On the Home Front: Civil War Fashions and Domestic Life

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On the Home Front
Civil War Fashions and Domestic Life
Cover and at left:

**Blue and black striped dress**

American, late 1860s
Sheer white cotton with blue and black striped bodice, skirt, apron and bow
Silverman/Rodgers Collection
KSUM 1983.1.122a-d
On the Home Front
Civil War Fashions and Domestic Life

Sara Hume

Kent State University Museum
September 30, 2011 - August 26, 2012
Ivory and green striped dress
American, ca. 1868
Cotton tarlatan and silk
Silverman/Rodgers Collection
KSUM 1983.1.37ab
You refer to Annie’s mourning dresses. She wore black at the funeral, but so many deaths are now occurring at home and in the army, that black apparel is not so generally worn as formerly. It is not pleasant to wear somber black for long periods, and besides it is far costlier than before the war.

Mrs. Thomas J. Anderson to Mrs. James H. Anderson. Marion, Ohio, Dec. 8, 1863. 1

The exhibition *On the Home Front: Civil War Fashions and Domestic Life* focuses on the daily life and experiences of the American civilian population during the Civil War and in the years immediately following. The pieces on exhibit, including women’s and children’s costumes, supplemented with related photographs, decorative arts and women’s magazines, are organized thematically. The exhibition draws heavily from the Kent State University Museum’s world-class collection of historic fashion, but also includes loans from the Western Reserve Historical Society in Cleveland, Ohio and the Kent State University Libraries, Special Collections and Archives.

The exhibit concentrates on the material circumstances of the North, particularly around Ohio. While life on the home front in the South was dramatically affected by wartime deprivation and occupation, the conditions for those in the North were far less altered. The letters and diaries of women and children reveal concern about making and buying clothing, and although prices were higher and supplies reduced, materials continued to be available. While the South was blockaded and cut off from supplies including textiles, the North continued to receive imports from abroad. Not only did northerners receive materials, they also derived fashion inspiration from Europe. American fashion magazines such as *Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine* and *Peterson’s Magazine* copied the fashion plates from French periodicals, as well as closely following styles. The fashion magazines continued to feature exaggerated silhouettes seemingly in defiance of the realities of wartime. In fact, *Godey’s* editorial policy stipulated that the magazine make no explicit mention of the war.2

The period of the Civil War did see the widespread diffusion of several technological innovations that transformed how fashions were made and recorded. The first of these innovations was the sewing machine and the second was the photograph. Sewing machines greatly facilitated the production of clothing and enabled fashions to expand in size and complexity. The enormous crinolined skirts became far more achievable thanks to the efficiency of machine sewing. The photograph’s influence on fashion is less immediate but nonetheless significant. For the first time people’s likenesses were reproducible in an inexpensive yet realistic manner. Far from being a simple trivial diversion during such a critical period, fashion provides a unique window into the lived experience of Americans during the Civil War. Despite being far from the battlefields, women and children were deeply and immediately touched by the conflict.

Sara Hume, Curator/Assistant Professor
Kent State University Museum
This uniform was worn by Colonel James Curry, Staff Officer in the Coast Artillery. The shoulder strap bearing an eagle signified that the wearer held the rank of colonel.
Military Influence

You may say to Europeans that there is no derangement of business at the North. Our absent troops are missed by their friends, but business is carried on as before.
Letter from Mrs. Thomas J. Anderson to Mrs. James H. Anderson, Marion, Ohio, Aug. 31, 1862.

Styles of dress for women and children in the 1860s took many cues from military uniforms. The most obvious form of reference was the adoption of braid as trimming. Children’s wear was particularly likely to bear such trim. A narrow strip of braid, known as ‘soutache,’ was stitched along the edges of the garment. This style of trim could be worked into very elaborate, sinuous patterns.

