

# Defining the Work Dress: Clothing for Active Impressions

In reenactor parlance, “work dress” is a term used to denote a workaday dress, typically cotton and washable, used for impressions that actually may create sweat during the course of the day. Usually the dress is worn without hoops, and many people consider it a staple of the lower-class wardrobe.

There’s just one problem: the term “work dress” doesn’t actually appear in period sources. (“Work dress” is, however, a vast improvement over the reenactorism “camp dress”—a garment term that absolutely did not exist in the period, and which today often refers to a “sutler row special” of calico blouse and drawstring skirt.)

There is one rather interesting “Women’s Working Costume” illustrated in Godey’s in the later 1850s; this shows a minimally fitted bodice with a short double skirt (one layer turned up and pinned in place), and a two-piece sleeve, the lower part of which detaches for particularly grimy or wet tasks. It does bear a good deal of resemblance to the clothing worn by field workers in the 1830s and 1840s in Great Britain (and seen somewhat in this country as well), but doesn’t look a great deal like the average “work dress” worn by reenactors today.

The living historese term “work dress” most often refers to a simple dress used for active work in a working class or lower class setting. (I prefer *wash dress* for cottons, and just plain old *dress* for a generic term, though *active impressions dress* works for discussion.)

A dress for working needs to be easy to care for, sturdy, and suited to the tasks at hand. These may not be terribly fashionable things, though they do follow the overall fashion silhouette to a large degree, with dropped shoulders (though not always dropped a lot), some light fitting through the waist, and full skirts. An active impression dress is likely cotton or wool, or a combination of the two. Cotton launders easily, and wool doesn’t require frequent laundering, so both are well suited to work.

Consider colors and patterns: solid fabrics show spotting and grime more easily, while these same besmirchments are lost in the distracting pattern of a plaid or print dress.

In cottons, prints and plaids are readily available (in the period) cheaply—at least to begin the war years—and so are readily had for hardworking, sometimes short-lived clothing.

While wool dresses are sometimes found in perfectly solid fabric, both wool and cotton are frequently seen made up in prints and plaids for active use dresses. (Cottons are not often stable enough in dye to make an entire dress of solid-color fabric; they fade unevenly. Wool is not so prone to this, however.)

A dress intended for actual physical work will often have a gathered-to-fit or pleated-to-fit bodice, for a bit more wearing ease; the lining may or may not be darted. Many have a waistband, with the skirts set directly to the bottom of the band. Coat sleeves will be popular, as they are easy to push up on the arm; bishop sleeves are easily rolled up if the cuff opens, or pushed up if they have a closed cuff. A jewel neckline is quite common.

Often the dress is worn with a neckerchief in place of a collar during work. This kerchief can be folded and knotted around the neck, with the fabric tucked beneath the neckline to absorb sweat and grime, and is easily removed and rinsed, used as an impromptu wash cloth, and easily laundered as needed. White is common, as most prints will fade quickly when used as a neckerchief.

Working dresses in this style will often be hemmed much shorter than the sort of dress one would wear with a hoop; the top of the foot, or even just at the ankle (or a finger or two above it), makes the wearer more mobile. Worn with a corded petticoat to give support and prevent the skirts wrapping round the legs, and one or two regular petticoats to soften the lines, this shorter length is very comfortable in working settings.

## Whose “Work Dress” Is It?

Depending on the tasks at hand, a dress for working wear needs to be easy to care for, sturdy, and suited for the activity. However, there is a wide range of activity in which an historic woman might engage—no one garment will cover it all. The working attire of each class is going to be different. In fact, one class’s working dress may be another’s best dress! Consider:

**Mrs. Marcham**, a woman of high society, has a simple wool dress without much trim, worn with a modest hoop and a covering apron, to wear when she directs the dusting. This is the most active work she does, aside from hand-washing her most valuable china cups (in the which case, she calls for a very covering apron along with the basin of hot water and towels, and does not otherwise change her clothing), and working in the occasional charity stall at a fund raiser (in the which case she wears something fashionable--ornamented or patriotic, as need may be--usually in silk.)

She regularly gifts her personal servant with her past-fashion dresses; the personal servant (a quiet French girl) either remakes them for herself, or sells them to a second hand clothing dealer.

Her immigrant house servant, **Gretta**, wears a similar basic black wool dress (over petticoats, as Mistress won’t allow hoops on servants) nearly every day, and has a pretty second-hand silk and hoops reserved for Sundays. She is expected to wear a fresh collar and cuffs every day in service, and takes some pride in her accessories always being very white and well-starched, though it does take some doing to get them that way during her odd moments of free time.

