

THESIS

“SUITABLE FOR ALL PARTS”: THE TRANSFORMATION OF MENSWEAR IN THE
EARLY AMERICAN REPUBLIC, 1780-1830

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ABSTRACT

“SUITABLE FOR ALL PARTS”: THE TRANSFORMATION OF MENSWEAR IN THE EARLY AMERICAN REPUBLIC, 1780-1830

In the period between the end of the Revolution and the Jacksonian upheaval of the 1830s, American society transformed. This transformation was visible in the way Americans dressed. The evolution of elite fashion is well known. Less appreciated is the role of dress in shaping the political and cultural identities of those adjacent to the fashion mainstream. In both the urban mid-Atlantic and in rural New England, ordinary men redefined the style and significance of democratic dress in the new American Republic. The story of early American men's fashion is incomplete so long as it ignores the man in the street.

The first chapter of this thesis examines the stylistic transformations in plebeian menswear from the end of the Revolution through the first decade of the nineteenth century using data from over 2,700 Philadelphian runaway advertisements. The second chapter examines the dissemination of men's fashion into the American countryside based on three rural tailors' account books and extant menswear in New England archives. Collectively, developments in rural and urban menswear point towards a more diverse and unruly democratization of dress in the early Republic than historic fashion narratives focused on elite dress usually permit.

Historians typically tell the story of men's fashion during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries from the perspective of the “better” sort. This study challenges such class-based assumptions. It uncovers an expansive market for fashionable clothes amongst both rural farmers and urban laborers. It illustrates how these men deployed clothing in culturally-specific

ways, as a marker of regional or class identity. Lastly, it reframes the role of clothing as a vector for political allegiance by exposing the multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings that men conveyed through dress.

PREFACE

The title of this thesis derives from the clause found in eighteenth-century indentures promising an apprentice or servant two good suits of wearing apparel—one for working, the other for sabbath days—suitable for all parts of his body. The phrase has an apt double meaning, simultaneously referring to all parts of the physical body, as well as the metaphorical body politic. In this thesis, I argue that the early American polity constituted a greater number of “parts” than historians generally acknowledge, and that rural and urban laboring men engaged in politics through dress. This thesis, too, contains a multitude of parts, and I owe debt to the following contributors, without whom it could never have been made whole.

To my advisor, Dr. Ann Little. To fully acknowledge all that Dr. Little has done for me during my time at Colorado State would take many pages. Suffice it to say that she has provided insightful feedback and incisive criticism on my work at every stage of writing. She has, furthermore, pointed me towards a host of venues where I presented my research, and put me in contact with numerous other historians who share my interests. Dr. Little was the first to direct me to the collections at Historic Deerfield, without which this thesis would not exist in its present form. I know I will never be able to ever sneak either an incomplete citation, or a reference to a 60s or 70s pop song past her radar.

To Dr. Leisl Carr Childers. Dr. Carr Childers was extremely generous in letting me pursue a project relevant to my research in her digital history course during fall of 2024. This project was foundational to the current work, and I want to thank her for putting her trust in an untried, first-year graduate student. Since then, Dr. Carr Childers has provided unwavering technical advice as I expanded my forays into digital methods.

To Dr. Paula Alaszkievicz. In spring of 2025, I attended Dr. Alaszkievicz's seminar on the care and upkeep of museum collections at the Avenir Museum of Design and Merchandising. Dr. Alaszkievicz generously invited me back to the Avenir the following fall, to curate an exhibition for the museum. Dr. Alaszkievicz let me work extensively with the Avenir's collection, and collaborated throughout the process. At the same time, Dr. Alaszkievicz has read and proofread innumerable pieces of writing, offering valuable insight from an art historical and curatorial perspective.

To Dr. Ellen Hartigan-O'Connor. My interest in early America was piqued in Dr. Hartigan-O'Connor's seminar at UC Davis, and I am immensely grateful to her for letting me develop my interest in early American dress for my term paper. It was also through Dr. Hartigan-O'Connor that I first found out about the graduate program at Colorado State and was introduced to Dr. Little. I literally would not be here if not for her help.

The initial research for Chapter 2 was conducted with the help of three talented undergraduates—Emma Kaiser, Lindsay Michael, and Melody Swenson. These three students threw themselves into the project with gusto and offered input throughout the process. Collectively, we established the coding procedure which provided the basis for the runaway dataset at the core of Chapter 2. I could not have asked for a more able group of collaborators.

While writing this thesis, a paper based on Chapter 2 was accepted for publication by the journal *Dress*. I would like to thank the journal's editors, Einav Rabinovitch-Fox and Sonya Abrego, as well as my two anonymous peer reviewers for their advice and criticism. My current revisions owe much to their feedback.

The research that made up the bulk of Chapter 3 was conducted under a Memorial Libraries Fellowship from Historic Deerfield. I want to thank the PVMA librarians, Jeanne

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While at Deerfield, I benefited from the expertise of Historic Deerfield's clothing and textile curator, Lauren Whitley. Lauren generously pulled numerous garments from Historic Deerfield's collection for me to examine up-close. She also put me into contact with numerous other costume scholars and museum professionals, many of whom are listed below. Also, to Samantha Frost, who stepped in to oversee my object viewing when Lauren was unavailable.

Special thanks must also go to Derek Heidemann and Christa Belardo of Old Sturbridge Village, for allowing me to make digital scans of Stephen Powell's two account books, which proved vital to Chapter 3. Derek was also kind enough to show me several examples of working men's dress in OSV's collection, and it was his comment on a pair of rustic "cossacks" which led me to pursue rural tailors as a topic.

Numerous museum professionals assisted me during my research in New England. Lynne Basset, Margaret Jessup, and Kelsey Sinelnikov of Historic Northampton; Matthew Keagle, Samantha Crumb and the other interpretive staff at Fort Ticonderoga; Ned Lazaro at the Wadsworth Atheneum; Betsy McKee of the Longmeadow Historical Society; Chelsea Mitchell of Historic Stonington; Callie Raspuzzi of the Bennington Museum; Kristen Wands of the Windsor Historical Society; Nicole Wiles and Clare Barnett of the Madison Historical Society; and the staff at the Connecticut Museum of Culture and History. Also, Edward Maeder, who was kind enough to share his insights on researching historic dress in New England over a damn fine cup of coffee.

I have been fortunate to share my research at several academic conferences. I would like to thank the coordinators of the Western Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, the Front Range Early American Consortium, and the Western Chapter of the Costume Society of America, for accepting my various paper proposals.

To Dr. Erika Gasser, director of Historic Deerfield's Summer Fellowship Program, and Anne Lanning, Senior Vice President of Historic Deerfield. Erika and Anne mentored me throughout my time at Deerfield, and were always on-hand with advice and feedback. To Rose Marques, for her indefatigable logistical support throughout the program. And to Deerfield's 2025 Summer Fellows: Abigail, Cameron, Caleigh, Ella, Madison, Maya, and Nicko. Cheers!

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To my family— Mom, Dad, Chris and Finn-- who have supported me throughout.

2MH—Here's looking at you, kid... Fade away never.

To be read at maximum volume.

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EPIGRAPH

*THE beaux genteel have laid aside
Their gloves of silk and leather,
And think it best their hands to hide
in corduroy and casimere.
Odd gloves, indeed ! but let 'em alone ;
No doubt they think it's cheaper ;
Their pantaloons and gloves all one,
And both made by the taylor.¹*

¹ “More Pockets Than Purses, or the Ladies’ Retaliation,” *Merrimack Miscellany* 1, no. 3 (June 1805). AAS.

CHAPTER 1

“What Clothes Conceal: American Men’s Fashion during the Age of Revolution, 1775-1830”

Introduction

In October 1785, the 23-year old physician William Stoddard Williams packed his small hair trunk for his first job in the Berkshire town of Richmond. *A new career in a new town.* Amongst medical textbooks, English and French grammars, and a single volume enticingly titled *Highway Robberies*, Williams took numerous articles of clothing. It was a motley assortment: Cassimere and homespun vests lay alongside satin beaver breeches, a bulky great coat crowded for space with ruffled shirts and cotton stockings— And where would he put the breeches and jacket “bro’t up to have ye Small Pox in”? When Williams packed his garments, closed the lid, and locked his trunk, he claimed legal possession of these clothes.²

Trunks were like fences, the legal historian Laura Edwards argues: they held little value on their own, but signified ownership of the property within. Yet clothes were more than just a store of value. Clothing lay at the intersection between Williams’ legal right to property, represented by his trunk, and his symbolic authority, represented by his books. Clothes embodied ideas of masculinity and civility. As one contemporary satire claimed, perhaps only half in jest, “[i]f a practicing physician wishes to enter into business, and for that purpose takes up his abode in some town at a distance from his place of nativity; the most necessary recommendation that is

² William Stoddard Williams, “A List of Wearing Apparel, Books, &c. of William Stoddard Williams,” 1785, Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, American Centuries, Accessed on March 8, 2025, <https://americancenturies.org/collection/199-029/>.

requisite for him, ought to be gaudy clothes, for the people care but little about his skill in *killing* or *curing*; provided he only *dresses well*. ”³

That same month, in neighboring Connecticut, another young man was on the move. Ebenezer Wickham, “in the 18th Year of his Age, a native of Dutchess [sic] County, Charlotte Precinct, State of New York,” “absconded from his Master, the 4th instant, without his Liberty.” Wickham’s master, Oliver Dickenson, offered three farthings to anyone who would return the lad, and his apparel, so that— in the words of innumerable similar advertisements— “his master might have him again.”

Wickham, too, carried clothes. True, these were not striped waistcoats or fancy breeches, but a short sailor’s jacket, corduroy vest and brown tow cloth overalls.⁴ By enumerating Wickham’s clothes, Dickenson sought to restore these items, along with the runaway, “back to the controllable world of goods.”⁵ Yet, if the accompanying engraving depicting a youth with a stick and kerchief slung over his shoulder was accurate, Wickham had other ideas. For runaways, the tied bandana containing a bundle of clothing served the same legal function as Stoddard William’s trunk; it indicated possession of the garments within.⁶ Through clothes, both Wickham and Williams asserted independence in the early American Republic. For free white men, at least, this was a period when social identity was up for grabs.

³ Laura F. Edwards, *Only the Clothes on Her Back: Clothing and the Hidden History of Power in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 143; Somebody [pseud.], “Remarks on Dress,” *Philadelphia Magazine*, May, 1798, 278. American Antiquarian Society (AAS) Historical Periodicals Collection: Series 1.

⁴ “Advertisement,” *Litchfield Monitor*, October 11, 1785. America’s Historical Newspapers.

⁵ David Waldstreicher, “Reading the Runaways: Self-Fashioning, Print Culture, and Confidence in Slavery in the Eighteenth-Century Mid Atlantic,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 56, no. 2 (1999): 253. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2674119>.

⁶ Edwards, *Only the Clothes on her Back*, 145.

In the period between the end of the Revolution and the Jacksonian upheaval of the 1830s, American society transformed from a patriarchal order in which those of lower status deferred to their social superiors, to one in which open competition between men of—ostensibly—equal status was encouraged in both politics and the marketplace.⁷ This transformation was visible in the way Americans dressed. The evolution of elite dress is well known: men relinquished embroidered silks, velvets, and lace in favor of somber frock coats and trousers, while, following the classical revival of the early 1800s, women’s clothing became ever more decorative and restrictive.⁸ Less appreciated is the role of dress in shaping the political and cultural identities of those adjacent to the fashion mainstream. In both the urban mid-Atlantic and in rural New England, ordinary men redefined the style and significance of democratic dress in the new Republic. The story of early American men’s fashion is incomplete so long as it ignores the man in the street.

This thesis is structured in three parts, each examining a facet of early American menswear. The remainder of the first chapter engages with the historiography of men’s fashion. It follows prior scholars in arguing that clothing is an expression of social change, and that men’s clothing in particular is an often-overlooked barometer for transformations in both politics and

⁷ Michael Zakim, *Ready-Made Democracy: A History of Men’s Dress in the American Republic* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 9-10. On the social transformation wrought by the American Revolution, see also Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (Knopf, 2011), esp. 271-286. For a more critical reading, see Alan Taylor, *American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750-1804* (W.W. Norton, 2016). Studies focusing specifically on the role of lower-status people in revolutionary-era developments include Gary B. Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America* (Penguin, 2006); and Woody Holton, *Sweet Liberty: The Hidden History of the American Revolution* (Simon and Schuster, 2021). On post-revolutionary transformations, see Daniel Walker Howe, *What God Hath Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (Oxford, 2007), esp. ch. 14; Alan Taylor, *American Republics: A Continental History of the United States, 1783-1850* (W.W. Norton, 2021).

⁸ For overviews of the major transformations in American fashion during this period, with emphasis on their political connotations, see Zakim, *Ready-Made Democracy*, 203-206, and *passim*; Kate Haulman, *The Politics of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century America* (University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 217-225; Linzy Brekke, “Fashioning America: Clothing, Consumerism, and the Politics of Appearance in the Early Republic” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2007), esp. Ch. 1.

consumer practice. The chapter concludes by examining the unique position of American men's dress within an emerging democratic society, and argues for a more capacious definition of democratic dress, including not just ready-made suits but working wear and rural clothing.

The second chapter, "Revolt into Style," is devoted to the stylistic developments in plebeian menswear from the end of the Revolution through the first decade of the nineteenth century. Using data from over 2,700 Philadelphian advertisements for runaway servants and apprentices, it argues that plebeian dress exhibited distinct styles and class associations. These styles had a significant impact on elite male dress of the early nineteenth century. As much as elite men, absconding apprentices and escaped servants engaged in post-revolutionary sartorial politics by claiming personal liberty through what they "had on when they went away."

The third chapter moves beyond the urban milieu of the indentured laborer and craft apprentice, to examine the dissemination of men's clothing into the American countryside. Using three rural New England tailors' account books, as well as extant garments in regional museum collections, this chapter argues that the agrarian northeast was far from a sartorial backwater, and that rural tailors played an active role in the transformation of menswear from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries. Rural tailoring, furthermore, was essential to incorporating New England rustics into an expanding body politic of democratic citizens. The conclusion returns to theme of the Americanness of American dress and poses questions for future research.

Lastly, a word on terminology. Scholars have developed an expansive lexicon for historic fashion, dress, and style. Fashion, according to one definition, comprises "changing styles of dress and appearance that are adopted by a group of people at any given time and place." Fashion can refer to changes in many social practices, including furniture, food, and language, but is most

frequently—and fruitfully-- applied to bodily adornment.⁹ Dress, meanwhile, has been defined as “an assemblage of modifications of the body and/or supplements to the body.” According to scholar Yuniya Kawamura, dress “is material production while fashion is symbolic production.”¹⁰ Style is the most ambiguous term: It can refer either to the distinctive features of a garment, or to an individual’s particular form of self-fashioning. Scholar Carol Tulloch considered style a form of “agency—in the construction of self through the assemblage of garments, accessories, and beauty regimes that may, or may not, be ‘in fashion’ at the time of use.” Through style, Tulloch claimed, individuals evaded the homogenizing tendency of the fashion system.¹¹

Eighteenth-century authors were rarely so precise in their terminology. “Despite its basis in material reality,” historian Linzy Brekke writes, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, “fashion was a highly unstable and protean category.”¹² When the North Carolina physician and congressman Hugh Williamson referred to the debilitating effects of foreign fashions on the national economy, he contrasted the “unchanging” dress of the nations like the Japanese, Chinese, and Dutch, with the “weekly revolutions” imported to America from England. Fashion, for Williamson, was the destabilizing force par excellence: It drained the country of specie, while upsetting traditional hierarchies.¹³ Others were more ambivalent regarding fashion’s influence. After opining on bewildering changes in shoe buckles, waistlines, and hair powder, an author in the *Wilkesbarre Gazette* concluded—equivocally-- “Many *honest folks* can

⁹ Susan B. Kaiser and Denise N. Green, *Fashion and Cultural Studies*, 2nd ed. (Bloomsbury, 2021), 8.

¹⁰ Linda Welthers and Abby Lillethun, *Fashion History: A Global View* (Bloomsbury, 2018) 13-19. Kawamura refers to clothing in the original quote, a similar but slightly restrictive term.

¹¹ Quoted in Kaiser and Green, *Fashion and Cultural Studies*, 8; see also, Carol Tulloch, “Style – Fashion–Dress: From Black to Post-Black,” *Fashion Theory* 14, no. 3 (2010): 273-304. <https://doi-org.ezproxy2.library.colostate.edu/10.2752/175174110X12712411520179>.

¹² Brekke, “Fashioning America,” 5.

¹³ Sylvius [Hugh Williamson], *Letters from Sylvius to the Freemen Inhabitants of the United States*, 12. Early American Imprints.

make/Longer bills—for *Fashion's sake*.”¹⁴ At its root, constant changes of style and dress were symptomatic of social life in the early Republic, and very few people of either high or low status could resist their influence.

In this thesis, I generally follow my eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sources in applying terms like fashion, dress, and style loosely. Rather than impose discreet categories, I think it is more useful to view these terms as part of a holistic “circuit,” per authors Denise Greene and Susan Kaiser.¹⁵ When young working men in Philadelphia discarded breeches in favor of trousers during the last decades of the eighteenth century, they changed their dress, their individual style, and, ultimately, prevailing fashions. Likewise, when a farmer in western Massachusetts went to the village tailor to have a new frock coat made, he purchased both an item of clothing and participated in wider male fashions.

Fashion and Costume History

The scholarly study of dress is a wide-ranging and, to the outsider, frequently baffling field. Its contours are too complex to do more than sketch here. Broadly, histories of dress may be divided between object-focused studies that emphasize description over analysis, and more-theoretical studies of fashion as a discursive system. The latter draw on linguistic models and are heavily associated with the cultural turn in historic studies. In the last two decades of the twentieth century, a material turn emerged which attempted to reconcile theoretical abstraction with object-based empiricism. Despite its drawbacks, material culture studies provides the most sophisticated avenue for apprehending the multivalent meanings of historic dress.

The Colonial Revival of the late nineteenth century spanned visual arts, letters, and public performance. Notably, it inspired some of the first studies of early American dress. Alice

¹⁴ “Fashion’s Sake,” *Wilkesbarre Gazette* April 1, 1800. Newspapers.com.

¹⁵ Kaiser and Green, *Fashion and Cultural Studies*, 19-20.

Morse Earle's *Two Centuries of American Costume* surveyed elite dress from the seventeenth to the turn of the nineteenth century. Arguing that "it is impossible to disassociate the history of costume from the general history of the country where such dress is worn," for Earle, clothing was not an abstraction, but a tangible link to a once-living past.¹⁶ In this respect, her study pre-empted some of the later advocates of material culture studies. Yet Earle's antiquarianism inevitably favored the surviving relics of the well-to-do.¹⁷ As historian Marla Miller argues, Earle omitted both the labor involved in making garments as well as those garments' contemporary significance in favor of nostalgia for an imagined homespun era.¹⁸

While some of Earle's assumptions have not withstood the test of time, the pattern she established continues to influence studies of American dress. In *What Clothes Reveal*, Linda Baumgarten situates items from the clothing collection of Colonial Williamsburg in their contemporary social contexts. While Baumgarten asserts that "the language of clothing does not have fixed rules or meaning," the construction of garments and their subsequent alterations may provide insight into how they were worn and understood.¹⁹ As such, Baumgarten's work conceives of historic clothing not as ossified museum pieces, but as articulate survivals from the past. Furthermore, through her attention to these garments' complicated history of use, Baumgarten demonstrates a self-reflexive approach to curatorship itself. Yet Baumgarten's wide geographic and chronological timeframe, as well as the acknowledged biases of the collection she studies, means she depicts the social use of garments in broad strokes.

¹⁶ Alice Morse Earle, *Two Centuries of American Costume* (Corner House Publishers, 1974), vol. 1, 7.

¹⁷ Earle, *Two Centuries of American Costume*, vol. 2, 419-421.

¹⁸ Marla Miller, *The Needle's Eye: Women and Work in the Age of Revolution* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), 211-212, 229-231.

¹⁹ Linda Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal: The Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America* (Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 2002), 204, 208-210.

In the second half of the twentieth century, scholars of the cultural turn adopted a new paradigm to study fashion based not on objects but on language. In *The Fashion System*, French literary scholar Roland Barthes applied nascent semiotics, or the study of signs, to clothing. Asking “whether clothing can signify without recourse to the speech that describes it,” Barthes answered in the negative; he wrote, “true reason would in fact have us proceed from the instituting discourse to the reality which it constitutes...it is not the object but the name that creates desire.”²⁰ Subsequent fashion theorists have taken up this discursive model, pointing out how dress, like language, acts as the interface between self and society.²¹ This model of fashion-as-discourse has broad implications. The French philosopher Giles Lipovetsky asserted, counterintuitively, that fashion’s instability and superficiality, its “seduction” as he terms it, in fact provided a stable ground for the exchange of ideas in liberal western democracies.²² Or, as feminist scholar Rita Felski wrote, fashions “rather than simply expressing an already constituted sphere of ‘real politics’ grounded in the economy or the state, may themselves operate as instruments of transformation, ways of reconstituting the social and political world.”²³

Fashion theory has its critics, who point to its tendency towards abstraction and ahistoricity. In response to such abstractions, scholars since the 1980s have placed greater emphasis on the close study of material objects to provide insight into shifting cultural attitudes.²⁴ While not the first scholar to lay the groundwork for material culture studies, Jules

²⁰ Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System*, trans. Matthew Ward and Richard Howard (Hill and Wang, 1983), xi-xii.

²¹ Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress, & Modern Social Theory*, 2nd ed. (Polity Press, 2015), 1-5; Kaiser and Green, *Fashion and Cultural Studies*, 1-30.

²² Giles Lipovetsky, *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter (Princeton University Press, 1994), 3-12.

²³ Quoted in Wendy Parkins, “Introduction: (Ad)dressing Citizens,” in *Fashioning the Body Politic*, ed. Wendy Parkins (Berg, 2002), 2.

²⁴ For an introduction to the significance of material culture to history, specifically, see Stefan Berger, *History and Identity: How Historical Theory Shapes Historical Practice* (Cambridge, 2022), 236-238.

Prown was arguably the most influential. Prown laid out several advantages to the study of things over more traditional written sources: Objects embodied the values of the society which produced them, objects were the only tangible survivals of the past, and objects' use encompassed a broader section of society than used the written word. Yet for Prown, what mattered most about material objects was their "objectivity." Unlike written works, filtered through the prism of contemporary and modern biases, "The methodology of material culture... affords a procedure for overcoming the distortions of our particular cultural stance, and, of almost equal importance, it makes visible the otherwise invisible, unconscious biases of our own cultural perspective."²⁵ To achieve his objective ends, Prown proposed a three-step method for analyzing material objects: Description, deduction, and speculation. By the time the student arrived at the final step, Prown alleged, they had engaged sufficiently with the material before them so as to be free of their innate cultural preconceptions.²⁶

Scholars have criticized Prown's pretense to objectivity. In lieu of Prown's "speculation," dress historians Ingrid Mida and Alexandra Kim propose a third step of interpretation for analyzing dress artifacts specifically. Drawing on the full range of the student's prior knowledge, including their knowledge of fashion theory, the interpretive stage leaves room for multiple readings of an object. Indeed, the very fragility and malleability of clothing almost demands a looser reading than other material objects, the authors argue.²⁷ Nevertheless, aspects of Prown's method remain salient when applied to historic dress. Whatever their prior history of use, dress objects are tangible remainders of the once-living past. Moreover, everyday things provide

²⁵ Jules David Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," *Winterthur Portfolio* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 1-5. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1180761>

²⁶ Prown, "Mind in Matter," 7-10.

²⁷ Ingrid Mida and Alexandra Kim, *The Dress Detective: A Practical Guide to Object-Based Research in Fashion* (Bloomsbury, 2015), 26-37.

insight into cultural attitudes which elude the documentary record. “Human-made things are far more than mere tools,” historian Ann Smart Martin writes, “they are complex bundles of individual, social, and cultural meanings grafted onto something that can be seen, touched, and owned.”²⁸ Furthermore, objects may contain an implicit agency absent in other areas of the historical record. Historian David Gary Shaw writes, “self-fashioning and the exercise of the self often work through active or passive engagement with places and things.”²⁹

Yet a persistent issue haunts historians of material culture: The uneven survival of everyday objects, especially dress objects, from the past. As Baumgarten writes, “while stylish formal wear was cherished and saved, perhaps becoming part of a museum collection, informal and work clothing wore out and was discarded.” Archaeological finds, a boon to scholars of more durable goods, rarely preserve clothing items. Discoveries like the clothing and textiles recovered from the sunken collier *General Carleton* and the warship *De Braak* are remarkable for their rarity. Alternative sources must be found. Baumgarten continues, “Scholars must consult written and pictorial sources, along with the few garments that have survived, to fill in the missing evidence of what was worn on a daily basis, what clothing meant to its wearers, and what pieces were called in their own time.”³⁰ Using documentary sources, such as probate inventories, shipping manifests, and newspaper advertisements, historian Robert Du Plessis examines the transformation of textile consumption in the early modern Atlantic. While European merchants dominated this traffic in goods, Du Plessis argues, European fashions were

²⁸ Ann Smart Martin, “Material Things and Cultural Meanings: Notes on the Study of Early American Material Culture,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (1996): 5-6.