While the war in the United States was an obvious inspiration for the trend, there were actually earlier, foreign sources that should not be overlooked. Among the more notable styles that drew their name from military heroes or troops were the Garibaldi shirt and Zouave jacket. Garibaldi was the Italian national hero who fought for unification in the 1860s. The style of shirts bearing his name were blouses, originally made of wool, but eventually broadening to describe cotton blouses with full sleeves gathered at the wrists. The word “zouave” comes from the regiments of indigenous soldiers conscripted into the French army in Algeria in the 1830s. The romantic image of the exotic outfit with wide, baggy trousers and fez cap combined with the bravado practiced by the Berber and French soldiers, inspired troops in later conflicts, including both the American Civil War and the Crimean War, to fashion themselves as Zouaves. The short jackets worn by these troops were adopted by fashionable women and children.

Children were particularly likely to wear clothing showing such influences. A significant proportion of surviving children’s clothing feature braid as trimming. Additionally, the style of wearing bolero or zouave jackets was more popular among young children and older girls than among adults.
The bodice of this dress is actually one piece, although the way the braid and ruching are arranged creates the illusion of a zouave-style jacket over a vest. The distinctive crescent shape of the sleeves was very characteristic of fashions of the first half of the 1860s — earlier sleeves tended to be full at the wrist while later styles were fitted along the entire arm.
Until the age of four or five, boys wore dresses, making it difficult to determine whether this dress of deep red wool was worn by a girl or a boy. Around the age of five, boys began to adopt trousers or knickers.

Child’s red dress
Probably American, 1860s
Wool, black braid along cuffs and hem
Gift of Mrs. Robert Johnston
KSUM 1986.67.1
Cold weather demanded very heavy, tightly woven overcoats. Both of the pieces shown at left are lined with thick quilting. In the woman’s plush coat, the lining is made of blue striped ticking, while the man’s overcoat bears a fine quality wool lining. These two examples clearly demonstrate the influence of men’s wear, specifically military uniforms, on women’s outerwear, particularly in the cord at the front closure.

The military overcoat, belonged to Major General Jacob D. Cox. Cox commanded the Ninth Army Corps in the Battle of Antietam. After he was put in command of a division of the 23rd Corps of the Army of Ohio, he served in the Atlanta Campaign, as well as the campaigns of Franklin and Nashville. In 1866, Cox was elected governor of Ohio.

**Jacket**  
American, 1860s  
Black plush with braid trim and quilted cotton lining  
Silverman/Rodgers Collection  
KSUM 1983.1.110

**Union Military Coat**  
Label: “Brooks Brothers, Broadway, Corner Grand New York”  
American, 1861-65  
Wool  
Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio  
WRHS 40.1
Outerwear

Cora has just come from school, and requests me to say to M --, that she has a pretty new pink and white hood, that the school girls think it lovely, that she will soon have a new set of fine furs, which have already been ordered from the city, and that she has a new black hat trimmed with white and black velvet ribbons, and white and black plumes. Her father will probably get her a new cloak also.

Miss Annie E. Anderson to Mr. and Mrs. James H. Anderson. Marion, Ohio, Dec. 8, 1863.4

The system of production of clothing was in flux in the mid-nineteenth century. Men’s ready-to-wear began to be introduced in the 1840s and made significant strides during the Civil War as a system was developed to provide uniforms for soldiers. Women’s fashions, in contrast, demanded customized fit, thus preventing such innovations from being easily adapted for them. In fact by the 1860s, the only type of ready-to-wear garment available for women was outerwear because capes, shawls and cloaks could be one-size-fits-all.

These forms of loose fitting outerwear had more to recommend them than their ease of sizing. The enormous volume of the skirts made form-fitting jackets less appealing. When wraps that hung from the shoulders spread out over the wide skirts, the resulting overall shape resembled a large cone.

As sellers marketed the ready-made wraps to women, they invented names that referred to exotic styles. While much of this labeling was little more than a gimmick, there were a number of styles that genuinely originated in Asia and Africa. Perhaps the most enduring style of the nineteenth century was the cashmere shawl. Such shawls were originally imported from Kashmir where they were handwoven from the finest goat hair. By mid-century, however, weavers in Europe, particularly in Paisley, Scotland, developed techniques to approximate the elaborate design on mechanized looms. The shawl included in this exhibition is of the latter European type.