When Gretta needs to do some heavy work of her own (perhaps back in the tenement, scrubbing with her mother) she wears either an old wool dress, or an old cotton dress--she finds the wool works better when scrubbing, as it doesn’t get so chilly when wet through.

The wife of the Marcham's minister, **Mrs. Reverend Mitchell**, has a good black silk for Sundays, and another in a pretty deep blue for less solemn occasions; both are trimmed conservatively, so as not to be seen as prideful by the congregation.

For everyday, however, she has wools and cottons, and likely a very plain wool or cotton dress, worn without hoops, in case she is called in for charity visits to the poor areas of the ministry.

She has a girl who comes in for the heavy cleaning of the house, and may or may not work along side her. Her everyday dresses may rotate into "charity visit & heavy housecleaning" work-type dresses, or they may be worn as everyday dresses until they fail entirely, so as not to appear a spendthrift.

**Mrs. Graham**, a struggling farmer's wife in a rural part of the state, owns predominantly dresses she can labor in—in fields, with livestock, hauling water, scrubbing floors, and the like. Cottons that can be easily washed, wools that don't need it often--these are the staple of her wardrobe.

For the occasional party or Sundays, she may have a nice cotton or wool, or a made-over silk (or even a silk originally made for her!)... when these dresses pass out of fashion too far, and cannot be updated, they will not likely be rotated into a "working" dress, but may be disassembled for another use, or sold or traded to a used clothing dealer passing through.

**Janet Ringer** is a 40 year old single woman who has decided to give her services as a nurse in the convalescent hospital. As part of Dorothea Dix's nursing corps, she is required to wear a plain, sturdy dress of black, brown, or another sober color suited to the grime and gore of hospital life. It is cut plainly, with no trim, and is hemmed for convenient movement.

No hoops are allowed in the wards, as quarters are cramped, so a corded petticoat keeps her skirts from tangling around her legs without a lot of unwieldy bulk. She often uses a white collar, but just as frequently uses a neckerchief, as

it is a bit easier to keep tidy, tidiness being a chief sign of upright morality.

Her aprons are a very useful wardrobe item, and she likes to keep them as clean as possible, too. While her clothing is similar to that of other nurses, and not designed to flatter, it is practical and sturdy, well-suited to the rigors of life in the wards.

In the center of Mrs. Marcham's city is a tenement. **Abby Cook** lives in a rented room when she can, and on the streets when she cannot afford the room. She owns the clothes she stands up in, and wears them daily and nightly, whether engaged in work, seeking employment or entertainment, or relaxing.

Third-hand wools from the charity mission box suit her just fine, though they are tatty around the hem, and her dress has a good-sized rent across the shoulder that's never been repaired properly. Still, her normal employment of picking through the refuse of the streets doesn't call for things particularly neat or tidy, and the tavern owner doesn't check for petticoat before selling her a pint.

#### **What's the Point?**

The point being, of course, that a dress worn by a working class woman might never enter the closets of an upper or upper middle class woman, while the "grunge dress" of the upper classes are used as best by some of the lower! Consider carefully your proposed impression, and suit your "working clothes" to your class and station.

It's important to keep in mind that we like to "name" their dresses more than they did. We'll talk of day, evening, wash, etc sorts of dresses, while they'll mention "my blue silk" or "my new summer dress is a pretty plaid, and very light."

They might even detail so far as to write, "Mother made me wear her hideous old wool dress to do the laundry--I nearly died when the Mansworth boys came by! I wanted to crawl into the laundry pot and boil myself to bits, being caught in a dreadful, out-moded rag like that! Skirts limp and medieval, just hanging there-- And my hair in a kerchief! I may never

live down the mortification. Thank Heaven Mrs. Mansworth was not with them."

It is not realistic to expect period correspondents to use our modern terminology to describe their dresses—or any terminology at all, for that matter! You may not find the term "work dress" in a period diary, but you may find notes on what garments were worn during different working activities; these are your clues to the actual "working dress" of a particular woman.

Consider your context when deciding what clothing to wear.

- **Who are you?**
- **Where and when are you?**
- **What will you be doing?**
- **Why?**

The "working dress" of Mrs. Marcham will not be the same as Mrs. Graham—yet both are for working.

### ***What work will you do?***