²⁹ David Gary Shaw, “Recovering the Self: Agency after Deconstruction,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Historical Theory* (Sage Research Methods, 2017), 23.

³⁰ Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal*, 106; for archaeological finds, see Lawrence Babits and Matthew Brenkle, “Sailor Clothing,” in *The General Carleton Shipwreck*, ed. Waldemar Ossowski (Polish Maritime Museum, 2008), 167-198; Tyler Rudd Putman, “Textile Artifacts from H.M. Sloop DeBraak,” *Military Collector and Historian* 65, no. 1 (2013): 75-88.

not adopted unilaterally outside settler colonies. Rather, the Atlantic basin was the site of multiple, overlapping dress practices.³¹

There is more at stake here than mere antiquarianism. As the Cuban historian Luis Perez illustrates, examining the use of everyday objects can reveal fundamental shifts in the moral values structuring day-to-day life. For middle-class Cubans of the later nineteenth century, Perez argues, incremental changes in everyday social practices, mediated through an expanding market, accrued over time to undermine existing colonial hierarchies. This transformation occurred despite its participants rarely being aware that they were agents of historic change.³² The same held true for Americans in the early Republic. For most American men, their experience of civil society came not through the writings of Hamilton, Jefferson or Locke, but through the granular experience of everyday things: Porcelain, newsprint, Chinese tea and Jamaica rum. And the cut, fit and texture of everyday clothes.³³

Men's Clothing in Costume History

Where do men fit within the broader narrative of western fashion? In fashion history, unlike most other historic fields, men—in scholar Martin Pel's phrase—are the “also-ran's.” The modern historical association of fashion with femininity has tended to diminish men's role within dress history.³⁴ Even the most well-researched monographs on historic dress tend to afford men a subordinate role, as though their dark suits rendered them a less-serious subject for sartorial

³¹ Robert Du Plessis, *The Material Atlantic: Clothing, Commerce, and Colonization in the Atlantic World, 1650–1800* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 1-22.

³² Luis Perez, *Intimations of Modernity: Civil Culture in Nineteenth-Century Cuba* (University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 2-6.

³³ For the first, and most lucid, articulation of this idea applied to American independence, see T.H. Breen, “‘Baubles of Britain’: The American and Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century,” *Past and Present* 119 (May, 1988): 73-104; an interpretation of Americans' evolving relationship with material goods, including clothes, from the colonial period through the first half of the nineteenth century, through the somewhat restricted lens of gentility, is Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (Knopf, 2011).

³⁴ Martin Pel, “Review of Daniel Delis Hill, *American Menswear: From the Civil War to the Twenty-First Century*,” *Costume* 46, no. 2 (2012): 255.

consideration than their more brightly-dressed companions.³⁵ This oversight belies the cultural significance of developments within men's fashion from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century. Indeed, men's clothing lay at the heart of the transformation of fashion from a symbol of bespoke aristocratic prestige to a mass-produced consumer product.

In part, the historically gendered process of fashion collecting contributed to the marginal status of men's fashion history. As scholar Julia Petrov writes, "Although many early collections were established and managed by men, the largest proportion of these collections was devoted to the clothing and accessories of women, and were designed to appeal primarily to female audiences." Furthermore, while the intent of these institutions may have been to document industrial progress, "the material contained within, instead reflected and inspired the consumption of leisured women." Fashion displays, Petrov argues, inculcated the values of the ideal consumer within their presumed female audience, and thus reinforced the gendered division of fashion within the collection and out on the street.³⁶ If elite menswear has been comparatively understudied, the same holds doubly true for ordinary men's clothing. As scholar Emily Taylor writes, regarding the collection of working men's clothing at the Scottish National Museum, "The everyday fashion of average working men still lies dormant, its contributions to our cultural understanding subdued by received narratives."³⁷

The most significant of these received narratives surrounds men's purported sartorial invisibility after 1800. The English psychologist J.C. Flügel's theory of male "renunciation," has

³⁵ Cf. Joan Severa, *Dressed For the Photographer: Ordinary Americans and Fashion* (Kent State University Press, 1995), xvii.

³⁶ Julia Petrov, "Gender Considerations in Fashion History Exhibitions," in *Fashion and Museums: Theory and Practice*, ed. Marie Riegels Melchoir and Birgitta Svenson (Bloomsbury, 2014), 3, 10-14.

³⁷ Emily Taylor, "Accidental remainders: Working Men's Fashion c.1730–1880 in National Museums Scotland," in *Everyday Fashion: Interpreting British Clothing Since 1600* ed. Bethan Bide, Jade Halbert, and Liz Tregenza (Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2023), 201.

remained dominant since it was first articulated in the 1930s. According to Flügel, during the decades on either side of the year 1800, men's dress transformed. "At about that time," he wrote, "Men gave up their right to all the brighter, gayer, more elaborate and more varied forms of ornamentation, leaving these entirely to the use of women..." Flügel dubbed this event "the Great Masculine Renunciation," and identified its roots in the political logic of the French Revolution, which abolished the ranks and orders of the *ancien regime* in favor of the brotherhood and equality of all men, and the economic logic of industrialism, which prioritized the bourgeoisie's labor done in the "the workshop, the counting-house, [and] the office," over the nobleman's deeds on the battlefield or the drawing room.³⁸ For Flügel, male renunciation represented a cumulative loss. Concerned, as he was, as much with psychology as history, Flügel saw in men's drab fashions a sign of psychological and sexual repression, and did his best to alter course through his own embrace of flamboyant styles in the name of male dress reform.³⁹

Flügel's theory has its critics. In his study of late Victorian men's fashion, *The Hidden Consumer*, English historian Christopher Breward argues that—far from excluding men from fashion—consumer practice, in fact, "positioned men right at the center of a debate concerning fashion and modern life while apparently denying their participation in its wider cultural ramifications." Using "popular novels, music hall dramatizations, store promotions and *cartes de visite*," Breward illustrates how representations of masculinity were far from stable, but rather "vulnerable to fracture and change."⁴⁰ Meanwhile, in his thesis on French men's fashion of the mid-nineteenth century, historian John Finkelberg claims the conventions of male portraiture,

³⁸ J.C. Flügel, *The Psychology of Clothes* (London: Hogarth Press, 1950), 111-113.

³⁹ Chloe Chapin, "Masculine Renunciation or Rejection of the Feminine?: Revisiting J.C. Flügel's *Psychology of Clothes*," *Fashion Theory* 26, no. 7 (2022): 987-990. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2021.1952919>.

⁴⁰ Christopher Breward, *The Hidden Consumer: Masculinities, Fashion and City Life* (Manchester University Press, 1999), 2, 19-21.

which depicted its subjects at their most austere and formal, obscure the diversity of men's clothing. Drawing on informal sources, such as fashion plates, advertisements, popular prints, and journals, Finkelberg argues, "the fashion industry encouraged elite men to cultivate a large, varied, and at times colorful wardrobe..." Purchasing such garments, men participated in a "community of dress": "Men did not passively just wear garments selected for them by others (especially women), they participated in the procurement, maintenance, and use of garments because they too were invested in drawing on the social and cultural value of dress."⁴¹

Despite criticisms, certain aspects of Flügel's theory remain salient. Historian David Kuchta's *The Three-Piece Suit and Modern Masculinity*, according to scholar Chloe Chapin, represents the most significant modern elaboration of Flügel's work. For Kuchta, male renunciation was not result of the bourgeoisie's triumph, but rather an appropriation of earlier, aristocratic styles.⁴² Kuchta argues that "the birth of the three-piece suit... meant not only the donning of a new wardrobe: it meant the fashioning of a new masculinity, a new ideology about the morality, politics, and economics of elite men's consumer practices, an ideology still prevalent today."⁴³ As Kuchta illustrates, the overthrow of the Stuart monarch James II replaced the court with the country estate as the basis for aristocratic prestige and power in England. Aristocrats communicated their new independence primarily through their restrained dress.⁴⁴ Later, middle-class men repurposed this sartorial language in order to legitimate their own rise to political power. The result of this appropriation of "traditionally aristocratic ideals of

⁴¹ John Finkelberg, "Becoming a Man in the Age of Fashion" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2022), 10-11, 19. ProQuest.

⁴² Chapin, "Masculine Renunciation or Rejection of the Feminine?" 992.

⁴³ David Kuchta, *The Three-Piece Suit and Modern Masculinity: England, 1550-1850* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 2.

⁴⁴ Kuchta, *The Three-Piece Suit and Modern Masculinity*, 112-113.

masculinity,” was “to exclude working-class men and all women from the increasingly shared institutions of power.”⁴⁵

If useful in structuring the overall outline of men’s fashion history, the theory of renunciation contains certain critical omissions. As Chloe Chapin argues, Flügel’s theory focuses exclusively on male loss, but overlooks the concurrent association of fashion exclusively with women’s dress. Rather than a denial of color and diversity in male wardrobes, Chapin instead reads masculine renunciation in terms of a rejection of the feminine—embodied in luxurious silks, sheer fabrics, and bright colors—and the associated rise of a fashion system that replaced distinctions of class with distinctions of gender.⁴⁶ Equally unremarked upon is Flügel’s assertion that the impetus for masculine renunciation came as much from an emulation of plebeian styles as it did a rejection of aristocratic ostentation.⁴⁷ This assertion requires interrogation. As much as Flügel’s preconceptions of gender, interrogating his preconceptions of class reveals overlooked nuances that call into question the strict sartorial divide between elite and nonelite wear. As this study will illustrate, fashion was not the sole provenance of the elite.

The Americanness of American Dress?

Up to now, this has been a broadly western survey of men’s fashion. Where do American men fit within this picture? Early studies claimed American elites’ fashions were strictly imitative of European models. According to Alice Morse Earle, in the early republic, Federalist men wore shoe buckles, knee breeches and powdered their hair, to more closely resemble the English squirearchy; Democrats wore their hair in curls *a la Titus* and dressed in close-fitting, ankle-

⁴⁵ Kuchta, *The Three-Piece Suit and Modern Masculinity*, 133-137, 169, 172..

⁴⁶ Chapin, “Masculine Renunciation or Rejection of the Feminine?” 985, 998-1001.

⁴⁷ Flügel, *The Psychology of Clothes*, 112-113.

length pantaloons after the model of the French *incroyables*.⁴⁸ There is some truth to this depiction. The French visitor Moreau de Saint-Méry observed that elite Philadelphians strove to copy French styles.⁴⁹ Yet the work of scholars of American dress since the turn of the millennium has emphasized how Americans adapted foreign modes to the distinct social conditions of the new republic: These scholars have shown how English riding frocks and neoclassical gowns alike took on new meanings when situated within a democratic society. This picture of early American dress remains incomplete, however, so long as it focuses on the respectable classes to the exclusion of the lower sort.

In *The Politics of Fashion in Eighteenth Century America*, historian Kate Haulman examines the shifting role of fashion in the gender politics of colonial and Revolutionary America. Claiming “that fashion has a politics that exists apart from, yet intersects with and influences, the realm of what is commonly considered ‘the political,’ or relations to the state,” Haulman argues “Fashion in dress... served as a flash point for social, economic, and political conflicts across the eighteenth century that were, fundamentally, about gender roles and relations.”⁵⁰ Key to Haulman’s argument is her conception of fashion as “a feminine and feminized form of power.” While she acknowledges that both men and women participated in fashion, Haulman claims that it was fashions’ femininity which exerted a destabilizing role in eighteenth-century political culture.⁵¹ Haulman’s feminized concept of fashion leaves little room men’s sartorial rebellion. By the early nineteenth century, Haulman claims, a stable sartorial regime emerged, predicated on the now-familiar theme of masculine renunciation. Once republican discourse segregated

⁴⁸ Earle, *Two Centuries of American Costume*, vol. 2, 418-419, 770.

⁴⁹ Médéric Louis Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Moreau de St. Méry's American Journey, 1793-1798*, trans. Kenneth Roberts and Anna M. Roberts (Doubleday, 1947), 283-284.

⁵⁰ Kate Haulman, *The Politics of Fashion in Eighteenth Century America* (University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 2-3.

⁵¹ Haulman, *The Politics of Fashion*, 3-6.

fashion within a separate, gendered sphere, female consumers might pursue fashion unproblematically, fueling the emerging market economy without threatening republican stability.⁵²

Taking up where Haulman leaves off, Linzy Brekke adopts a similarly expansive definition of political activity, and sees similar dynamics of gender and race at play in early Republican fashion. However, rather than a unitary Republican fashion regime, Brekke sees fashion as an inherently unstable, protean force in early national culture. It was through material goods, Brekke argues, that men and women, both Black and white, attempted to define social roles within the new Republic. Objects could mean various things, depending on circumstance:

“A sheer muslin gown preserved in a box on a museum shelf might have been the ne plus ultra of refinement when selected in 1797. But that gown worn on a black body, on a poor body, on a coquettish woman’s body with red shoes and a daring sash would have evoked very different associations. In the eyes of beholders, it was in fact, not the same gown at all.”⁵³

Anxiety over fashion was particularly fraught amongst men. Whereas the sober dress associated with the masculine renunciation articulated an active, rational role for men in the industrializing economy, men’s clothing purchases and comments on dress bespoke a persistent anxiety over their ability to “cut a figure.” Furthermore, the counterfeit gentility of the store clerk and the plebeian dandyism of the Bowery “b’hoy” alike undermined the uniformity of the male fashion regime.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, despite these persistent anxieties, Brekke concludes that fashion had become a “shared institution of power” for white male citizens by the mid-nineteenth century.

⁵² Haulman, *The Politics of Fashion*, 225.

⁵³ Brekke, “Fashioning America,” 5-9, 18.

⁵⁴ Brekke, “Fashioning America,” 197-204.

Indeed, if the narrative of renunciation dominates histories of men's fashion broadly, then the narrative of democratization looms large in American men's fashion, specifically. Claudia Kidwell and Margaret Christman gave an early articulation of this narrative in their 1974 study *Suiting Everyone*, arguing that the nineteenth-century technologies of scientific tailoring and mass-production made ready-made clothing synonymous with democratic dress.⁵⁵ Yet economic historian Michael Zakim's 2003 study *Ready-Made Democracy* provides the most comprehensive definition of democratic fashion. Asking how "material culture became political culture," Zakim traces the evolution of democratic ideals from homespun solidarity to industrial competition. In the process, he examines the changing role of the democratic citizen, from the thrifty yeoman farmer to the self-interested man of business. Representing "the acme of technological standardization that, in turn, became the means of individuation," the nineteenth century "uniform" of dark colored frock coat and trousers integrated its wearer into the democratic polity and capitalist economy. By the mid-nineteenth century, Zakim concludes, a "fashion regime" had been established that united individuals in pursuit of self-interested gain, while conflating that pursuit with the very principles of democracy itself.⁵⁶

Zakim acknowledges that many Americans remained aloof from the revolution in men's fashion, and that enslaved peoples' dress in particular lay outside the expanding market for ready-made men's clothing.⁵⁷ Indeed, historians of African Americans' dress emphasize how Black style subverts Euro-American standards of taste, providing a counterpoint to the democratization narrative. In their history of African American bodily presentation, *Stylin'*, the Australian historians Shane and Graham White argue that, from the eighteenth century on,

⁵⁵ Claudia Kidwell and Margaret Christman, *Suiting Everyone: Democratization of Clothing in America* (National Museum of History and Technology, 1974), 15-16, 35-64.

⁵⁶ Zakim, *Ready-Made Democracy*, 1-10, 69-95, 185-211.

⁵⁷ Zakim, *Ready-Made Democracy*, 50-51, 209.

African Americans developed a syncretic visual culture which merged Euro-American dress with African aesthetics, all while implicitly critiquing white fashions.⁵⁸ Subsequent scholars of Black dress have elaborated on the Whites' thesis. Monica Miller interprets the formation of Black diasporic identity through the prism of the Black dandy, whose self-conscious performance of both gender and race unsettled strict sartorial categories.⁵⁹ Art historian Christine Checinska adopts a similar approach, identifying what she terms a "Great Masculine Enunciation," amongst the leaders of the Haitian Revolution, who appropriated the symbols of European colonial authority, while inverting the aesthetic principles of European dress. The search for sartorial freedom in Haiti, Checinska writes "was characterized by dressing up rather than dressing down."⁶⁰ There is an open question about how widespread such sartorial practices were, particularly amongst enslaved communities, and until a thorough statistical analysis of enslaved men's dress is performed, the evidence for subcultural styles will remain anecdotal.

Historians examining the lower sort in early America writ large suggest the insights derived from African American dress may be applied more generally. In his 1991 article "To Look Upon the Lower Sort," Jonathan Prude writes that historians have long understood dress as a signifier of individual identity, "but... have not often applied this insight to the unfashionably limited and 'simple' costumes of the poorer nongenteel."⁶¹ In his own chapter on runaway servants, part of a larger study of the "lower sort" in early republican Philadelphia, historian Simon Newman

⁵⁸ Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (Cornell University Press, 1998), 16.

⁵⁹ Monica Miller, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (Duke University Press, 2009), 1-25.

⁶⁰ Christine Checinska, "Stylin': The Great Masculine Enunciation and the (Re)Fashioning of African Diasporic Identities," *Critical Arts* 31, no. 3 (2017) 53-54, 64-69. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2017.1383495>.

⁶¹ Jonathan Prude, "To Look Upon the 'Lower Sort': Runaway Ads and the Appearance of Unfree Laborers in America, 1750-1800," *Journal of American History* 78, no. 1 (June 1991): 157-158, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2078091>.

emphasizes the ability for dependent servants to carve out identities separate from their employers through clothing.⁶² Though the studies by Prude and Newman do not principally focus on clothing, each author appreciates dress's material and semantic value when examining the social conditions of lower-status people. Unfree men participated in fashion, but not in ways which strictly emulated elite styles. As Newman writes, "style may effectively function to communicate a visible subculture that stands in opposition to the mainstream culture of those who owned servants and slaves."⁶³

Yet in other key aspects, paradigms derived from marginal populations are limited. For one, in focusing on oppositional fashions, scholars tend to diminish the role of lower-status men as consumers within a broader fashionable marketplace. By contrast, historian Tyler Rudd Putman maps an extensive network of ready-made clothing dealers in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Philadelphia through whom working-class men acquired clothing. The impact of these "slops sellers" was not restricted to plebeian wearers; rather, as Putman argues, "in America, cheap ready-made clothing, produced in slop shops... was 'democratizing' men's dress and creating complex networks of countercultural fashions well before the store-bought suit came to epitomize the new urban capitalism of the mid-nineteenth century."⁶⁴ Exigencies of climate are another, often unremarked upon, factor delimiting men's dress. As fashion scholar Neal Hurst has shown, the heat of Southern summers prevented elite men from dressing in dark woolens favored in England and the Northern colonies, and led to their adoption of styles and textiles more commonly associated with the working classes.⁶⁵ Studies by Putman and Hurst not

⁶² Simon Newman, *Embodied History: The Lives of the Poor in Early Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 102.

⁶³ Newman, *Embodied History*, 101.

⁶⁴ Tyler Rudd Putman, "The Slop Shop and Almshouse" (MA Thesis, University of Delaware, 2010), 35, 67 71-72.

⁶⁵ Neal Hurst, "For the Heat is Beyond Your Conception: Men's Summer Dress in the American South During the Long Eighteenth Century" (MA Thesis: University of Delaware, 2015), 1-12, 104-105, 133-135. ProQuest.

only point to a diverse regional market for men's clothing in the late colonial and early Republican periods, but also to an expanded definition of the democratic polity. Namely, these scholars have shown that, amongst white American men, dress did not necessarily convey sharp distinctions of status: The line between artisan and apprentice, or master and mechanic could be blurry indeed.

Conclusion: Dress and Democracy?

Clothing, because of its material necessity, its role in conveying status, and its expressive value, represents an essential aspect of the study of material culture in early America. The numerous works produced by dress historians after the turn of the millennium have done much to complicate our image of early American dress. No longer a society clad either in colonial homespun or "democratic" broadcloth, the early United States emerges as a place in which persons at all societal levels participated in fashion through distinct and nuanced means. Yet despite this progress in the study of early American dress, historians still overlook the role ordinary men played in fashion. Furthermore, no early Americanist has adequately synthesized available material and documentary sources for all genders to produce a comprehensive picture of ordinary American dress, as British historian John Styles has done for eighteenth-century English plebeians.

Drawing on a diverse range of sources, including court depositions and account books, Styles argues that clothing was instrumental in the formation of collective identities amongst English plebeians.⁶⁶ While participating in an expanded market economy, plebeians' clothing purchases did not necessarily emulate elite dress, nor did they parallel the individuation of modern consumerism. Rather, clothing constituted a "a collective social phenomenon," assuming new

⁶⁶ John Styles, *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-century England* (Yale University Press, 2007), 1-2.

meanings when worn at wakes, fairs and church ales.⁶⁷ Styles' work has important implications for the study of early American costume, and many of his sources—including probate records, account books, and runaway advertisements—are familiar to American historians. However, Styles places a greater emphasis on the role of class in effecting both the purchasing power of the nonelite and the social meaning of dress. Styles argues that consumer culture did not exist in conflict with customary values, as social historian E.P. Thompson alleged over half a century ago, but in many instances acted in synergy.⁶⁸

Early Americanists would benefit from incorporating Styles' class paradigm, in addition to the prevailing paradigms of gender and race, within their work. Per Styles, early Americanists have yet to comprehensively explore the social significance of ordinary Americans' fashion choices. Such a study would include both women and men, enslaved and free individuals. It would require drawing on a range of sources, beyond newspapers, account books, and rare surviving garments. It would have to encompass the South and the West, as well as the North and mid-Atlantic. Such a far-ranging project is outside this current thesis's scope. Instead, what I hope to achieve is a more nuanced understanding of the role of men's fashion in shaping the political culture of the early Republic. Simultaneously, I want to recover the agency of ordinary American men in directing those fashions. The cumulative effect of this study, I hope, will be to present a multifaceted if necessarily incomplete portrait of men's fashion at this critical juncture.

⁶⁷ Styles, *The Dress of the People*, 305.

⁶⁸ Styles, *The Dress of the People*, 324.

CHAPTER 2

“Revolt into Style”: Working-Class Dress and the Transformation of American Menswear, 1781-1810

Introduction

It was not the first time Peter de Camp ran. Back in November of 1785, the diminutive 18-year-old made his escape from Lawrence Swope’s shop on the bank of Front Street in Philadelphia; on July 22, 1787, now aged between 19 and 20, and a few inches taller, he ran away again. It was the third time. He was caught, again, by Swope, who, “in compassion for his ailing mother,” allowed the young man ten days’ leave “to seek another master.” He never came back. We know scant little about who Peter was: He had been born in New Jersey and was a cordwainer by trade; he enjoyed games, especially pitch and toss, and was “much given to swearing.”⁶⁹

We do, however, know a great deal about what Peter wore. On his first elopement, “a white coatee pieced in the sleeves, with a white corduroy cape and white buttons. . . a grey brown jacket, double breasted, lined with serge. . . a double breasted olive coloured nankeen jacket with black horn buttons. . . a castor hat almost new, and fustian jacket with sleeves,”⁷⁰

to name but a few of his meticulously enumerated garments. On the next occasion, he had a similarly eclectic array of clothing, including a “fustian coatee faced with oznabrigs[sic] with his name wrote near the cape inside,” and “a pair of pumps better than half worn, [with] a pair of

⁶⁹ “Six Dollars Reward,” *Pennsylvania Packet and Daily Advertiser*, November 11, 1785, America’s Historic Newspapers.

⁷⁰ “Six Dollars Reward.”

odd plated buckles.”⁷¹ More than his love of pitch and toss or his penchant for swearing, clothes—like an extant brown linen boy’s jacket in the Connecticut Museum of Culture and History (figure 2.1)—distinguished Peter as a working-class youth. Such garments did the same for thousands of other young men who struck out from their masters’ employ with little more than the clothes on their back and what they could carry away.



Fig. 2.1: Boy’s Jacket, American, 1775-1785. Linen. Connecticut Museum of Culture and History, 1981.110.0.

Historian Tyler Rudd Putman notes that little has been written on the clothes of men and boys like Peter, the bound servants and apprentices who made up a considerable part of the early American workforce.⁷² This chapter seeks to remedy that imbalance. It is based on a

⁷¹“Six-Pence Reward,” *Pennsylvania Packet and Daily Advertiser*, July 26, 1787, America’s Historic Newspapers; “Whereas Peter de Camp,” *Pennsylvania Packet and Daily Advertiser*, August 30, 1787, America’s Historic Newspapers. Joseph Lee Boyle, in *Pennsylvania Runaways, 1784-1790*, lists only these three advertisements for De Camp. See Joseph Lee Boyle, *Pennsylvania Runaways, 1784-1785* (Baltimore: Clearfield Press, 2024), 430.

