards tape, thread, &c.”⁹ Women’s gowns sometimes were taken apart for

major cleaning. A recipe book for washing and starching chintz with rice added, “If a gown, it must be taken to pieces.”¹⁰

The clothing of the poor must have been altered countless times, although such garments seldom survived to be added to museum collections. A slave named Sterling ran away from his Virginia master wearing an osnaburg shirt and a pair of breeches and jacket of purple or bluish color. The jacket, “being too narrow, had a piece of blue cloth put in to widen it at the neck and shoulders.”¹¹ George Hunt, an indentured servant who worked as a caulker, ran away wearing an assortment of mismatched clothing. He had a jacket of brown linen, laced instead of buttoned, a cinnamon colored coat, and trousers layered over a pair of cloth breeches. Hunt’s breeches had “Pieces set on the seams between the thighs.”¹²

Sometimes alterations had to be done before clothing could be worn. Not all clothing was custom-made to people’s measurements, and even that made by tailors occasionally needed adjustment. Henry Purefoy complained to the tailor, “The grey Breeches you made mee are too shallow in the Seatt and must be let out, so desire you will bring with you a naill of grey cloath the same to the pattern enclosed to enlarge them.”¹³

Those ordering from long distances were accustomed to fine-tuning the fit when the clothing arrived. George Washington ordered a “Corderobe” made of lustring for his 12-year-old step-daughter from Mrs. Harris via his agent, Robert Cary, in London. He requested that Mrs. Harris send two extra yards of fabric “in case an Alteration be necessary.”¹⁴ In the early nineteenth century, Rosalie Calvert of Riversdale in Maryland willingly altered some of the garments she commissioned for herself and her girls through her sister in Antwerp. Regarding one shipment in 1817, Rosalie wrote that her blue gown was somewhat long, but that was “easily

remedied." One of her daughter Caroline's gowns was too small, requiring some more extensive alterations. Rosalie wrote, "I opened the bodice under the arm and inserted a small piece there as well as in the sleeve, and now it fits her quite well." On another occasion, Rosalie requested that the dressmaker contracted by her sister send along a little extra material with the clothing "in case of mishap."¹⁵ When the imported stockings for his slaves arrived in sizes too small, Edward Ambler instructed that pieces of woolen fabric should be handed out to slaves so the stockings could be made larger as necessary. Since the "plaid hose" to which he referred were cut and sewn from the woolen fabric, it would have been a relatively easy task to open up the back seams and set in strips of wool for greater width.¹⁶

In-use alterations and repairs occurred at every social level. Thomas Jefferson's surviving stockings, underwear, and waistcoats betray a pattern of mending and "making do."¹⁷ Martha Washington and Mrs. Robert Carter, Virginia gentry women, occasionally had their gowns remade. Those with vast wealth were no less careful of their textile belongings. Even the extensive wardrobe of England's Queen Elizabeth I was refurbished and altered periodically, right down to her stockings that were re-dyed or had new feet knit into them.¹⁸

The practice of altering knitted stockings persisted for hundreds of years. In 1748, Elizabeth Boyd of New York advertised that she altered and repaired stockings: "All sorts of Stockings new grafted and run at the Heels, and footed; also Gloves, mittens and Children's Stockings made out of Stockings." Three years later she again advertised her skills at working with knitted clothing. "Elizabeth Boyd... will continue, as usual, to graft Pieces in Knit Jackets and Breeches, not to be discern'd,

Figure 3. Woman's silk damask gown that has been turned. England, textile late 1740s, altered 1760-1770. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1941-257.



also to graft and foot Stockings, and Gentlemen's Gloves, Mittens or Muffatees made out of old Stockings, or runs them in the Heels. She likewise makes Children's Stockings out of old ones."¹⁹ The concept of re-footing stockings is more comprehensible when we realize that many eighteenth-century stockings were frame-knitted in two pieces. The bottom of the foot was a separate piece sewn into the stocking.

In times of scarcity, textiles and clothing were especially valuable and subject to being remade. During the War of American Independence, both sides experienced shortage of supplies. The British soldiers stationed in Montreal in 1777 did not receive their supply of clothing the year before, so the worn clothing was cut down in order to extend its useful life. Thomas Anburey reported that "the commanding officers of

the different regiments have received orders to reduce the men's coats into jackets, and their hats into caps, as it will be the means of repairing their present cloathing."

Anburey went on to explain that shorter coats were more practical "for wood service," anyway.²⁰

On the other side of the conflict, colonists were doing much the same thing, while trying to maintain consistency in the appearance of the uniform. Woolens were no longer available from England—the former supplier to the colonies but now the adversary—and other European sources had not come through in February of 1783. It was reported from George Washington's headquarters at Newburgh, New York:

The Non arrival of the Cloathing expected from Europe renders the greatest Oeconomy in that article doubly necessary. The Commander in Chief therefore recommends that the business of turning and repairing the Coats of last year should now be considered as a primary object, in doing which a certain Model as to the fashion and length (for the coats ought to be made something shorter than at present) will be established by the Commanding officer of the Corps, from which there must be no deviation. . . .