Another popular form of outerwear during this period was the burnous, taking both its name and its general design from a form of hooded, wool cloak worn by Arabs and Berbers in North Africa. First adopted by the French, who incorporated these practical garments into the uniforms of some French colonial soldiers, these cloaks were adopted by fashionable women in Europe and America throughout the 1860s.
The Cashmere Shawl – It may cost a large sum in the outset, but it is always worth its money, and relatively speaking (since all human things are subject to decay), it never wears out. It is for this reason that a real Cashmere shawl has become an indispensable article in a fashionable wedding trousseau.

Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine, October 1868, p. 362.

**Blue silk dress**
American, ca. 1865
Silk taffeta with glass beaded fringe
Transferred from the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio, Gift of Mary Smith McRae, 1946.
KSUM 1995.17.52

**Paisley shawl**
European, 1860s-70s
Wool
Silverman/Rodgers Collection
KSUM 1983.1.1545

**Fashion Plate**
from *La Mode Illustrée*, 1865

(above) Blue silk dress
American, ca.1865
Silk taffeta with glass beaded fringe
Transferred from the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio, Gift of Mary Smith McRae, 1946.
KSUM 1995.17.52

Paisley shawl
European, 1860s-70s
Wool
Silverman/Rodgers Collection
KSUM 1983.1.1545

(above) Fashion Plate
from *La Mode Illustrée*, 1865
This burnous (also spelled ‘burnoose’) of fine wool trimmed and lined with quilted, salmon-colored silk taffeta matches the evening dress of brocaded taffeta. There are quilted pockets stitched on each side of the cloak’s lining.
Black lace wrap
Probably American, early 1860s
Black lace
Silverman/Rodgers Collection
KSUM 1983.1.144

Tan taffeta skirt
Probably American, mid 1860s
Silk taffeta
Silverman/Rodgers Collection
KSUM 1983.1.99b

Blouse
Probably American, 1860s
Sheer pinstriped cotton
Gift of Katherine W. Foote
KSUM 2008.13.5
The wraps on these two pages represent the range of weights and materials available for outerwear. While the delicate lace would have been appropriate for warm weather, the heavier velvet with fringe would provide greater warmth.
Gold taffeta dress
American, ca. 1870
Silk taffeta skirt and bodice trimmed with self-fabric ruffles and fringe
Transferred from the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. E.P. Vance, 1970
KSUM 1995.17.57ab

This elaborate dress demonstrates the changes both in silhouette and ornament by the end of the decade. Increasingly fabrics were solids rather than patterned. The copious amounts of self-fabric trim could be created thanks to the sewing machine. The pattern on the buttons was typical of the period. The effect of the netting closely resembles the design of the hair jewelry.
Formal wear such as evening, dinner and reception dresses, capture some of the most highly elaborated examples of the new styles in fabric colors, patterns and ornamentation that came into fashion in the 1860s. The previous decade saw the invention of synthetic dyes, which enabled the creation of a range of vivid colors that had previously been prohibitively expensive, if they were possible at all. Through the 1860s such colors as brilliant blues, greens and purples continued to see great popularity.

Fashions, particularly in the early years of the decade, favored patterns that were both elaborate and large in scale. Owing their popularity not just to synthetic dyes, but also to the complexity enabled by mechanized looms, such bold patterns often combined a number of different motifs into one pattern, such as plaid and floral patterns. Mechanized looms permitted not just elaborate textiles but also were adapted for the creation of ornamentation such as braid, ribbon and fringe. As these trims became more affordable and varied, their use proliferated.

Women’s clothing underwent a number of significant changes over the course of the decade. The skirt changed from dome-shaped to conical and finally gained fullness in the back as the bustle gained popularity. The changes, however, encompassed more than shifts in the silhouette. The vogue for large patterns gave way to an increased use of subtler patterning and even solid colors. While trimmings during the early part of the decade depended on heavily patterned ribbons and fringe, by 1870 trimmings increasingly involved manipulating the fabric with techniques such as ruching and rosettes.

