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"WORN IN OHIO":

RESEARCH ON CLOTHING AND EARLY SETTLEMENT

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As the State of Ohio prepared to celebrate its bicentennial in 2003, a special commission was formed to plan events of all kind from barn painting and wagon rides to elementary school activities and original historical research. In a February 11, 2001 article for *The Cincinnati Enquirer,* journalist Randy McNutt tried to explain to readers what the state had in mind for its birthday bash. "'We're trying to stress legacies,' said Stephen C. George, executive director of the Ohio Bicentennial Commission. 'We want people to come out of this with a greater sense of pride. Legacy and education are not only important themes, they are central goals.'" With this in mind, a research project and exhibition entitled "Fashion on the Ohio Frontier: 1790-1840" was organized at the Kent State University Museum in an attempt to demonstrate that clothes could contribute to the understanding of Ohio's early settlement history.

Going west to the new American frontier left impressions of Conestoga wagons, ruffian-farmers dressed in homespun clothing and ragged women in aprons. Artifacts held in Ohio collections told a different story. Field research unearthed artifacts that were stylistically emulating high fashion throughout the period covered, 1790s to 1840, and confirmed the possibility that fashionable clothing was worn in the Ohio Territory during this time. While some artifacts had strong provenance, not every piece had a story attached to it that could generate an understanding of its origins. The former could inform the latter and, with extensive research, a story emerged that was far different than the traditional narrative. In addition to seeking, finding and presenting artifacts unknown to most historians, the research's contribution to scholarship broadens the narrow focus on "dead white men's" achievements as garments, accessories and portraits pertained to women's and children's history as well as other under-represented groups. As a result, the traditional heroic narrative subsided to allow a wider audience to connect with the past. Although not representative of what the majority of settlers could have adopted, the garments found nevertheless reveal a diversity of settling experiences and help to expand our vision of both Ohio and American history.

Artifacts Redirect the Project

Field research in museums and historical societies in Ohio and in areas with geopolitical ties to the state began in 2001. When asked about surviving clothing artifacts from the early settlement period, most people questioned had little hope that much would be found. The story of the farmer-settler was firmly anchored in popular culture. According to historian Andrew Cayton in his book *Ohio: The History of a People,* an idealization of the early settlement period occurred quickly and promoted the democratic image of the farmer-settler in his self-sufficient environment (Cayton, 102). As a result, clothing, accessories and portraits dating from before

Ohio's canal building days (1825-1834) were thought to be few. The initial research concept was thus geared towards an exhibition entitled "Locks & Frocks: Fashion at the Time of the Ohio and Erie Canals." The archetype of the farmer-settler who lived a rough life in homespun utilitarian clothes had erased from public consciousness the existence of other settling behaviors. In addition to their rarity, the nonconforming nature of pre-canal days artifacts had likely led to their invisibility. Nonetheless, sophisticated pre-canal days artifacts were located that negated the stereotypical vision of the early settler and changed the course of the project. The frontier experience was soon targeted as one that could be broadened through artifactual research as fashionable dress in sync with that of the East Coast's upper classes conveyed neither self-sufficiency nor ruffian-farmer behavior. A focus on agriculture and early settlement migration patterns was required to better understand the objects found.

Agriculture was at the core of the territory's initial success. As such, it is not too surprising that farming occupied a large part of the public's early history consciousness. What is often overlooked in the myth of the early settler is how the Northwest Territory was first partitioned: not in small plots manageable by an individual or family but in vast portions sold directly by the U.S. Congress to venture capitalist groups. Wealthy individuals pooled their resources to become shareholders in such groups to partake in what became a very profitable act of land speculation. In turn, they had the land surveyed and divided in smaller lots that they then sold for small-scale farming. Some shareholders and their families migrated to the "Ohio Country" and kept a portion of their land to become gentlemen farmers in vast estates not too different than Thomas Jefferson's Montebello. As for others who migrated to the early American west, clothing was tied to their sense of identity and their place in the social order. As such, fashionable clothing of precious cloth in the latest cut travelled with them and sartorial preoccupations continued to be part of their lives.

Dress as Part of the Social Structure

Clothing mattered to early settlers and, as individuals across the economic spectrum migrated west, the system of dress that prevailed in their native land followed them as well. As settlers moved, merchants did too. The cut and fit of garments, the quality of the fabric and how up-to-date motifs were on woven or printed cloth spoke volumes. Merchandise of different quality can be found in surviving artifacts as well as written documents and visual renderings. In her master's thesis at Wright State University, Adrienne Elizabeth Saint-Pierre lists fancy items such as gauzes, plumes, brooches and hair ribbons from Philadelphia as well as thick cowhides of a more utilitarian nature as merchandise found in the 1789 inventory of the Woodridge store of Marietta, the Northwest Territory's first permanent legal settlement established in 1788 (Saint-Pierre, 41, 30-36). Before statehood in 1803 and throughout the pre-canal days, a wide-array of textiles was advertised in the *The Scioto Gazette* of Chillicothe. On June 4, 1801, for instance, merchant John McDougal advertised his holding of "India Calico" and "Fine Sprig'd Muslins." Henry Nevil's merchandise included "Cambrick Muslins, English and India Handkerchiefs and Shawls" in the issue of May 23, 1808. S. & F. Edwards advertised an assortment of "English, French, Scotch, India, German and Domestic Goods" in *The Supporter and Scioto Gazette* (Chillicothe) of August 10, 1826. Like his predecessors, he had not been reached by the canals yet offered a variety of goods to the local population.