George Washington added that, in the interest of a uniform appearance, the men should not be allowed to make alterations themselves, "according to their own whim and Caprice."²¹

Turning

"Turning," referred to in Washington's accounts, extended the life of a textile that was abraded, faded or stained. The entire garment was taken apart and remade with the other side of the fabric uppermost. Not all clothing could be

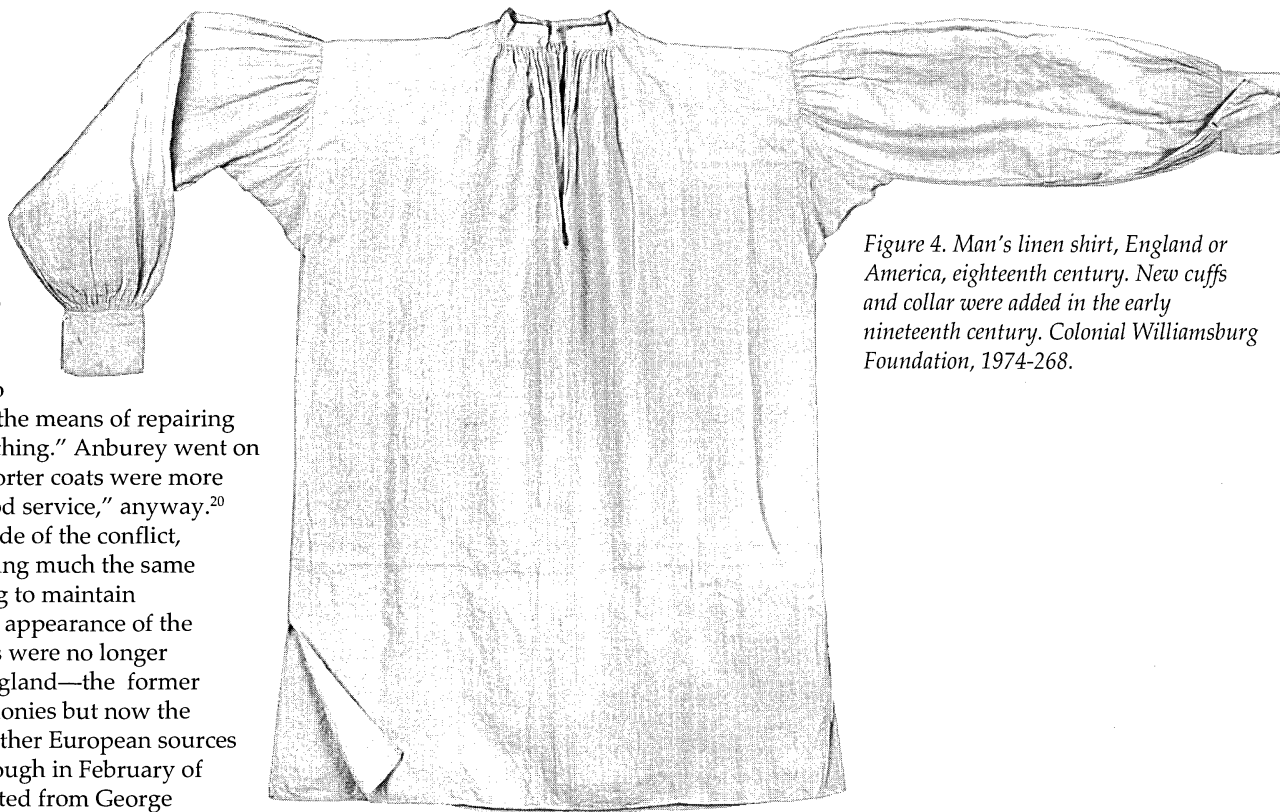


Figure 4. Man's linen shirt, England or America, eighteenth century. New cuffs and collar were added in the early nineteenth century. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1974-268.

turned; success obviously depended on whether the textile could be used with the reverse side up. Textiles with loose or carried threads on the backside, such as brocaded silk, are not reversible, though plain woolens, silks and damask are.

Jane Nylander analyzed the accounts of Connecticut tailor, Asa Talcott. She found that a large part of his tailoring work was in cutting apart, turning and resewing old clothing for clients.²² Studies of other tailors have found the same activities.²³ John Harrower of Virginia recorded in his diary that the brown coat he had brought with him in 1772 was "new mounted and turned" by a tailor for six shillings in 1775. This must be the "Superfine Brown Cloath Coat full mounted" that he recorded as part of his inventory of clothing a year earlier.²⁴ Superfine cloth was a very fine grade of wool that was fulled, napped and shorn to give it a felt-like texture and smooth surface. Not only was it identical on front and back sides, but it was expensive, making it an ideal candidate for turning. Col. Francis Taylor also had one of his coats turned, recording in June of 1792, "I sent an old Coat this

morning to get turned by Mrs. Stewart."²⁵

Women's gowns also could be turned. Elizabeth Jervis of Staffordshire, England had two gowns turned. Her records list charges for "Turning Scarlet gown & Sleeve Linings 4s. 6d" in 1753 and "turning my Lutstring negligee by Vernon 5s" in 1757.²⁶ (The negligee referred to may have been a sack gown, rather than a robe to wear about the house.²⁷) An orange silk damask gown in the Colonial Williamsburg collection has been turned (Figure 3). It displays considerable piecing, but the evidence for turning is especially evident in the seams, which have old fold lines where they were once pressed open in the opposite direction from the present seams. The *Workwoman's Guide* of 1838 suggested that turning an old gown was not only expected, it was planned for in advance. The author wrote that "it is economical to line the skirt, as it keeps the dress cleaner and makes it look better if turned."²⁸

Replacement of selected worn parts was easier than turning a garment completely. In 1791 and again in 1797, Col. Francis Taylor sent out some shirts to get new wristbands. An eighteenth-century

shirt in the Colonial Williamsburg collection has replaced collar and wrist bands (Figure 4). The shirt body is sewn with linen thread, but the collar and cuffs—parts that would receive the most wear—are not only made of different linen, but are expertly sewn and top-stitched with cotton, probably in the early nineteenth century.

Clothing had to respond to the wearer's life cycle—growing, shrinking, and changing proportion with age. Pregnancy, in particular, meant that a woman's meager wardrobe had to be adapted in size. Although many women's styles were adjustable by means of lacings and ties, alterations were often necessary, especially when fashions abandoned stomacher fronts in favor of more fitted (and less forgiving) edge-to-edge closures. Virginian Frances Baylor Hill altered clothing for various family members in 1797, among them her pregnant sister-in-law.²⁹

Children's Clothing

Children's clothing could be let out as the child grew or made out of adult's older garments, cut down to size. A child's linen



Figure 5. Child's linen shift, made from a baby shirt, worn by Mary Compton (b. 1807), New Jersey, 1808-1815. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, G1991-106, Gift of Mrs. Richard Killion.