⁷² Tyler Rudd Putman, “The Slop Shop and the Almshouse: Ready-Made Menswear in Philadelphia,” (MA Thesis, University of Delaware, 2010), 6-7.

comprehensive analysis of advertisements for European and Euro-American apprentices and indentured servants printed in Philadelphia newspapers during the last decades of the eighteenth and the first decade of the nineteenth centuries.⁷³ Using keyword searches of digitized scans available through the online databases *America's Historic Newspapers* and Newspapers.com, a dataset of 2,764 runaway apprentices and servants was assembled. The advertisements' data was then compiled into searchable spreadsheets, which included both demographic information on runaways—their age, ethnicity, and occupation—and documented each piece of clothing listed in a given advertisement. Once compiled, this data was cross-referenced chronologically with reference to multiple categories such as textile or color. As we shall see, the data from advertisements illustrates considerable transformations in plebeian men's clothing, some of which had far-reaching implications for men's fashion more broadly.

Philadelphia offers an ideal vantage point from which to view these sartorial transformations. Not only did the Quaker City produce a disproportionately large corpus of runaway advertisements, but it was also at the forefront of economic and societal change in early America.⁷⁴ An important mercantile and political center in the colonial period, Philadelphia grew during the post-revolutionary decades from a provincial capital of 39,000 inhabitants to a metropolis of 185,000.⁷⁵ Simultaneously, the city underwent an economic transformation, from a

⁷³ This study grew out of an initial research project to apply digital techniques to analyze a limited corpus of advertisements. I would like to thank my collaborators, Emma Kaiser, Lindsay Michael and Melody Swenson for establishing the coding procedure to translate information from advertisements into searchable spreadsheets and for gathering the initial dataset. In addition to digital databases, advertisements were sourced from published collections, namely Richard Wojtowicz and Billy G. Smith, "Advertisements for Runaway Slaves, Indentured Servants, and Apprentices in the Pennsylvania Gazette, 1795-1796," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 54, no. 1 (1987): 34-71, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27773159>; Joseph Lee Boyle, *White Pennsylvania runaways, 1776-1783* (Baltimore: Clearfield, 2017); and *Pennsylvania Runaways, 1784-1790*.

⁷⁴ Barry Levy, "Levelers and Fugitives: Runaway Advertisements and the Contrasting Political Economies of Mid-Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts and Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 78, no. 1 (2011): 13-15, <https://doi.org/10.1353/pnh.2011.0006>.

⁷⁵ Ronald Schultz, *The Republic of Labor: Philadelphia Aristans and the Politics of Class, 1720-1830* (Oxford University Press, 1992), 164.

commercial entrepot to an industrial manufacturing center. “The world of the craftsman was being turned inside-out,” historian Ronald Schultz writes, “by a process of change that made merchants the employers of skilled craftsmen and master artisans the breakers of custom and craft divisions.”⁷⁶ These developments influenced laboring men’s dress. During the early nineteenth century, Putman notes, “clothing was eventually dropped from craft indenture obligations in favor of cash as the retail clothing market expanded.”⁷⁷

Early Republican runaway advertisements document a workforce in flux. During this period, historian Sharon Salinger writes, wage laborers supplanted indentured servants, who had figured prominently in the colonial labor force.⁷⁸ During the 1780s, over half the runaways in the dataset were described as servants; in the following decades, this number shrunk to less than a third. At the same time immigrants from within the United States supplanted those from overseas as the source of the city’s cheap labor.⁷⁹ During the 1780s, just over half the runaways listed were immigrants, a third Irish, but with significant numbers of Germans, Dutch, and Britishers. In the 1790s and into the 1800s, immigrants accounted for just over a quarter of the total number of runaways.

There were continuities throughout the period, as well. The runaways whose occupations were listed came overwhelmingly from the craft trades, with shoemakers, tailors, bakers, and blacksmiths the most common professions. Furthermore, regardless of their indenture, trade, or national origin, runaways remained on average very young, just over nineteen throughout the

⁷⁶ Schulz, *The Republic of Labor*, 176, 228-231.

⁷⁷ Putman, “The Slop Shop and the Almshouse,” 6-7, n. 12

⁷⁸ Sharon Salinger, *To Serve Well and Faithfully: Labor and Indentured Servants in Pennsylvania, 1682-1800* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), 153-156.

⁷⁹ Billy G. Smith, *The Lower Sort: Philadelphia’s Laboring People, 1750-1800* (Cornell University Press, 1990) 60-62, 151-52.

period. As other scholars have noted, clothing played an instrumental role in these young men's individual identity formation; clothing also contributed to the formation of collective identities.⁸⁰

The advertisements illustrate a struggle over runaways' status, as subscribers sought to fix runaways' identities, and runaways sought to craft new ones.⁸¹ While masters might determine the form of these advertisements, individual runaways contested their content. Through subcultural styles and the precocious adoption of new textiles, runaways asserted individual and group identity. Furthermore, plebeian styles were not insular but influenced wider American men's fashion. Most significantly, these young working-class men claimed a form of citizenship which their youth, dependent status, and lack of property otherwise denied them. In the urban mid-Atlantic, working-class men launched their own sartorial revolution.

The first part of this chapter surveys advantages and drawbacks of runaway advertisements as sources for plebeian clothing in the early Republic. Lacking substantial survivals of working dress, the best source for such plebeian garments are descriptions found in runaway advertisements. The second part discusses the methodology for translating these written sources into a searchable database. The third part tracks some of the most significant transformations in working-class menswear using both the database of runaway advertisements and extant garments. As the fourth part demonstrates, these developments both influenced broader early nineteenth-century men's fashions and had significant implications for runaways'

⁸⁰ See Simon Newman, *Embodied History: The Lives of the Poor in Early Philadelphia* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 102.

⁸¹ Levy, "Levelers and Fugitives," 19.

identities. The conclusion reflects on some of the wider implications of working men's fashion choices, especially their potential political connotations.



Fig. 2.2: "Eight Dollars Reward," Pennsylvania Packet, July 9, 1785. America's Historical Newspapers.

The Runaway Advertisement in History

Common in American newspapers from the mid-eighteenth century onwards, advertisements for runaways sought, first and foremost, to retrieve absconding servants or apprentices and return them to their master's residence in exchange for a monetary reward. To this end, advertisements noted runaways' distinctive physical features and clothing to aid in their apprehension.⁸² As the July 9, 1785 advertisement for 21-year-old tailor's apprentice James Byrne stated, "Whoever secures the said Lad, so that his master may get him again, shall have above reward [of eight dollars] and reasonable charges paid, by Anthony Groves, Taylor, Water street near Arch street." (Figure 2.2) From Byrne's ad, we learn the young Irish tailor not only possessed a "fair

⁸² Jonathan Prude, "To Look upon the "Lower Sort": Runaway Ads and the Appearance of Unfree Laborers in America, 1750-1800," *Journal of American History* 78, no. 1 (1991): 124-125, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2078091>

complexion, grey eyes, [and] sandy hair,” but “had on and took with him,” a brown broadcloth coat with yellow metal buttons (“with a small knob in the middle”), a pair of olive colored corduroy breeches, “a black castor hat with a band a buckle,” and a pair of striped trousers, in addition to several shirts, stockings, and neck stocks.⁸³

Cumulatively, runaway advertisements like Byrne’s provide exceptional documentation of everyday dress. True, such textual sources alone cannot fully reconstruct the appearance of lower-status people in the early Republican United States. Their subjects skewed young and were overwhelmingly male. Furthermore, writing for a contemporary audience, subscribers did not prioritize defining specific clothing terms: What, for instance, was the distinction between a “coatee,” a “short coat,” or a jacket with skirts? Yet the advantages of runaway advertisements outweigh their drawbacks. As historian Sharon Block states, the ads are the only contemporary source which “offers an opportunity to aggregate thousands of parallel descriptions of the physical appearance of enslaved and free people.”⁸⁴ Furthermore, as other scholars demonstrate, when supplemented by contemporary illustrations and rare extant garments, runaway advertisements can illuminate the material world of the past.⁸⁵

Whether as voluntary or involuntary consumers, ordinary Americans participated in fashion, even if few of their everyday clothes survive. Well-to-do people preserved exceptional, valuable, and sentimental garments, while lower status individuals used utilitarian clothing until it wore out.⁸⁶ In the absence of surviving garments, the techniques of digital history provide an essential tool for exploring the development of plebeian dress through written sources. Using

⁸³ "Advertisement," *Pennsylvania Packet*, July 9, 1785, *America's Historical Newspapers*.

⁸⁴ Sharon Block, *Colonial Complexions: Race and Bodies in Eighteenth-Century America* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 145.

⁸⁵ Putman, “The Slop Shop and the Almshouse,” 62-63; and Howard, “Had on and Took With Him,” 1-2.

⁸⁶ Linda Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal*, (Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 2002), 2; Putman, “The Slop Shop and Almshouse,” 57.

digitized American newspapers, historian Rebecca Fifield compiled a clothing database of almost 900 female runaways from 1750–1790.⁸⁷ More recently, Elaine Farrell and Eliza McKee analyzed 4,083 notices for missing and deceased persons dating from the second half of the nineteenth century in the Irish police gazette the *Hue and Cry* to create a database of 14,000—mostly plebeian—clothing items.⁸⁸ These databases’ utility extends beyond simply cataloging and quantifying items of dress. As fashion scholar Lauren Downing Peters writes, “digital traces discovered in online archives and databases might enable fashion scholars to recover histories of fashion that have been lost through the conventional practices of conservation, collecting and archiving.”⁸⁹

This picture of lower-status dress remains incomplete, however. As Fifield concludes, “The subsequent cataloguing of runaway men’s clothing is a natural progression of this project.”⁹⁰ In the decade since her publication, no one has attempted this admittedly daunting task. Earlier work by historian Jonathan Prude and archaeologist Bryan Paul Howard pointed in the right direction but was limited by its restricted geographic or descriptive focus.⁹¹ Meanwhile, notable digital history projects such as the University of Virginia’s *Geography of Slavery in Virginia* and Joseph Yanielli’s *Runaway Connecticut* have compiled demographic information on runaways, but do not focus on clothing. Indeed, despite the existing scholarship on the genre of runaway ads in particular and on working-class clothing more broadly, no early Americanist

⁸⁷ Rebecca Fifield, “‘Had on When She Went Away...’ Expanding the Usefulness of Garment Data in American Runaway Advertisements 1750–90 through Database Analysis,” *Textile History* 42, no. 1 (May 2011): 83, <https://doi-org.ezproxy2.library.colostate.edu/10.1179/174329510X12798919710671>. <https://doi-org.ezproxy2.library.colostate.edu/10.1179/036121178805298838>.

⁸⁸ Elaine Farrel and Eliza McKee, “Captured in the Clothing: Ireland, 1850s–1890s,” *Dress* 48, no. 2 (2022): 125–142. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03612112.2022.2039484>.

⁸⁹ Lauren Downing Peters, “A History of Fashion Without Fashion: Recovering the Stout Body in the Digital Archive,” *Critical Studies in Fashion and Beauty* 10, no. 1 (2019): 94.

⁹⁰ Fifield, “‘Had on When She Went Away,’” 99.

⁹¹ See: Prude, “To Look upon the ‘Lower Sort,’” 144; and Howard, “Had on and Took With Him.”

has yet synthesized these two approaches to produce a comprehensive picture of plebeian men's dress.

The current analysis focuses exclusively on white male runaways.⁹² As Howard wrote in 1991, indentured servants and apprentices represent a significant population that has been largely overlooked in professional literature, while a more recent historiographical study by historian Antonio Bly confirms this scholarly oversight.⁹³ Into the nineteenth century, advertisements for white apprentices and indentured servants outnumbered those for black and mixed-race runaways in Philadelphia papers. Furthermore, a substantial literature exists on the clothing of the enslaved, while, thanks to Fifield's work, the clothing of female runaways during the late eighteenth century has been well documented.⁹⁴ Escaped criminals and deserters from military units were also excluded. Concrete demographic information on the former is often lacking, while many of the latter ran away wearing part or all of their issued uniforms. By restricting the analysis to white servants and apprentices, this article illustrates changes in fashion among a relatively coherent demographic in early America.

Methods

This study grew out of an initial research project to apply digital techniques to analyze a limited corpus of 156 advertisements printed in the *Pennsylvania Packet*, a daily newspaper published in Philadelphia throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As noted above, the techniques of digital history provide powerful tools for distilling the material and demographic

⁹² This number includes repeat runaways, like Peter de Camp.

⁹³ Howard, "Had on and Took With Him," 3; Antonio T. Bly and Tamia Haygood, *Escaping Servitude: A Documentary History of Runaway Servants in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (Lexington Books, 2015), 341-9.

⁹⁴ See: Patricia Hunt-Hurst, "'Round Homespun Coat & Pantaloon of the Same': Slave Clothing as Reflected in Fugitive Slave Advertisements in Antebellum Georgia," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 83, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 127-140, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40584195>; Katie Knowles, "Fashioning Slavery: Slaves and Clothing in the U.S. South, 1830-1865," (PhD diss., Rice University, 2014); and Linda Baumgarten, "Clothes for the People: Slave Clothing in Early Virginia," *Journal of Early Southern Decorative Arts* 14, no. 2 (1988): 52-53. Archive.org.

information contained in runaway advertisements. Notably, digital tools' ability to collate and filter this mass of data means that the techniques developed to sort and analyze a little over 150 advertisements could, with slight modifications, "scale" to apply to an expanded dataset of over 2,700.

The expanded dataset, covering the years 1781 to 1810, drew on newspapers from two databases, *America's Historical Newspapers* and *Newspapers.com*. The databases vary considerably in both the specificity of their search engines and their ability to filter results. Optical character recognition (OCR) keyword searches were used to find runaway advertisements. OCR searches have limitations when applied to historic newspapers. Printing noise, and unequal line and word spacing in historic documents inhibit accurate scanning of a digitized text.⁹⁵ However, the expanded timeframe of this project made an issue-by-issue search impractical. Keywords had to be varied to return relevant results. Variations on the keyword phrases "had on" or "ran away" and various boolean operators proved generally reliable. Searches were restricted to papers printed in Pennsylvania. When available, published collections compiled by Richard Wojtowicz and Billy G. Smith, and by Joseph Lee Boyle were consulted both to double-check the sources and to acquire additional ads.⁹⁶

After being collected, the advertisements were compiled into a master dataset using Google's free spreadsheet tool, Google Sheets. In the master spreadsheet, runaways were indexed by demographic information, such as their age, ethnicity, and occupations. Another

⁹⁵ Sean Graham, Ian Milligan, and Scott Weingart, *Exploring Big Historical Data*, (Imperial College Press, 2016) PDF, 73.

⁹⁶ "Advertisements for Runaway Slaves, Indentured Servants, and Apprentices in the Pennsylvania Gazette, 1795-1796," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 54, no. 1 (1987): 34-71, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27773159>; and Joseph Lee Boyle, *White Pennsylvania runaways, 1776-1783* (Baltimore: Clearfield, 2017); and *Pennsylvania runaways, 1784-1790* (Baltimore: Clearfield, 2024).

sheet listed all the clothing items in the advertisements. Clothing items were described by their number, color, fabric or material, and the type of garment, as well as a series of descriptive categories that included details such as cut, wear and embellishments. As Rebecca Fifield notes, eighteenth-century authors often adopted non-standard spelling for clothing terms, particularly textiles. For example, the coarse linen known as osnabrig could be spelled any number of ways—from ozenbrig, to osnabrug, to osnabrigs.⁹⁷ To count these garments accurately, standardized spellings were adopted, based on those found in Florence Montgomery’s *Textiles in America*. Textiles were further identified by their primary fiber content, again based on the definitions from Montgomery.⁹⁸

Returning to Byrne’s ad, we can see this process in action. The top image in Figure 2.3 shows Byrne’s demographic data, including his place of origin, broken down by state, city, and address, as well as his age (21) and ethnicity (Irish). It also lists relevant contextual information, such as the date of Byrne’s advertisement, Byrne’s indenture type, and the name of the subscriber, Anthony Groves. The bottom image shows Byrne’s clothing: His garments are broken down by color, fabric and type of garment. Additional details, such as the yellow metal buttons “with a small knob in the middle,” on Byrne’s coat are recorded in subsequent columns. The same transcription process was done for the thousands of other runaways in the dataset.

⁹⁷ Fifield, “Had On When She Went Away,” 91.

⁹⁸ For further detail regarding the coding procedure, see Emma Kaiser, Lindsay Michael, and Evan Stackpole, “Stop the Villains!” Runaway Clothing in the Pennsylvania Packet, 1785-1786” (unpublished manuscript, December 10, 2024), 3-18, Google Docs file.

Date person	Newspaper	Name of Runaway	Citation	Reward Mon	State	County or Cit	Town or Adc	Gender	Nationality/ I	Age	Name of Sut	Indenture Ty
1785-07-03	1785-07-09	James Byrne	1785_07_09_pap_02.pdf	Eight Dollars	PA	Philadelphia	Water Street	male	Irish		21 Anthony Groves	servant

#	Color	Fabric/m	Garment	Garment	Condition	Lining	Buttons	Additions	Additions	Name	Citation	Years
183	1 brown	broadcloth	coat				yellow metal buttons which have a small			James Byrne	1785_...	1785
712	1 black	castor	hat					band and buckle		James Byrne	1785_...	1785
2233	1 olive	corduroy	breeches							James Byrne	1785_...	1785
4834	2 white	linen	shirt							James Byrne	1785_...	1785
6231	1	nankeen	waistcoat					short		James Byrne	1785_...	1785
6557	1	plated	buckles	knee						James Byrne	1785_...	1785
7042	1	silk	stockings							James Byrne	1785_...	1785
7106	1	plated	buckles	shoe						James Byrne	1785_...	1785
7463	1	thread	stockings							James Byrne	1785_...	1785
13671	2		stock							James Byrne	1785_...	1785
14170	1 striped		trowsers							James Byrne	1785_...	1785

Fig. 2.3: James Byrne, Demographic and Clothing Data

Using Google Sheets' filters, clothing data could be refined by year, textile or by type of garment. Grouping clothing by the individual wearer, for instance, provided a quick means of visualizing individuals' wardrobes. The pivot function, meanwhile, could be used to sort through garments, which proved useful for collapsing large numbers of garments or textiles into a single quantity in a table, without resorting to manually counting and inputting numbers. These same filters could also be applied to sort individual runaways by geographical location. Pennsylvania's newspapers sometimes advertised runaways from very far afield. Maryland and Virginia plantation owners regularly placed ads for escaped slaves heading north.⁹⁹ Free laborers, too, might come from miles away—Jacob Forgundas, a hired journeyman barber, fled his employer in New York to return to his parents in Philadelphia.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ John Bull of Berkley county, for instance, expressed astonishment that Port and Quash would run, and attributed this perverse impulse to the fact that they "expected to be free in Pennsylvania," see "Twenty Dollars reward," *The Freeman's Journal or North-American Intelligencer*, May 24, 1790. Newspapers.com.

¹⁰⁰ "Twenty Shillings Reward," *Pennsylvania Mercury and Universal Advertiser*, March 26, 1791. America's Historic Newspapers.

The Evolution of Plebeian Style in Runaway Advertisements

Influenced by antiquarian studies, early scholarship on everyday American dress has emphasized its supposedly static and homespun qualities.¹⁰¹ Late twentieth century-research called into question such “common sense” assumptions. The consumer revolution of the late eighteenth century in particular upset traditional sartorial hierarchies. Elites complained incessantly that one could no longer tell a gentleman from his servant by their appearance alone.¹⁰² Despite occasional reliance on their masters’ largesse to provide wearing apparel, runaways, too, participated in this revolution. Without access to the whole plethora of imported calaminacos, chintzes, and muslinetts available for purchase from Philadelphia’s merchants, the advertisements nevertheless demonstrate that, within the limits of available garments, runaways crafted diverse and individual wardrobes.

¹⁰¹ Cf. Alice Morse Earle, *Two Centuries of American Costume* vol. 2 (Corner House Publishers, 1974), 418-419, 501-502; and Peter Copeland, *Working Dress in Colonial and Revolutionary America* (Greenwood Press, 1977), xv.

¹⁰² Linzy Brekke, “The ‘Scourge of Fashion’: Political Economy and the Politics of Consumption in the Early Republic” *Early American Studies* 3, no. 1 (2005), 113. See also Kate Haulman, “Fashion and the Culture Wars of Revolutionary Philadelphia,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 62, no. 4 (2005), 625-627; and Ann Smart Martin, “Material Things and Cultural Meaning,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (1996), 7-8. Studies of the consumer revolution in eighteenth century North America owe a debt to T.H. Breen, “The Baubles of Britain’: The American and Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century,” *Past and Present*, 119 (1988): 73-104.

Table 2.1: Garments Appearing Over 400 Times in the Dataset, out of 15,544 Total**Garments**

Garment	1781-1790	% had on	1791-1800	% had on	1801-1810	% had on	Grand Total	% had on
trousers Total	511	54.42%	858	81.25%	546	71.00%	1915	69.28%
jacket Total	751	79.98%	668	63.26%	492	63.98%	1911	69.14%
hat Total	644	68.58%	697	66.00%	494	64.24%	1835	66.39%
shirt Total	668	71.14%	496	46.97%	290	37.71%	1454	52.60%
coat Total	604	64.32%	518	49.05%	195	25.36%	1317	47.65%
shoes Total	472	50.27%	465	44.03%	245	31.86%	1182	42.76%
stockings Total	545	58.04%	379	35.89%	187	24.32%	1111	40.20%
breeches Total	635	67.63%	319	30.21%	32	4.16%	986	35.67%
waistcoat Total	258	27.48%	323	30.59%	263	34.20%	844	30.54%
coatee Total	148	15.76%	286	27.08%	299	38.88%	733	26.52%
buckles Total	291	30.99%	156	14.77%	4	0.52%	449	16.24%
pantaloon Total		0.00%	54	5.11%	367	47.72%	421	15.23%
vest Total	64	6.82%	164	15.53%	173	22.50%	401	14.51%
Grand Total	5965	635.25%	5693	539.11%	3888	505.59%	15544	562.37%

Data on specific types of garments reveals changing plebeian fashions. As Table 2.1 shows, the most frequently named garments in runaway ads did not remain static over time. Table 2.2 illustrates in greater detail how leather breeches fell out of style during the last two decades of the eighteenth century. Sometimes referred to as the era's "blue jeans," leather breeches were once a ubiquitous plebeian garment on both sides of the Atlantic.¹⁰³ A "mechanic"

¹⁰³ Linda Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal: The Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America* (Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 2002), 125.

in the early nineteenth century recalled, “[w]hen I was a young man two pair of leather breeches during a seven years’ apprenticeship, were reckoned great things. In fact many got but one pair.”¹⁰⁴ Of his runaway dataset, spanning the 1750s through the 1770s, Jonathan Prude noted that runaways’ breeches were more likely to be leather than anything else, while in a sample of New Jersey runaways, from 1770 to 1774, leather or buckskin breeches comprised just over half the total number of breeches listed.¹⁰⁵ During the years 1781 to 1782, leather and buckskin were the most frequently named materials for runaways’ breeches, comprising over 40 percent of the total number of breeches listed. Leather made up a significant portion of the total number of breeches throughout the 1780s and first half of the 1790s, amounting to 137 total breeches.

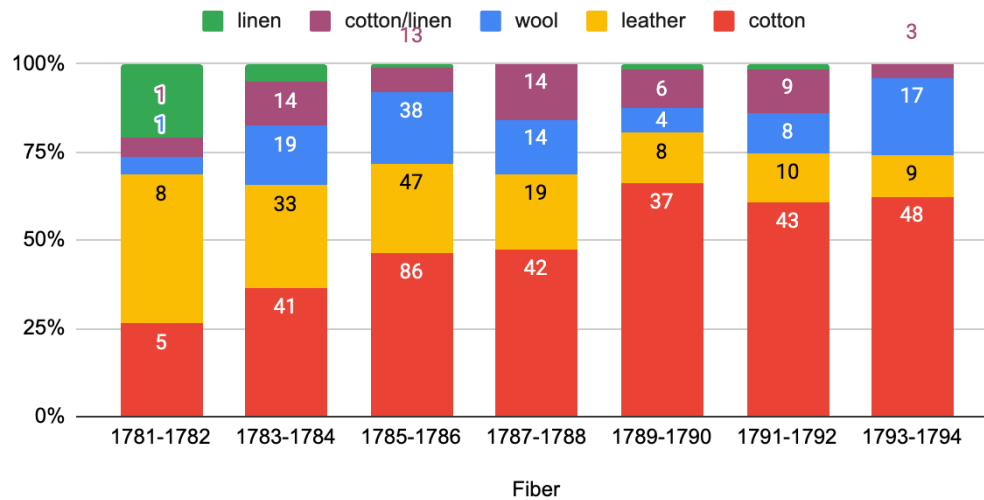
¹⁰⁴ “The Mechanic, No. III,” *Boston Weekly Magazine & Ladies’ Miscellany* August 31, 1818, American Antiquarian Society (AAS) Historical Periodicals Collection: Series 1.