There is a party this evening at Mr. Robert King’s to which I am invited. Parties are rare now a-days, for the people do not feel like giving them. The times are too serious.
Miss Annie E. Anderson to Mr. and Mrs. James H. Anderson. Marion, Ohio, May 23, 1864.
The elaborate floral pattern on this evening dress is warp-printed. The threads of the textile were printed before being woven, creating the slightly indistinct edges to the design. Further interest is created in the weave as the stripes of patterning are separated by stripes of a contrasting satin weave. While this dress is a larger size than most others on exhibit, the waist measurement is actually only 28 inches.
Purple plaid dress
American, late 1860s
Silk taffeta bodice, skirt and overskirt with brocaded floral accents
Silverman/Rodgers Collection
KSUM 1983.1.92a-c

This purple print encompasses most of the fashionable trends in motifs. The purple color itself saw great popularity thanks to the invention of synthetic dye. Furthermore the print includes both plaid and a warp-printed floral pattern. The scale of the pattern is smaller than those popular earlier in the decade.
Photography was one of the most significant innovations of this period. The Civil War was the first conflict in American history that was documented in film. Likewise the fashions of this period were the first to be captured in photographs. While photographic techniques such as daguerreotypes had existed since the 1830s, by the 1860s albumen prints had become the dominant form.

Certain fixed sizes of prints gained favor. The small scale prints known as cartes de visite became extremely popular because they could easily be reproduced and came to serve as calling cards. These cards also were easily collected into albums. Before the widespread adoption of photography, people would have albums that held autographs or locks of hair. Photo albums replaced these earlier sorts of souvenirs.

By the late 1860s cabinet cards came to replace cartes de visite as the standard format for photography. The larger size favored display on the wall or on a shelf, rather than in an album.
Memories and Mementos

That you are having a pin made for me Princie is quite a surprise. You will please find enclosed some of Clay’s and Virgil’s hair, and I should like some of yours and James’ put in. You have no idea how much the necklace pleased Cora. She says she will always keep it because it contains some of her mama’s hair, and some of yours.

Mrs. Thomas J. Anderson to Mrs. James H. Anderson. Marion, Ohio, Feb. 16, 1864.6

The nineteenth century is remembered as being a very sentimental age. People developed a number of ways of remembering loved ones in their absence. In that age of high infant mortality and war, death was all too common and the need for such mementos was very great. Even in situations of temporary absence, as in the case of soldiers off at war or children off at school, tokens and keepsakes were treasured.

Photographs, particularly the conveniently proportioned cartes de visite, became a widely exchanged form of keepsake. Families could hold onto a tangible representation of an absent loved one. This period was thus the first time that a completely accurate representation of how people dressed could be recorded. The collection of photographs on view in the exhibit had belonged to the Kent State University Museum’s founder, Shannon Rodgers. Most of them depict members of the Barton family, a prominent New England family.

One of the most popular ways to preserve someone’s memory was to keep a lock of their hair. While in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century this may have entailed simply saving a curl, by mid-century, this practice had evolved into the production of elaborately worked jewelry and even wreaths made out of hair. Hair jewelry could be ordered through the mail from Godey’s. A person would send either their own hair or that of a loved one and receive the finished bracelet, necklace or earrings in return.

Quilts were another item richly embedded with memory and meaning. The remarkable quilt included in this exhibit epitomizes this medium’s ability to serve as a memento. The maker of the quilt, Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley (1818-1907), was a freed slave who had served as the dressmaker to many prominent Washington women, most notably Mary Todd Lincoln. Keckley made the quilt after the war from scraps of dress fabric, likely from Mrs. Lincoln’s own dresses.
Hair bracelet with gold locket
American, 1860-90
Bracelet with locket containing picture of Lourens W. Wolcott
Human hair, metal findings, daguerreotype
Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio
WRHS 63.154.1

This bracelet made of hair includes a locket with a daguerreotype image of Lourens W. Wolcott. This object, in fact, combines two forms of keepsake.

