

# Mary Seacole

Understanding History Through Appearance—An analysis of a Black Woman in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

A scholarly exhibition by

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## Biographical Sketch

### **Jamaica & Panama**

Mary Jane Grant was born May 1805 in Kingston, Jamaica. She was considered a mulatto woman--her father was a Scottish army officer, and her mother a freeborn black of Creole descent. Mary grew up in a rather well to do household compared to the average Black family of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Her mother was a respected homeopathic nurse who owned and operated Blundell Hall, a boarding house for army and navy officers, where Mary learned the art of medicine that would become her lifeblood.

In the mid 1830s, Mary wed Edwin Horatio Seacole, the godson of Lord Viscount Horatio Nelson. There is little known about Mr. Seacole other than he was a very sickly man and died just months after the wedding. There are no records of children from their marriage.

The cholera epidemic of 1850 inspired Mary to pursue her love of medicine. While gaining first hand knowledge of the disease, Mary developed many homeopathic remedies to treat cholera, including a salve made of mustard that was rubbed onto the stomach. Although doctors today would consider Mary's natural remedies ineffective, many in the 19<sup>th</sup> century believed Mary's concoctions healed their ailments. Mary was soon known throughout the area

as "Mother Seacole" for her nurturing demeanor and healing medicines.

When the epidemic subsided in Kingston, Mary joined her brother Edward in Cruces, Panama. Here, she found herself in the breeding ground of tropical disease. Offering her services, Mary encountered an onslaught of gender as well as racial prejudices. Even though the town had no residential doctor, many were highly reluctant to seek treatment from a Black woman. As yellow fever, malaria, and cholera ran rampant, the town eventually sought out the remedies of Mary's medicine.

### **England & the Crimea**

In 1854, a religious quarrel sparked a war between Russia and Turkey--on the Crimean peninsula. Named for the site of the battlefield, the Crimean War gave recognition to the nursing profession. Florence Nightingale was the most famous of these nurses and is commonly credited with establishing nursing as a profession.

Learning that many of those known to her in Jamaica were to be sent to the Crimean War, Mary traveled to England in 1854 to offer her nursing services. She applied to the war office and other army departments recruiting nurses but was rejected. Mary next sought employment in Florence Nightingale's Nursing Corp. Feeling devastating rejection, Mary decided to venture forth on her own. She established the British Hotel on the battlefield of the Crimean War. Mary literally treated wounded soldiers in the trenches, and in the line of fire.

When Mary Seacole died May 14, 1881, she left behind a memory of a great woman in history. She was an innovator in medicine and a master of courage. Mary Seacole was a leader for women overcoming diversities in society. She showed the world that neither gender nor racial discrimination

should get in the way of one's dreams. Today, Mary's memory is celebrated in nursing journals, essays, and her own autobiography, *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*.

### Appearance in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

Fashion in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century was influenced by rapidly changing technology. It was the age of the railroad, providing faster, cheaper transportation and communication. Advertising became less expensive with the introduction of ladies' literary and fashion journals such as Godey's Lady's Book. The development of the department store provided women with easy access to the growing number of factory made apparel items. The sewing machine and synthetic dyes were invented. Photography was invented. The Butterick pattern company started. Charles Frederick Worth founded his couture house in Paris. The women's suffrage and dress reform movements were organized. The monarch who gave her name to the era also influenced fashion--Queen Victoria reigned from 1837 to 1901.

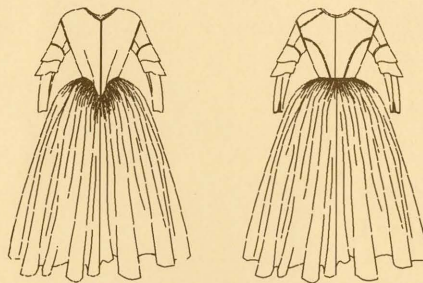
The fashionable silhouette of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century featured a full skirt supported by numerous petticoats and later a crinoline cage. The bodice was tightly fitted and boned, and worn over a boned corset. The waistline was at the normal position. Providing balance to the skirt fullness, sleeves were also full, but beginning to decrease in size. They were stitched to a sloping shoulder line resulting in a shoulder-less appearance.

### The Research Process

To examine history through the perspective of appearance, Dr. Sanders identified specific research questions and collected data from a purposive sample. Seven judges independently coded extracted references to establish common themes and sub-themes.

Along with the background research conducted by a study group using secondary sources, a number of primary sources were surveyed. To identify period silhouette and construction details, original garments from the Historic Costume & Textiles Collection at Colorado State University were studied. Fabric print and design as well as weave structure were also noted. In addition, *Punch*, or *The London Charivari*, 1855-1856 was surveyed for references to the Crimean War, Florence Nightingale and Mary Seacole. The *London Times* during the same

period was used as a source of information on the war and Mary Seacole. From this research the four garments currently on exhibition were reconstructed.



*Example of one of the four reconstructed garments.*

The remaining steps in Dr. Sanders' research process include:

- peer review of the research findings, including the significance of the study and interpretation of the reconstructed garments;
- peer review of the exhibition of the garments currently displayed, via video tape;
- adjustments to the research text and/or garments based upon reviewers comments; and,
- development of a scholarly catalog, including research methodology and illustrations of the garments.

### **Help Mary Travel**

*The life of Mary Seacole is truly an inspiration. A traveling exhibition will bring Mary alive to others across the nation. Please consider making a tax-deductible gift so that others may learn about this extraordinary woman.*

**Dr. Sanders' longer-term dream is to develop a one-person theatrical production on the life and times of Mary Seacole.**

### Special Thanks

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