

Clothing in the 1850s

- Although people on the frontier or in some rural areas still raised sheep, spun thread, and wove cloth, Americans in long-settled areas like Geneva purchased fabric for their clothing by the mid-1800s. Railroads and the Erie Canal made almost any kind of fabric available in Geneva by 1850.
- All fabrics were natural. There was no polyester, spandex, elastic, or vinyl. The most-used fabrics were cotton, linen, wool. Silk was available, but very expensive. There were no zippers, snaps, safety pins or Velcro, and buttons were mostly for decoration. Hooks, straight pins, and laces were the most common fastenings.
- Most clothing was made by hand at home by the women of the house.
- Wealthy families would hire a seamstress or tailor to make women's dresses and men's suits. They might have servants to help with other sewing.
- Sewing was an important female occupation, and even wealthy women did much of their own mending and sewing of simple garments, like aprons, shirts, sheets, table linens, and baby clothes.
- The sewing machine was invented in 1846 but was not used in homes until the late 1860s.
- Most ordinary people had only a few clothes: an everyday outfit or two—a dress for women/girls and a suit or coat and trousers for boys and men—and a Sunday “best” outfit. Wealthy people might have a few more clothes, but not as many as people have today.
- With no running water or washing machines, washing clothes was very hard work. Dresses and coats would not be washed very often, but undergarments were washed regularly. Collars and cuffs for both shirts and dresses were removable, so they could be changed for fashion or for cleanliness. Girls wore large aprons or pinafores that covered their dresses to keep them clean. Men's shirts and women's chemises or shifts were washed regularly.
- Everyday men's clothing included a shirt, pants, waistcoat (vest), tie and coat. The shirt was made of linen and pulled over the head (no button-up shirts). It hung down the thighs and was sometimes used as a nightshirt. Men did not wear underwear but tucked the long shirt into their trousers. Their pants had straight legs and a button fly. The tie, called a cravat, was like a scarf wrapped around the collar and tied in front. A waistcoat was worn, whether or not a coat went over it. Trousers were held up with suspenders. Stockings held up with tied straps called garters.
- Most men wore their hair parted on the side and often combed up into a high wave at the center of the forehead. The hair was usually collar-length and



covered the ears. Beards came into fashion in the late 1850s. Outside, men wore wide-brimmed or tall hats made of fur, silk, or straw.

- Under their dresses, women and girls wore several layers, starting with drawers and a chemise. Drawers tied at the waist and extended down to the knees like modern shorts. The shift or chemise was a simple gown with short sleeves and no waist, like a nightgown. Over the chemise a woman wore a “stay” or corset for support. These were made of heavy cotton and had either whalebones or cotton cording for stiffening and shaping. They laced up the back and had a long wooden or ivory stick called a busk inserted in the front. The stay gave a woman the proper shape, and no woman would feel dressed without it. Over the stay and chemise women wore petticoats, usually at least

three. Often at least one petticoat would be stiffened with cording or horsehair to make the skirt stand out. Women wore homemade or store-bought stockings held up by garters tied above the knees. Over all of this they wore ankle- to floor-length dresses of wool, silk, or cotton. Sleeves were almost always long, except on evening gowns. Skirts were very full and bell-shaped. Removable collars and cuffs or undersleeves were worn.

- Women wore their hair long, with a center part, and pulled into a knot at the back of the head. The sides were shorter and smoothed back over the ears or left to hang in ringlets. Outside they wore bonnets, which were often decorated with ribbons, lace, flowers, ruffles and feathers. Inside, most women wore caps when they were working or decorative ones when they were not.
- Both boys and girls under 5 years of age wore the same clothes. Babies wore long white cotton gowns over cloth diapers and caps on their heads to keep them warm. When they learned to walk, children wore short dresses, often with short white trousers underneath.
- Girls wore clothing like their mothers, but with a few differences. Their stays were lighter and shorter. Their dresses sometimes had short sleeves. Their skirts were shorter, ending from just below the knee to the lower calf. As girls got older, their skirts progressively got longer, until at about 16-18 years, they were the same length as a woman's.
- Little girls usually wore their hair loose, short to shoulder length, with a middle part. Older girls sometimes wore their hair in ringlets around their ears or pulled back in a knot, like their mothers'. Girls wore hats out of doors.
- After boys reached about 5 or 6 years old, they started wearing trousers, white shirts, and jackets that buttoned up the front. At about 12 years old they started wearing waistcoats, stiff collars, and cravats like their fathers. Their hair was short and usually side-parted, and they too wore hats outside.

