

The Costume Collection

By Gail Alterman

Upstairs at the Hanson House are three rooms that hold the Costume Collection of the Cranford Historical Society. The collection is unique within the confines of the Historical Society in that not everything relates directly to Cranford. Instead, the collection relates to peoples own personal history—as clothing is something everyone wears and that everyone can relate to. When you look at a garment mounted on a mannequin, and look closely at the silhouette, you can wonder how a body—even your body—could wear such a garment.

Unlike more visible and famous collections (such as the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art or at the Fashion Institute of Technology), our collection is important in that it reflects what the common, everyday man, woman and child would have worn. Objects tell stories and the stories they tell are our history. Though our collection has its share of fancy dresses, it also has its share of everyday dress, and from a historical viewpoint, these everyday dresses of everyday people are of more historical importance than a fancy couture gown or bespoke suit. They are what people—like us—wore on a daily basis.



Figure 1: Everyday ensemble, c. 1919-21. Woman's cotton summer dress, child's coat, man's seersucker suit.

One of our oldest complete garments in the collection dates to the mid 1850s, and graced the Crane-Phillips House Museum for Christmas a few years ago. We collect clothing, quilts, parasols, hats and shoes...almost anything relating to textiles or objects that were worn by or used by people.

Our collection is heavily weighted towards women's clothing, and this is not unusual. Women's fashion often has changed at a much faster rate than their male counterparts, and therefore they often have more clothing, meaning more survives. Children's clothes are often rarer finds, as their clothing is often handed down, or worn out. Often, the clothing that does survive does so because the garment imparts a special memory or meaning; for instance, most women save their wedding gowns and every collection has its fair share of wedding garments. In our collection, we have traditional, white wedding dresses, many dating from the 20th century, as well as other dresses which were worn for weddings. Often, a bride would wear her "best Dress" for her marriage, and several costume in our collection reflect this. We have dresses from the mid-19th century as well as

from the early-20th century which to the ordinary eye would look like normal, everyday dresses that are documented as having been worn by a bride.



Figure 2: Woman's dress, c.1855, of a ribbon plaid. This fabric and these bright colors are typical for the time period.



Figure 3: Girl's cotton print dress, c.1840. The construction of the skirt and bodice closely mimics that of a woman's dress, although the sleeves and hemline are shorter.

This is not to say that our collection does not reflect Cranford and its residents—it does. We have Henrietta Dreyer's wedding gown, and Ira Dorian's dress uniform as a JAG lawyer. There is the wedding ensemble of Mr. and Mrs. Carl Peterson—he wore his Army service uniform from World War II, and her full-length ivory colored gown in missing a button—because her husband took a button from her dress and carried it with him until he returned at the end of the War. A lovely story told through clothing.

We have strived to tell stories –and history—through our yearly displays at Crane-Phillips House Museum. In these two figures, we made the costumes from the popular PBS show *Downtown Abbey* local, by displaying two dresses which demonstrate the vast changes in women's fashion in the years following the First World War.



Figure 4: Wedding ensemble of Mr. and Mrs. Carl Peterson. The Peterson's were married during World War II and were residents of Cranford.

A formal, corseted, long women's evening gown changes in the space of less than ten years to a loose fitting, knee-skimming dress—changes that occurred whether you were in London society, New York society or in Cranford, New Jersey.

Additionally, we have a unique collection of military costumes of which I am merely the guardian of—as the work on the military collection was the pride of the late Bob Fridlington and his “coffee clutch” –a group of men who identified every badge and insignia of the uniforms. The collection began small, as people “cleaning out houses” were loath to throw out the service uniforms of family members. What began with a few garments has grown into a large collection which spans all branches of the military, and includes every day uniforms as well as dress uniforms. Here, our oldest uniform belonged to Chauncey Harris, who served as a Union officer in the American Civil War. Today, the military collection includes uniforms for World Wars I and II, Korea and Vietnam. Both men's and women's uniforms are included, and if you visited Crane-Phillips House Museum recently you would see a World War I woman's Ambulance driver uniform. She is displayed alongside a skirt and blouse that would have been worn by her contemporary who could have been a member of the regular work force. They share a similar style, yet served different purposes.



Figure 5: These two garments illustrate the rapid change in women's fashions after the World War. The tightly corseted, long length evening dress gave way in a mere 10 years to a looser and shorter silhouette.

The costumes are cataloged and stored in a manner to preserve them as historical artifacts. We recently had air conditioning installed upstairs, and this helps to keep the temperature controlled and

create a proper environment for the collection. Many of our objects are stored in acid free, archival boxes, others are on padded hangars hidden from light. Some pieces are in need of conservation, which is all done by hand, and therefore is very time consuming. We adhere to museum guidelines for collections of costumes and textiles, and the costumes are never, ever worn. They are considered “costumes” in the historical sense, not as dress-up costumes.

Please come by the museum in the Fall when new mannequins will be on display.



Figure 6: Uniforms of a female Ambulance Corps Driver, World War I. Women's skirt and blouse c. 1914

Note: Gail Alterman is the Curator of the Cranford Historical Society Collections