

PANTS ON WOMEN

Part 3: HISTORY OF WOMEN WEARING PANTS IN OUR COUNTRY

This article involves a piece of over-looked American history, namely, history of the women's rights movement. Surprisingly to many, the issue of women wearing pants was more of a POLITICAL issue than it was a SPIRITUAL one.

Our country's European forefathers brought a type of gender system over here which originated in the Middle Ages while Europe was ruled by the Catholic Church. Laws based upon the inferiority of women were enacted in America. It was not until the Victorian Era that women became empowered to throw off the symbolism of male (*sinful, abusive*) authority associated with pants, as the quest for equal legal rights with men became a heated political issue.

THE VICTORIAN ERA AND WOMEN

By the Victorian Era the definition of "femininity" had taken on a much exaggerated meaning, and dress distinguished gender in exaggerated ways.ⁱ All Victorian women were expected to be weak and helpless, a fragile delicate flower, incapable of making decisions, and ignorant of intellectual opinion. Advertisements and illustrations from popular literature promoted the ideal of the delicate and domestic woman contained within her fashionable **corseted dress**.ⁱⁱ



Beginning in the 1850's women stuffed their flesh into steel and whaleboned, tightly-laced **corsets** that produced an exceptionally thin waistline – 15" at times – offset by a voluminous hoopskirt. Adding layers of petticoats made a woman's trousseau weigh between 10 and 20 pounds – up to 30 pounds in winter. Most women in 1850 often wore up to 14 pounds of undergarments. Every layer made their movements more and more restricted. In the minds of many, a woman's status was linked to her dress. A letter to the *Sibyl* in 1863 makes the connection:

"Everywhere woman is considered to be, and described as, the inferior of man. Society is based upon this as on a fundamental position. The Church proceeds...on this ground, and the State places her lower than either the Church or common society. ...As a creature holding a position of inferiority, it is necessary that she should be symbolized as such. Her dress is that symbol..."ⁱⁱⁱ

The Victorian Era (1837-1901) was marked with progress. President Thomas Jefferson opened the century on horseback; President William McKinley closed it riding in an automobile. By 1900 the railway, the typewriter, telephones, the post, the camera, the sewing machine, artificial rayon fibres, and the bicycle became normal for many. For some gas, water, electricity, and even the motor car were already in use. New inventions and how to use them led to new thinking, and women of all classes felt the dynamic atmosphere of change as much as men. The tremendous changes – political, social, economic and cultural – that marked the 19th cen. affected DRESS REFORM.^{iv}

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Reform was in the air as intellectual female thinkers began to state their case. By the middle of the 19th cen., women (*feminists*) whose experience with the **abolitionist movement** led them to believe that all members of society should be treated equally. Victorian women were expected to marry and have children. Marriage, though, did not provide a shelter from the **harsh inequalities of the law**. A widow could be evicted from her home after her husband's death, even if it had been purchased through HER wages, labor, or family's wealth. Upon marriage, her property was forfeited to her husband, and she became his **chattel** [*tangible property*]. If a woman divorced or her husband died, she could not legally retain guardianship of her own children. A divorced woman had no right to see her children and had no chance of acceptance in society again. Property laws varied from state to state. In 1849, for instance, the Tennessee Legislature decided that women could not own property because they did not have souls.^v Since laws denied them the vote women who did own property believed – like the founders of the country – that they were being taxed without representation.

Other factors contributed to the **oppression of women**. Because they had very limited educational opportunities, women did not have access to high-paying or skilled jobs, and those who did work did not have the right to their OWN wages.

It was late in the century, 1887, that the Married Woman's Property Act was passed giving a woman the right to own property.

In 1848 Elizabeth Cady Stanton (wife of a U.S. senator) led the call to suffrage, joined by Susan B. Anthony. Among all the issues: property rights, divorce, employment, racial discrimination, education, DRESS REFORM was another hotly debated issue throughout the last half of the 19th cen.^{vi}

An important and over-looked fact to mention is that the women's rights movement went hand-in-hand with the movement to abolish slavery. Advocates for women's rights and the abolishing of slavery drew a perfect parallel between men owning slaves and men owning wives as **chattel**. Both rested upon the same legalities, and both were protected by American law.