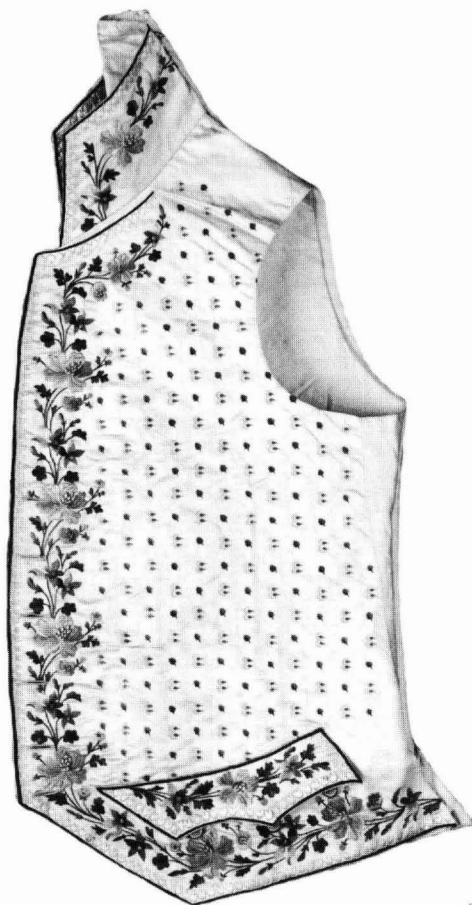
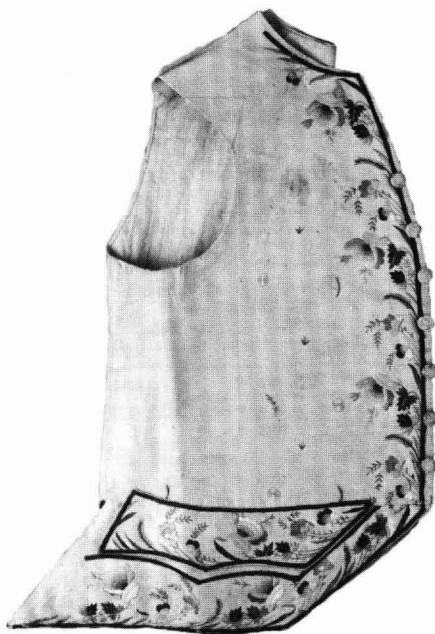


Figure 6. Boy's waistcoat, silk embroidered with silk, cut down from a man's waistcoat. Europe, 1770-1790, altered 1790-1810. Shown with man's silk embroidered waistcoat dating around 1790. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1970-109, G1971-430, anonymous gift.

shift typifies the challenge of remaking clothing as a child grew. The surviving shift has been created from an earlier baby shirt, pieced out to change the form entirely (Figure 5). Coarser linen was added to the straight-cut shirt to lengthen the hem and extend the sides, creating a garment both longer and wider, with the typical flare of a shift.

A boy's waistcoat appears oddly proportioned, with oversized pocket flaps and out-of-scale embroidery (Figure 6). Closer examination reveals that it was made from a full-size embroidered waistcoat for which the scale of the embroidery and larger pocket flaps would have been more suited. It has been cut down above the pocket flaps to shorten the body; further, the linen back and linings are cut down corresponding to the outer portions. The Williamsburg collection has two boy's

coats from the late eighteenth century, both showing alterations (not illustrated).³⁰ One of the coats, made of patterned silk, was cut down for a boy sometime in the nineteenth century. The other coat, made of striped silk velvet, was enlarged as the child grew, being let out down the fronts and at the back shoulder. The sleeves were lengthened by moving the cuff down and extending the lining.

A child's waistcoat of white cotton embroidered with linen has been cut down from a larger garment (Figure 7). The bottom hem and front angle are positioned on the embroidery design without following its original shape. The pocket flaps are decorative, not functional, and are placed well forward of the original pocket placement for the larger garment, now cut off and lost in the seams.

The clothing of adults, too, was altered in size when the wearer gained or lost weight. Despite the prevalence of adjustment ties or buckles on men's breeches and waistcoats, some men grew in girth beyond the garment's ability to accommodate. One of the most common surviving alterations is the addition of pieces in waistcoat seams, positioned where the enlargements would be covered by the coat. Pieces were added either in the side-rear seams or down the center back.

Changing Fashion

Evolution in fashion accounted for many alterations. Men's waistcoats grew shorter and more cut-away as the century progressed; old styles had to be re-designed to conform to the fashion. Yet their distinctive shaping and the presence of pockets and flaps meant they could not be altered successfully merely by turning up hems or cutting off the bottom. Waistcoats that were embroidered or brocaded to form presented the further difficulty that the decoration was designed for the exact shape, following a formula. The decoration typically concentrated down the center fronts and hems, becoming more dense and elaborate around the pockets, creating specially-designed reserves for the pocket flaps. Sizing the waistcoat by trimming edges or turning up the hem would have meant disturbing the elaborate decoration. For this reason, they had to be altered by skillfully cutting through the embroidered or brocaded design where it would show the least. Usually, this was across the top of the pocket flaps.