¹⁰⁵ Prude, “To Look Upon the Lower Sort,” 145; Evan Stackpole, “NJ Condensed Breeches Spreadsheet,” Google Sheets, last modified April 21, 2025. Based on data from William Nelson, ed. *Documents relating to the colonial, Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary history of the State of New Jersey: Extracts From American Newspapers, Relating to New Jersey*, vol. XIII, IX, and X. 1772-1773 (Patterson, NJ: 1916) Internet Archive.

Table 2.2: Material Listed for Breeches, 1781-1796

Materials Used for Breeches, 1781-1796

Based on 684 Garments



By the late 1780s, however, leather became less common: from a fraction at the beginning of the decade, cotton outnumbered leather by the mid-1780s. The proportion of cottons increased throughout the decade, and over half of runaways' breeches were made of cotton by the 1790s. Of these new cotton textiles, corduroy was the most common. Described as “a kind of coarse, durable cotton fabric, having a piled surface, like that of velvet, raised in cords,” over half the cotton breeches during these years were corduroy.¹⁰⁶ Thomas Billington, listed as a “merchant tailor” in the 1794 Philadelphia directory, advertised “corduroy breeches lined at 18s9 per pair,” amongst sundry other “ready made cloaths.”¹⁰⁷ A similar process was underway in England, where, according to breeches maker-turned-radical politician Francis Place, “The [leather] breeches trade was rapidly declining in consequence of the increase of the cotton manufacture,

¹⁰⁶ Quoted in Florence Montgomery, *Textiles in America, 1650-1870* (W.W. Norton, 2007), 205.

¹⁰⁷ “Thomas Billington,” *Pennsylvania Journal and Weekly Advertiser* May 28, 1785. America’s Historical Newspapers; James Hardie, *The Philadelphia Directory and Register*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, 1794), 12.

corduroys and velveteens were now worn by working men instead of leather.”¹⁰⁸ Notably, Place claimed this transformation occurred first among “rag fair” breeches made from low-quality skins and sold readymade, and only later described gentlemen adopting corduroy or cassimere breeches instead of leather for riding.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Francis Place, *The Autobiography of Francis Place*, ed. Mary Thale (Cambridge University Press, 1972), 80.

¹⁰⁹ Place, *The Autobiography of Francis Place*, 110.



Fig. 2.4: L, Breeches, Taunton, MA, c. 1760-1800. Leather. Old Sturbridge Village, 26.40.21; R, Breeches, American, c. 1790-1820. Twill-woven cotton. Historic Deerfield, 2001.14. Author's photograph.

The data from runaway advertisements allows us to situate rare extant examples of working dress within a broader historical context. The collection of Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts contains a pair of leather breeches owned by Jack Durfee, a formerly enslaved man. (Figure 2.4, L). In the northern and mid-Atlantic colonies (and later states), both enslaved and indentured laborers wore broadly similar garments.¹¹⁰ The breeches are made of yellowish chamois doeskin and feature tied knee straps and a broad fall front.¹¹¹ Durfee's breeches resemble certain of the leather breeches described in runaway ads. Amongst his "many other articles," 19-year old German servant Leonard Mayer carried off two pairs of leather breeches

¹¹⁰ Robert S. DuPlessis, *The Material Atlantic: Clothing, Commerce, and Colonization in the Atlantic World, 1650–1800* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 159-162.

¹¹¹ I am grateful to OSV's head of collections, Derek Heidemann, for allowing me to view this item in-person.

“tied with cords,” like Durfee’s, when he absconded in December of 1786.¹¹² Leather’s unique properties dictated the construction of this garment. Unlike breeches cut from cloth, Durfee’s breeches lack triangular gussets and pleats in the seat; instead, the material molded itself to the wearer’s body through constant use.¹¹³

Another pair of breeches in the collections of Historic Deerfield illustrate the late-eighteenth century transformation of these garments (Figure 2.4, R).¹¹⁴ Made of sturdy, twill-woven cotton and lined in the fall and knee band with coarse, plain-woven linen, this pair shows signs of hard wear. The front of the breeches, behind the fall, is pieced with a darker, plain-woven fabric, and somewhat coarsely stitched; the same material has been used to patch a spot on the right knee. Instead of fashionable knee buckles or ties, this pair’s knee bands close with a simple button fastening. Francis Place noted how this style of closure was common to working youths’ breeches.¹¹⁵ Deerfield’s breeches make an interesting contrast with the pair at Sturbridge. Though clearly an unpretentious, working garment, their use of novel cotton textiles indicates a stylistic evolution occurring within working dress.

¹¹² See “Forty Shillings Reward,” *Pennsylvania Packet* January 6, 1786. America’s Historical Newspapers.

¹¹³ Derek Heideman, Personal Communication to the Author, August 12, 2025.

¹¹⁴ I am grateful to Lauren Whitley for letting me view this, and numerous other items in Historic Deerfield’s collection.

¹¹⁵ Place, *The Autobiography of Francis Place*, 62.

Table 2.3: Garment Textiles, 1781-1810, about of a total of 8,088 garments with textiles listed

Fiber	1781-1790	% of Total	1791-1800	% of Total	1801-1810	% of Total
wool	1296	43.06%	1286	42.94%	811	38.97%
cotton	485	16.11%	754	25.18%	674	32.39%
linen	649	21.56%	371	12.39%	241	11.58%
cotton/linen	225	7.48%	324	10.82%	99	4.76%
leather	168	5.58%	101	3.37%	68	3.27%
wool/linen	72	2.39%	77	2.57%	30	1.44%
silk	97	3.22%	48	1.60%	30	1.44%
wool/cotton	14	0.47%	25	0.83%	124	5.96%
silk/cotton	4	0.13%	7	0.23%	4	0.19%
silk/wool			2	0.07%		
Grand Total	3010	100.00%	2995	100.00%	2081	100.00%

The transformation of breeches was part of wider adoption of new cotton textiles by plebeian wearers. As Table 3 illustrates, cottons doubled over the period, increasing to almost a third of the total number of textiles by the first decade of nineteenth century. During the decade 1781-90, a little over fifteen percent of the listed textiles were cottons. By the following decade, this proportion increased to just over a quarter. In the decade after that, the proportion of cotton textiles had risen to over 30 percent. Some confusion remains as to the fiber content of eighteenth-century cotton. Fashion historian Linda Baumgarten notes that so-called Kendal or

“negro” cottons were in fact woolens.¹¹⁶ Furthermore, many of the cotton textiles during this period were not pure cottons but rather cotton and linen blends known as fustians.¹¹⁷

Balanced against this confusion over terminology, however, are contemporaries’ awareness that cotton represented an innovation in clothing. Looking back in 1819, American economist Tench Coxe remarked on the enormous expansion of the cotton industry during the last decades of the eighteenth century.¹¹⁸ The boom in cotton production had deep implications for dress. As an 1801 article stated, “From the highest to the lowest, from the richest to the poorest, cotton, in one sort of fabric or other, is universally worn, in a proportion scarcely inferior to that in which we wear woolens.”¹¹⁹

In addition to corduroy, nankeen became popular during the last decades of the eighteenth century. Described by textile historian Florence Montgomery as “[a] cotton cloth of plain weave originally sold at Nankin in China and made from a yellow variety of cotton ‘of the same yellow tinge which it preserves when spun and woven into cloth,’” nankeen was the most frequently named cotton, constituting over a third of the total number of named cotton textiles. Nankeen fabrics were durable, lightweight, and washable—an ideal material either for gentlemen’s summer dress or workingmen’s wear.¹²⁰ In 1797, 19-year old Robert Boyd carried off “two pair nankeen breeches,” while his companion Thomas Andrews wore a pair of “blue and yellow and white striped nankeen trowsers,”; 17-year old Peter Kunsman took “a clouded nankeen coat,”

¹¹⁶ Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal*, 112.

¹¹⁷ Neal Hurst, “‘For the Heat is Beyond Your Conception’: Men’s Summer Dress in the American South During the Long Eighteenth Century,” (Master’s Thesis, University of Delaware, 2015), 69. ProQuest.

¹¹⁸ Tench Coxe, *A Memoir, of February, 1817, Upon the Subject of the Cotton Wool Cultivation, the Cotton Trade, and the Cotton Manufactories of the United States of America* (Philadelphia, 1817), 2-3

¹¹⁹ “Cotton Manufactory,” *Aurora General Advertiser*, August 3, 1801, Newspapers.com.

¹²⁰ Montgomery, *Textiles in America*, 308; and Amanda Lange, “Nankeens: Chinese Cottons for the American Market,” *Historic Deerfield Magazine* 15 (2015): 21-24.

amongst his “sundry articles of Summer clothing,” when he ran in March, 1801.¹²¹ During the period, nankeen doubled, from under 22 percent of the total number of cottons in 1781-1790, to over 40 percent in 1801-1810.

The rise in popularity of nankeen, though, may only partly be attributed to its practicality. Working-class people did not buy cottons for strictly utilitarian reasons, British historian John Styles claims; rather, working-class consumers valued cottons both for their decorative patterns and high-style associations. As fashion historian Neal Hurst notes, nankeen’s natural yellowish color mimicked the shade of stylish chamois or buckskin.¹²² Considering nankeen and other cottons’ increasing popularity, we may concur with historian Beverly Lemire, when she wrote that cottons “reconfigured fashionable dress in the Western world,” by “defining and redefining the meanings of democratic dress.”¹²³

The style of plebeian men’s garments, likewise, evolved during this period. At the turn of the nineteenth century, more runaways wore roundabout jackets. Described by historian Tyler Rudd Putman as a “type of relatively close-fitting jacket, single- or double-breasted, that buttoned up the front” without skirts, advertisements referred to “roundabouts” infrequently throughout the 1780s and 1790s.¹²⁴ After the turn of the nineteenth century, however, their number shot up suddenly: Roundabouts appeared 227 times between 1801–1810. These included a “blue cloth round about jacket lined with white flannel,” worn by sixteen-year old Dutch servant John Berger, as well as a “roundabout plain nankeen jacket,” worn by George Hyneman,

¹²¹ “10 Dollars Reward,” *Philadelphia Gazette* April 4, 1801. America’s Historical Newspapers.

¹²² Styles, *The Dress of the People*, 126-127, 130-132; Neal Hurst, “For the Heat is Beyond Your Conception: Men’s Summer Dress in the American South during the Long Eighteenth Century,” (MA Thesis, University of Delaware, 2015), 72, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

¹²³ Beverly Lemire, *Cotton* (Berg, 2011), 33.

¹²⁴ Putman, “Working Men’s Clothing in New Jersey, 1750-1825,” 19.

presumably part of his working clothes, as “his Sunday clothes he kept at his father’s in water street.”¹²⁵

Meanwhile, fur and roram hats, “made with a wool felt body faced with a finer wool surface,”¹²⁶ became increasingly common, rising to over a third of the total number of hats by 1801-1810, while felt hats declined from almost 20 to less than 2 percent. Like the “half worn roram hat, about six inches high” worn by Samuel Green, more of these hats were described as high or deep-crowned—precursors of the later nineteenth century top hat.¹²⁷ As one of the most visible parts of a man’s wardrobe, ordinary people were attuned to shifts in headgear styles. During the 1780s, “round hats were coming into fashion,” Englishman Francis Place recalled, “when I was quite a child I wore one, with a gold band and tassel,” despite the disapproval of his father. Place styled his hat in a peculiar manner known as a “knucklers cock,” “knuckler” being “the slang used for a pick pocket.” “This was done by looping up the sides in the manner of some of the Clergy and the Judges wear theirs.”¹²⁸

¹²⁵ “Five Dollars Reward,” *Poulson’s American Advertiser*, January 3, 1801, America’s Historical Newspapers; and “Thirty Dollars Reward,” *Aurora General Advertiser*, July 7, 1801, Newspapers.com.

¹²⁶ Putman, “Working Men’s Clothing in New Jersey, 1750-1825,” in *Work of Play: Where Business Meets Leisure*, ed. Siobhan Fitzpatrick (Museum of Early Trades and Crafts, 2013), 18.

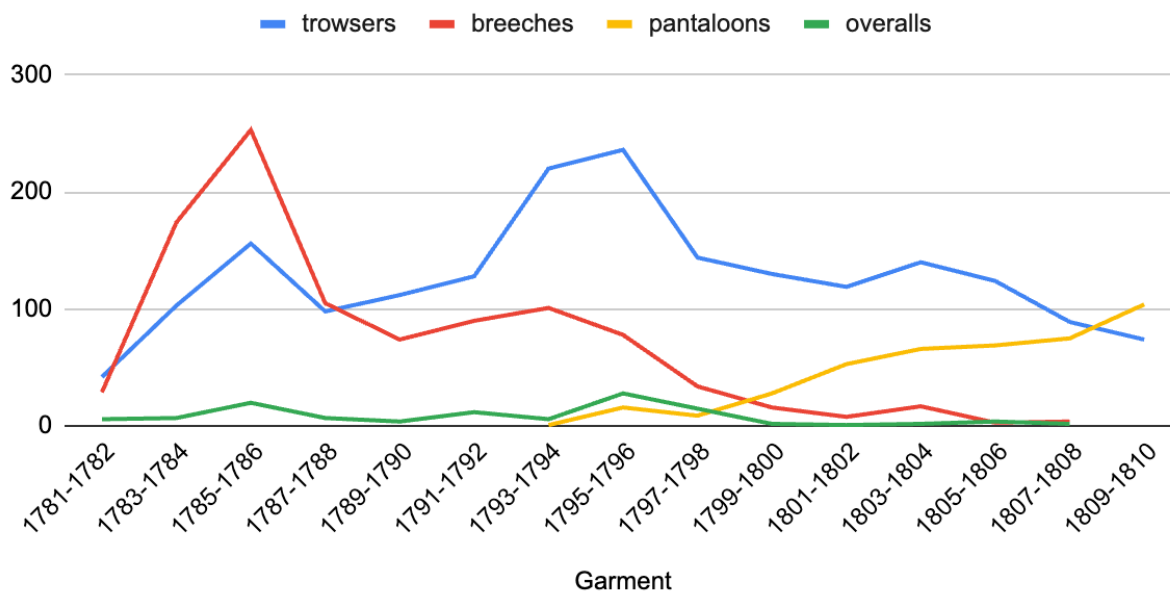
¹²⁷ “Twenty Dollars Reward,” *Dunlap’s American Daily Advertiser*, November 24, 1795. America’s Historical Newspapers.

¹²⁸ Place, *The Autobiography of Francis Place*, 62-63.

Table 2.4: The Decline of Breeches, 1781–1810.

Runaways' Legwear, 1781-1810

Based on 3,438 Garments



However, the most dramatic shift in plebeian menswear occurred below the waist.

As Table 2.4 illustrates, during the late 1780s and into the 1790s, working men discarded breeches en masse in favor of straight-legged trousers. About 67 percent of runaways “had on or took with them” a pair of breeches during the years 1781-1790, compared with 54 percent who had trousers. In the 1790s, only about 30 percent of runaways carried off a pair of breeches, next to 81 percent who had a pair of trousers. By the first decade of the 1800s, only about 4 percent of runaways ran wearing breeches.

Runaways wore trousers throughout the three decades under review, sometimes in conjunction with breeches. James Broadly, “an Irish servant lad,” ran on November 5, 1785,

wearing a “a pair of leather breeches, and a pair of canvas trowsers [sic] over them.”¹²⁹ From the late 1780s onwards, however, trousers, and the related garments overalls and pantaloons, appeared increasingly as the exclusive netherwear for working men. Historians generally define trousers as long, straight-legged nethergarments, while pantaloons were more closely fitted and ended above the ankle; overalls, often associated with military dress, fit like pantaloons with a covering over the instep.¹³⁰ The distinction between these various garments could be unclear, even to contemporaries. For example, John Bauman, “by trade a hatter, formerly in the continental service,” ran away on October 25, 1785, wearing “a pair of linen overalls or trowsers,” while Philip Balthasar, “a native of Germany,” wore a pair of “drab cloth overalls or pantaloons,” when he made his escape in 1794.¹³¹ One thing is certain, however, these were all distinct garments from knee-length breeches.

To be sure, trousers appeared frequently in American documents since the mid-eighteenth century. Trousers had clear practical advantages over tight-fitting breeches for physical tasks such as farming or seafaring. Using Southern advertisements from the 1750s and 1760s, dress historian Linda Baumgarten has determined that one pair of trousers appeared for every 2.37 pairs of breeches. Of these garments, Baumgarten writes, “The American trousers had nothing to do with fashion. . . they were functional work clothes made of sturdy unbleached linens such as osnaburg, crocus, and rolls.”¹³² For American elites, trousers did indeed carry such rustic

¹²⁹ “Advertisement,” *Pennsylvania Packet and Daily Advertiser*, November 11, 1785, America’s Historical Newspapers.

¹³⁰ See, Ann Murray, “From Breeches to Sherryvallies,” *Dress* 2, no. 1 (1976): 17-33.

¹³¹ See: Boyle, *Pennsylvania Runaways, 1784-1790*, 160; and “One Hundred & Thirty Dollars Reward,” *Pennsylvania Gazette*, February 5th, 1794, Newspapers.com.

¹³² Linda Baumgarten, “Review of *The Dress of the People, Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England*,” *Dress* 36 no. 1 (2013): 88-89.

connotations. As John Adams wrote in a letter to Abigail dated July 7, 1774, “as for myself a Frock and Trowsers, an Hoe and Spade, would do for my Remaining Days.”¹³³

Yet the sudden eclipse of breeches by trousers is difficult to read as anything other than a change in fashion. By wearing trousers, British historian John Styles writes, “these plebeian men were prefiguring a move from breeches to trousers that would transform elite men’s fashion after the turn of the nineteenth century.” Both Styles and Lemire attribute the rise of trousers in England to “imperial masculinities,” associated with Britain’s burgeoning naval and merchant marine force.¹³⁴ Across the channel, scholars associate the rise of trousers with the social upheavals wrought by the French Revolution, trousers being the favored wear of the working-class *sans culottes*.¹³⁵ Yet despite the cultural influence of both countries on American fashion, this sartorial development appears to be homegrown. In the early nineteenth century, working-class Englishmen were still wearing breeches, while their American cousins had changed styles a decade before.¹³⁶

In 1797, readers of the *Oracle of Dauphin* received a striking reminder of how much the country had changed since the revolution. “Wonderful Alteration!!” proclaimed the author, “Veritas.” Amid the various political tumults, the transformation in Americans’ clothing struck the author most. In the first year of the revolution, the legislature dressed in hunting shirts and

¹³³ John Adams to Abigail Adams, July 7th 1774, Adams Papers Digital Edition, Massachusetts Historical Society, <https://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/view/ADMS-04-01-02-0088#sn=3>. I am grateful to Chloe Chapin for bringing this quote to my attention.

¹³⁴ John Styles, *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-century England* (Yale University Press, 2007), 87, and Beverly Lemire, “A Question of Trousers: Seafarers, Masculinity and Empire in the Shaping of British Male Dress, c. 1600–1800,” *Cultural and Social History* 13, no. 1 (2016): 18, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14780038.2016.1133493>.

¹³⁵ Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell, *Fashion Victims: Dress at the Court of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette* (Yale University Press, 2015), 270.

¹³⁶ Christina Fowler, “Robert Mansbridge, A Rural Tailor and his Customers 1811–1815,” *Textile History* 28, no. 1 (1997): 33–34, 37. <https://doi.org/10.1179/004049697793711094>.

trousers, while army officers marched wearing blanket coats and moccasins; their men were barefoot.¹³⁷ The current year, on the other hand, saw:

“An attorney’s clerk clothed in purple and fine linen and faring sumptuously every day. . . . A labourer pulling hemp in a Holland shirt, gingham overalls, cotton stockings, calf-skin pumps and fur hat; A cropper plowing in gloves, velvet breeches and boottees.”¹³⁸

While the author’s intent may have been satirical, the foregoing survey of runaways’ clothing suggests his examples were drawn from life. Runaway’s dress did not remain static over the three decades under review. Neither was their dress uniformly drab and utilitarian. While certain developments in plebeian fashions may have been practical, such as the shift from breeches to trousers, others, such as the shift to cotton textiles, were not necessarily so. As much as elite consumers in the early Republic, Philadelphia’s servants and apprentices participated in fashion.

Runaways’ Dress in Wider Context

In a letter to his mother dated July 1799, Thomas Boylston Adams wrote,

“I find my five year old dimmity Coat, which was the first any body undertook to wear here, now quite the rage—a pair of very wide sailors trousers of gingum, a square brimmed hat, very light, a small single breast waistcoat a dimmity coat & a short crop,

¹³⁷ Veritas [pseud.], “Wonderful Alteration!!” *Oracle of Dauphin and Harrisburgh Advertiser*, October 18, 1797. Newspapers.com.

¹³⁸ Veritas [pseud.], “Wonderful Alteration!!”

render your Thomas one of the oddest but most comfortably dressed young men in this City. Not one of these peculiarities will remain such at the end of the season.”¹³⁹

Thomas Boylston may have overstated his status as a trendsetter. A glance at the advertisements in Claypoole’s *American Advertiser* or Duane’s *Aurora* would have revealed numerous similarly dressed young men on the run. Jacob Evenson was one. He was a bashful-looking youth who escaped from his guardian in the Northern Liberties only a few weeks after Adams penned his letter. Like Adams, Evenson was dressed in blue and white striped cotton trousers and a nankeen jacket.¹⁴⁰ Seemingly, a vast gulf of wealth and status separated the teenaged runaway and the young Harvard-educated lawyer. Yet both participated in the adoption of new styles that transformed men’s dress in the early American Republic. As “Veritas” observed, not just attorney’s clerks, like Adams, but laborers and croppers led the revolution in fashion.

Though less ornate, elite men’s dress of the late eighteenth-century continued to reflect the restraint and formality of the *ancien régime*. By the 1770s and 80s, gentlemen’s suits—consisting of coat, waistcoat, and breeches—grew more restrained under the influence of English country fashions.¹⁴¹ Men’s coats became slimmer and more fitted, with the center front curving away from the chest. Waistcoats shortened and were sometimes cut straight across. While the waistline of breeches rose, leather breeches and top boots, once worn exclusively for riding, became fashionable daywear.¹⁴² Wealthy American men’s garments reflected European trends. A brown “superfine” wool broadcloth coat worn by Ezra Hayden at the Windsor, Connecticut Historical Society features narrow sleeves, a curved front, and a stand-fall collar (stiffened with

¹³⁹ Thomas Boylston Adams to Abigail Adams, 6th July 1799, Adams Papers Digital Edition, Massachusetts Historical Society, <https://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/view/ADMS-04-13-02-0258#sn=89>. I am indebted to Dr. Chloe Chapin for bringing this quote to my attention.

¹⁴⁰ “Ten Dollars Reward,” *Aurora General Advertiser* July 26, 1799. Newspapers.com.

¹⁴¹ Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal*, 25, 216, 219.

¹⁴² Ribeiro, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, 209-211, 214.

coarse buckram), all characteristic of contemporary European dress. The tight fit of the back and sleeves on such coats encouraged stiff posture and precise movements.¹⁴³ (Figure 2.5)

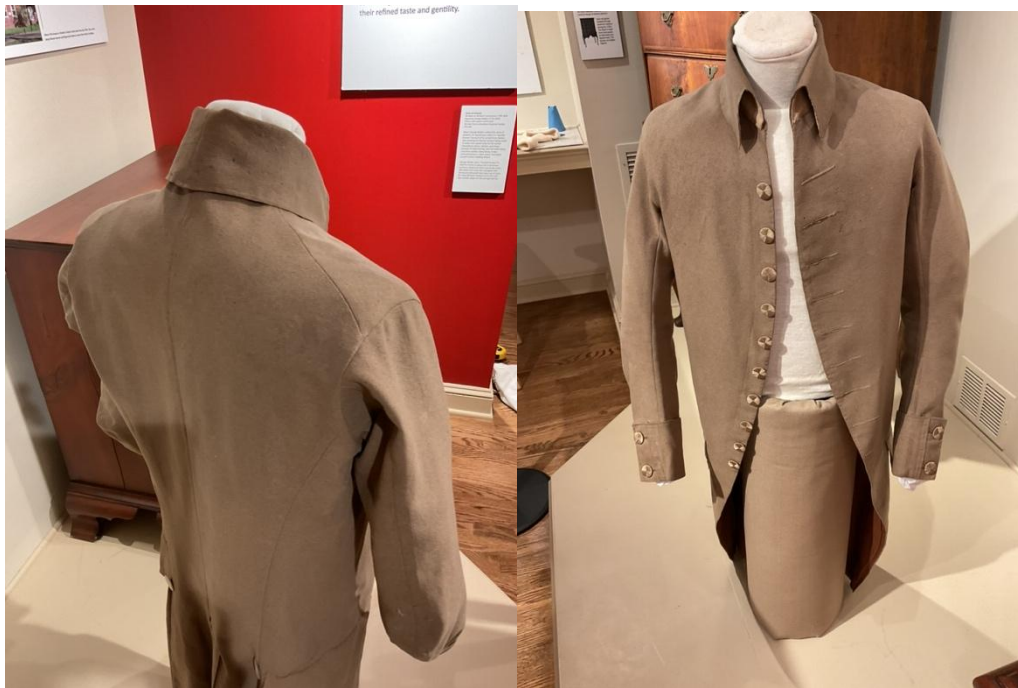


Fig. 2.5: Coat, American, c.1785. Wool. Windsor Historical Society.

