

# Costume Tips GIRLS

## Mid 18th century clothing: basics for beginners

### How to choose and assemble a basic clothing kit for women

I will focus on the mid-18th century, common, “working class” or “Goodwife” woman’s attire. I will give you this information with the consideration that we are in a French occupied fort. I will try to give you the period correct description and how it was created, then give you an “acceptable” modern equivalent.

#### Essential, basic clothing items are:

Chemise, Petticoat preferably 2+, Some sort of sleeved top, Cap and Other Accessories to add onto the basic 4

**The Chemise-** The chemise (French) or the shift (English) was usually made of white linen. Less commonly found in Cotton or hemp fabrics. This was an all purpose garment and a woman would have had several of them. This garment goes on first under all layers of clothing next to the skin. The sleeves were elbow length or longer, quite full and fitted to a narrow band at the elbow or a simple drawstring casing. The length is mid calf or just above. The neck opening is fitted to the gown neckline and does NOT fall off the shoulders easily. There might be a narrow drawstring casing around the neckline. These garments can be tailored to the individual, but usually come in youth and adult. White cotton muslin can be used, you will need about 3-1/2 to 4 yards fabric.

*Noted differences in design: a chemise for the nursing mother or wet nurse at times had a small slit at center front to ease nursing. Fancy/decorated chemises that have lace or ruffles at neckline or cuffs were for the rich. They would have been applied to the same basic chemise after it’s creation, and removed for laundering.*

**Petticoats-** Petticoats (English) or Jupe (French) are the skirts of the 18th century woman. These have a full skirt (approximately 120” wide), gathered to fit a waistband of fabric tape. These are tied front and back, or would the petticoat could have a drawstring waistband. Usually 2 or more are layered on for warmth. French women were noted for having shorter skirts than their English counterparts. Skirt length is around the mid calf. The shorter skirt offers ease in labor and movement and helps keep the skirts cleaner. Who wants to trip on their skirts while carrying a heavy load or baby? Also worn short to show off pretty clocked stockings and shoes.

Fabric choices for skirts were commonly of wool, linen and silk or blends there of. Less common is cotton and hemp. Solid colors predominated. Vertical stripes are noted of the women in New France. I recommend that prints be used only when matching your top garment. Skirts are constructed with selvage edges on the sides. Raw edges were hemmed narrowly at bottom.

Quilted petticoats were seen by all classes, the wealthier the person, the more luxurious the fabrics and trims.

**The Sleeved Gown, Jacket or Bedgown-** Even the poorest sort of women were known to have at least one gown for finer wear. See and research published period runaway articles for had on/took with items.

Gowns are fitted garments consisting of an upper bodice section and lower skirt section reaching low calf to floor length. They have set in sleeves and often have cuffs. They are worn over stays. Two basic gown styles for our period are the “Sack” gown. ( “sacque” or “robe á la Française”) It is distinguished by the full, loose pleats falling from the back and shoulders of the gown to the floor or hem of the garment. Shorter mid-thigh length versions of this gown are known as the “pet-en-l’air”, or “short sack”. The bodice of this gown is fitted by the inner lining that is laced close and tight to the body.

The other style is the so-called “English” gown (“robe a l’angaise”). Has a fitted back done in 2 different methods: 1) by stitched down pleats in the center back section that flows in one long piece into the skirt (“en fourreau”), or 2) by separately cut pieces that are seamed to the skirt. The en fourreau style is first half to 3rd quarter and the pieced method comes in to fashion in the 1770’s.

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*Styling details: Robings that look like turned back lapels on a gown front are seen on the majority of gowns up to mid century (1750's and 1760's). They pin or lace over a "stomacher" that concealed the stays beneath. The style trend after mid century is the front and side pieces are being stitched together, resulting in a smoother, tighter fitting front.*

Jackets are fitted, sleeved garments of widely varying styles. They nearly always have set in sleeves. Sometimes they have cuffs. Jackets generally have skirts that vary in length from hip high to much lower, but not as low as a full gown. A good stopping point is below hip, above knee. Ladies of New France were noted to have worn a "mantelet" also known as: a woman's waistcoat, fitted bodice, juste. It is a woman's garment; it has sleeves, occasionally with cuffs. It closes in front with hooks and eyes or with lacing in front or in back. If you have seen the painting "the Chocolate Girl" The jacket style shown is what I am describing. Other jacket styles are caraco, cassaquin, and Riding habits.

Bedgowns or shortgowns are unfitted or loose fitted (via stitched down back pleating) garments that are open at the center front. They are t-shaped and have large roomy sleeves that are cut in one piece with the body of the garment. These garments are undress or work wear. Undress does not necessarily mean "at-home" It means anything less than a formal occasion. Common women might have worn these all the time. This garment is very utilitarian and comfortable. I have grouped the style shortgown in this area. Some evidence shows that the shortgown is peculiar to the mid-Atlantic region, perhaps even to CT or PA.

Choose your fabrics carefully. Heavier weight cotton can be used in place of linen, unless you can get good linen. Silk blends and wool blends can be used. Acceptable period prints are hard to find unless you know what you are looking for. Stick with solids, or vertical stripes until you are more comfortable with textiles of the time. Gowns take about 8-10 yards of fabric, Jackets and bedgowns around 4 yards.

*If you don't have stays or do not want to wear them, I recommend that you wear a less fitted bedgown or jacket. It is less obvious that you are not wearing stays with these choices.*

**Caps-** A peasant in France or a habitante in New France always covered her hair with some kind of a cap. It was the rule based on religious customs. There were many possible head-dress. And styles were changing constantly. The basic Cap was of white linen, had a larger piece of cloth called the crown, and was pleated to a band or brim. Some had decoration of ruffles, ribbon or lace added. White muslin is an acceptable substitute. Lappet caps were noted among the woman of New France, along with a style of turban noted as being a square of blue check cloth wrapped around the head then tied afore with the two square ends hanging in back. More research is needed on this item, how it is worn, and by whom.

**Other Accessories-** Items to add to the basic 4 as interest and money allow: Kerchief, Apron, pockets, stays, cloak, stockings and shoes. Shoes should be black or brown leather with a low heel, closed toe and preferably a buckle type closure. Heeled "mules" are acceptable. Wooden shoes or "clogs" could be worn. Aprons can be white if you are portraying a better sort. Wool in a color is better for work., especially if around a fire. Pockets are necessary if you are going to carry anything personal, not period correct. Like a cell phone, modern watches wallet, etc. Stays are expensive, for good reason. If you are serious about your hobby, invest in a well-made set from someone you know, or have good references for. Ill-fitting stays are not worth any price. Stockings are thigh high and are gartered below the knee.