A white cotton and linen embroidered waistcoat is very similar to the boy's waistcoat discussed previously (Figure 7). The larger waistcoat has been altered by taking a slice of material out of the body, from the pocket flaps out to the side seams. This updated the style by increasing the angle of cut-away, but

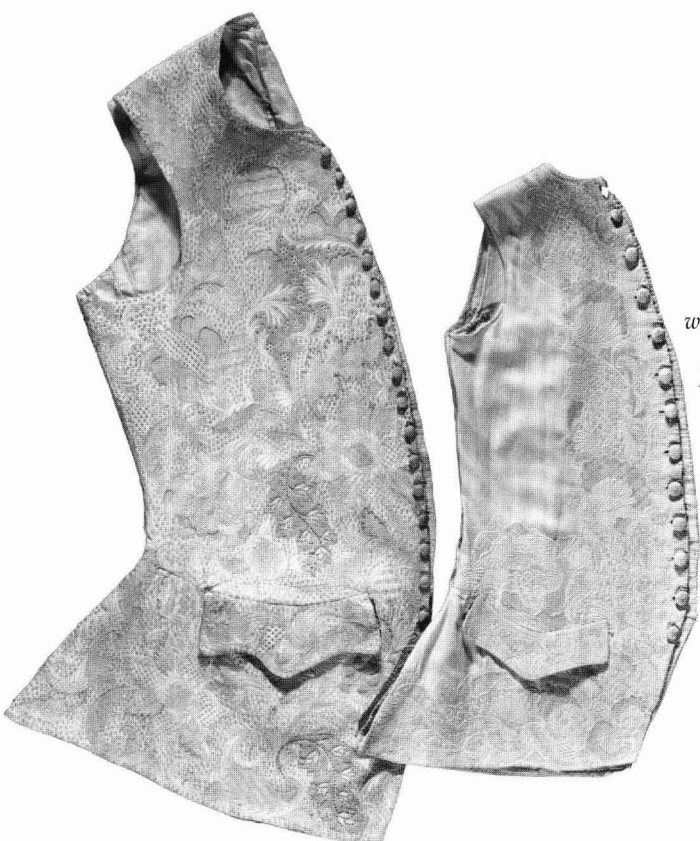


Figure 7. Two altered waistcoats, cotton embroidered with linen. England, 1740-1760. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1960-700, G1971-1577, anonymous gift.

avoided cutting through the needlework at the fronts. The old lining has been made to fit the new shape by means of long horizontal darts tapering from the seams toward the center fronts. In addition to the change of shape at the front, the waistcoat has been enlarged with pieces added under the arms.

A satin waistcoat embroidered with silk, paste stones, metallic purl and sequins shows similar alterations (Figure

8). In this case, the entire waistcoat has been shortened by removing excess fabric above the pocket flaps. Although the flaps originally would have been bordered all around, just as they are on the sides and bottom, the elimination of the top border embroidery is not immediately apparent to a casual viewer.

Fashion's evolution at the end of the eighteenth century required further changes in waistcoat design. Waistcoats

Figure 8. Detail of man's waistcoat that was shortened above pocket flap. Silk embroidered with silk, sequins, and paste stones. Europe, 1750-1770, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1960-652.





Figure 9. Man's waistcoat, silk embroidered with silk and parchment sequins, Europe, ca. 1780, altered ca. 1800, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, G1971-1562, anonymous gift.

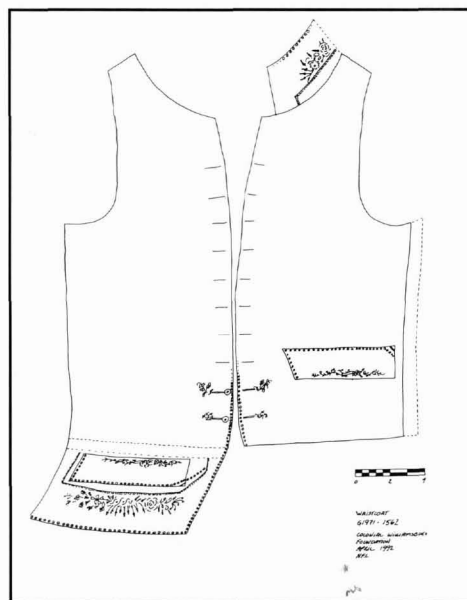


Figure 10. Plan of alterations, Figure 9, drawn by Natalie Larson.

were shortened to just below waist level, pockets rose along with the hems, and welt openings replaced shaped pocket flaps. At the same time, high, standing collars came into fashion. It was more difficult to change an older style into this new silhouette, but some tailors did succeed in doing just that, as seen in a cream satin example, embroidered with silk and parchment sequins (Figure 9). Its present style is typical of the period around 1800 with a high collar, welt pockets and short length. But a closer examination reveals that the embroidered design is somewhat eccentric. When one mentally recombines the pieces of the puzzle, the waistcoat gives up the information that it was once longer, with pocket flaps angling off in correspondence to a front cut-away opening (Figure 10). The new

standing collar is actually taken from the front hem, turned upside down, and re-sewn to the neckline. The new pocket welts are created from the old pocket flaps, similarly turned and repositioned. This type of alteration is not an isolated example. A waistcoat at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts is altered in the same manner.³¹

Women's gowns were remade at least as often as men's clothing. Martha Washington had a four-year old ensemble remade in 1763, and hoped to obtain additional fabric to match the old. George wrote to his agent in London on her behalf: "Mrs. Washington also begs to have 4 yds. of Silk sent according to the Inclosed pattern w'ch was bought in the year 1759 of Palmer & Co. and made into a suit of Cloaths by I Scherberg, but now having occasion to turn it into a

Sack and Coat it cannot be effected with't more of the same; this (if to be had) may be sent with my Cloaths." On September 28, 1760, Martha sent a gown to England to be cleaned or redyed. This involved taking the gown apart and remodeling it in the process. George wrote to Robert Cary and Company, "Mrs. Washington sends home a Green Sack to get cleaned, or fresh dyed of the same colour; made up into a handsome Sack again would be her choice, but if the Cloth wont afford that, then to be thrown into a genteel Night Gown."³² (A night gown was an informal fitted gown with the back pleats stitched down close to the body.)

Such a transformation from sack to "night gown" occurred to a brocaded silk dress with a Rhode Island history (Figure 11). The gown is made of imported English silk dating from 1726-1728 but is now in the style of the 1770s or early 1780s. Faint impressions of folds and piecing indicate that its bodice was changed from a stomacher-front to an edge to edge closure. The sleeves were narrowed by taking in the seams and elongated with pieces set in at the elbows. The back bodice has old folds from the pleats of a sack back.