The turn of the nineteenth century, however, saw a revolution in men's fashion. In 1808, the American-born engraver James Malcolm claimed, "male dress changed almost insensibly from formality to ease."¹⁴⁴ The favored style of men's coat altered from the single-breasted, curved lapelled coat of the eighteenth century, to a double-breasted style cut square in the waist and featuring a stand-fall and later a rolling collar.¹⁴⁵ The cut of these coats encouraged greater freedom of movement. As tailor Mark Hutter notes, narrower backs, enlarged armholes and the

¹⁴³ I am grateful to Kristen Wands of the Windsor Historical Society for letting me examine this coat.

¹⁴⁴ Quoted in Kuchta, *The Three-Piece Suit and Modern Masculinity*, 164.

¹⁴⁵ Mark Hutter, "Coat Tales: Changes in the Fashion, Cut and Construction of Men's Clothing, 1775-1830," in *"An Agreeable Tyrant": Fashion After the Revolution*, ed. Alden O'Brien (DAR Museum, 2016), 48.

lower placement of the shoulder seams permitted a greater range of motion in the arms.¹⁴⁶ These liberated styles extended below the waist. Initially, ankle-length pantaloons supplanted breeches during the 1790s. In the 1800s, legwear changed again, when, as one contemporary poem put it, “loose trousers [snatched] the wreath from pantaloons,” in polite society.¹⁴⁷ Earlier historians of dress assumed these fashions traveled to federal America from Revolutionary France.¹⁴⁸ Yet as working men’s earlier rejection of breeches demonstrates, American elites also had models closer to home.

According to some historians, the new simplicity of men’s suits incorporated them within the emerging capitalist economy.¹⁴⁹ However, it is revealing that, when contemporary satirists commented on the plebeian appearance of young elites, they emphasized the transgression inherent to working-class styles. “But now, our youths no longer aim at the character of *pretty gentlemen*,” one author complained, describing the address of modern youth deriving from “the common *slang* of the day, collected from the conversation, of hostlers, footmen, porters, &c.”¹⁵⁰ Another recalled,

“this mode of dress may sometimes cause temporary inconveniences; as, for instance, a first rate gentleman, thus appareled, was lately in passing through the street, accosted by a porter with a request that he would lend him a hand to adjust his load.”¹⁵¹ (Figure 2.6)

¹⁴⁶ Mark Hutter, “Men’s Fashion in America,” October 10, 2017, DAR Museum, YouTube Video, 57:09, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D54VkyV8-n8>.

¹⁴⁷ Murray, “From Breeches to Sherryvallies,” 23-27; Ribeiro, *The Art of Dress*, 104-105; “Horace at Brighton,” *The United States Gazette*, December 3, 1810.

¹⁴⁸ Alice Morse Earle, *Two Centuries of Costume in America*, vol. 2 (New York, 1903), 770. Internet Archive.

¹⁴⁹ Zakim, *Ready-Made Democracy*, 95.

¹⁵⁰ Jonathan Oldstyle [pseud.] “The Beaux of Former Times Contrasted with Those of the Present,” *Boston Magazine* July 27, 1805, 159. American Antiquarian Society (AAS) Historical Periodicals Collection: Series 1.

¹⁵¹ “Modern Manners: Rules for Walking the Streets, &c.,” *Juvenile Port-folio & Literary Miscellany* December 4, 1813, 238. American Antiquarian Society (AAS) Historical Periodicals Collection: Series 1.



Fig. 2.6: Thomas Rowlandson, “Three Principal Requisites to Form a Modern Man of Fashion,” British, 1814. Print. Metropolitan Museum of Art.

In America, more so perhaps than in Europe, the readymade clothing trade played a pivotal role in these developments. The story of the eighteenth-century revolution in consumer goods is well known, as is the transformation of the men’s clothing trade, from bespoke to readymade, during the first half of the nineteenth century.¹⁵² Yet the significance of working men’s clothing within these developments is less appreciated. American urban clothing dealers, known as slops sellers, regularly sold imported naval clothing to the lower sorts; runaways of all

¹⁵² On the “consumer revolution,” see Breen, “The Baubles of Britain”; Ann Smart Martin, *Buying into the World of Goods: Early Consumers in Backcountry Virginia*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008). On the transformation of menswear, see Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 119-124; and Michael Zakim, “A Ready-Made Business: The Birth of the Clothing Industry in America,” *Business History Review* 73, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 61-90.

occupations wore sailor jackets throughout the period 1781-1810.¹⁵³ The slops trade had a significant impact on the development of the ready-made clothing trade in America. One early nineteenth-century English tailor complained, “patterns can be of but little use to any but slop makers, where they may have them from the smallest size to the largest figure, upon proportional scales.”¹⁵⁴ Yet pre-cut patterns were the way of the future. As historian Tyler Rudd Putman illustrates, the systems of production associated with ready-made working-class dress transformed elite menswear. In American cities, standardized sizing, as well as the use of out-work and the display of finished garments in the storefront, began in slop shops and later moved up to the high street.¹⁵⁵

For runaways, these ready-made fashions had important cultural connotations. Nineteen-year old Frederick Gossner’s dark complexion, curled hair, and tattoos,¹⁵⁶ as well as his blue roundabout jacket, nankeen trousers, and Marseilles striped waistcoat signaled a nautical affinity.¹⁵⁷ Gossner may have acquired his tattoos, if not his dress, during an elopement the previous year when he enlisted aboard the *United States* frigate under the name Jack Clemens.¹⁵⁸ Nor was Gossner alone. At least seven other runaways, most of them teenagers, were tattooed in some fashion, usually with their initials or the equally-traditional anchor. Tattoos associated

¹⁵³ Tyler Rudd Putman and Henry Cooke, “Fearnothering Seamen’s Jackets and Honey Comb Breeches: A 1760 Shipping Invoice for Ready-Made Clothing in the Memorial Libraries,” September 15, 2021, *Historic Deerfield*. <https://www.historic-deerfield.org/2021-9-15-fearnothering-seamens-jackets-and-honey-comb-breeches-a-1760-shipping-invoice-for-ready-made-clothing-in-the-memorial-libraries/>; and Putman, “The Slops Shop and the Almshouse,” 42; In total, 120 sailor’s jackets appear in the dataset, the third most common description of a jacket.

¹⁵⁴ Quoted in Patricia Trautman, “An Eighteenth-Century American Tailor: Myth and Reality, as Seen Through One Tailor’s Surviving Records,” *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 3 no. 2 (Spring 1985): 28.

¹⁵⁵ Putman, “Joseph Long’s Slops: Ready-Made Clothing in Early America,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 49, no. 2/3 (Summer/Autumn 2015): 64-65, 89-91.

¹⁵⁶ “on his right [arm], our Saviour on the Cross; The Anchor, Mermaid, and sundry other devices left...”

¹⁵⁷ “20 Dollars Reward,” *Aurora General Advertiser*, October 14, 1800, Newspapers.com.

¹⁵⁸ For Gossner’s previous elopement, see “Ran away from the Subscriber,” *Claypoole’s American Daily Advertiser*, May 31, 1799. America’s Historic Newspapers.

these youths sartorially with the “hardcore” of professional mariners.¹⁵⁹ Such men were plebeian fashion icons: In their short jackets, “resplendent handkerchiefs and distinctive striped trousers,” mariners “epitomized a robust masculinity, founded on skilled seamanship, expressed within global theaters of action.”¹⁶⁰ By adopting styles associated with this “deep-sea proletariat,” boys like Frederick Gossner took part in a counter-cultural movement, which predicted later nineteenth century fashion subcultures like New York’s Bowery B’Hoys.¹⁶¹ If the number of runaways “expected to go to sea,” not to mention the almost-universal injunction that “masters of vessels are forbidden to carry him off at their peril” provides any indication, then the allure of this nautical demi-monde was widespread indeed.¹⁶²

Indeed, clothing, whether fashionable or utilitarian, was central to runaways’ identity-formation. When he ran in 1793, William Weston took not only a “common” suit of clothes, consisting of a fustian coatee and trousers, but also a “bettermost” suit, consisting of a brown camblet coat, striped vest and striped nankeen trousers.¹⁶³ An author writing in the *Boston Weekly Magazine* lambasted such desire for fashionable dress amongst working youth, claiming an apprentice, “should be contented with making a decent figure in going to church, and few other occasions will he find to be seen in his *Sunday coat*, without seizing every means to possess himself of the empty frippery of the times.”¹⁶⁴ Yet for apprentices and servants, clothing represented a means of claiming independence from officious masters. As historian Simon

¹⁵⁹ Newman, *Embodied History*, 107.

¹⁶⁰ Beverly Lemire, “‘Men of the World’: British Mariners, Consumer Practice, and Material Culture in an Era of Global Trade, c. 1660–1800,” *Journal of British Studies* 54, no. 2 (2015): 318-19, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24702040>.

¹⁶¹ Smith, *The Lower Sort*, 156; Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 300-301.

¹⁶² Cf. “Ten Dollars Reward,” *Aurora General Advertiser*, June 15, 1801, Newspapers.com.

¹⁶³ “Ten Dollars Reward,” *Federal Gazette* August 19, 1793. America’s Historical Newspapers.

¹⁶⁴ “The Mechanic, No. III,” *Boston Weekly Magazine & Ladies’ Miscellany* August 31, 1818, AAS.

Newman writes, “high-quality, fashionable clothing may have helped . . . to carve out a time and space separate from that which belonged to their masters.”¹⁶⁵

Genteel clothing could be aspirational. Deerfield’s Philo Munn, a shoemaker’s apprentice in the 1830s, remarked on the appearance of two “fine young men handsomely dressed” and spent a considerable sum to emulate their appearance. Meanwhile, New York cabinet maker Samuel Seabury remarked that, while in formal dress, “I would meet persons on a footing of equality in the evening who would pass me in the streets next morning with a handbarrow or bed post in a dress not fit for a sans-culotte.”¹⁶⁶ Indeed, John Styles argues that one of young working men’s “first priorities” was “building up a stock of clothes, including some for best wear,” and further that such clothing carried connotations of economic independence, sexual maturity, and respectability.¹⁶⁷ For young men like Weston, Munn, or Seabury, clothing provided an accessible means of achieving both social recognition and personal autonomy.¹⁶⁸

Clothing further played a significant role in the social rituals of the lower sort. In Philadelphia during the 1790s, the French visitor Moreau de St. Méry observed of white female servants “they love to dress up for their evening promenade.”¹⁶⁹ The same held true for young journeymen in New York and Philadelphia, who aped Broadway dandies.¹⁷⁰ Fourth of July celebrations became a particular site of plebeian display. The German expatriate artist John Lewis Krimmel depicted a Fourth of July scene in Philadelphia in 1812. (Figure 6) On the far left

¹⁶⁵ Newman, *Embodied History*, 101-102.

¹⁶⁶ Philo Munn, Diary, May 4, 1835. PVMA; Brekke, “Fashioning America,” 201-203; Putman, “The Slop Shop and the Almshouse,” 6/ I am grateful to Jeanne Solensky of the PVMA library for providing scans of Munn’s diary.

¹⁶⁷ Styles, *The Dress of the People*, 60.

¹⁶⁸ Brekke, “Fashioning America,” 206-207.

¹⁶⁹ Moreau de St. Méry, *Moreau de St. Méry's American Journey*, ed. Kenneth Roberts and Anna M. Roberts (Doubleday, 1947), 297. Archive.org

¹⁷⁰ Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City & the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 56; Putman, “The Slop Shop and the Almshouse,” 6-7 n. 12.

of the painting, a pair of youths, both wearing silk kerchiefs and black high-crowned hats, one in a double-breasted waistcoat and short sailor-style jacket, purchase alcohol from an old woman in a black bonnet. (Figure 7)

As Krimmel observed, dress incorporated these young men within the rituals of their collective social milieu while simultaneously distinguishing them as a group apart. Indeed, clothing's role in working-class social life points to its significance beyond individual rebellion or aspiration. As fashion historian John Styles argues, for English plebeians, clothing represented not simply a form of individual self-fashioning, but rather a "a collective social phenomenon."¹⁷¹ The same principle may hold true across the Atlantic. Whether dressed in self-consciously working-class garb, or in the latest metropolitan styles, runaways engaged both in individual and collective identity formation.

¹⁷¹ Styles, *The Dress of the People*, 303-319.



Fig. 2.7: John Lewis Krimmel, “Fourth of July in Centre Square,” American, 1812. Oil on Canvas. Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts.



Fig. 2.8: Detail from Krimmel, “Fourth of July in Centre Square.” Author’s Photograph.

Conclusion

The significance of workingmen's dress in early Republican political culture remains underexplored. American elites often assumed a basically subordinate role for the "people out of doors" in politics, including the politics of fashion. "If a few respectable citizens in every state," would dress in American manufactures, Carolinian physician Hugh Williamson claimed, "beyond doubt [their adoption] would be universal."¹⁷² This political culture of deference broke down in the post-Revolutionary period. As historian David Waldstreicher argues, the decades on either side of the nineteenth century were characterized by a "productive tension" between elite and popular politics. "What made this middle ground possible," Waldstreicher claims, "were precisely those aspects of the public sphere that theorists, political scientists, and historians tend to overlook: the relationships between local and national publics and crystallization of those relationships in celebrations and celebratory publicity."¹⁷³ Working-class youth, too, had a role to play in these nationalist rituals. Despite falling outside the republican ideal of independent citizens, runaways could make political statements through dress.

Much of the literature on runaway clothing has focused on runaways' claim to individual liberty. Whether as a form of disguise, a method of individual self-presentation, or as a legal claim to property, runaways asserted independence through dress.¹⁷⁴ Yet this assertion may have had a political dimension as well. Early Republican political discourse placed a premium on the

¹⁷² Sylvius [Hugh Williamson], *Letters from Sylvius to the Freeman Inhabitants of the United States* (New York: 1787), 16; David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 72-73.

¹⁷³ Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 219.

¹⁷⁴ See, Laura F. Edwards, "James and His Striped Velvet Pantaloon: Textiles, Commerce, and Law in the New Republic," *Journal of American History* 107, no. 2 (September 2020): 337-338. <https://doi-org.ezproxy2.library.colostate.edu/10.1093/jahist/jaaa180>; Shane White and Graham White, "Slave Clothing and African-American Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *Past & Present*, no. 148 (Aug.1995): 150-165. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/651051>; Newman, *Embodied History*, 97-102.

similarity between appearance and intent, as an antidote to the instability wrought by the upending of aristocratic hierarchy.¹⁷⁵ By claiming free status, runaways implicitly contested this ideology of appearance.¹⁷⁶ There is evidence that contemporaries registered such political implications, albeit satirically. As a New Jersey paper recorded,

“On the evening of Thursday, the 24th January . . . Citizen John Kelley, a youth of about 19 years of age, bound to the subscriber until the age of 21, by a *ci-devant* obligation, commonly called an Indenture, inspired with that noble love of *Liberty* and *Equality*, gallantly released himself from my service by the manly operation of running away.”¹⁷⁷

There is also evidence that runaways signaled their membership of a wider working-class political culture through dress. True, American laboring dress lacked the explicit political connotations it carried in England, where the laborer’s fustian jacket became associated with the “hardy working-class masculinity” of the Chartist Movement.¹⁷⁸ Nevertheless, beyond the adoption of political insignia like French cockades, clothing itself could serve as a marker of politicized class identity. A boisterous plebeian culture, centered around theaters, taverns, and oyster houses, was characteristic of the urban working class. As historian Sean Wilentz reminds us, this leisure culture was not divisible from working-class political activity. Rather, it was in these very taverns, frequented by Bowery dandies and union leaders alike, that working-class political organizing occurred.¹⁷⁹ Clothing, then, must have been an important—albeit, often

¹⁷⁵ Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 77-80.

¹⁷⁶ Waldstreicher, “Reading the Runaways,” 247-249.

¹⁷⁷ “From a Connecticut Paper: Humorous Advertisement,” *New Jersey Journal* March 20, 1793. America’s Historical Newspapers.

¹⁷⁸ See, Vic Clarke, “‘Fustian Jackets, Unshorn Chins, Blistered hands’: Fabric and political feeling in the Chartist Movement, 1837–48” in *Everyday Fashion: Interpreting British Clothing Since 1600*, ed. Bethan Bide, et. al (Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2023), 227.

¹⁷⁹ See, Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 53-56, 257-271; see also Claire Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble*, 186-236.

unremarked upon—element of the cultural milieu from which the early nineteenth-century working men's movement emerged.

Indeed, recognizing working-class men's contribution to the post-revolutionary politics of fashion may revise our understanding of bottom-up democracy in this period. Fashion scholars acknowledge the role of clothing not merely in representing, but in constituting political movements of the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁸⁰ Elites in the early Republic, too, understood fashion's unique potential to merge the personal and the political. By asserting their own styles, working-class men may have critiqued this elite hegemony. Within a governmental system that denied them an official voice in political debates, clothing allowed working-class men to claim a place in early American political culture. The escapes of Peter de Camp, Frederick Gossner, or Jacob Evenson, and thousands of others like them, become all the more daring when they are recognized as political acts.

¹⁸⁰ Wendy Parkins, "Introduction: (Ad)dressing Citizens," in *Fashioning the Body Politic*, ed. Wendy Parkins (Berg, 2002), 2.

CHAPTER 3

“The Rise and Fall of the Rural Tailor: New England, 1760-1840”

Introduction

Henry Thoreau was not a good customer. “When I ask for a garment of a particular form, my tailoress tells me gravely, ‘They do not make them so now,’” he complained.¹⁸¹ Instead of fulfilling his order for old-fashioned clothes, Thoreau’s tailoress deferred to the whims of an abstract fashion, and implied Thoreau ought to do the same. Her assumption was symptomatic of a wider societal malaise. In the introduction to his seminal work, *Walden*, Thoreau condemned the incessant pace of change in mid-nineteenth century America, brought on by industrialization, which upset rhythms of everyday life. Rather than pursue their fundamental needs, men of Thoreau’s time grasped after what could not be obtained, and in the words of one of his contemporaries, “what is not worth the having.”¹⁸² Clothing was no exception. “I say, beware of all enterprises that require new clothes,” Thoreau wrote, “and not rather a *new wearer* of clothes.”¹⁸³ [emphasis mine]

Yet Thoreau’s example of the tailoress relevant in another way. As Thoreau’s anecdote illustrated, this rural craftsperson acted as the primary point of contact between the resentful transcendentalist and cosmopolitan fashions. She was hardly alone. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, tailors in rural communities disseminated fashion into the American countryside. Yet despite their seeming ubiquity, comparatively few in-depth studies have been done on the numerous accounts left by these tailors. Viewed in conjunction with

¹⁸¹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (Boston, 1854), 32.

¹⁸² William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (London, 1848), 680.

¹⁸³ Thoreau, *Walden*, 31.

extant garments, rural tailors' entries reveal a clientele responsive to changing fashions far from Boston or New York. It was through tailors' shops that rural farmers and craftsmen interfaced with wider sartorial developments overtaking men's fashion, and, by extension, the evolving role of the male citizen in the early Republic. Furthermore, the persistence of these bespoke tailors well into the nineteenth century may call into question some of the prevailing economic narratives of the rise and dominance of the urban readymade industry in menswear during this period.

The first section of this chapter examines the transformation of the tailoring trade in early Republican America. From a handicraft focused primarily on making bespoke garments for individual wearers, tailoring became an industry through the expansion of outwork and the increased production of standard-fit, ready-made garments. The central part examines this transformation from a novel vantage point, the western Massachusetts countryside. This section is structured around three case studies of rural tailors' account books: The 1762 to 1775 accounts of Deerfield's John Russell, the 1807 to 1839 accounts of Stephen Powell of New Marlborough and the 1815-1823 accounts of Greenfield's Sylvester Allen. By performing qualitative and quantitative analyses on these accounts, we arrive at a fuller understanding of the provision of men's clothing during this pivotal period.¹⁸⁴ As the final part of this chapter argues, to understand the depth of the transformation that overtook menswear, it is necessary to examine not only the sweatshop and the emporium, but also the modest dwelling of the rural craftsman.

¹⁸⁴ For this analysis, a full survey was done of all the garments listed in Russell's two volume accounts. Samples were taken from both Powell's and Allen's account books. After the first twenty pages of Powell's accounts were coded, every four pages, and later every six pages of his account books was sampled. Every four pages from Allen's accounts was sampled for either garments or textiles; if garments were not found on that page, subsequent pages were examined.

Making Clothing in Early America

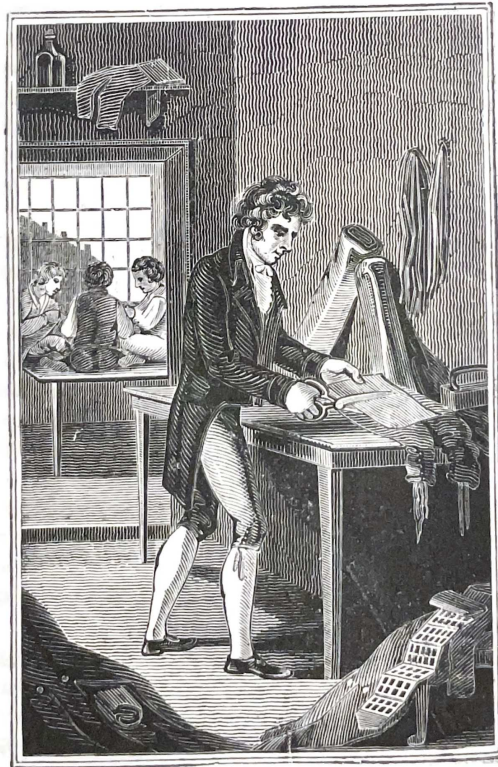
The costume historians Claudia Kidwell and Margaret Christman write, “the great bulk of eighteenth-century clothing can be characterized as having been made for somebody and not for anybody.”¹⁸⁵ That someone was, more often than not, a professional tailor. Yet historical circumstances have tended to erase the tailor from view. Homespun thrift was a potent symbol of American self-sufficiency both during the Revolution and after, while the image of the industrious housewife at her sewing needle was a fixture of nostalgic imaginings of the pre-industrial past.¹⁸⁶ The historical record does not bear this image out. Thanks to the work of Marla Miller, historians know considerably more about the lives and labor of rural tailoresses and dressmakers during the late eighteenth century.¹⁸⁷ The men who employed these rural women warrant thorough examination, likewise. Tailoring played a significant role in the economic and social life of the early Republic, and the trade’s transformation was a harbinger of industrial change.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁵ Claudia Kidwell and Margaret Christman, *Suiting Everyone: The Democratization of Clothing in America* (National Museum of History and Technology, 1974), 27.

¹⁸⁶ Marla Miller, *The Needle’s Eye: Women and Work in the Age of Revolution* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), 220-221; Laurel Thatcher Ullrich, *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth* (Vintage Books, 2008), 3-11; Michael Zakim, *Ready-Made Democracy: A History of Men’s Dress in the American Republic* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 20-22.

¹⁸⁷ See Marla Miller, *The Needle’s Eye*.

¹⁸⁸ See also, Rachel Hope Cleves, *Chairty & Sylvia: A Same-Sex Marriage in Early America* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 166-174.



The Tailor.

Fig. 3.1: “The Tailor,” *The Book of English Trades* (London, 1821) Historic Deerfield.

Tailoring had a lengthy history in the American colonies. Tailors were present on the first vessels to arrive in Jamestown in the 1600s.¹⁸⁹ The earliest account book surviving from Deerfield, Massachusetts, left by Joseph Barnard and dating from 1676 to 1695, lists entries for “making a lincy jacket,” “making a pair of long trowzers [sic],” and “making a longe westcoat lind,” alongside other charges for farming and tailoring work.¹⁹⁰ By the end of the eighteenth century, the parameters of tailoring were well-established. As the 1821 edition of the *Book of English Trades* claimed, “in a Tailor's shop, where much business is carried on, there are always

¹⁸⁹ Kathleen Eileen Egner, “By Measures Taken of Men’: Clothing the Classes in William Carlin’s Alexandria,” (MA Thesis, William and Mary, 2011), 32.

¹⁹⁰ July 18, 1680, May 1681, and June 1681, Joseph Barnard Account Book, 1676-1695. PVMA Library.

two divisions of workmen: first, the foreman, who takes the measure of the person for whom the clothes are to be made, cuts out the cloth, and carries home the newly-finished garments to the customers. The others are mere working tailors, who sit cross-legged on the bench... of these, very few know how to cut out, with any degree of skill, the clothes which they sew together.”¹⁹¹ (Fig. 3.1)

Some American tailors appear to have followed English practices. The Alexandria, Virginia tailor William Carlin, for instance, kept a stock of cloth on hand to make up garments for his clients, and had skylights installed in his shop in 1767 to provide a well-lighted workspace. Carlin took on several apprentices during the 1760s and 1770s, and may have owned at least one enslaved man.¹⁹² Cambridge, Massachusetts’ “gentleman tailor,” Edward Marret, likewise conformed to metropolitan patterns.¹⁹³ Other tailors, as we shall see, followed more ad hoc practices—working out of their own homes or those of their clients, and relying on an semi-itinerant staff to help make up their garments.