Clothing in 1890

- By 1890 only the poorest and most rural people would spin their own thread or weave cloth. They would still hand sew many of their own clothes. Most people in the cities or with a good income would buy clothes or make them using a sewing machine. The wealthy still had clothes custom made by a seamstress or tailor, but many garments could be purchased readymade, including most men's and children's clothes, underwear, stockings, corsets, gloves, and hats. Some women's clothes were available, but since sizes were not standardized, and the clothes did not always fit well, many women found it was easier and cheaper to make their own clothes.
- Washing clothes was still difficult work, but more and more families in the cities could afford a laundry woman or to send their clothes out to be washed at large commercial laundries. As more fabric and clothes were made in factories, the prices dropped, and people began to own more clothing. Many women no longer sewed at home, except to mend things or make small gifts or decorative items.
- A man's clothing depended largely on his work. Working class men wore sturdy trousers or overalls with shirts and coats, while businessmen wore suits like the 3-piece suit of today. They were usually black or grey, but sportswear included plaid and colorful trousers or jackets. The shirt buttoned up the front and was worn with drawers or a union suit (long johns). Shirts were stiffly starched, as were the detachable collars, which stood up around the neck. Ties were also like those of today. Socks were worn and held up by garters around the calves. Most men wore their hair



short and often had a mustache and sideburns. Silk top hats, bowler hats, caps, and straw boater hats were popular and always worn when outside.

- Women wore ankle to floor-length dresses, but with less fullness than earlier in the 1800s. The “hourglass” figure was in fashion, with small waists and rounded hips and chest. Separate blouses (called shirtwaists) and skirts were also very popular, especially among women working in libraries, schools, stores and offices. Dresses and shirts had high



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collars and puffed sleeves at the shoulder that became narrow around the wrists. Divided skirts and “bloomers” caught on among women who enjoyed sports and were worn for activities like tennis, bicycling and riding.

- Many women wore chemises and drawers for underwear, but “combinations” were becoming popular. This was an undergarment that combined the top of a chemise and the drawers into one garment. Over the combinations a woman wore a corset made of steel “bones” and elastic. Over this they wore a corset cover (like a camisole). Women still wore petticoats and sometimes small bustle pads to shape their skirts. Stockings were held up with elastic garters or attached to the corset or a garter belt. Shoes were leather slippers for indoors and dress, while ankle boots with buttons up the side were worn out of the house.

▪ Women wore their hair long and pulled up into a loose topknot or bun at the top of the head. Loose, wispy bangs were also worn. Small hats decorated with lace, ribbons, feathers and artificial flowers were worn high on the back of the head when outside the house.

- Clothes for children under 5 years were very much the same throughout the 1800s. In the 1890s sailor suits for boys and girls were very popular. Girls’ dresses were very frilly, often covered with lace and ribbons and were often white. Girls wore light corsets and drawers or combinations, like their mothers. Their skirts were shorter than a woman’s, ending just below the knee on young girls and just above the ankle for adolescents. Girls wore aprons or pinafores over their dresses to protect them from dirt and wear. Younger girls wore their hair long, sometimes loose with the front pulled back into ribbons, or braided. Boys wore short pants (knickers) over stockings, a shirt, and coat or jacket, sometimes with a waistcoat. Out of doors boys and girls always wore hats or caps.