

THE MANTUA MAKER

BY PATRICIA LAW HATCHER, FASG

This article began because the people gazing at a computer screen couldn't read an occupation on a census. Being the nosy person that I am (and that most genealogists are), I peeked over a shoulder and volunteered the information that it said *mantua maker*. This bit of enlightenment didn't seem to enlighten anyone. No one had heard of the term.

I had once attended a lecture on mantua making, but didn't remember enough about it to make more than generalized statements. So, of course, my curiosity was aroused (another trait of genealogists), and I began researching. I found much conflicting information, so what follows is my interpretation.

I found mantua makers on the US census from 1790 through 1910, but the story begins much earlier.

Mantuas became stylish in the seventeenth century. First, I should be clear that we are not talking about a mantle nor a mantilla. A mantua was a loose gown worn over a petticoat and open down the front. Although this standard dictionary definition brings to mind the image of a dressing gown, the mantua was nothing of the sort. The style may have begun as a casual, robe-like garment, but mantuas were usually made of sumptuous material such as damask or brocade and worn for dressy occasions.

And "loose" is a relative term. A mantua was unboned, but it wasn't unfitted. In other words, there were no stays. (As colleagues of mine remarked, having heard the description of the effects of stays in my earlier column, "No wonder mantuas were so popular!")

The construction was quite tricky. This is what I remembered from the lecture I had attended. As I recalled, the idea was that the mantua was constructed from a single length of material, with few if any cuts. Our image of dressmaking is cutting out a variety of smaller pieces from the fabric, then sewing those pieces together. Initially, mantua-making was not at all like this.

One of the things that identifies a true mantua is that it did not have a separate skirt and top. The material was one continuous piece from shoulder to floor. Mantuas fit the figure, yet had a very full skirt. This was accomplished by shaping the material to the body with a series of deep, outward-facing stitched-down pleats that flared gracefully below the waistline.

This single-piece construction with few unreversible actions meant that gowns could be altered for changes in fashion, weight, and ownership. A skilled mantua maker could, literally, disassemble a mantua and remake it into a new garment, saving the beautiful material.

Depending on the current style and the mantua-maker's construction, the rich fabric might be longer in back, almost forming a train. The mantua was not closed at the front (usually just caught at the waist, sometimes belted), exposing the skirt of the lightweight petticoat (you will recall from *IN A YELLOW PETTICOAT AND A GREEN GOWN* that this could refer to a dress-length garment), which was often of silk. As you can imagine, this allowed interesting and attractive contrast in color and fabric. It also permitted more freedom of movement. I can practically hear the swishing sounds as mantua-wearing women made their social calls.

A stomacher was often worn with a mantua. This was an elaborate, decorated, ornamental piece, shaped in a V to help create the illusion of a slim waist.

As is often the case with historical terminology, things changed. Eventually the term mantua seems to have been applied to any elaborate gown of dressy material that was open down the front (and even to some that were not), especially a gown worn at court or a fancy event.

As you can imagine, the skills required to construct a mantua was not something young girls learned from their mothers. Additionally, the materials used were expensive. Thus, mantua-making became one of the first female occupations, run as a business. (The other was the milliner, who carried various accessories for women's attire and some dresses.) Thus it is that in the Philadelphia census for 1790 we see in Southwark a listing for "Lucy (Mantua Maker) Brown." A colleague remarked that she often noticed mantua makers mentioned on St. Croix (we figured that in the hot humid climate in the islands, the women were thrilled with a looser garment). Mantuas were also worn in England and France.

By the nineteenth century, most mantua makers were no longer mantua makers. The market for the most elegant mantuas had been limited to begin with, fashions changed, and mantuas were no longer worn. Yet, in the mid-1800s, almost every small town in America seemed to boast a milliner and a mantua maker in their business directories. What seems to have transpired is that although dresses could be made at home, mantua making had established the right to exist as a WOB (women-owned business), so as more women set up shops as dressmakers, they did so under the title of mantua maker (which probably added class to the establishment, too), even though they may not have made dressy gowns. Eventually the title changed also, and the women began calling themselves dressmakers instead.