

## IN A YELLOW PETTICOAT AND A GREEN GOWN

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*Daffy-Down-Dilly has come up to town*

*In a yellow petticoat and a green gown*

Yellow seems like a funny color for an undergarment, but words change meaning and usage over time. One of these is petticoat. The word equates with our current understanding of the word skirt.

Settlers in the earliest years of America wore clothing described in terms unfamiliar to us. The joint inventory of Sarah and Godbert Godbertson, taken in Plymouth Colony in 1633, lists many articles of clothing: two cloakes, a hatt, a paire of breeches, a jerkin, a ruff, a band, a wastcoate and kirtle, a yock, a wastcoate and petticoate, a apron, a paire of stockings, 2 aprons, 1 old croscloth, 2 old ?quoines, a paire of shoes, a gowne, a coate, an other coate, a wastcoate, a band, a paire of stockins, coyfes and handercheifes, an old cloake, and a coate.

A *jerkin* was a snug fitting, sleeveless jacket; a *band* was probably a belt. Both men and women wore *ruffs* around their necks (think of those portraits of Elizabeth I), although this one probably belonged to Godbert. Sarah probably wore the *waistcoat* and *kirtle* (a dress-length garment). A *crosscloth* was a headband, usually of linen. Godbert was Dutch, and Sarah (Allerton) Vincent Priest had lived for many years in Leiden, so the *coif* probably referred to a close-fitting cap worn by Sarah that can be seen in many Dutch paintings.

Many of the terms in the inventory referred to items worn by both men and women, such as coat, gown, and waistcoat. The meaning of the words also changed over time, and it can sometimes be very difficult for historians to determine accurately which items of clothing were worn in which combinations by which sex.

As it turns out, Dutch genre paintings are an important source of information about what the early American settlers wore and the articles they might have used because the Dutch paintings are more likely to depict lower-class and middle-class persons engaged in everyday activities than are English paintings. There was much commerce between the two countries, so there was great similarity in such items.

I recently reread an interesting scholarly paper about dressing the interpreters at Plimoth Plantation. (See the end of this article for citations.) It was a reminder that attention to details can make a great difference in understanding our ancestors. Jill Hall points out that in constructing the clothing to be worn by the many interpreters at the historic site, they must arrive at a balance between authenticity, ease of construction, and frequent alteration.

She describes the changes made over time in something as simple as constructing petticoats. Early on, the wardrobe department made them by gathering the material at the waist, which makes sense to those of us for whom the first garment we constructed in Home Ec class was a simple gathered skirt. These skirts fit smoothly over the hips and fall straight and slim to the floor.

However, this profile doesn't correspond to images of the times in which skirts sort of bulged out over the hips and were much wider, falling away from the body, as if there were padding and many underskirts. The answer lay in learning to make a special, but simple, type of pleating, instead of the gathering. The skirts then formed the proper profile on their own. Attention to detail made all the difference.

I found the discussion of waistcoats even more interesting. They followed patterns by Janet Arnold, who has studied the subject of clothing construction extensively, including creating patterns for stage and reenactments. Once again there was a problem. Wrinkles. Sagging tummy folds. The waistcoats just didn't have that nice smooth look.

The answer (unfortunately for the interpreters, I suspect) was stays. We think of them as tortuous devices to slim waists and raise bosoms. But as Jill Hall says, "Although we had known seventeenth-century women wore stays, it was hard to appreciate just how essential they were to the look and fit of seventeenth-century clothes until we saw the reproduction waistcoats worn without them."

Now we come to the part I found most interesting about the stays. Hall says it so well, I prefer to quote her.

"They change a woman's posture and alter the way she moves and lifts and carries objects. They change the way she uses the reproduction artifacts and the way she relates to her environment. Women depicted in seventeenth-century paintings do not bend at the waist. They bend from the hips when reaching for an object on the floor; they crouch or sit on low stools as they work in the hearth. When they fall asleep in their clothes, they sit bolt upright and support their head on one hand, their elbow resting on a table or their knee. Their clothes caused them to move in certain ways."

Did your mental image of your female ancestors just become more vivid? Mine did.

### RESOURCES

C. S. Simmons, *Plymouth Colony Records*, 2 vols. (Rockport: Picton Press, 1996).

For changing definitions concerning clothing, see one of the editions of *The Oxford English Dictionary*, available at major libraries. A good dictionary, preferably unabridged, will provide basic definitions and some illustrations.

Jill M. Hall, "'I shall Cut my cote after my cloth'; Reproducing the Dress of the Pilgrims," *Textiles in New England II: For Centuries of Material Culture*, 1999 Annual Proceedings of The Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife, Peter Benes, ed. (Boston: Boston University, 1999). This volume is held by many college libraries, so you should be able to get it on Interlibrary Loan.

For information on visiting Plimoth Plantation, see their website.

Janet Arnold, *Patterns of Fashion; Englishwomen's Dresses and their Construction* (New York: Drama Book

Specialists, 1972). She has produced several books on the subject of clothing and accessories. This is just one example, a more recent book was used at Plimoth Plantation.