The portability of cloth, clothing and accessories might have placed dress ahead of other social markers like housing and furnishings. In his *Letters from America,* Scotchman James Flint described his trip to the northeastern part of Ohio in 1818, a time when Euro-American settlement of this region was not as advanced as the central and southeastern parts: "In the last hundred and fifty miles which I have traveled, I met with few travelers, but several of these were well dressed and polite men. I have also seen some elegant ladies by the way. Indeed, I have often seen among the inhabitants of the log-houses of America females with dresses composed of the muslins of Britain, the silks of India, and the crapes of China" (Flint, 285-286). While dress might have conveyed one's place in the social order more readily in the early days of settlement when log cabins were first built, more permanent and imposing structures followed that could serve the same purpose.

Not unlike Jefferson, fellow Virginian Thomas Worthington (1773-1827) was a gentleman farmer and politician. His surveying efforts led him to settle in Chillicothe in 1797 or 1798 where, on a vast 2,000-acre estate, his house "Adena" was built between 1806 and 1807 following plans commissioned in 1805 from architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe (1764-1820), who

also made plans for the Capitol and White House in Washington, D. C. As with other early settlers, he brought with him from Virginia fashionable clothing that survived and was neither homespun nor strictly utilitarian and reflected his place in the social structure. A ca.1796 miniature of him at age 23 in the collection of the Ohio Historical Society depicts him in a light grey wool coat and an ivory brocaded silk waistcoat (both with fashionable high collars) that survived the trek and the passage of time (figure 1). As a man of wealth, an influential member of the constitutional convention of 1802, a United States senator (1803-1807 and 1811-1814), a representative in the Ohio House (1807-1808 and 1821-1825) and a governor of the state (1814-1818), his is a well-documented life that enables researchers to place his material culture legacy in context – a phenomenon that did not extend to the female counterparts of this and most other groups of settlers.

Underrepresented Settlers

Information on women's and children's lives is not as abundant in traditional written sources and, as such, artifactual sources are helpful to shed light on their experiences. In an era when textiles were a major part of the cost of one's wardrobe, clothing was kept and often recycled. This explains why a very small person's clothes, which were harder to adapt to a new style or body, had higher rates of survival. This often misleads contemporary audiences into thinking earlier populations were smaller. While some pieces may have been kept for sentimental reasons, the cycle of reuse led to such fabrics as heavy woollen cloth, often found in men's coats, to be recut numerous times. In Ohio's pre-canal days, men's styles did not change as drastically from 1788 on and were not found to the same degree as women's. A paradigm shift in female dress occurred in the 1780s and early 1790s. As a result, early women settlers might have brought garments west that were soon obsolete in style. This might explain the survival of several gowns that could hardly cater to the soft hand of the fabrics needed to create the new 1790s linear silhouette.

Two 1780s *robe à l'Anglaise* of earlier English Spitalfields thick silk damask were found in Ohio collections, one of which can be seen in figure 2. According to the records of the Ohio Historical Society, this taupe gown and petticoat is only described as having a Connecticut provenance. A blue gown similar in fabric and cut from the Western Reserve Historical Society in Cleveland, Ohio, is said to have been worn by Susannah Smith (great-great-grandmother of the donor) at her 1756 marriage to Brigadier General John Douglas, resident of Plainfield, Connecticut, who was an officer in the Continental Army and friend of George Washington. A new striped petticoat and shoes have survived with the blue gown and indicates later updating. As the northern part of the state was the "Western Reserve of Connecticut," the origins of the Spitalfields gowns correspond to many of that region's early settlers. While not enough is known of the lives of their owners, the gowns with their conical torsos shaped by boned stays and large skirts are typical of the silhouette in style in the 1780s and suggest a certain continuity from east to west.

While we do not know for certain that the silk damask gowns were worn very early in the course of Ohio's settlement, another 1780s silk gown that belonged to Massachusetts' native Polly Parkman Bradshaw Foster, wife of one of "the first 48 pioneers" of Marietta (established in 1788 and located in the southeastern part of present-day Ohio), has also survived and is part of the Ohio Historical Society's collection. Wives (and children) soon joined their husbands on the frontier but did not share in the glory of their exploits. Worn by Polly either as part of her trousseau or at her July 10, 1780, wedding to Peregrine Foster, the cut and fabric of Polly's gown would still be fashionable in 1788. However, as Euro-American settlers did not venture to northern Ohio until the 1790s, the possibility that the blue English Spitalfields silk damask gown may have been worn on the frontier appears slim. Why then would it be found at the Western Reserve Historical Society? Other scenarios exit that are more likely. As the 1790s was a period of transition in women's fashion, the blue gown could have been worn by an older women who chose not to adhere to the latest styles, or it could be a memento brought west by an upper-class settler.