THE "BLOOMER" COSTUME

Arguments for dress reform stressed the need for **unrestricted movement** which would allow women greater freedom – literally and figuratively – in the public sphere. Unhampered by long, full skirts, women – theoretically – could engage in any employment.^{vii}

Elizabeth Smith Miller was the cousin of Stanton and advocate of dress reform. Her father was a member of the U.S. Congress, and her family's home was a station in the Underground Railroad. Mrs. Miller contrived an outfit that consisted of a short skirt with **TURKISH pantaloons** underneath. Miller displayed her new outfit to Stanton who immediately adopted it. In this outfit Stanton visited Amelia Bloomer who began to wear the costume and promote it enthusiastically in her magazine. Mrs. Bloomer, who attended the Women's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls, N Y., in 1848, began publishing her views on social issues in her own bi-weekly publication, *The Lily*, in 1849. The paper spoke on many issues such as dress reform and the need for enfranchisement for women. The **TURKISH TROUSERS** became known as "bloomers" after Amelia.



Women all over the country began to wear the new costume soon after Bloomer's article in *The Lily* was reprinted nationally in 1851. It was worn by members of the National Dress Reform Society and most of the leaders in the women's rights movement. The same women who adopted the new dress were also advocates of the vote for women. The "Bloomer" or "Reform costume" was meant to liberate women from an inferior position in society by freeing them from the confined lifestyle necessitated by conventional dress.^{viii}

The outfit was not completely new when it was introduced by Bloomer, neither was it new to Miller. Patients in health retreats, some female workers in Europe, etc. wore a version of the “Bloomer Costume” earlier than 1851. With the erection of the first cotton mills in the 1820’s white women left their farms to work in factories in order to supplement the family income. In 1860 this one industry employed more women than men. Some experimentation with the reform outfit introduced by Bloomer occurred in the mills early on.^{ix}

According to authors Catherine Smith and Cynthia Greig, of *Women in Pants*, there have always been women who wore pants. They were worn by women mountain climbers, women who played baseball, or worked in fields. Women working the ranches of the 19th century American West also wore trousers for riding, and in the early 20th century aviatrixes and other working women often wore trousers.^x

Intelligent American women were informed about **DIVERSE CULTURES** through traveling, lectures, books, newspapers, and the reports of friends who went abroad. Western travelers to the East showed a great deal of fascination with Eastern clothing and often affected “Oriental” dress while staying in the Middle East. Lady Mary Wortley Montague, who lived in the Middle East while her husband served as an ambassador, wrote in 1717 of the freedom she enjoyed when wearing her **pantaloon**s. In a letter to her sister, Montague insisted “the first part of my dress is a pair of drawers, very full, that reach to my shoes, and conceal the legs more modestly than your petticoats.” **Dress reformers drew inspiration from clothing worn by non-Western women. The pantaloons Miller introduced were worn by the Ottoman Turks, who copied them from Persia.**

A misconception that has persisted into the present is that dress reformers looked solely to men’s clothing as the inspiration for their reform garb – observers considered reform dress “a travesty of male attire.” The intentions of dress reformers was not to blur distinctions between the sexes. Trousers represented physical freedom, and some women imagined freedom from societal restraints as well. Their arguments stressed that there was nothing inherently male about trousers, and that the garment **COULD BE ADAPTED AND MADE FEMININE**. Dress reformers did **NOT** copy men’s wear but simply **BORROWED FROM ANOTHER CULTURE where pants were not a strictly male garment.**

