

ONE, TWO, BUCKLE MY SHOE

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One, Two, Buckle My Shoe

This children's counting rhyme raises the question: what was our ancestors' footwear like?

Inside their homes they may have worn some type of soft footwear (slippers), just as we do today. Sometimes they went barefoot in warmer areas (especially the children), but insect bites, splinters, and uncleared ground made this an undesirable option for general outdoor activities. Their first preferences would have been for what they knew, adapted for a new environment if necessary.

In Europe, common people wore wooden-soled footwear, often called clogs. (Be aware that the meaning and description of terminology for clothing varied over time.) These had leather uppers nailed onto the wooden sole, hence the advantage of long wear. These simple styles that could be made inexpensively at home were imported to the Americas. Clogs were used in various ways. They might have been worn as the main footwear, with or without stockings, or as something like an overshoe to help protect the wearer's shoes from mud.

Frontier settlers soon found that the moccasins favored by the Indians were practical and relatively easy to create, and in some areas these became an accepted form of footwear.

I have noticed that in seventeenth-century inventories there is a differentiation between shoes and boots. For example, a man might be said to own one pair of boots and one pair of shoes, but rarely do you see more than one of each. Technically, "boot" referred to footwear that came above the ankle, often being calf-high or even knee-high.

There was another difference between shoes and boots. Shoes had fasteners. Shoelaces are said to have been invented about 1790, and laced shoes came in to common use in the 1800s. So, for our early American ancestors, shoes were fastened onto the feet by *latchets* (straps) secured by buckles. Shoe buckles have two parts. The *chape* is the working portion of the buckle. It might have bars and/or sharp prongs to hold the straps in place. Not that they always worked. Shoe buckles seem to have been subject to frequent breakage or loss. For example, on one day in 1784 my ancestor in Virginia bought 1 pair of men's shoes, for which he seemed to have needed three pairs of shoe buckles.

Quite a few broken, lost, or abandoned shoe buckles have been found in archaeological digs or among miscellaneous "old stuff," in both Europe and America. They also appear in drawings and paintings. Thus, we know that shoe buckles also could have a decorative component, ranging from simple scrolling on the metalwork of the chape to paste jewels on a shoe buckle belonging to a society gentleman or lady. Today, there are a number of companies that supply sell replicas of antique shoe buckles, especially for persons involved in reenactments. You can find many illustrations on the Internet.

I have a fascinating drawing in my home that was an illustration to an old English book of children's songs, in this case "Hot Cross Buns." The lady of the house appears in the doorway wearing soft slippers. Her two children have shoes with buckles. The old woman selling the hot cross buns is standing on the cobbled street. She is wearing shoes with buckles, but attached to the shoes are metal rings that elevate her shoes above the cobblestones (and the water, mud, and sewage common on city streets). These rings are called *pattens* and were often attached to shoes and clogs in early America.

Both shoes and boots were manufactured by a cordwainer (leatherworker) or shoemaker. Shoemakers formed shoes by shaping leather around a wooden "last." Each last was a different size. Lastmaking was considered a separate trade from shoemaking, as were the tanners and curriers who prepared the leather. Early footwear wasn't particularly shaped to the foot. In fact, even custom footwear didn't come in left and right! It would be made to general length and width, but both shoes were just alike. Shoes specifically for left and right feet were mass-produced in the mid-1800s.

Any type of footwear was repaired as it wore, so early shoemakers—and shoe wearers—did as much repairing as creating, probably more.

Adequately-shod feet were critical to successful colonial ventures. In the *Colonial Williamsburg Journal*, in "Footprints on the Past," D. A. Saguto (Colonial Williamsburg's master boot and shoemaker) writes that "The earliest surviving list of recommended apparel for the would-be Virginian was written for servants going to Smyth's Plantation in 1618. On it are three pairs of shoes and repair supplies—soles, thread, awls, pitch, and rosin—worth 1.5 times all other articles of regular clothing combined." The Massachusetts Bay Company suggested that a man should have four pairs of shoes and three pairs of stockings.

Under their shoes, boots, and clogs, people often (but not always) wore stockings, generally knitted of wool (only the wealthy could afford silk, and cotton doesn't seem to have been used much for knitting). To help you envision your ancestors' stockings, one word will help—baggy. Stockings were not shaped to the foot and leg, but were generally tubes. They bagged around the ankles and over the insole. If you think about it, it makes more sense from a practical point of view, because the stocking could be turned for even wear, making it longer lasting. This did, however, sometimes necessitate the use of garters to keep the stockings up.

Stockings were often more colorful than other elements of wardrobe in an inventory. For example, a collateral relative of mine died in 1757 with few assets other than his clothing, which included a pair of blew worsted stockings, a pair of black worsted stockings, a pair of blew yarn

stockings, and a pair of pale blew yarn stockings. Red stockings were popular in the colonial period.

Unless your ancestors were among the wealthy who would have followed fashion (fancy men's shoes had

higher heels—often painted red!), they were most likely to have chosen footwear that fit their lifestyles and the environment in which they lived.