A ca. 1780-1781 portrait of Connecticut natives Mary Kidder Gleason and her daughter Bethia Gleason (figure 2, center), depicts women in fashionable attire who will later become frontier settlers in Belpre, southwest of Marietta. The portrait was brought to the Northwest Territory in 1800 by the widow Mary Kidder Gleason, who moved west to join the recently widowed Bethia. By 1800, the new linear silhouette with an elevated waistline was in fashion and the garments depicted in the portrait are no longer in fashion. Nonetheless, the movement of this artifact west brings to the forefront

the presence of settlers whose age and gender are seldom part of the frontier archetype. The artifact brings to the forefront underrepresented facts, which can serve to better assess the two Spitalfields gowns. With the Gleason portrait, the migration of a woman no longer in her early years is made factual and can strengthen the possibility that such emigration occurred in Ohio in the 1790s, where the two surviving Spitalfields gowns were found. These gowns, like the Gleason portrait, could also have been mementos of a settler's past and outward display of their station. The continuity from east to west brought forth by the artifacts may then have been that of the social structure. The three 1780s silk gowns and the Gleason portrait remind us that our stereotypical vision of settlers' ages, genders, marital status and social positions must be broadened, as does the type of artifacts we think they may have brought with them, which may not be limited to living essentials.

Experiencing History in Different Ways

Fashion can engage museum visitors as most people can relate to this type of artifact on a personal level. Juxtapositions of artifacts often spoke to viewers and drew them into a multi-faceted world. For instance, the ca. 1810-1811 brown printed cotton "frock" of little Ben Mowry (figure 3, center) of Massillon, Ohio, was similar to that of a brown printed cotton closed robe of 1783 from the Cornell Textile and Costume Collection of upstate New York, presented beside it. The cotton fabric of the 1783 closed robe had in its selvage three blue threads. Florence Montgomery in her book *Printed Textiles; English and American Cottons and Linens 1700-1850* indicated that these threads were mandated by British law for tax-exempt fabric meant for export between 1774 to 1811 (Montgomery, 34). The similarity of the brown printed cottons identified the child's frock as a recycled artifact likely made of late eighteenth-century British fabric—a phenomenon seldom linked to self-sufficient pioneers. Ben Mowry's frock and its neighbors thus served to communicate the long tradition of textile imports from Great Britain, the change to the new linear silhouette, recycling habits in adult's and children's wear, as well as issues of gender, as most viewers assumed the frock belonged to a girl. Printed original sources would have been unlikely to engage viewers both young and old as effectively.

Seeing the artifacts on display helped to shatter the deeply anchored settler's myth (figure 4). Although limitations exist in the use of nonverbal artifacts in historical research, the garments found indicate that the meaning of fashion in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century did not change with the movement of a population to a new remote territory. The discovery of fashionable garments from the early settlement period and their cut, construction and fabrics suggest the presence of a type of social behavior that has not been traditionally associated with Ohio's frontier days. In order to expand on the museum experience, a video documentary project discussing Ohio history through fashion was conceived in collaboration with Gayle Strege, Curator of The Ohio State University Historic Costume & Textiles Collection. With the financial support of The Alberta Institute for American Studies this new enterprise offers both Strege and Bissonnette, who joined the University of Alberta's Human Ecology Department in 2009, new innovative ways to hone their story-telling craft.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1. Grey wool frock coat and ivory silk brocade waistcoat with linen back, made in western Virginia (now West Virginia) before December 1796, worn by Thomas Worthington for his wedding on December 13, 1796, in Shepherdstown, western Virginia (now West Virginia), brought to Chillicothe, Northwest Territory, ca. 1797-1798. Ohio Historical Society (OHS), H86201 (coat) and H80779 (waistcoat). The knee breeches are not part of Worthington's bellowing and belong to the Collection of Bruce and Susan Greene

Figure 2. Blue wool frock coat and brown velveteen knee breeches ensemble, ca. 1775-1790s, Western Reserve Historical Society (WRHS), 65.124.1ab. Taupe silk damask open robe and petticoat used as a wedding gown in Connecticut and made of English Spitalfields silk damask in the 1750s (altered ca. 1780s-early 1790s), OHS, H72111ab. Portrait of Mary Kidder Gleason and Bethia Gleason by Winthrop Chandler, Woodstock, Connecticut, ca. 1780-1781, OHS, H27064. Ivory printed cotton open robe, ca. 1797, WRHS, L1832.

Figure 3. Brown closed robe, 1783, Cornell Textile and Costume Collection, no. 58. Brown child's frock, ca. 1810-1811, Massillon Museum, BC1592. Prussian blue gown, ca. 1805-1810, CoConnecticut, 1979.68.864.

Figure 4. "Fashion on the Ohio Frontier: 1790-1840," Kent State University Museum, July 2003 to January 2004.

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