Rarely do any unused fragments survive after alteration, but a green silk gown brocaded with a lacy pattern of the 1730s still retains the original bodice that was laid aside when it was updated



Figure 11. Woman's brocaded silk gown, made from an English textile, 1726-1728, altered and worn in Rhode Island, ca. 1770, shown with silk quilted petticoat, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1951-150, 1952-19.

around the middle of the eighteenth century (Figure 12). The older bodice has full cuffed sleeves of the 1730s and 1740s. The new sleeves fit more closely than those on the older bodice and end in ruffles typical of the mid-eighteenth century. The remodeled gown has a closed skirt with front drop panel, eliminating the need for a separate gown petticoat. In all likelihood, the original petticoat was cut up to create the new bodice.

Altering eighteenth-century clothing did not end with a new century. In the nineteenth century, clothing continued to be taken apart to be remade into the latest styles. Although the bold, heavy textiles of the eighteenth century were not readily compatible with the soft lines of the neoclassical style around 1800, by the 1830s and 1840s they were once again viable for gowns with full skirts that stood crisply away from the body.

Recycling

An alteration wasn't always a one-for-one translation. The many yards of clothing in women's gowns could be re-fashioned into garments for men, too. The textiles were, in effect, recycled for a totally new use. In 1661 Samuel Pepys recorded that he had a suit made from one of his wife's petticoats: "I went home and put on my gray cloth suit and faced white coate, made of one of my wife's pettycoates—the first time that I have had it on."³³ During the eighteenth century, such a transformation was somewhat less likely to occur, as men's suitings diverged in design from women's gown textiles. Nevertheless, there was some overlap in certain garments, such as dressing gowns or Banyans. A man's gown (Banyan) and matching waistcoat of floral brocaded silk were made from a woman's gown (Figure 13). Vertical pleat lines down the front and creases in the sleeves suggest



Figure 12. Woman's gown and earlier bodice, brocaded silk, England, 1730-1740, altered ca. 1750-1760. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, G1990-16, 1-2, Gift of Cora Ginsburg.

that the garments were made from the long lengths of fabric in a woman's sack back gown.

Sometimes clothing was made from scratch using old textiles. Virginian Joseph Ball instructed that his worn-out sheets and linens should be torn up and re-used to make clothing for slave children.³⁴ Robert Craig, an indentured weaver from Scotland, had a jacket made out of an old Dutch blanket and a drab cloth coat that was "much patched."³⁵ A runaway woman from Charleston wore a petticoat made out of a bed quilt.³⁶ (This is not an isolated example; Colonial Williamsburg owns a maternity ensemble made in England from an old bed quilt.³⁷)

Fancy Dress in the Nineteenth Century

Besides the usual alterations for daily wear, the nineteenth century found new uses for old-fashioned clothing in response to the great popularity of revivals, fancy dress parties and historical commemorations. Queen

Victoria and Prince Albert dressed in eighteenth century style for the Queen's 1850 birthday ball. A year later, the Queen dressed in the style of Charles II at the Restoration Ball, held in Buckingham Palace.³⁸ Americans and Canadians shared the passion for fancy dress. When Americans celebrated their centennial in 1876, increasing numbers of people pulled their ancestors' clothing out of attics to celebrate the occasion by dressing up.

Even if the size were about right, however, nineteenth century bodies did not usually fit eighteenth-century clothing. Corseting and new aesthetics had changed the shape of the body and posture, necessitating another round of alterations. While wearers may have thought they looked exactly like their ancestors, the dresses they wore were fitted with darts and seams to conform to the stays and body underneath. The nineteenth-century woman's torso was no longer shaped in a cone like it had been in the eighteenth century. Torsos now had defined breasts, small rib cage, constricted waist, rounder back, and

Figure 13. Man's gown or Banyan with matching waistcoat, made from woman's brocaded silk gown, England, textile ca. 1750, gown 1760-1770, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1941-208.



broader shoulders. Even men's fashions changed from sloping shoulders and narrow backs to more square, broad shoulders. As old garments were re-made, current dressmaking and tailoring techniques were utilized.

A woman's gown and petticoat originating around 1770 shows its nineteenth century alterations in the bodice (Figures 14-15). Machine sewn darts and extra boned seams give the

gown an hourglass shape in contrast to the tapered cone of the eighteenth century. The tapes for drawing the skirt up in polonaise are replacements. The additions to the polonaise skirt, along with the bodice and sleeve shape, suggest that the gown was remade to be worn around 1875-1885 when the polonaise skirt was again in fashion. The separate petticoat was also remade and lined with yellow-white glazed cotton. The original

petticoat pleats have been taken out, leaving faint fold lines. The center front of the petticoat is now flat, and the remaining fullness is gathered to a replacement tape waistband in closely-spaced cartridge pleats of the type one sees on women's gowns from the 1830s onward. The resulting ensemble owes much to the eighteenth century in color, fabric, and trim, and may have been remade to wear at a historical pageant,

but it conforms to nineteenth century aesthetics in its silhouette.

Another gown and petticoat of eighteenth century fabric have alterations suggestive of more than one period (Figure 16). The gown textile dates from the 1760s, the gown back dates from the 1780s, and the darts and sleeves suggest the period around 1900. The square shoulders and gathered sleeves are especially characteristic of the