Beginning in the 1810s, the clothing trade in American cities moved out of small shops and into the hands of large retailers. At the clothier’s emporia, workers cut cloth according to patterns drafted by a master cutter, which were then sent off to outworkers, who sewed up the garments. These laborers, many of them women, suffered extremes of exploitation within a system that relied on reducing workers’ wages as much as possible to maximize contractors’—and ultimately, clothiers’—profits.¹⁹⁴ This system was not altogether new, but rather replicated

¹⁹¹ Anon., *Book of English Trades and Library of the Useful Arts* (London, 1821), 334.

¹⁹² Gruber, “By Measures Taken of Men,” 35-38, 55.

¹⁹³ See Patricia Trautman, “An Eighteenth-Century American Tailor: Myth and Reality, as Seen Through One Tailor’s Surviving Records,” *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 3 no. 2 (Spring 1985): 25-30.

¹⁹⁴ Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class* (Oxford University Press, 1984), 119-124.

the labor division of a bespoke tailor's shop, adapted to the rhythms of the machine age.

Outwork, Michael Zakim writes, "allowed manufacturers to coordinate supply and demand in a way that avoided fixed costs or expensive long-term investments."¹⁹⁵

The craft of the tailor evolved. Scientific tailoring, achieved, in part, by the adoption of the inch-measure, allowed tailors to reproduce fashionable garments *en masse* instead of relying on proprietary patterns. In 1822, English tailor J. Wyatt claimed,

"The Art of fitting the human shape, has been the study of many men for ages though sciential principles in the above, were but little known, or practiced... the rules are likewise more simplified and easier obtained, they are formed on principles of practical geometry. Whereby the form of all garments are mathematically described."¹⁹⁶

Wyatt's guide, and dozens of others like it published from the 1820s onward, reduced the body to a series of quantifiable measurements in order "to deliver a 'definable, repeatable... procedure,'" for making garments that fit.¹⁹⁷ By the 1830s, these processes contributed to the rise of the ready-made industry for gentlemen's garments.¹⁹⁸

New England played a significant role in these developments. As North Carolina physician and congressman Hugh Williamson claimed, "it may be expected that the citizens of the eastern states will be among the first manufacturers."¹⁹⁹ Shortly after the Revolutionary War, Jeremiah Wadsworth set up the Hartford Woolen Manufactory, with the intention of producing

¹⁹⁵ Zakim, *Ready-Made Democracy*, 130-132, 137.

¹⁹⁶ J. Wyatt, *The Tailor's Friendly Instructor, Being an Easy Guide for Finding the Principal and Leading Points Essential to the the Art of Fitting the Human Shape* (London: 1822) in *Late Georgian Costume*, ed. R.L. Shep (Mendocino: R.L. Shep, 1991)

¹⁹⁷ Zakim, *Ready-Made Democracy*, 93.

¹⁹⁸ Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 120.

¹⁹⁹ Sylvius [Hugh Williamson], *Letters from Sylvius to the Freeman Inhabitants of the United States: Containing Some Remarks on the Scarcity of Money; Paper Currency; National Dress; Foreign Luxuries; the Federal Debt; and Public Taxes* (New York: 1787), 17.

“homespun” cloth to rival imported English broadcloths. While Wadsworth’s concern eventually folded, New England went on to play a pivotal role in the early history of American industrialization.²⁰⁰ The story of the cotton mill at Lowell, Massachusetts is so well known as not to bear repetition. Yet perhaps more significant even than the expansion and mechanization of the textile industry was the shift in labor patterns within the needle trades. As Marla Miller writes, the widespread participation of New England women in sewing for clients was part of a wider “industrious revolution,” through which households restructured their economies to produce more intensively for a market.²⁰¹ Women’s participation in the industrializing economy via traditional sewing practices recalls Sean Wilentz’s contention that the most profound economic transformations during this period occurred not only in the mechanized industries but also within the “traditional” handicrafts.²⁰²

Historians contend that these sartorial developments contributed to a widespread democratization of fashion during the first half of the nineteenth century. Democratization meant different things to different people. For some, democracy in dress simply implied expanded access to clothes. As Kidwell and Christman write, “mass production meant middle quality clothing for the majority of the people, and so it was that average Americans became the best dressed average people in the world.”²⁰³ However, democracy could also imply adherence to a more abstract set of populist principles embodied through dress. For men of the middle classes especially, the restrained suit of the republican citizen mirrored his rational exercise of political power. As Michael Zakim writes, “If the tape measure integrated [a citizen’s] unique body into a

²⁰⁰ Linzy Brekke, “Fashioning America: Clothing, Consumerism, and the Politics of Appearance in the Early Republic” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2007), 26-36.

²⁰¹ Miller, *The Needle’s Eye*, 188-189.

²⁰² Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 112-114.

²⁰³ Kidwell and Christman, *Suiting Everyone*, 14.

universal market of anonymous customers, fashion made this integration a wholly conscious, indeed enthusiastic experience.”²⁰⁴ Tailoring played a crucial role here. Through the industry of the tailor, men could be in fashion, but not of it: Whereas the fop was a “slave to fashion,” the rational citizen “[surrendered] himself to his tailor, whose duty lies in dressing him becomingly.”²⁰⁵ This definition of democracy was connected to the first. The decreasing cost of readymade clothes placed these garments within reach of a wider public. Continental observers marveled at well-dressed American crowds; mobs in America, if they existed, were mobs in broadcloth.²⁰⁶

A revolution, then, overtook men’s fashion during the first decades of the nineteenth century. Its ramifications were not restricted to urban America, however. Rather, in small towns and villages far from the cramped garrets and glistening emporia of cities like New York and Boston, a thriving business in bespoke clothing persisted well into the nineteenth century. Despite their remote location, rural tailors were not divorced from the transformations—both sartorial and commercial—affecting their urban brethren. As we will see, a close study of tailor’s accounts shows them to be far from backwards in either their business practices or their sense of fashion. Thoreau’s Concord tailoress participated in the transformation of menswear just as surely as Brooks Brothers.

The Evidence of Rural Clothing from Tailors’ Accounts: John Russell of Deerfield

“In July in 1756, I cum [sic] first to live at Deerfield at Mr. John Sheldon’s House and Began to work att my trade and was taken sick.” So begins the first volume of tailor John Russell’s account books. Born in 1731, in Wethersfield, Connecticut, Russell arrived in the farming village

²⁰⁴ Zakim, *Ready-made Democracy*, 188.

²⁰⁵ Quoted in Zakim, *Ready-made Democracy*, 197.

²⁰⁶ Zakim, *Ready-made Democracy*, 207-208.

of Deerfield in his mid-20s, where he worked as the town's principal tailor until his death in 1775. Currently held by the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association Library, Russell's accounts comprise two volumes, covering the years 1763 to 1775, and illustrate his transactions in Deerfield and surrounding communities. Russell worked as a farmer, listing expenses for sowing crops, mowing hay, and pasturing livestock. He sold his fellow townsmen tea, crockery, and numerous gallons of rum. Most importantly, Russell made his countrymen's clothes. In the space of a little over a decade, Russell cut, sewed, mended, altered or turned over 1,700 coats, breeches, vests, overcoats, and other garments. More than a simple record of purchases, Russell's accounts illustrate how he adapted his craft to serve a rural clientele.

As the principal tailor on "the street," Russell catered to all segments of Deerfield's population. Militia officers and clergymen numbered amongst his clients; it was from Russell that the Reverend Jonathan Ashley, Deerfield's Tory minister, purchased his coats and vests, as well as a habit for his wife Dorothy and clothes for his sons Elihu and Solomon. Russell also made and repaired breeches for Cato, a man enslaved by the Ashleys.²⁰⁷ Indeed, a significant number of Russell's clients included apprentices, servants, and the enslaved from Deerfield and surrounding towns. Apart from Cato, six other free and enslaved African Americans appear in Russell's accounts.²⁰⁸ Russell billed numerous men for garments intended for other individuals, at least some of whom, no doubt, were servants or apprentices.²⁰⁹ In 1756, the selectmen of Deerfield bound Burns Cooley, son of Ebenezer, to Noah Wright, "to be taught and instructed... in the business and calling of a husbandman." At the end of his term, Cooley was promised "two

²⁰⁷ September 1763, John Russell Account Book, vol. 1; January 4, 1771, December 1st 1773, John Russell Account Book, vol. 2. PVMA Library.

²⁰⁸ "Russell, John: Account Book," *African Americans in the Record*, PVMA Library. Accessed March 8, 2026. <https://aane.deerfield-ma.org/sources/source/15/>.

²⁰⁹ Virginian William Carlin's accounts show similar expenses, see Gruber, "By Measures Taken of Men," 25-26.

good suits of apparel for all parts of his body the one serviceable for working days the other decent and fit for sabbath days.” An entry in Russell’s account book, dating from April 1770, records the making of a vest, breeches and coat for one Cooley.²¹⁰ Was this to be the young man’s “decent suit”? If Cooley had been apprentice at age seven or eight—a young, but not improbable age, especially for a youth “bound out” by the overseers of the poor-- then the math would certainly add up.

What sort of garments did Russell make? An earlier study of Russell’s account books claimed “the major portion of his tailoring business [was] men’s work clothes: leather and coarse buckrum [sic] breeches, vests, and coats... He worked with deerskins, mohair, buckrum, and other suitably sturdy, coarse materials.”²¹¹ A close reading of the clothing listed in Russell’s accounts, however, reveals a more nuanced picture. Russell largely dealt in the standard pieces of an eighteenth-century man’s wardrobe— coats, vests, and breeches. (Table 3.1) Heavy overgarments, essential for New England’s harsh winters, also figured prominently: Russell made 55 surtouts and 69 great coats. Russell occasionally dealt in more up-scale garments, including three ladies’ riding habits, four gowns (including two for boys), and a man’s banyan for Lieutenant David Field. Derived from East Indian clothing, banyans offered a lightweight alternative to the voluminous dressing gown of the early eighteenth century and were particularly favored during the summer months.²¹² Russell rarely made undergarments. His accounts list only three shirts. Made of rectangular pieces of fabric, shirts did not require the three-dimensional

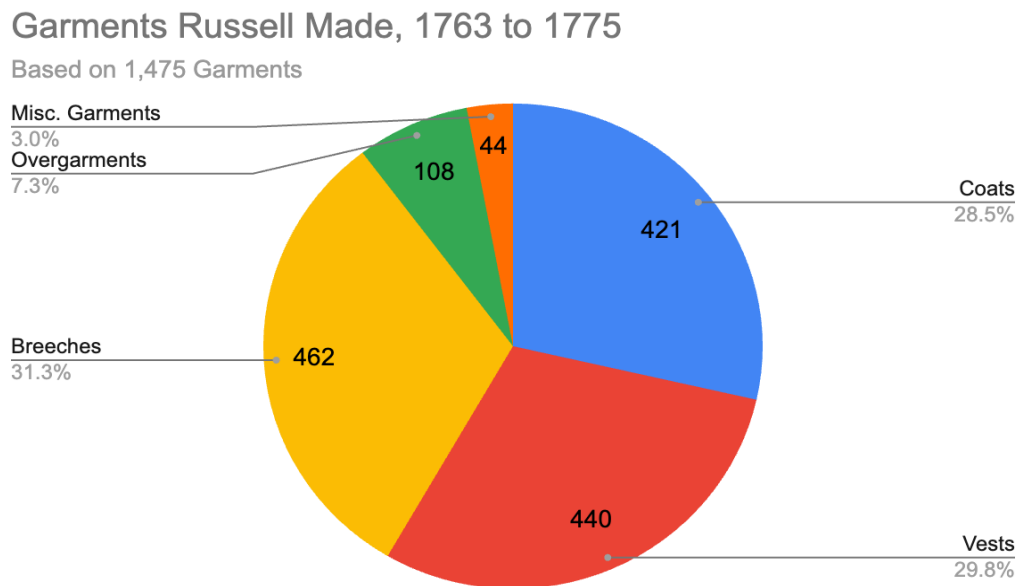
²¹⁰ Burns Cooley to Noah Wright, May 6, 1756, Deerfield Town Papers, box 9, folder 9, PVMA Library; April 4, 1770, John Russell Account Book, 1763-1775, vol. 2, 115. PVMA Library.

²¹¹ Joshua Lane, “Breeches and Rum: An Investigation of Rural Economy through the Account Books of John Russell,” (seminar paper, Historic Deerfield, Inc., 1984), 12, 14.

²¹² Linda Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal: The Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America* (Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 2002), 110-112; Neal Hurst, “For the Heat is Beyond your Conception: Men’s Summer Dress in the American South During the Long Eighteenth-Century,” (MA Thesis, University of Delaware, 2015), 122-126.

tailoring skills demanded of more fitted garments, and thus could be easily made up at home by a man's wife or servant.²¹³

Table 3.1: Garments Made by John Russell, 1763-1775.



Some of Russell's garments derived from indigenous or French-Canadian dress. Russell's accounts include four pairs of "endian stockens," and one pair of "Indian shoes." The former, the diarist Epaphras Hoyt recalled, were "coarse knit leggings, reaching from the hip to the shoe, to which they were fastened with strings."²¹⁴ Such "stockens" appear to have gone out of style shortly after Russell's death: only one pair appeared in Hampshire County inventories dating from 1783 to 1811.²¹⁵ Meanwhile, gilets, a short under waistcoat favored by French *habitants*, appear four times. The presence of these "frontier garments" is unsurprising. Decades after the famous 1704 raid, Deerfield remained the westernmost outpost of British imperial power in New

²¹³ Miller, *The Needle's Eye*, 57.

²¹⁴ Hoyt, *Recollections of Time and Things of My Early Life*, np.

²¹⁵ Wendy Kenerson, "Forms, Fashions and Vanities: A Study of Men's Clothing in Western Massachusetts Through Probate Inventories," (Senior Thesis, Skidmore College, 1987), 93.

England. However, the presence of such garments does not necessarily imply a form of “cultural cross-dressing,” as historian Sophie White observes amongst Frenchmen in the Louisiana territory during this same period. Rather, these garments represented specific adaptations of indigenous or *habitant* dress which did not significantly alter the dominant pattern of Euro-American dress documented in Russell’s accounts and corroborated by contemporary inventories.²¹⁶

A clear hierarchy existed in the Russell’s work. The tailor cut, sewed, and lined—a process known collectively as “making”—more formal garments, such as coats, vests, and breeches, whereas he merely cut utilitarian garments, namely trousers, which his clients sewed up at home. In total, Russell cut 22 pairs of trousers, while he only made six pairs. I remarked earlier on trousers’ rustic associations in early America; the absence of trousers in Russell’s accounts stands in contrast to their frequency in Hampshire County inventories during the same period. Their relative absence may suggest that, during this early period, trousers, like shirts, were more likely to be sewn up in the home rather than purchased from a tailor.²¹⁷ All told, for every single garment Russell cut, he sewed, stiffened and trimmed twelve more. Furthermore, while a fair portion of Russell’s labor involved mending, altering, or “turning” existing garments, most of the garments he made were new.

Russell kept on hand materials for sewing, stiffening and facing garments. The *Book of English Trades* described the “buckram, tapes, bindings, trimmings, buttons, &c. with which every master Tailor should be furnished, and from which they derive very large profits.”²¹⁸

²¹⁶ Sophie White, *Wild Frenchmen and Frenchified Indians: Material Culture and Race in Colonial Louisiana* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 208-228; see also Robert DuPlessis, *The Material Atlantic: Clothing, Commerce, and Colonization in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 227-228.

²¹⁷ See, Kenerson, “Forms, Fashions, and Vanities,” 88.

²¹⁸ Anon., *Book of English Trades*, 334-35.

Though not as extreme as on later nineteenth-century coats, padding and interfacing were essential for providing structure to eighteenth-century men's garments.²¹⁹ Contemporaries sometimes remarked on tailors' propensity upcharge their clients on these articles. A poem printed in the *Greenfield Recorder* claimed,

“By buckram, canvas, tape, and thread,/sleeve linings, pockets, silk and twist,/And all the long expensive list/With which uncouth bills abound/ Though rarely in the garment found...”²²⁰

Russell apparently followed this practice: In Russell's second account book, over 20 percent of his transactions included surcharges for trimmings, earning him a total of 77 pounds. Unlike his English counterparts, Russell does not seem to have kept an extensive stock of cloth on hand.

The November 28, 1768 entry for William Shattuck is a notable exception, listing 3 ½ yards of blue coating, at seven shillings six pence a yard, and red baize for the cape (collar), in addition to the five shillings Russell charged for making Shattuck's coat.²²¹ As the breakdown in prices indicates, cloth represented a considerable expense, and customers did their best to preserve it.

Russell usually charged between 8 and 12 shillings to “turn” a coat-- ripping its seams and turning the cloth inside-out, then sewing it again-- about the same as he charged for making a new one.

The nineteenth-century antiquarian George Sheldon described Russell as “famous for his leather breeches.”²²² In the late eighteenth century, leather breeches making was a distinct trade,

²¹⁹ See Linda Baumgarten, John Watson and Florine Carr *Costume Close-Up: Clothing Construction and Pattern 1750-1790* (Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1999), 81-82; Mark Hutter, “Coat Tales: Changes in the Fashion, Cut and Construction of Men's Clothing,” in *An Agreeable Tyrant: Fashion after the Revolution*, ed. Alden O'Brien (DAR Museum, 2016) 45-51; Hurst, “For the Heat is Beyond your Conception,” 113-114.

²²⁰ “The Embarrassments of False Shame, or The Adventures of Young Whipstitch. A Tale,” *Greenfield Recorder* November 11, 1800. Newspapers.com.

²²¹ November 28, 1768, John Russell Account Book, 1763-1775, vol. 2, 53.

²²² Sheldon, *History of Deerfield*, vol. 2, 275.

often considered independent of tailoring. As an 1814 article in the *Literary Visitor*, claimed “—observe, this personage is not called a tailor, but a maker of breeches—tailors are considered an inferior class and never meddle with leather.”²²³ Cutting and fitting leather breeches required its own set specialized skills, distinct from tailoring cloth. English breeches maker Francis Place described his job as a “paster,” who brought the breeches pieces (which his master cut out of dressed and tanned animal hides) into shape “by means of broad strips of sheep or lambskin.”²²⁴ A pair of high-waisted leather breeches in the collection of the Bennington Historical society feature similar broad strips of leather reinforcing the opening on the fall front.²²⁵ As the close-cut of the Bennington garments suggest, fitting such leather breeches could be an ordeal. (Fig. 3.2) The *Literary Visitor* recalled:

“When a gentleman was in labor of a new pair of leathern breeches, all his strength was required to force himself into them; and all the assistant-operators to draw them on: when it was nearly accomplished, the maker put his hands between the patient’s legs, closed them, and bade him sit on them like a saddle, and kick one leg at a time, as if swimming. They could not be buttoned without the help of an instrument.”²²⁶

²²³ “Leathern Breeches,” *Literary Visitor* 2, no. 60 (1814): 478. EBSCOhost; in his 1785 Philadelphia Directory, Francis White listed 18 leather breeches makers in the Quaker city, see Matt Ainslie, “1785 Street Directory for Philadelphia, PA,” University of Delaware, last modified May 8, 2005, <http://udspace.udel.edu/handle/19716/1503>.

²²⁴ Place, *The Autobiography of Francis Place*, 6.

²²⁵ See Breeches. American, c. 1790. Buckskin. Bennington Museum, A2045. I am very grateful to Callie Raspuzzi of the Bennington Historical Society for letting me examine this pair in person.

²²⁶ “Leathern Breeches,” 478.

breeches, with silver knee buckles,” exciting the stares of neighbors in the Connecticut River Valley.²²⁸

Evidence from Russell’s account books, however, suggests he was at best a minor player in the rural breeches trade. The tradesmen and shopkeepers of the Connecticut River Valley were certainly no strangers to leather breeches making, though the trade appears to have been less organized than it was in metropolitan America or England. Shopkeeper John Williams recorded purchases for leather breeches made at his store in Deerfield during the 1780s, as did Datis Ensign of Westfield, Massachusetts and Samuel Smith of Farmington, Connecticut.²²⁹ None of these men was primarily a breeches maker: Williams and Smith kept shop in their respective towns, while Ensign was principally a weaver. Though Russell made a significant number of breeches—456 in total—and cut, altered, or mended over a hundred more pairs, very few of these seem to have been leather. Indeed, only twelve entries for leather breeches appear in Russell’s accounts.²³⁰

For the most part, Russell was a conventional tailor after the eighteenth-century mode. He does not appear to have specialized in any particular garment, such as leather breeches, nor do his accounts suggest his garments were especially coarse or workmanlike. The presence of some garments derived from indigenous or French-Canadian dress in his accounts does not imply that either Russell or his clients dramatically altered predominant Euro-American styles.

²²⁸ John Singleton Copley, “Mr. and Mrs. Isaac Winslow (Jemima Debuke),” American, 1773. Oil on Canvas. MFA, 39.250; Epaphras Hoyt, *Recollections of Time and Things of My Early Life* (1839, np). HD Library. Compare Hoyt’s account with Justin Hitchcock’s claim that amongst their long-skirted coats and flapped hats, “the men [of the Connecticut River Valley] wore leather britches and brass shoe buckles,” see Justin Hitchcock, *A Sort of Autobiography and Genealogy*, 10-14, PVMA Library, Hitchcock Papers, Box , Folder 6.

²²⁹ See, John Williams, December 13, 1783 for Thad. Barnard in 1782-1784 Account Book, 112; March 1766 for Thomas Noble in Datis Ensign, Account Book; April 29, 1771 entry for Ezekiel Hasford in Samuel Smith Account Book.

²³⁰ August 16, 1765, John Russell Account Book, vol. 1; A further four entries for breeches, while not explicitly described as leather, include accompanying costs for purchasing skins, including one for Timothy Childs for “2 small leather skins,” and a subsequent entry for “making breeches.”

Yet Russell departed from the metropolitan norm in other ways: Clients brought Russell lengths of cloth to be sewn into garments, rather than purchasing them at Russell's store. Furthermore, Russell's division of labor between cutting and sewing garments illustrates how the tailor adapted to circumstances in Deerfield. All told, Russell's accounts provide compelling evidence for how craftsmen balanced tradition and innovation in late colonial America.

The Transformation of the Trade: Stephen Powell of New Marlborough

Born four years before Russell's death, in 1771, Stephen Powell was a lifelong resident of New Marlborough in Berkshire County. The 1820 census lists Powell as a manufacturer, one of only a few in a town of farmers.²³¹ In addition to his tailoring practice, Powell served as postmaster for New Marlborough, and his account books list occasional expenses for delivering mail. An 1808 entry for John Strong, for example, records, rather petulantly: "to postage from three newspapers sent you from Hartford over and above the year agreed for. To eight cents paid for you towards postage on our protest."²³² Powell did not restrict his ire to his customers. When it came time to draft his last will and testament, he bequeathed his son Adonijah, "one dollar, having before given him what I consider his portion in my estate."²³³ Regardless of his interpersonal relations, Powell kept up a brisk trade tailoring. His accounts reveal how rural tailoring transformed during the first three decades of the nineteenth century.

The first volume of Powell's accounts, dating from 1807-1814 show a number of distinct business practices from Russell's of thirty years' prior. The difference is not at first apparent.

²³¹ 1820 U.S. census, Berkshire County, Massachusetts, New Marlborough, population schedule, p. 33 (penned), Stephen Powell; NARA microfilm publication M33, roll 48. <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-9YBC-ZVD?view=explore>.

²³² Hadley Turner, *A History of New Marlborough : 1735-1944* (Berkshire Courier, 1944), 50; October 15, 1808 Stephen Powell Account Book, 1807-1814, 23. OSV.

²³³ Stephen Powell, will dated 1843, proved 1844, no. 6651, box 4, Probate File Papers, 1761-1917, Berkshire County, MA. <https://www.americanancestors.org/DB2725/i/48369/6651-co4/68652906>.

Like Russell, Powell began his book with an autobiographical anecdote, “Bought at Barrington of Bacon and Roger Merchants July 10, 1807.” The accounts inside seem, likewise identical to Russell’s. Clients paid in a mixture of cash, agricultural produce, and odd jobs. Powell still hired workers on an ad hoc basis, including Fanny Wright, whom he paid for several days sewing work during the years 1808 to 1812, and Samuel Norton, whom he credited with .80 cents worth of “tailor work” on March 3, 1808.²³⁴

Yet Powell’s accounts differed in significant ways. For one, Powell appears to have been itinerant, to a degree unusual amongst master tailors. Numerous entries describe him working out of clients’ homes: In mid-December 1814, Powell cut one great coat, two surtouts, two coats, four vests and four pairs of pantaloons at the home of Elihu Ward.²³⁵ Occasionally, Powell traveled a considerable distance to work for his clients. In December of 1811, he travelled twelve miles from New Marlborough to Sheffield to cut clothes for Lovit Taft’s family, for which he charged Taft four dollars.²³⁶ Further, in contrast to Russell, Powell appears to have made most of his income from tailoring. While references such as “put my heifer into Mr. Carlin lot Saturday morning August 5th, 1815,” reveal that Powell was just as much of a farmer as his neighbors, the bulk of his debit entries record garment making.