“Hair Ornaments”
from *Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine*
May 1861, p. 476

Nearly every issue of *Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine* includes a section called “Godey’s Arm-Chair” that ends with a listing of the orders the magazine had taken in the past month for hair jewelry.

Hair jewelry
American, ca. 1870
Brooch and pendant made from Emma Pierce’s hair for Fanny V. Sackett
Human hair, metal findings
Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio
WRHS 79.89.13

This brooch and pendant are pieces from a suite of hair jewelry that also includes a necklace and a pair of earrings. All of these pieces were made from Emma Pierce’s hair for Fanny V. Sackett.
This quilt attributed to Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley (ca. 1818-1907) combines scraps of dress fabric with embroidered sections and is trimmed with tassels and fringe. The remarkable story of the quilt suggests that the fabrics may have been from Mary Todd Lincoln’s dresses. Beyond these fascinating origins, the quilt itself is a remarkable object. The small hexagonal pieces of fabric include an array of colors and motifs typical of dress fabrics of the mid-nineteenth century. The inclusion of the central embroidered eagle design bearing the word “liberty” is particularly poignant considering Keckley was a slave until she bought freedom for herself and her son. In 1868 she published her autobiography, *Behind the scenes, or, Thirty years a slave and four years in the White House*. 

**Quilt**

Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley (ca. 1818-1907)
American, Third quarter of the nineteenth century.
Pieced quilt of various silks w/raised eagle and flower motifs
Gift of Ross Trump in memory of his mother, Helen Watts Trump
KSUM 1994.79.1
Photographs of the Keckley quilt by David Thum.
Crinoline
Label: Empress Reception, J.W. Bradley’s Coulter
Steel Springs, Pat. Mar. 62
American, ca. 1865
Steel hoops suspended from cotton waistband with cotton tapes
Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio
WRHS 82.17.11

By replacing the multitude of stiff petticoats demanded by fashions of the 1850s with the steel support structure of the crinoline, women actually gained greater freedom for their legs. Nevertheless they still faced a safety hazard in an age of fireplaces and candlelight.
Foundations

The defining shape of women’s fashion during the Civil War depended on the structure provided by the undergarments – most notably the hoop skirt known as a crinoline. The word ‘crinoline’ comes from the French words for horsehair (‘crin’) and linen (‘lin’), and originally was woven from these two fibers. By the 1860s these underskirts were made from hoops of steel. Once the skirts were held out from the body by this metallic scaffolding, it became imperative that women wear some form of undergarment to protect the legs. The pantalets that women adopted actually consisted of separate pieces for each leg that were attached to the waistband but not stitched together at the crotch. Children’s skirts were shorter than those of adults and the hems of the pantalets would show beneath the skirt hem.

The structure for the upper body was provided by a corset. The 1860s were something of a transitional period for corsets. During the first half of the nineteenth century, corsets were fairly light, with a limited amount of boning. The shaping was created primarily by the seams, which were cored or quilted. By the second half of the century, corsets became increasingly boned. The ever more elaborate construction was greatly facilitated by the introduction of the sewing machine. The very wide skirts of the mid-century were paired with very small waists, emphasizing both features. While the corsets of the 1860s were designed to pinch in the waist, they could remain relatively short because the skirts completely concealed the hips.

Both corsets and crinolines created structure through the use of stiff, rigid elements that needed to be concealed when the outer garments were worn. Corset covers and petticoats served the dual role of disguising the ridges created by bone and steel, as well as protecting the rich outer textiles from damage.

Have been at home all day. Made me a pair of drawers [sic], finished one mitten [sic] and began the other one. Think I have done a good days work.