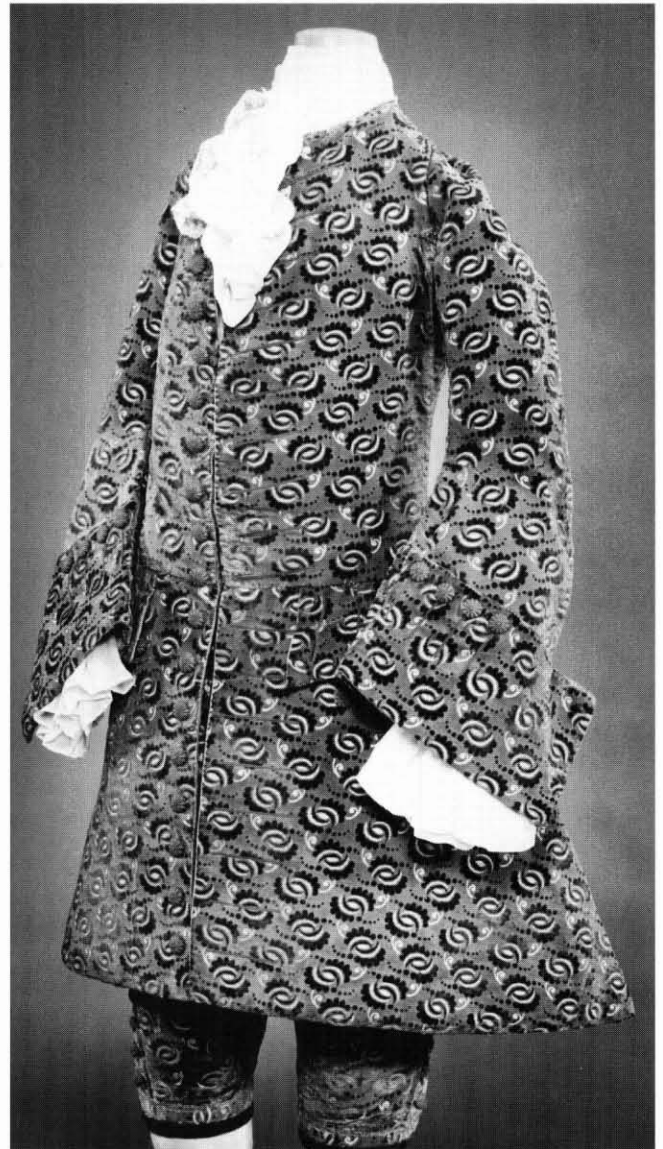
(left) Figure 14. Woman's gown and matching petticoat, brocaded silk, England, 1770-1780, altered 1870-1885, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1952-459.

(below) Figure 15. Interior of Figure 14, showing the later boned darts and tapes.





(above) Figure 16. Woman's gown and petticoat, silk, Europe, 1760-1770, altered 1880-1900, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1954-1009, 1-2.



(right) Figure 17. Man's coat and breeches, voided velvet, England, 1725-1750, altered for a taller man in the late nineteenth century, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1967-129, 1-2.

end of the nineteenth century. The front of the gown bodice is very pieced up and has old marks from folded robings at either side of a stomacher front. The gown back was once a sack, but was altered in the 1780s into a fitted style with very deep point at the waist. The petticoat is a different eighteenth century patterned silk woven in colors complementing the gown, but was certainly not worn with the gown until

the nineteenth century. Folds in the fabric suggest that the petticoat was, in fact, made from a different sack-back gown, not from another gown petticoat. It has a single pocket sewn into one of the seams, typical of the pockets on mid-to late-nineteenth century women's gowns. (Eighteenth century gowns did not have sewn-in pockets, but had slits in the skirts accessible to separate pockets tied around the waist under the gown and

petticoat.)

A man's suit with obvious alterations was probably worn in the late nineteenth century to a pageant or costume ball (Figure 17). Its nineteenth-century wearer was a much taller, larger man. The coat sleeves were lengthened by removing the cuffs and positioning them further down on the sleeve, revealing the cleaner textile originally protected under the cuff. Hidden under

the newly-positioned cuff, the coat sleeve was lengthened with pieces of wool cloth and the extension was lined with cotton. The breeches were extended at the top by adding two different wool broadcloth textiles to give a longer rise. The breeches legs were enlarged by adding pieces to the inseams, probably using material from the now-missing waistcoat. The legs were lengthened and new metallic knee bands applied. Ironically, in spite of the elongation of the legs, the body of the coat was restyled to create a shorter jacket, possibly to conform to the aesthetics of later men's suits with shorter coats.

Conclusion

Altered clothing abounds in museum collections. Sometimes the alterations are obvious, like the woman's vest that was made from an eighteenth-century silk embroidered apron (Figure 18). The garment is machine stitched and probably was made into a vest in the first third of the twentieth century. Sometimes the garment causes an "a-ha" reaction. A puzzling sleeved waistcoat, once thought to be from the early eighteenth century, was discovered to have been fashioned from a crewel embroidered bed coverlet (Figure 19). Although the crewel embroidery is from the eighteenth century, the waistcoat was constructed around 1900.

Extant altered clothing confirms and illuminates the written record of how people lived with their clothes. Each garment has a different story contained within the threads and fibers themselves, allowing us to look into the lives of those who wore items over many years and adapted their clothing to their constantly-changing life situations. Finally, altered clothing shows how our immediate ancestors related to their own histories, helping us to share in that continuum.

Acknowledgements

This material is drawn from the forthcoming catalogue of the Colonial Williamsburg costume collection, scheduled for publication in 2001. The author thanks John Watson for his valuable insights on the object as an encyclopedia of historic techniques and materials. He will recognize some of his ideas herein. Thanks also go to Florine Carr, who assisted the author with examining garments and detecting alterations during the 1991 recataloging of the Colonial Williamsburg collection. The anonymous reviewers of this manuscript made many helpful suggestions and comments, for which the author is very grateful.

Figure 18. Woman's vest, back view, made from woman's apron, silk embroidered with silk and metal threads, Europe, 1730-1750, altered 20th Century, shown with unaltered silk embroidered apron. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, G1971-1561 and G1971-1541, anonymous gifts.

