

What Do I Wear?

Dressing up is not a requirement for participation in 18th Century Days, however we do encourage you to do so. Most parent volunteers do choose to dress up – would you like to have your child ask, “Mom, how come you were the only mom (or dad) not dressed?”?

We will be going over the various pieces that make up the 1770s rural Massachusetts wardrobe. For the women, it starts with a shift (a long, scoop-necked garment resembling a nightgown). The ones available have a drawstring neck, which goes in the front. You don't want to pull it up right to your neck – it won't look right and would probably be uncomfortable. As an alternative, if you have a white scoop-necked shirt or Gap-style T-shirt, you can wear that.

In the 18th century, the proper foundation garments created the proper look, so women would wear stays – similar to Scarlett O'Hara's corset but not nearly so tight or binding. You will NOT be asked to wear this! Over the shift, women would wear at least two petticoats, or skirts, in modern parlance. Some accounts have women wearing up to 16 petticoats in the winter for warmth – fortunately, big hips were in! We will only ask you to wear one. Most of the petticoats available have drawstring waists so they are one size fits all. I would like to add that if for some reason you don't wish to remove your pants or jeans, to please roll the pantlegs up so they are not visible. Sometimes the skirt is not long enough to conceal them.

After the petticoats, a woman would put on her gown (like I am wearing) or a jacket (like Nancy has on). In spite of whatever the weather may be, please put one on. Going about in just a shift with no jacket over it is the equivalent of going around in jeans and a sports bra. We have several jackets to choose from. Don't worry about color-coordinating with the petticoat. Some lace up the front and others cross over in the front and are held closed by the apron. Which brings me to the next article, the apron. Women wore aprons nearly all the time. Very often you will see “dress” aprons worn in portraits. The apron goes over the jacket, with the ties going around your waist, crossing over at your back, and coming around to your front again to be tied.

Women wore kerchiefs for protection from the sun and for modesty. Select a kerchief. The ends can either be tucked into the jacket front or tied with a square knot.

Caps were worn to help keep the hair clean. A woman doing a number of chores, including cooking over an open hearth, would want to protect her hair, since she probably only washed it weekly. Caps of different sizes are available. The cap really completes the 18th century look.

A word about shoes. Try to wear black or brown shoes or boots, and please avoid white sneakers. I know they're comfortable, but they really don't fit the look you've worked so hard to achieve with the reproduction clothes. Black or brown clogs are also acceptable.

For the men's clothing, the basic components of a suit haven't changed that much in 225 years. Mainly it is the cut of the garments and the length of the pants. You'll start by choosing a shirt. The main difference between 18th century shirts and modern ones is in the length (18th century shirts are much longer) and the buttons (18th century shirts don't button all the way down the front, only at the neck).

Next, choose a pair of stockings. They are very long, so it is easier to put them on before putting on the breeches. Now choose a pair of breeches (which is the correct term – I have no idea where the term knickers came from). No zippers here – it's all buttons. There are also safety pins if needed for adjustments. Tuck your shirt into the breeches.

Pick out a waistcoat, or vest. Now, choose a neckcloth (the modern equivalent is the necktie). Roll the neckcloth up, then put it around your neck under the shirt collar, and tie in a square knot at the base of your throat. If necessary, tuck the ends into the neckline of the waistcoat.

In the 18th century, indoors, men would wear a workman's cap, or if he was wealthy, a turban. For this, no hats are necessary for the men.

Again, for shoes, please choose black or brown shoes. Please avoid sneakers.

If anyone has any problems on the day of, Nancy is here in the morning and can give you some help.

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