Lastly, and most significantly, Powell cut more garments than he made. In a sample from the first account book, Powell recorded 671 entries for cutting as opposed 230 for making garments, a rate of almost three garments cut for every one made. (Figure 3.2) A day book, kept by Powell in the back of his accounts, shows an even higher ratio of 9 to 1. This ratio practically inverts the work Russell did. It is easy to see why Powell preferred cutting to sewing up and

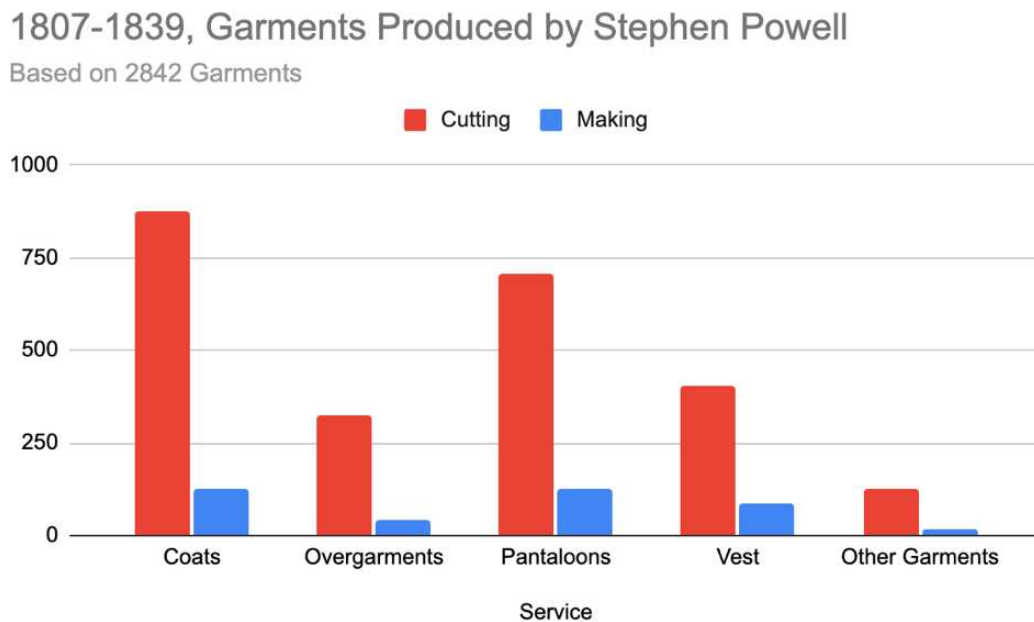
²³⁴ March 3, 1808, January 22, 1809, May 20, 1810, May, 1812 and September 24, 1812, Stephen Powell Account Book, 1807-1814, 37. OSV.

²³⁵ December 14, 1814, Stephen Powell Account Book, 1807-1814.

²³⁶ December, 25, 1811, Stephen Powell Account Book, 1807-1814.

stiffening. The labor involved in making up a garment could be considerable: An article in the *Pittsfield Sun* claimed a gentleman's coat contained a total of 25, 243 stitches, "in the collar alone, 3,056," and required two days' work to make up.²³⁷

Table 3.2: Garments Produced by Stephen Powell, Cutting vs. Making



By cutting out a garment, but not sewing it, Powell saved considerably on the labor involved. Powell does not seem to have made vastly more garments than Russell. However, Russell hired several laborers throughout the 1760s and 70s.²³⁸ Powell does not seem to have relied on the same number of in-house workers. Instead, Powell could draw on an extensive pool of female sewing labor available in rural New England-- women like Fanny Wright-- whose numbers included both semi-itinerant seamstresses and country housewives. By restricting his

²³⁷ "Tailors Work," *Pittsfield Sun* December 8, 1831. America's Historical Newspapers. A variant of the same article, appearing in the *Greenfield Recorder* misprinted the original count as 25,000,243, and attributed it to a tailor in Boston. See, "By Statement of a Journeyman Tailor," *Greenfield Recorder* July 22, 1817. Newspapers.com.

²³⁸ Lane, "Breeches and Rum," 15-16.

business to cutting, and putting out sewing, Powell replicated the division of labor emerging within the urban clothing trade.²³⁹

The clothes Powell cut reveal developments in popular fashions. Powell's clothes share certain similarities with Russell's. Both accounts include a significant number of entries for great coats, for instance. Yet Powell's accounts include very few entries for breeches, some eight in total. By contrast, pantaloons proliferate in Powell's accounts, with 395 entries. In the previous decade, long pantaloons had replaced breeches as the favored legwear for fashionable men.²⁴⁰ The evidence from Hampshire county inventories, compiled by Wendy Kenerson, shows that Pantaloons began appearing in men's wardrobes from the turn of the nineteenth century on.²⁴¹ Meanwhile, coats made by Powell were predominantly blue or black, while the most listed material was broadcloth, again reflecting the prevailing styles of elite men's dress. Pantaloons and vests were more varied in their materials, which might include cassimere, velvet, or nankeen, but were equally sober in their coloring, with black, white, and blue the most common colors. Powell's Berkshire clients, then, were not removed from the metropolitan styles which came to define a democratic citizenry.

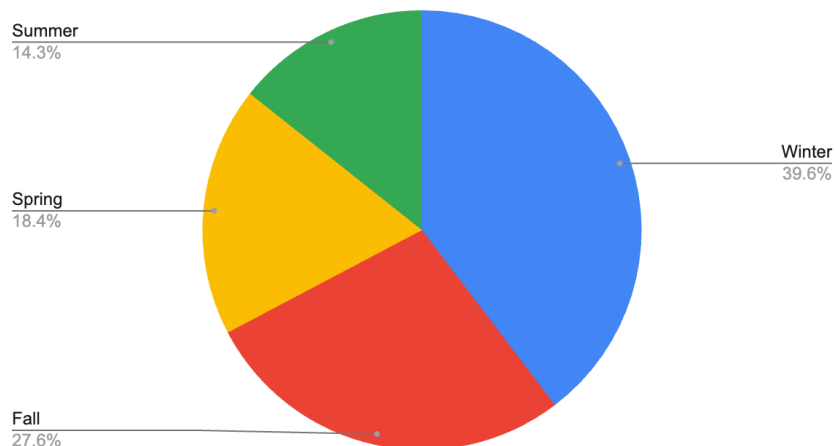
²³⁹ Miller, *The Needle's Eye*, 63-68, 71; Zakim, *Ready-Made Democracy*, 129-146

²⁴⁰ Aileen Ribeiro, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (Yale University Press, 2002), 214.

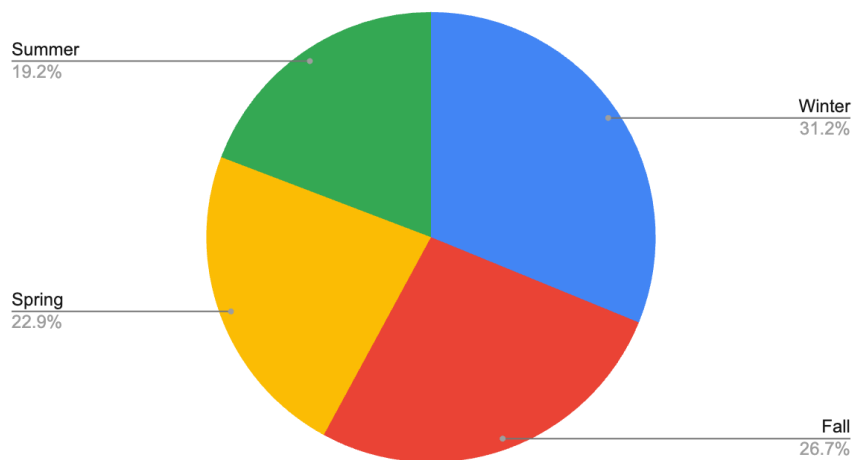
²⁴¹ Kenerson, "Forms, Fashions and Vanities," 90.

Table 3.3: Seasonal Distribution of Powell's Labor, 1807-1814 and 1828-1839.

Seasonal Distribution, 1807-1814 (Based on 1,564 Garments)



Seasonal Distribution, 1828-1839 (Based on 1,469 Garments)



Powell's second account book, covering the years 1828 to 1839 reveals further developments in his practices. At first glance, Powell's business appears relatively consistent. We see the same payments made in cash and kind, and the same overall distribution of garments. Powell still spent the bulk of his time cutting rather than making garments. However, the seasonal rhythm of Powell's business shifted in the intervening decades. Like Russell, Powell's

accounts initially followed clear seasonal patterns, corresponding to the agricultural year.²⁴² By the time of Powell's second account book, however, this pattern had changed. Instead of the sharp peaks and troughs seen in his first account book, the seasonal variations in Powell's transactions during the 1830s was much less abrupt. True, his business slowed during the summer and increased during the winter. However, Powell still produced—either cutting or sewing-- 93 garments in July, his slowest month, during a sample from the years 1828-1839, as opposed to the 56 he produced in August, the least-busy month during the years 1807-1814.

The seasonal shift in Powell's work may indicate an adaptation to new market circumstances. As Michael Zakim notes, one of the characteristics of the production of ready-made clothing was a shift from the seasonal rhythms of the bespoke trade towards a year-round production schedule.²⁴³ Despite continuing to work in the bespoke trade, Powell, too, seems to have adapted his labor to meet a year-round demand for clothing. A comparison of the seasonal distribution of Powell's garment making shows that, during the years 1807-1814, Powell made over a third of his garments in winter (December-February). By 1829-1839, while still making most of his garments in the Winter and Fall months, he was now making more garments in Spring and Summer.

The garments Powell made likewise adapted to changing fashions. Popular writings of the period alleged rural tailors persisted in making outdated garment, well after they had gone out of style. A satire in the *Massachusetts Spy* described a country lad come into his inheritance, who, upon arriving in the metropolis, discovered he was hopelessly *du trop*: He was clad in homespun rather than "fine Saxony,"²⁴⁴ "instead of the elegant fit of the tailor, his was the

²⁴² Lane, "Breeches and Rum," 21.

²⁴³ Zakim, *Ready-made Democracy*, 136.

²⁴⁴ a new worsted, "woven plain like a wildbore," see Florence Montgomery, *Textiles in America*, 342.

clumsy work of the country seamstress.”²⁴⁵ A later nineteenth-century account claimed, “the fashions of the country tailor are the fashions that were in vogue when he learned his trade.”²⁴⁶ Powell’s later accounts bely such stereotypes. Certain garments, such as short coats and great coats, disappeared from the second book. Meanwhile, new garments, such as box coats, frock coats and rolled collared vests, appeared with increasing frequency. Skirted frock coats came into fashion during the late 1810s and 1820s, as an alternative to more formal tailcoats; Powell listed 54 in his accounts.²⁴⁷

Occasionally, Powell worked from direct models when adapting fashions for his customers. On January 1, 1839, he made up a single-breasted frock coat for Samuel Norton which had been cut in New York.²⁴⁸ More frequently, however, Powell adapted existing garments to new styles: Twelve entries record Powell making new garments out of old ones, while Powell altered ten more garments. A frock coat in the collections of the Daughters of the American Revolution illustrates what one of these adaptations might look like in practice: The coat features panels of matching cloth inserted into the skirts so that they wrap all around the wearers’ body. Another frock coat, dating from the mid-century in the collection of Longmont Colorado’s Merchant Tailor Museum, shows similar alterations.²⁴⁹ (Fig. 2) Powell, then, was not stuck in his ways, but adapted his practice, and his garments, to suit his clients.

²⁴⁵ “The Leg Safety Chain,” *Massachusetts Spy* February 24, 1830. America’s Historical Newspapers.

²⁴⁶ “There are Differences...” *Oakland Tribune* September 12, 1893. Newspapers.com.

²⁴⁷ Alden O’Brien, ed. *An Agreeable Tyrant: Fashion After the Revolution* (DAR Museum, 2016), 110.

²⁴⁸ January 26, 1839, Stephen Powell Account Book, 1828-1839. OSV.

²⁴⁹ “Coat, Frock,” American, 1820-1845. Wool and Cotton. DAR Museum, 2023.19. “Converted Frock Coat,” American, 1840s-1850s. Wool. Merchant Tailor’s Museum, CO15. I am grateful to Rebecca Evans for bringing this garment to my attention.



Fig. 3.3: “Coat, Frock,” American, 1820-1845. Wool and Cotton. DAR Museum, 2023.19.

Other extant garments provide corroborative evidence of changing rural menswear. Three pairs of trousers, two in the collections of Old Sturbridge Village and one at Historic Stonington in Connecticut, illustrate developments in legwear during the first decades of the nineteenth century. (Fig. 3.4) Old Sturbridge's pair of blue and white striped, narrow fall-front trousers retains many features of late eighteenth-century breeches, despite being made long and loose in the leg.²⁵⁰ Like breeches, this pair features triangular pleated gussets at the rear. By contrast, a pair of cream-colored pantaloons, dating from slightly later, illustrate an evolution in style. They are cut fashionably tight in the leg and feature a notched broad fall front which mimics the appearance of a narrow fall. Though pleated at the rear, this pair lacks the rear gusset seen on earlier breeches. Finally, a pair of tan linen trousers at Historic Stonington illustrates a final evolution of men's legwear during the first decades of the nineteenth century.²⁵¹ Lacking the pleated rear of either of the earlier examples, these trousers instead feature narrow gathers at the front of the garment, on either side of the very narrow three-button fall. These may represent an adaptation of the then-fashionable Cossack trousers, which elite men began wearing in the years after the Napoleonic Wars.²⁵² With their sturdy, often coarse fabrics, none of these garments could be considered high style; yet each, in its own way, demonstrates a responsiveness to contemporary fashion trends.

²⁵⁰ Derek Heidemann, Personal Communication, August 12, 2025.

²⁵¹ My thanks to Chelsea Mitchell of Historic Stonington for letting me examine these in person.

²⁵² I am again very grateful to Derek Heidemann for this observation, and for showing me a similar pair in the collections at Old Sturbridge.



Fig. 3.4: R-L, Trousers, American, c. 1805-1810. Striped Linen. Old Sturbridge Village. Author's photograph; Figure 6: Pantaloon, Millbury, MA, c. 1820. Cotton (nankeen?) Old Sturbridge Village, 26.40.49; Figure 7: Trousers, American, c. 1820-1830. Linen. Historic Stonington, 2006.0095, Author's Photograph.

Powell adapted to changing circumstances in third way, by incorporating elements of scientific tailoring into his accounts. On the first page of his second account book, Powell wrote: "P. Stevens is 5 feet 11 inches high his coat cut in Hartford this spring 1831 was 19 inches...23 inches skirt 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ back 7 $\frac{3}{4}$ skirt." Meanwhile, "E. Shearon's Fr. Coat 18 inches waist... Inches skirt 4(?) inches at the bottom Collar 11 $\frac{1}{8}$... waist down forward 23 [inches]." ²⁵³ Further down the page are various notes on cutting garments. (Fig. 3.5, L) Powell's precise measurements of his clients reflected broader developments within his trade. Scientific treatises on tailoring were becoming more common in the New England countryside during his lifetime. In an 1822 edition of the *Greenfield Recorder*, Curtis Fairchild of Sunderland promised to instruct "Gentleman and Ladies," in cutting clothes on "philosophical principles," "very different from and far superior to

²⁵³ Undated Entry, Stephen Powell Account Book, 1828-1839.

the rule of thirds... which has heretofore extensively used,” while several years later William Fairchild expounded at length on his own mechanical system for making clothes.²⁵⁴ Michael Zakim argues that the scientifically-tailored suit represented “the acme of technological standardization.”²⁵⁵ Not all contemporaries agreed: An anecdote in the Pittsfield *Sun* related: “*A Scientific Tailor*—A tailor lately replied to a gentleman, who complained that his coat fitted badly, ‘I beg pardon, sir, but the coat must fit, for the measure’s right, and we always cuts on a jometry [geometry] principle.’”²⁵⁶ Regardless, by the first decades of the nineteenth century, even men in the remote Berkshires were plugged into a republican sartorial regime, thanks, in part, to the precocious adaptation of new systems and styles by tailors like Stephen Powell.

Fig. 3.5: L, Entry from Stephen Powell Account Book, 1828-1839; R, Scientific Tailoring Guide, American, c. 1830, OSV. Author's Photograph.

Several key points emerge from Powell's accounts: First, the rural tailor adapted to new work regimes as readily as his metropolitan counterpart. Indeed, rural networks of tailoresses and other needlewomen may have encouraged this adaptation, and seasonal rhythms of work shifted to accommodate new production demands. Second, rural communities were hardly resistant to changes in fashion. Regardless of how they dressed on their working days, Berkshire farmers could be certain of acquiring from Powell at least some fashionable clothing which approximated metropolitan styles. Lastly, Powell and his contemporaries were innovators insofar as they adapted new technologies to better serve their clients. For the moment, at least, the rural tailor was riding high. Elsewhere, however, developments occurred which fundamentally altered the nature of the trade and which would, in time, render craftsmen like Stephen Powell obsolete.

The Apotheosis of the Clothier: Sylvester Allen of Greenfield

While Stephen Powell was busy replicating the rhythms of the New York emporium deep in the Berkshires, the Greenfield tailor Sylvester Allen set about redefining the role of the rural tailor. According to Greenfield's town historian, Allen was born in Providence, Rhode Island in 1782.²⁵⁷ After arriving in Greenfield in 1811, the young man advertised himself as a tailor: "From experience, and close attention to his business, he flatters himself that he shall be able to please all who will favor him with their custom. Said Allen's arrangements in Boston, are such as will enable him constantly to procure the newest fashions."²⁵⁸ Allen soon prospered. In 1822, Allen and other Greenfield merchants founded the town's first bank; the brick storefront bought by Allen in 1827 remained a fixture of Greenfield's townscape for almost a hundred years.²⁵⁹ Covering the years 1812 to 1826, Allen's accounts illustrate tailoring in transition. From an artisan, Allen expanded his operations into luxuries and general merchandise, notably a diverse array of textiles. His transition into retail paralleled that of many urban clothing sellers of the same period.

Some idea Allen's initial practice may be gleaned from a contemporaneous tailor's daybook. Interleaved in the ledger of Deerfield resident Consider Dickinson, the daybook records transactions during what were, traditionally, the tailor's busiest months—December through early spring. Though the author is unknown, it is likely that he was an associate of either Oliver Reed or James Fisk, both of whom kept tailoring businesses in Deerfield during the late

²⁵⁷ Francis M. Thompson, *History of Greenfield: Shire Town of Franklin County, Massachusetts*, vol. 2 (Greenfield, 1904), 843.

²⁵⁸ Sylvester Allen, "Tailoring Business," *Greenfield Recorder* October 29, 1811. Newspapers.com.

²⁵⁹ Anon., *History of S. Allen's Sons: One Hundred Years* (Greenfield, 1912); Francis M. Thompson, *History of Greenfield: Shire Town of Franklin County, Massachusetts*, vol. 1 (Greenfield, 1904), 616

1810s and both of whom have credit as well as debit entries in the book.²⁶⁰ The daybook records a standard array of garments for the early nineteenth century. Pantaloon were the most common garment listed, appearing 47 times, followed by coats, vests, and surtouts. The proportion of clothing made—legwear, compared with coats and vests—recalls the garments John Russell produced during the 1760s and 70s. As with Russell, the anonymous tailor kept on hand a supply of buckram, padding, twist, buttons and tape for making up and trimming garments, but does not seem to have carried a supply of cloth on hand. The breakdown of anonymous tailor's work, the number of garments made versus the number cut, likewise recalls Russell's mid eighteenth-century work. The Greenfield tailor made more garments than he cut, at a rate of roughly five garments made for every one cut.

Sylvester Allen, meanwhile, was diversifying his practice. An early twentieth-century history of Allen's business claimed, "From 'tayloring' Mr. Allen gradually expanded his adventure to the dimensions of the country store—all the stores in the town then being of that character,"²⁶¹ Contemporary evidence, however, points to a more complex picture. Allen's business shared some similarities with John Russell's of some fifty years prior: both tailors trafficked in basics such as salt, lamp oil, and rum.²⁶² Yet, unlike Russell, Allen's principal stock-in-trade appears to be textiles. An 1820 advertisement for Allen's store trumpets his assortment "London Broadcloths & Cassimeres, Silk & Fancy Vestings, elegant black Italian and Twill'd Silks. Also, Plaid, Green and Changeable Sinchaw & Sarsnets; Parasolls, and a general assortment of English Goods," alongside humbler American gingham, stripes, checks, bedticks,

²⁶⁰ See, "Tailoring in Style," *Greenfield Recorder* March 3, 1818.

²⁶¹ Anon., *History of S. Allen's Sons: One Hundred Years*, n.p.

²⁶² Cf. "Advertisement," *Greenfield Recorder* December 12, 1819.

and shirtings.²⁶³ (Figure 3.6) According to the United States census of that year, one person in Allen's household was involved in commerce, while two more worked in manufacturing. There were four adult men in the household, three between sixteen and twenty-six, and one over forty-five, presumably Allen himself.²⁶⁴ Allen had only been married three years prior, to Harriet Ripley.²⁶⁵ The others listed in the census therefore could very well have been Allen's employees. Far from a humble country store, then, Allen's concern seems to have been fairly substantial one, with international connections and employing several staff.

²⁶³ "New Goods," *Greenfield Recorder* May 16, 1820, Newspapers.com.

²⁶⁴ According to the same record, Allen resided with one boy under ten, another lad between sixteen and eighteen, one girl under ten, and two women between sixteen and twenty-six, as well as a free black woman between the age of twenty-six and forty-five, see 1820 U.S. census, Franklin County, Massachusetts, Greenfield, population schedule, p. 33 (penned), Sylvester Allen; NARA microfilm publication M33, roll 50.
<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XHGM-CJ6>.

²⁶⁵ *Vital Records of Greenfield Massachusetts to the Year 1850* (Boston, 1915), 211. Archive.org.

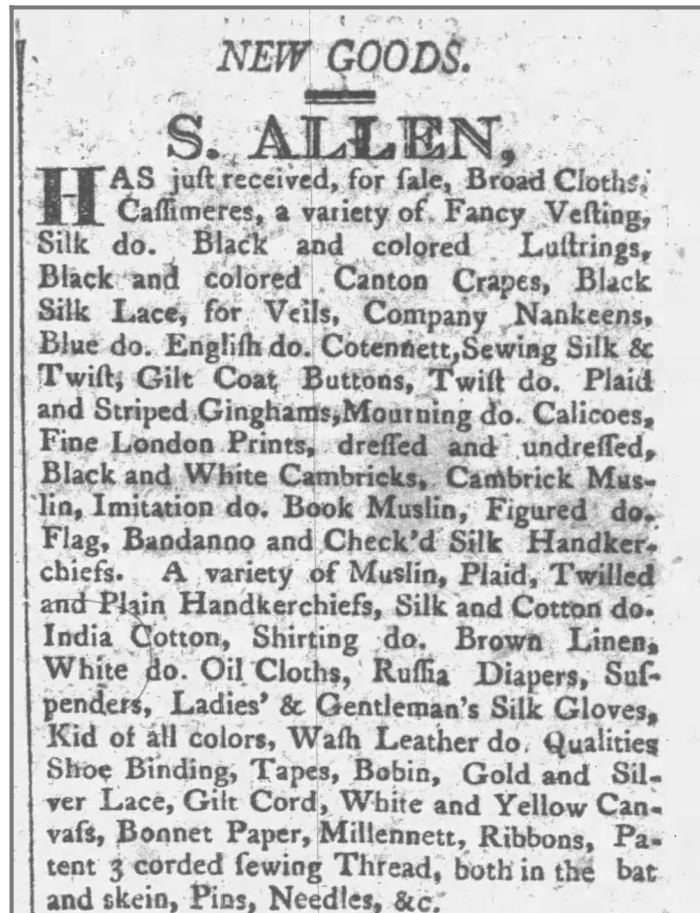


Figure 3.6: *Greenfield Recorder* April 30, 1816. Newspapers.com

As both his advertisements in the *Greenfield Recorder* and his surviving accounts attest, Allen's business was that of a clothier who specialized in both making clothes and selling fabric. A sample from Allen's accounts lists 271 entries for textiles and 411 for garments. Allen recorded a range of textiles sold, from plain shirting and calico at around .30 cents a yard, to high quality broadcloths at around 5 or 6 dollars a yard. Garments were more valuable to Allen's business, accounting for \$1,077.92 worth of sales as opposed to \$493.41 for textiles. Even after branching out into retail, Allen retained his reputation as a tailor. After partnering with Cephas Root in 1828, an advertisement read: "S. Allen has just returned from Boston, where he took particular pains to obtain the latest fashions for Gentlemen's Clothing, and will assure any who

may favour him with custom, that he will give them good work and warrant good fits.”²⁶⁶ Later, after partnering with tailor William Chapman, Allen boasted of “doing the best of Work in style and manner the most approved.”²⁶⁷

Allen’s partner Chapman, for his part, played an active role in disseminating metropolitan styles into Greenfield and surrounding communities in Franklin County. An 1837 advertisement promoted “The Tailor’s Guide, And Quarterly Report of Fashions,” a quarterly periodical which, Chapman promised, “contains minute details of cutting and making garments, and is furnished at *less price* than those of New York.”²⁶⁸ Such publications did more than merely promulgate technical information. The 1838 issue of the *Tailor’s Magazine* contained not only reports on New York fashions, alongside technical instructions for how to replicate them, but also included editorials, literary pieces, and lists of business contacts.²⁶⁹ Through such periodicals, Allen and his cohort of country tailors engaged with a burgeoning national industry. Indeed, Allen and his partners’ practice resembles that of clothiers in New York during this same period, taking distribution of cloth and production of clothing under one roof.²⁷⁰ Allen’s accounts provides compelling evidence that such business innovation was not restricted to urban America.