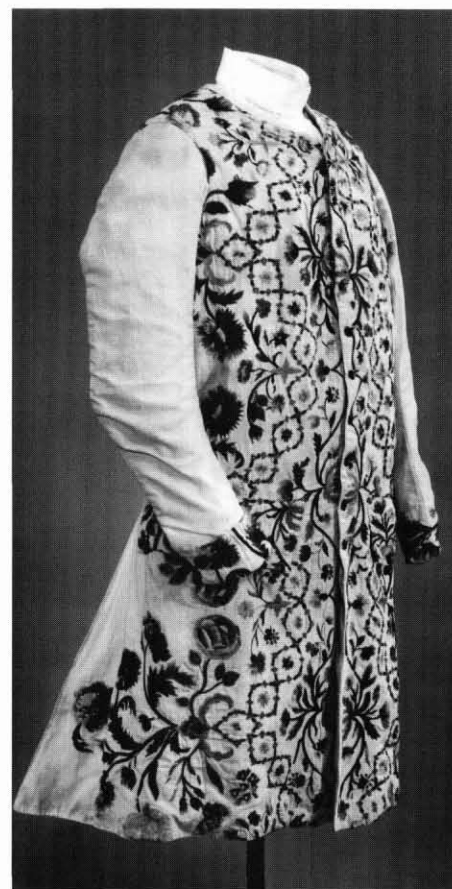


Figure 19. Man's sleeved waistcoat made from a bed coverlet, cotton and linen embroidered with crewel wool, England, textile ca. 1750, waistcoat ca. 1900, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1953-1027.

- ¹ For example, The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston has exhibited altered clothing and has used label copy to inform the public about what it is seeing. An altered gown, originally the wedding dress of Elizabeth Porter, in the collections of the Porter Phelps Huntington Historic House Museum in Hadley, Massachusetts was exhibited at the Wadsworth Athenaeum. See Jane C. Nylander, "Textiles, Clothing, and Needlework" in *The Great River* (Hartford: The Wadsworth Athenaeum, 1985), 384-386.
- ² Conversation with the author, 1988.
- ³ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, reprinted 1993), 263, 278.
- ⁴ The question of whether to restore antique musical instruments for use is of serious concern to musicians and professional organologists. Although restoration allows one to hear music on an authentic instrument, it can destroy valuable evidence of old textiles, leather, and other component parts. For a discussion of the issue, see John R. Watson, "Historical Musical Instruments: A Claim to Use, an Obligation to Preserve," *Journal of the American Musical Instrument Society* 17 (1991): 69-82.
- ⁵ Lowenthal, *Past*, 263.
- ⁶ The Los Angeles County Museum of Art restored a seventeenth-century gown that had been remade in the nineteenth century. It was determined that the rarity and importance of the seventeenth-century original warranted careful study and reconstruction. Care was taken to preserve original stitching. The conservation has been the subject of papers and presentations by Edward Maeder, Theresa A. Knutson, Dale Gluckman, and other staff at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art who have delivered papers to the Costume Society of America and to the American Institute of Conservation. See "A Seventeenth-Century Gown Rediscovered: Work in Progress" in *Museum*, the newsletter of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, May, 1998, 4-5.
- ⁷ Will of John Johnson alias Weston, 28 January 1768, Norfolk County, Virginia Wills, Microfilm M-1365-21, John D. Rockefeller Jr. Library, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.
- ⁸ Cited in Anne Buck, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: B. T. Batsford, Ltd., 1979), 79-80.
- ⁹ Invoice of 15 July 1771, in Christopher Gilbert, *The Life and Work of Thomas Chippendale* (New York: Macmillan, 1978), 192.
- ¹⁰ Colin MacKenzie, *Five Thousand Receipts* (Philadelphia: James Kay, Jun. & Co, Library Street, 1830).
- ¹¹ *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie and Dixon edition) 23 June 1768.
- ¹² *Virginia Gazette* (Hunter edition) 20 October 1752.
- ¹³ Henry Purefoy to his tailor, 7 July 1751, quoted in Phillis Cunnington and Catherine Lucas, *Costume for Births, Marriages and Deaths* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1972), 247.
- ¹⁴ Letter of 20 July 1767, in John C. Fitzpatrick, ed. *The Writings of George Washington* (Washington: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1931), 2: 463.
- ¹⁵ Letters from Rosalie Calvert to Isabelle Van Havre, 30 December 1817 and 25 March 1819, in Margaret Law Callcott, ed., *Mistress of Riversdale* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 329, 347.
- ¹⁶ Letter of Edward Ambler, 7 December 1767, Charles W. Dabney Papers, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill, quoted in Linda Baumgarten, "Plains, Plaid and Cotton," *Ars Textrina* 15 (July, 1991): 212.
- ¹⁷ The clothing is in the collections at Monticello, Charlottesville, Virginia. See Linda Baumgarten, "Jefferson's Clothing," *Antiques* (July, 1993): 100-105 and "Under Waistcoats and Drawers," *Dress* 19 (1992): 4-16.
- ¹⁸ Janet Arnold, *Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd* (Leeds: Maney, 1988), 40 and Jeremy Farrell, *Socks and Stockings* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1992), 10.
- ¹⁹ Advertisements of 26 September 1748 and 1 April 1751 in *The New-York Gazette Revived in the Weekly Post-Boy*, quoted in Rita Susswein Gottesman, *The Arts and Crafts in New York, 1726-1776* (New York: New York Historical Society, 1938), 275, 325-326.
- ²⁰ Thomas Anburey, *Travels Through the Interior Parts of America in a Series of Letters by an Officer* (London: Printed for William Lane, 1789, reprinted New York: Arno Press, 1969), I: 197.
- ²¹ General Orders from Newburgh, New York, 24 February 1783, in *The Writings of George Washington*, 26: 158-159.
- ²² Jane C. Nylander, *Our Own Snug Fireside* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 165.
- ²³ Stuart Maxwell, *Two Eighteenth-Century Tailors* (Hawick: News Print Works, 1973, reprint Hawick Archaeological Society Transactions, 1972), 13.
- ²⁴ Journal entries for 14 July 1775 and 26 May 1774. John Harrower, *The Journal of John Harrower, An Indentured Servant in the Colony of Virginia 1773-1776*, ed. Edward Miles Riley (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc. 1963), 45, 102-103.
- ²⁵ Entry of 30 June 1792, Diary of Col. Francis Taylor, 1786-1799, Original in Virginia State Library, Microfilm M-1759, John D. Rockefeller Jr. Library, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.
- ²⁶ Peter Hayden, "Records of Clothing Expenditure for the years 1746-79 Kept by Elizabeth Jervis of Meaford in Staffordshire," *Costume* 22 (1988): 38.
- ²⁷ "One could not appear in the presence