Diary of Alice Hawks, (b. 1845 in Indiana). Entry dated Jan. 3, 1862.
This cotton corset from the mid-1860s is small not only in the waist measurement (19 inches), but also in its length. Because of the voluminous skirts, the bottom of the corset did not extend far down the hips.
While there are distinct decorative edgings at the hem of these drawers at left and in the fashion plate above, overall they are plain, particularly in comparison to the elaborate styles that would come into vogue for undergarments by the end of the nineteenth century.
This corset cover and petticoat were part of the wedding outfit worn by Louisa Johnson Smith on November 26, 1868 (page 33). The corset cover is actually boned. Over this layer, Mrs. Smith wore an additional under shirt that would have been visible under the extremely sheer cotton dress. Underneath the corset cover and corset, she would have worn a chemise. The layer against the skin would protect the corset from skin oils and could be easily washed.

The petticoat provides a smooth covering over the crinoline. In fact, the skirt of the wedding dress is sheer enough to reveal the layer below, demanding a plain underlayer.
The effect of the Civil War on fashion cannot be thoroughly explored without focusing on cotton. The impact of war was global in scope owing to the centrality of cotton to manufacturing around the world. By the late 1850s cotton was critical to the world’s most important industry. The textile industries in Britain, France, Germany and Russia depended on American cotton for nearly 80 percent of their supply. Once the war broke out, the export of cotton was completely cut off by the northern blockade. In 1861, the United States exported 3.8 million bales of cotton; by 1863, exports had effectively ceased. Many historians of the Civil War have focused on this foreign dependence in relation to the South’s hopes for foreign intervention in their war effort. The actual effect of the elimination of the supply of cotton from the American South was the rise of cotton production in countries such as Egypt, India and Brazil. Rather than cultivating cotton through slave labor, these countries became increasingly subject to colonial domination from European powers.

Fashions of the 1860s continued to feature the cotton fabrics that played such an important role in the American political economy. The pieces on display attest to the range of quality and texture that were available during this period.

While most of the surviving women’s outfits seem to be matched bodices and skirts, if not one piece dresses, this period also saw a great vogue for ‘separates.’ Blouses were frequently referred to as “bodies” or “waists,” while one particularly popular style was called the “Garibaldi shirt” for the Italian military hero who had recently helped to unify his nation. These shirts could either be worn underneath one of the popular jacket styles, such as the zouave or bolero, or they could be worn alone. The style of wearing a blouse and skirt was most popular among girls and young women. It was particularly practical in light of war shortages as it enabled someone to continue to use a skirt once the bodice was worn out.

*Everything is getting dear; cotton goods are very dear, and woolens are rising. Wool that brought less than a year ago 40 to 50 cents per lb. is now selling at 60 to 65.*

Blue and black striped dress
American, late 1860s
Sheer white cotton with blue and black striped bodice, skirt, apron and bow
Silverman/Rodgers Collection
KSUM 1983.1.122a-d

The dresses shown on these two pages attest to the range of colors, patterns, textures and uses for cotton. The cotton in the striped dress at left reveals how finely woven and sheer it could be. Cotton was used for printed day dresses, but also for blouses and even evening gowns.
Dress
American, ca. 1860
White cotton with plum and red zigzag and floral pattern
Gift of Virginia Bowman Fisher (Mrs. Paul V.)
KSUM 1986.127.1

Blouse
American, 1860s
Cotton seersucker
Gift of Katherine W. Foote
KSUM 2008.13.3

**Purple windowpane check dress**
American, ca. 1860
Silk taffeta bodice and skirt
Transferred from the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John Jay McKelvey, 1948.
KSUM 1995.17.53

Dress
French, early 1860s
Sheer white cotton with blue satin sash
Silverman/Rodgers Collection
KSUM 1983.1.2071a-d
The indigo-dyed cotton dress with resist-dyed floral pattern represents a rare surviving example of everyday wear. This type of serviceable garment usually was worn until it wore out and was finally discarded. This dress provides a glimpse at how the wide skirts of the period would be adapted into a more practical line.
Like the indigo-dyed dress *opposite* this little girl's dress shows clear evidence that it was worn. The skirt has a number of patches that were carefully added. These patches are similar in color and pattern to the dress fabric but they do not match exactly.