Costume historian, Stella Mary Newton, suggests that the number of “popular engravings of melting beauties in **TURKISH** trousers that followed the cult of Byron and the French conquest of Algeria influenced the *feminists’* costume design.” [This Western interpretation of Middle Eastern female attire, pictured right, has the same basic silhouette of the U.S. pantaloons reform outfit. From *Graham’s Illustrated Magazine* 53, August, 1858.] The resulting look was not one normal men would want to copy. **TURKISH TROUSERS** were different, exotic, pretty, and offered freedom of movement. But, at the same time made a **political statement**. Long skirts symbolized women’s “degradation” in society. But, despite the “femininity” of the costume, dress reform critics denounced it as “masculine.” No matter how “soft” the design, there were those who believed bifurcated garments belonged exclusively to men. **IN OUR CULTURE** the person who ostensibly had the upper hand, esp in a marriage, wore the pantaloons. Bifurcation and lack of ornamentation was associated with **MASCULINE DOMINANCE** in the public sphere and **MALE SUPERIORITY** in general.^{xi}

This association with bifurcation did NOT exist in the Bible! It was only a part of European/American CULTURES and did NOT exist in OTHER COUNTRIES and OTHER CULTURES!



IN OUR CULTURE the person who ostensibly had the upper hand, esp in a marriage, wore the pantaloons. Bifurcation and lack of ornamentation was associated with **MASCULINE DOMINANCE** in the public sphere and **MALE SUPERIORITY** in general.^{xi}

After the Civil War interest in the “bloomers” waned, and most women returned to their long skirts, because of the amount of attention given to its criticism in the press. But, about the same time the “bloomer” craze was phasing out, the **exercise movement** was just beginning to gain momentum. Schools of gymnastics sprang up, and the most suitable clothing for women was the **TURKISH TROUSER** outfit.^{xii} A year after Bloomer’s death, in 1895, the trousers made a come back.

THE BIFURCATED BICYCLING OUTFIT



The Girl in the Dress, by UPCI author Lori Wagner, p 96, states that the “public responded with outrage (to the “bloomers”) and people dressed pretty much the same until the rebellious Roaring Twenties,” but this is FALSE. The midy-and-bloomer was the **gym suit** worn in high schools and colleges for the next 25 years from 1908, and was not finally abandoned until about 1930!^{xiii} The bicycle phenomenon revived an interest in comfortable clothing for women. Turn-of-the-century variations on the “bloomer” costume gained more acceptance, as women found it more practical and safer than a long skirt for bicycle riding. The bicycling outfit consisted of shorter, full **TURKISH** trousers gathered below the knee and a blouse. The short skirt of the “bloomer costume” of the 1850’s and 1860’s was completely abandoned. When commercially manufactured knickerbockers, bloomers, and pantaloons became available for women many still considered them “male attire.”^{xiv}

Yet, no normal man would have wanted to wear *bouffant* pantaloons or Turkish “harem” pants!

Society feared a woman in pants. Dress reformer, Mary Tillotson, in *Progress versus Fashion*, stated:

“Much of the present antipathy to their use by women probably arose from the rustic adage that wives who persisted in expressing their views, or maintaining some rights, wanted to rule their husband; or as the phrase went, ‘to wear the breeches.’ ...the implied idea that pants are allied to power, is correct, and long, entangling skirts are as plain a type of general lack of power.”

Although Mrs. Tillotson failed to pinpoint the exact historical source of the “rustic adage” linking pants with power, the early dress reformers were intellectual women who did do some “homework.” They tried in various ways to educate the public by referring to historical examples and contemporary accounts of women in **OTHER CULTURES** – Arab, Chinese and Eskimo – who wore bifurcated garments. Some 19th cen. writers believed that women were the **FIRST** to wear trousers; others cited certain **CULTURES** in which **BOTH** men and women wore similar clothing – the Romans, the 10th cen. Anglo-Saxon, and the French during the Reign of Terror. In 1903 Alice Morse Earle wrote:

“With the constant...newspaper jesting which we daily hear and read, that women are striving to capture that article of dress, now held to be so distinctly masculine, it is somewhat amusing to be told by careful students that trousers were first assumed for general wear, not by men, but by women. ...In fact, **trousers had been worn by BOTH men and women of ancient MEDIA around the 4th cen. B.C.**



Chinese immigrant women's traditional dress consisted of bifurcated garments, commonly seen on the streets of San Francisco.^{xv}

Some women wore straight "stove pipe" pants underneath a short skirt, but an infatuation with Turkish "harem" pants lasted throughout the last half of the 19th cen. and into the 20th.