Allen’s accounts resemble the operations of metropolitan clothiers in another way: His traffic in readymade garments. Allen’s trade in ready-made garments accounted for about 22 percent of his total garment sales; the proportion climbs to 36 percent when factoring in Allen’s sale of accessories, such as shoes, gloves, handkerchiefs and stockings. Allen’s ready-made stock did not differ dramatically from his bespoke clothing: Overalls, coats, and vests were the three

²⁶⁶ “More New Goods,” *Greenfield Recorder* November 11, 1828. Newspapers.com.

²⁶⁷ “Tailoring,” *Greenfield Recorder* June 17, 1834. Newspapers.com.

²⁶⁸ “The Tailor’s Guide,” *Greenfield Recorder* October 31, 1837. Newspapers.com.

²⁶⁹ *Tailors’ Magazine & Quarterly Report of Fashions* 2, no. 10 (April 1838). AAS.

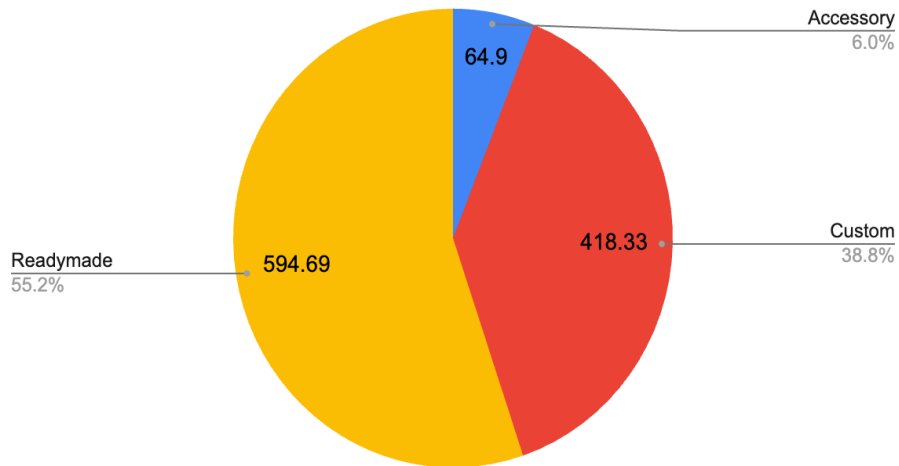
²⁷⁰ Zakim, *Ready-Made Democracy*, 38-43.

most listed garments in both categories. The relative proportion of these garments differed, however. Within a sample of transactions from throughout the eight years covered by his account book, Allen made or cut a total of 81 coats and 104 overalls. He sold pre-made 12 coats and 24 pairs of overalls, a ratio of about 2 to 1. It was, presumably, easier to cut legwear as opposed to outer garments, which required complex techniques to achieve a precise fit. The most common ready-made item Allen sold were vests, which came in a several colors and fabrics including satin and cassimere. Allen made 55 vests, compared with 32 sold readymade. Furthermore, while Allen's bespoke work took up a greater number of entries, ready-made clothing was more valuable to his bottom line. Sales for readymades amounted to \$556.08, while bespoke work accounted for \$418.18. The total rises to \$672.76 when adding accessories. (Table 3.4)

**Table 3.4: Ready-made vs. Custom Purchases at Allen's Store; Value (Top) vs. Quantity
(Bottom)**

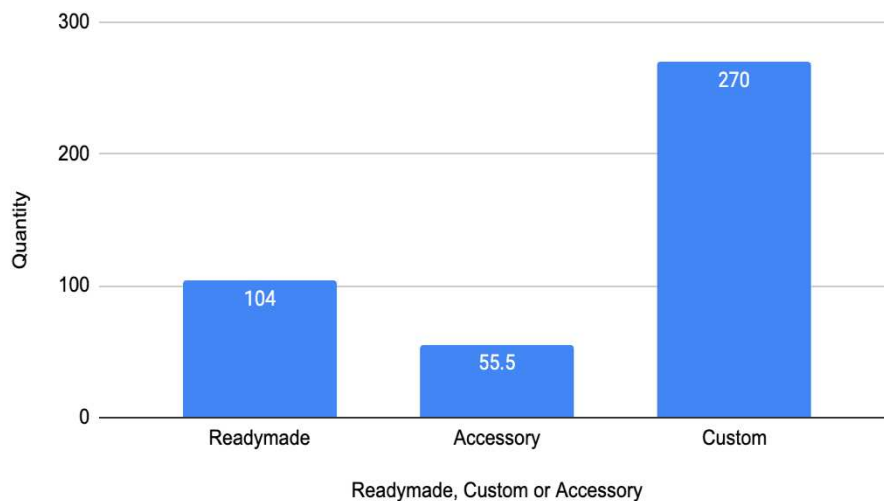
1815-1823, Garment Purchases at Allen's Store

Based on 412 Entries



1815-1823, Garment Purchases at Allen's Store

Based on 412 Entries



In their accounts, tailors distinguished between purchases of bespoke versus purchases of ready-made garments. Using a London tailor's account from the late 1760s, English historian Miles Lambert shows how the former included separate entries for cloth, lining, and trimmings,

while entries for the latter simply list the garment and its material.²⁷¹ Allen, likewise, distinguished between the two types of work. A July 3rd entry for Clark Gos of Montague records both a purchase of “coats cloth” for \$9.25, and a subsequent entry for “cutting coat,” at .50 cents. A prior entry, for Col. Richard Newcomb, lists “cloth for overalls and cutting,” for a total of \$3.80. By contrast, Allen’s transaction with Jabez Whiting of Northfield lists one “blk broadcloth coat,” without any mention of labor or materials, sold for \$19.75.²⁷² While it is possible that Allen simply condensed multiple tasks into one entry—he was known to group clients’ small purchases into the catch-all category “sundries”—the similarity of his accounts to those of the metropolitan London tailors, as well as his propensity to itemize other tasks in his accounts, suggests he was selling pre-made garments.

Allen’s sales of ready-made clothing marked a significant departure for rural tailoring. Ready-made clothing was not unknown in rural America. Shopkeepers in the Connecticut River Valley, such as John and Elijah Williams, sold certain ready-made garments since the mid-eighteenth century. In Virginia during the same period, country merchant John Hook offered his customers two full-trimmed broadcloth suits, ready-to-wear.²⁷³ Yet Allen was distinct from these earlier retailers. Rather than occasional luxury or work items, Allen’s traffic in readymades was a consistent and relatively commonplace part of his overall clothing sales. In this respect, Allen’s practice resembles that of certain contemporary English tailors. Lambert notes how during the latter eighteenth century, urban British tailors diversified their business by selling increasing numbers of ready-made garments, which might account for nearly a quarter of their total value of

²⁷¹ Miles Lambert, “Bespoke Versus Ready-Made: The Work of the Tailor in Eighteenth-Century Britain,” *Costume* 44, no. 1 (2010): 57.

²⁷² May 29th, 1816, and n.d., Sylvester Allen Account Book, 1815-1823. PVMA Library.

²⁷³ December 13, 1783, John Williams Account Book, 1782-1784, 112. PVMA Library; Ann Smart Martin, *Buying into the World of Goods: Early Consumers in Backcountry Virginia* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 80.

sales.²⁷⁴ Several decades later, 67 percent of the clothes sold by the Hampshire, England tailor Robert Mansbridge to his rural clientele were ready-made, including toilenette waistcoats and “baragon” jackets.²⁷⁵

Even more significant, Allen’s production of ready-made clothing paralleled domestic developments. Concurrent with Allen, New York’s merchant tailors were expanding their sales in ready-made garments, thanks to an expanding network of canals, turnpikes, and, later, railway lines.²⁷⁶ While serving a more restricted market, Sylvester Allen nevertheless participated in this ready-made revolution. Ironically, however, Allen’s transition from artisan into businessman signaled the demise of the trade that had brought him to prominence in the first place. From purveyors of fashion, by the mid-nineteenth century, rural tailors sunk into obscurity and ignominy.

Conclusion

“A New Era,” proclaimed an advertisement in the December 26, 1843 edition of the *Greenfield Democrat*. At his store south of the Greenfield House, shopkeeper Lewis C. Munn advertised “an assortment of Ready-Made Clothing,” including overcoats, sack coats, and pantaloons, all at extremely low prices. “Gentlemen in want of Clothing will do well to call on the subscriber. Any article not on hand will be made at the shortest notice, and warranted to fit.”²⁷⁷ Advertisements like Munn’s became increasingly common in rural American newspapers during the mid-nineteenth century. Between 1840 and 1860, over 2,500 advertisements for Ready-Made clothes appeared in Greenfield’s newspapers. The expansion of ready-made clothing had deep

²⁷⁴ Lambert, “Bespoke Versus Ready-Made,” 56-58.

²⁷⁵ Christina Fowler, “Robert Mansbridge, A Rural Tailor and his Customers 1811–1815,” *Textile History* 28, no. 1 (1997): 33-34. <https://doi.org/10.1179/004049697793711094>.

²⁷⁶ Kidwell, *Suiting Everyone*, 53-64; Zakim, *Ready-Made Democracy*, 87.

²⁷⁷ “A New Era,” *Greenfield Democrat* December 26, 1843. Newspapers.com.

implications for rural tailors. As one “country tailor” complained in 1849, “many pleasant and flourishing little villages which a few years ago sustained half a dozen tailors each... are now giving a scanty support to less than half the number, because the merchants and establishments devoted exclusively to the business, are selling cheap ready-made clothing.”²⁷⁸

The fading of the rural tailor was part of the broader economic transformation occurring in early America. The *Massachusetts Spy* described the decline of a fictional village, once home to a variety of artisans and professionals, but which vanished into obscurity under pressure from the national market. Tellingly, the instigating incident occurred when the lawyer forsook the services of the village tailor, one “Mr. Snip,” in favor of cheaper, more fashionable clothing from Boston.²⁷⁹ The precise incidents described in the article were fictitious; the circumstances it revealed were not. Through the “Market Revolution,” capitalism entered more pervasively into Americans’ everyday lives. We have already remarked on industrialism’s effects on the handicrafts, but farming too evolved from subsistence into business during the first half of the nineteenth century. Facing fewer opportunities in the countryside, young people flocked to burgeoning cities. Historian Daniel Walker Howe writes, “Overall, in the years between 1820 and 1850 the sector of the population considered ‘urban’ (residing in places with more than 2,500 people) multiplied fivefold and increased its share of the total population from 7 percent to 18 percent—commencing the period of the most rapid urbanization in American history.”²⁸⁰ In both cities and countryside, social relations transformed, as the face-to-face relationships of the

²⁷⁸ Quoted in Zakim, *Ready-Made Democracy*, 62.

²⁷⁹ “History of a Country Village,” *Massachusetts Spy* August 27, 1828. America’s Historical Newspapers.

²⁸⁰ Daniel Walker Howe, *What God Hath Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 526.

old “moral economy” were subsumed by impersonal transactions between creditor and debtor, employer and employee.²⁸¹

The reputation of rural tailors evolved under the influence of these economic developments; by the mid-nineteenth century, the country tailor had become a by-word for unfashionability. When “Caleb Clambake” wanted to satirize a “Yankee,” he described his ill-fitting apparel as “evidently the work of a country tailor.”²⁸² In contrast to his over-dressed spouse, the newly-inaugurated James K. Polk was said to dress “not only plain, but rather slovenly,” in clothes “badly made... as though they were made by a country tailor not familiar with the latest fashions.”²⁸³ A new fashion regime was in the making. As Michael Zakim describes, homespun cloth, once associated with the industry of the American colonies and the new Republic, became, by the mid-century, a sign of anti-consumerism.²⁸⁴ The rural tailors’ work underwent a similar rhetorical transformation. Once the agent through which agrarian customers interacted with the wider world of fashion, the rural tailor was now opposed to all things cosmopolitan and forward-looking.

Yet, during their heyday from the mid-eighteenth to the turn of the nineteenth century, rural tailors played a pivotal role in the social and economic lives of their communities. In the latter decades of the eighteenth century, John Russell balanced economic imperatives with dedication to his trade to produce a range of clothing for the residents of Deerfield. During the first half of the nineteenth century, Stephen Powell adapted to a new regime of out-work to make clothing for his Berkshire neighbors. Finally, Sylvester Allen consolidated the business of the retailer and

²⁸¹ John Lauritz Larson, *The Market Revolution in America: Liberty, Ambition, and the Eclipse of the Common Good* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 98-140.

²⁸² Caleb Clambake [pseud.], “The Yankee Engineer,” *Semi-Weekly Eagle* June 1, 1848. America’s Historical Newspapers.

²⁸³ “Washington Gossip,” *Centinel Of Freedom* March 11, 1845. America’s Historical Newspapers.

²⁸⁴ Zakim, *Ready-Made Democracy*, 32-33.

craftsman into a single enterprise which altered—however imperceptibly at first—the relationship of the rural artisan and his clientele. In their own capacity, each of these tradesmen helped push their communities into a changing market economy, even as they integrated their male clientele into an expanding democratic citizenry. It is an under-recognized historical irony that the very industriousness of these rural craftsmen helped create the conditions which resulted in their cultural and economic obsolescence.

CONCLUSION

Dedicated Followers of Fashion?

In his 1835 pamphlet *England, Ireland and America*, the radical politician Richard Cobden made a scathing comparison between his homeland and its erstwhile colonies. Despite being far in advance of the United States in terms of industrial production, and having twice its population, England remained yoked to outmoded feudal laws, foreign entanglements and a ruinous public debt. England spent huge sums on its army and navy during peacetime, while America guarded its frontier with a paltry constabulary of 7,000 men. America embraced the railroad, while English shipping still muddled along its eighteenth-century canals. There were 1,265 newspapers printed in America, compared with 369 in England. Yet, if statistics were insufficient, Cobden “[ventured] on a simile,” to convince his readers of the two countries’ prospects.²⁸⁵

“Such of our readers as remember the London tradesman of thirty years ago, will be able to call to mind the powdered wig and queue, the precise shoes and buckles, and the unwrinkled silk hose, and tight inexpressibles, that characterized the shopkeeper of the old school,” Cobden wrote. The old tradesman’s practice reflected his dress. He did business in his wood-paneled shop with a stately mien (according to the time-worn practices of his ancestors). Gold-headed cane in tow, he visited his less-fortunate neighbors, “inquiring into their affairs, settling their disputes, and compelling them to be honest, and to manage their establishments according to his plan,” with the airs of a feudal lord of the manor. His employees were equally composed: “His

²⁸⁵ A Manchester Manufacturer [Richard Cobden], *England, Ireland and America*, 2nd ed. (London, 1835), 101-131.

clerks, shopmen, and porters, all had their appointed costumes; and their intercourse with their chief, or with each other, was disciplined according to the established laws of etiquette.”²⁸⁶

The modern tradesmen of the 1830s looked very different. Their “first innovation was to cast off the wig, and cashier the barber with his pomatum-box, by which step and hour was gained in the daily toilet.” Instead of buckled shoes and tight breeches, “whose complicated details of buckles and straps, and whose close adjustment occupied another half hour,” the modern tradesman wore Wellington boots and pantaloons, “which were whipped on in a trice, and gave freedom, though perhaps at the expense of dignity to the personal movements during the day.” Their shops, now built with plate glass windows extending from ground to ceiling, “were made to blaze with all the tempting finery of the day.” Modern tradesmen did business in a hurry, with none of the old formality and deference. They showed no interest for the concerns of their neighbors, “so long as they did not break their break their windows.”²⁸⁷

For Cobden, England was the old-school tradesmen, while America was the new-fashioned “man of business”: “Our debt may be called the inexpressibles or tights, which incessantly restrain us from keeping up with the nimble pace of our pantalooned rivals.” Buckled shoes were England’s feudal laws, impeding national progress compared with “Wellington-booted brother Jonathan.” The powdered wig and queue was the ornamental, if functionally useless, established church, which distracted parliament’s attention from more-pressing matters of public policy, “all of which the legislature of our straight-haired competitor has been enabled to apply to the encouragement of a prosperous trade.” How would England reverse this trend? The country may not be in danger of imminent collapse in the face of its younger (and more

²⁸⁶ Cobden, *England, Ireland and America*, 131-132.

²⁸⁷ Cobden, *England, Ireland and America*, 132-133.

stylish) rival, Cobden argued, “but we fervently believe, that our only chance of national prosperity lies in the timely remodeling of our system, so as to put it, as nearly as possible, upon an equality with the improved management of the Americans.”²⁸⁸

When Cobden’s “simile” was reprinted in the *Massachusetts Spy* several years later, it lost its sense of urgency. After all, the comparison flattered the United States by portraying the country not as an agrarian backwater, but rather at the forefront of industrial change. Instead, the editors copied the excerpt for their readers’ “amusement.”²⁸⁹ Readers might chuckle at the old-school tradesmen’s powdered wig and buckled shoes, as they doubtless did at similar satires of fashion from bygone eras, which regularly appeared in early Republican magazines and newspapers.²⁹⁰ Shorn of shiny buckles and tight “inexpressibles,” men’s dress conveyed their status as restrained, rational actors in politics and the economy. This change reflected a broader transformation in how Americans thought about fashion. As historian Michael Zakim and others have argued, the onset of industrialization replaced the politics of homespun with paeans to consumption; fashion no longer posed a threat to Republican virtue but rather provided the basis for commercial prosperity.²⁹¹ In historian Kate Haulman’s phrase, “fashion was citizenship’s corset: a hidden but foundational device that underpinned the figurative garb of democracy and equality.”²⁹²

²⁸⁸ Cobden, *England, Ireland and America*, 133-136.

²⁸⁹ See “From the Boston Transcript: The London Tradesman Thirty Years Ago,” *Massachusetts Spy* August 23, 1837. AAS.

²⁹⁰ Cf. Andrew Merry, esq., “The Dress of 1700,” *Greenfield Recorder* April 18, 1808; “Fashions,” *Greenfield Recorder* July 1, 1834. Newspapers.com; “The Young Beaux Outwitted by the Old Buck,” *National Register* 6, no. 9 (November 7, 1818). AAS.

²⁹¹ Michael Zakim, “Sartorial Ideologies: From Homespun to Ready-Made,” *American Historical Review* 106, no. 5 (Dec. 2001): 1578-1579; Kate Haulman, *The Politics of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century America* (University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 217-225.

²⁹² Haulman, *The Politics of Fashion*, 225.

However, this development was not as straightforward as historians like Haulman and Zakim imply. Fashion scholar Linzy Brekke argues that “the disassociation of men from fashion and the body,” in the early Republic, “was not natural but coerced and historically and discursively constructed... We have taken their muted and muffled sounds as proof that the process was successful, when in fact, it is evidence instead of a purposeful silencing.”²⁹³ This thesis has attempted to uncover some of those silences. It has examined young working-class men’s precocious adoption of new fabrics and styles during the post-revolutionary period through the unlikely source of runaway advertisements. It has further illustrated how these young men’s fashions held culturally-specific and occasionally subversive connotations within their social circle, while pointing to the wider influence of working-class styles on elite fashions. Shifting focus to the New England countryside, this thesis has examined the rural tailor’s shop as the site of innovative business practices and changes in fashion. Through the bespoke work of rural tailors, agrarian farmers and craftsmen interacted with the wider world of democratic dress. Throughout, this thesis has placed both rural and urban written sources in conversation with rare extant garments. Together, these chapters have attempted to fashion a more comprehensive image of democratic dress in early Republican America.

This study has broader implications beyond its limited geographic and chronological focus. Historians typically tell the story of men’s fashion during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries from the perspective of the “better” sort. Dress and deportment alike originated with the elite and filtered down to the middle classes; what borrowings occurred from lower-status dress occurred solely on the initiative of elite wearers.²⁹⁴ This study challenges such

²⁹³ Linzy Brekke, “Fashioning America: Clothing, Consumerism, and the Politics of Appearance in the Early Republic,” (Ph.D. Diss, Harvard University, 2007), 174.

²⁹⁴ See Karin Calvert, “The Function of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century America,” in *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Cary Carson, Ronald Hoffman, and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville:

class-based assumptions. It uncovers an expansive market for fashionable clothes amongst both rural farmers and urban laborers. It illustrates how these men deployed clothing as a marker of both regional or class identity. Lastly, it reframes the role of clothing as a vector for political allegiance by exposing the multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings that men conveyed through dress.

Yet despite its wider significance, this study remains limited with regards to broader regional and racially-defined menswear. While its focus on the mid-Atlantic and North shows significant parallels between these regions, regional distinctions and similarities have not been a focus of this thesis. As the popularity of blue check fabrics in the Connecticut River Valley demonstrates, regional dress existed in eighteenth-century America, and it is possible these peculiarities persisted into the nineteenth century, despite the homogenizing tendency of ready-made, urban fashions.²⁹⁵ Furthermore, the dress of free and enslaved Black men demands its own comprehensive study. Outside of a few isolated instances, this study has not examined these men's dress. In a period of both legislative and self-emancipation in the northern United States, what did it mean to dress for freedom? How was the sartorial divide between the supposedly drab, uniform clothing of the enslaved and the more varied wardrobes available to free Blacks experienced in practice?²⁹⁶

University Press of Virginia, 1994), 281; Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (Knopf, 2011), 30-60, 68-73.

²⁹⁵ On Connecticut Valley checks, see Marla Miller, *The Needle's Eye: Women and Work in the Age of Revolution* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), 33-34.

²⁹⁶ Linzy Brekke points the way forward with her chapter on African-American dress, yet more work needs to be done, particularly on the dress of working-class Blacks, many of whom continued to exist in a state of semi-unfreedom after states like Pennsylvania issued gradual emancipation laws. See, Brekke, "Fashioning America," 237-286. Katie Knowles argues that, in the Antebellum South, "enslaved people resisted race-based slavery by individualizing their appearance... but they were ultimately unsuccessful in resisting their exclusion from the race-based American fashion system." See Katie Knowles, "Fashioning Slavery: Slaves and Clothing in the U.S. South, 1830-1865" (Ph.D. Diss., Rice University, 2014), 1.

This study also poses questions for the study of women's clothing. To paraphrase Joan Scott's famous assertion, information about men is necessarily information about women; the same holds true for men's and women's fashion.²⁹⁷ As numerous authors have claimed, fashion became feminine during the nineteenth century. Furthermore, this association meant women were excluded from the republican sartorial regime; according to Zakim, women "had no way to participate in sartorial virtue without betraying their nature."²⁹⁸ Such assertions, however, tend to overlook working-class women as much as they overlook working-class men. How did women on tight budgets adapt to their new social roles as consummate consumers? While authors have examined how working and country women did their best to follow fashions under mitigating circumstances, there is more work to be done. In particular, it remains to be seen what influence, if any, lower-status women had on elite fashions in early America.²⁹⁹

Nevertheless, this study has made a significant step towards expanding our definition of democratic dress. Namely, looking beyond the urban middle classes both deepens and complicates the meanings of clothing as the marker of the democratic citizen. For the urban apprentice in his bright kerchief, striped trousers and short sailor jacket, or the farmer in his Sunday frock coat and pantaloons, clothing *meant* something distinct from the self-possession of the urban bourgeoisie. These men's fashions are indicative of both their belonging to and participation in a republican political culture embodied through dress. Recognizing this

²⁹⁷ Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category for Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1395.

²⁹⁸ Chloe Chapin, "Masculine Renunciation or Rejection of the Feminine?: Revisiting J.C. Flügel's Psychology of Clothes," *Fashion Theory* 26, no. 7 (2022): 998-1001; Haulman, *The Politics of Fashion*, 217-225; Zakim, "Sartorial Ideologies," 1580-1582.

²⁹⁹ Cf. Brekke, "Fashioning America," 157-167; David Lazaro, "Fashion and Frugality: English Patterned Silks in Connecticut River Valley Women's Dress, 1660-1800," *Dress* 33 (2006): 55-77. ; Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell discusses the influence of peasant women's dress on aristocratic fashions, as well as the colonial origins of Marie-Antoinette's *chemise à la reine* in Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell, *Fashion Victims: Dress at the Court of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette* (Yale University Press, 2015), 172-199.

contribution demands shedding the most enduring images of late eighteenth and nineteenth-century men's fashion. The dark suit conceals more than it reveals.

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