**Child's dress**  
Probably American, 1860s  
White cotton dress with small floral print accented with pink cotton edged with white braid.  
Transferred from the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio, Gift of Mrs. C.A. Barden and Mrs. Harold Henderson, 1949  
KSUM 1995.17.1642

**Carte de visite of Mary and Alice Deluze**  
American, 1860s  
Albumen print  
Kent State University Libraries, Special Collections and Archives  
RS114-B2-F3
Carte de visite of an unidentified couple
American, 1860s
Albumen print
Kent State University Libraries, Special Collections and Archives
RS120-B2-F3
Weddings

Yesterday we were all up at Cleveland to attend Burke’s and Mary’s wedding.... The wedding was a very quiet, pleasant affair.... Burke and Mary both looked well, Mary the best I ever saw her. She is in fine health now, was dressed very neatly in light silk with no ornament but a simple wreath of bridal flowers around her hair put up in plain style and a few prettily arranged in the fastening of a neat little collar, and we all said that we felt when we saw her standing beside Burke so womanly and dignified that she was indeed very good looking.

Letter from Lucretia to James Garfield, Hiram, Ohio, May 25, 1862.12

Weddings during the Civil War took on a particular poignancy. The dresses that brides wore stood a better chance of being kept and preserved than did everyday clothes. Even more remarkable about some of the pieces included here is the completeness of the outfits. Not only were the dresses themselves kept, but in some cases so were the corresponding underclothes and shoes.

Another noteworthy distinction of wedding dresses is that most often the exact day that the dress was worn can be known with a fair degree of certainty. While many dresses in costume collections have unknown dates and origins, wedding dresses usually have a known provenance and identifiable original wearer.

The wedding dresses included in the exhibition demonstrate that while white or off-white was gaining widespread favor as the color of choice, brides still wore a variety of colors on their wedding day. The tradition of wearing white is widely believed to have begun with Queen Victoria, yet more recent writings have refuted this claim.13

For the modern brides the aspiration seems to be to find a wedding dress that is “timeless” and “classic.” Effectively a style of bridal wear has developed that is distinct from mainstream, everyday wear. During the nineteenth century, however, brides wore dresses that were the height of fashion. The styles of the dresses on view could easily be dated even if the exact day they were worn were not known.
This brown wool gown was worn by a bride in Poland, Ohio. The use of a colored dress as a wedding dress demonstrates how people continued to wear one of their finest dresses to get married rather than a specially made white dress. The wool on this dress is woven with sheer stripes, which reveal the muslin lining and underskirt worn below.
This dress of sheer white cotton was worn by Louisa Johnson Smith on Nov. 26, 1868. Its style reveals a number of features that were the height of fashion at the time. The skirt has the conical shape of the late 1860s and includes an overskirt that ties together at the back. The dress is so sheer it seems to float — an effect enhanced by the gathers at the hem. This style of trimming is known as *bouillonné*, meaning bubbly.
Ivory wedding dress and slippers
American, 1861
Worn by Elizabeth Anne Proctor at her marriage to John Morrison
Silk faille skirt and bodice, kid leather shoes
Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio
WRHS 74.148.1

This dress of ivory faille was worn by Elizabeth Anne Proctor at her marriage to John Morrison in 1861. Like many wedding dresses today, this gown features a number of details to create interest at the back. The waist is trimmed with a rosette from which cascade two panels trimmed in lace. Additionally the sleeves, which open down the front are carefully gathered at the shoulders, which are set low. In addition to the dress itself, she also wore these slippers of kid leather. The two slippers are identical in shape, lacking a distinct right and left shoe.

Notes

1. James House Anderson, *Life and letters of Judge Thomas J. Anderson and his wife, including a few letters from children and others* (Columbus: F. J. Heer, 1904), 326.
Acknowledgements

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Jacket of Civil War uniform (detail)
American, ca. 1863
Black broadcloth, brass button
Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio
WRHS 49.37