- of the Queen except in a Dress, not elsewhere worn, called a Sacque, or Neglige, with a hoop, treble ruffles and Lappets " quoted in Diana De Marly, *Costume on the Stage, 1600-1940* (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble, 1982), 59.
- ²⁸ A Lady, *The Workwoman's Guide* (England, 1838, reprinted Bloomfield Books, 1975), 109.
- ²⁹ See Linda Baumgarten, "Dressing for Pregnancy: A Maternity Gown of 1780-1795," *Dress* 23 (1996): 16-24.
- ³⁰ Colonial Williamsburg Accession numbers 1960-694 and 696.
- ³¹ Accession number 1975.Dt. 3. The waistcoat is pale green silk, embroidered to form with silk, metal threads, and sequins. The embroidered stand-up collar was taken from the embroidered reserve just beneath the pocket flaps. The shaped pocket flaps were turned upside-down and moved up on the body to become welt pockets. The original hems were cut and re-pieced into position to become the new hems. The waistcoat probably dates from the 1770s and was remodeled around 1800. My thanks to staff at the Fine Arts Museum of Montreal for allowing me to examine the waistcoat in 1994.
- ³² *The Writings of George Washington*, 2: 395, 351.
- ³³ It is not clear whether the "cloth suit" or the "faced white coate" was made from the petticoat. Cloth during this period was probably a fulled and napped woolen material, not typical of women's clothing. It is more likely that the coat or the white facing came from the petticoat. Diary entry for 13 June 1661, Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, Robert Latham and William Matthews, editors (London: Unwin Hyman, 1970), 2: 120.
- ³⁴ Joseph Ball Letter Book, Original in Library of Congress, quoted in Linda Baumgarten, "Clothes for the People,"

- Journal of Early Southern Decorative Arts* 14:2 (November, 1988): 50.
- ³⁵ *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie and Dixon edition), 10 December 1767.
- ³⁶ Lathan Windley, *Runaway Slave Advertisements, South Carolina* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1983), III: 44.
- ³⁷ Colonial Williamsburg Accession Number 1936-666; see also Linda Baumgarten, "Dressing for Pregnancy," 16-24.
- ³⁸ "In Royal Fashion" an exhibition at the Museum of London, Summer, 1997. Franz Xavier Winterhalter painted the Queen and her family in historical costume on several occasions.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- A Lady. *The Workwoman's Guide*. England, 1838. Reprint, Bloomfield Books, 1975.
- Anburey, Thomas. *Travels Through the Interior Parts of America in a Series of Letters by an Officer*. London, 1789. Reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1969.
- Arnold, Janet. *Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd*. Leeds: Maney, 1988.
- Ball, Joseph, Letter Book, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.
- Baumgarten, "Clothes for the People': Slave Clothing in Early Virginia." *Journal of Early Southern Decorative Arts* (November, 1988) 14, No. 2: 26-70.
- _____. "Dressing for Pregnancy." *Dress* 23 (1996): 16-24.
- _____. "Jefferson's Clothing." *Antiques* (July, 1993): 100-105.
- _____. "Plains, Plaid and Cotton." *Ars Textrina* 15 (July, 1991): 203-222.
- _____. "Under Waistcoats and Drawers." *Dress* 19 (1992): 4-16.
- Buck, Anne. *Dress in Eighteenth-Century England*. London: B. T. Batsford, Ltd., 1979.
- Callcott, Margaret Law, ed. *Mistress of Riversdale*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991.
- Cunnington, Phillis and Catherine Lucas. *Costume for Births, Marriages and Deaths*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1972.
- Dabney, Charles W. Papers, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.
- Farrell, Jeremy. *Socks and Stockings*. London: B. T. Batsford, 1992.
- Gilbert, Christopher. *The Life and Work of Thomas Chippendale*. New York: Macmillan, 1978.
- Ginsburg, Madeleine. "Women's Dress Before 1900," in *Four Hundred Years of Fashion*. Natalie Rothstein, ed. London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1984.
- Gottesman, Rita Susswein. *The Arts and Crafts in New York, 1726-1776*. New York: New York Historical Society, 1938.
- Harrower, John. *The Journal of John Harrower, An Indentured Servant in the Colony of Virginia 1773-1776*. Edward Miles Riley, ed. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1963.
- Hayden, Peter. "Records of Clothing Expenditure for the years 1746-79 Kept by Elizabeth Jervis of Meaford in Staffordshire." *Costume* 22 (1988): 32-38.
- Lowenthal, David. *The Past is a Foreign Country*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- MacKenzie, Colin. *Five Thousand Receipts*. Philadelphia: James Kay, Jun. & Co., 1830.
- Maxwell, Stuart. *Two Eighteenth Century Tailors*. Reprint, Hawick Archaeological Society Transactions, 1972. Hawick: News Print Works, c. 1973.
- Norfolk County, Virginia Wills. Microfilm M-1365. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.
- Nylander, Jane C. *Our Own Snug Fireside*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993.

- Pepys, Samuel. *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*. Robert Latham and William Matthews, eds. London: Unwin Hyman, 1970.
- "Tale of a Puce Dress." Notes Extracted by Pamela Clabburn. *Costume* 6 (1972): 100.
- Taylor, Col. Francis. *Diary, 1786-1799*. Virginia State Library, Richmond.
- Virginia Gazette*. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.
- Washington, George. *The Writings of George Washington*. John C. Fitzpatrick, ed. Washington: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1931.
- Watson, John R. "Historical Musical Instruments: A Claim to Use, an Obligation to Preserve." *Journal of the American Musical Instrument Society*, 17 (1991): 69-82.
- Windley, Lathan. *Runaway Slave Advertisements, South Carolina*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1983.