Trousers have been part of the Eastern and Middle-Eastern woman's wardrobe for centuries. A 20th cen. archaeological excavation in northern Mongolia uncovered a woman's coat and pair of billowy trousers gathered at the ankles – similar in design to the *shalvar* (pants) worn by Turkish women – dated to around the 2nd cen. B.C. Arab women most likely adapted the fashion from the Persians who ruled over the Eastern region of Islam.^{xvi}

Henry T. Finck wrote in *The Independent*, in 1907:

"Today the Eskimo women are by no means the only ones who wear the bifurcated garment. **Feminine trousers** survive in many conservative Oriental countries – in Persia, Arabia, Turkey, China, India, Algiers, Tunis: they may even be seen here and there in Europe. Some of the Alpine dairymaids and harvesters of Switzerland and the Tyrol wear trousers, as do the women who toil in the mines of Belgium, and the Russian women engaged in the caviar [sic] business. In Paris one may come across female teamsters, or masons, or other laborers..."

Religious leaders quoted Deuteronomy 22:5 against women wearing pants, and **these same preachers believed the Bible justified slavery, and the inferiority of women was a Biblical principle.** Gerrit Smith, member of the U.S. Congress and father of Elizabeth Miller, an abolitionist and advocate for women's rights, began a church that did not believe in slavery. He countered the beliefs of the general public in his letter to *The Sibyl* in 1857:

"...man and woman have a common nature, a common dignity, and common rights. ...many tell me that the Bible shows it to be otherwise. But perhaps as many tell me that the Bible justifies slavery, and knows one human being as a man, and another as a chattel. ...I never can consent to insult that book...by taking to it any question which common sense forbids me to raise."

In the 19th century, according to law, the sex or the race of a person determined his or her worth. These beliefs were regarded as "Christian" to the general public, and our legal system reflected these "Christian" beliefs.

Our country's first *feminists* are iconoclasts who broke the delicate and fragile mold in which the ideal female image had been made and re-created themselves as autonomous and self-made women. The "New Woman" of the Victorian Era became an icon for a whole generation of women who would increasingly exert their influence beyond the confines of the home and into the world at large.



WW I and WW II called women by the hundreds of thousands into shops and factories to work to relieve the men who had to fight lest civilization be destroyed. "Womanalls" were designed to be safer around machinery as women took employment in munitions factories. Women have proved they are not weaklings.^{xvii}

Of all the arguments presented against women's pants the view that women "took on men's roles" in munitions factories is perhaps the worst but is indicative of the extremism characteristic of their doctrine. Even when the alternative was to see our country come under the totalitarian dictatorship of a

despot and antichrist like Adolph Hitler! A military officer on the Military History T.V. channel said it

was WOMEN who won WW II for us! Women were indispensable in winning the war. No woman who helped bring down Adolph Hitler's Regime was an "abomination" in the sight of God! These women were PATRIOTS, and the contrary view is not even American.

CONCLUSION

In order to straighten out the issue of women's pants we have to go back in U.S. history to the beginning of the women's rights movement. We can learn some important facts from this much overlooked piece of American history:

1. The women's movement was a part of the abolitionist movement. Wives and slaves were legally the same – they were chattel.
2. Pants on men were associated with MALE SUPERIORITY, and long, entangling skirts represented female INFERIORITY **IN OUR CULTURE** -- NOT in the Bible!
3. In the CULTURES of countries where pants were first worn this association with pants did NOT exist, but BOTH sexes wore pants!
4. Our country's first *feminists* were intellectual women who knew perfectly well what they were doing when they introduced women's pants into our country's culture. They broke the cultural mold, and pants are no longer a strictly male garment.

Women's pants were associated with women's rights which were hard and slowly won, and women's pants gradually gained in their popularity. There are actually churches today, the UPCI and similar, who have negative views toward women's rights. Hebrew women of the Bible had more rights than American women had at the founding of our nation! In a DEMOCRACY equal legal rights for women and men are imperative. Although there are always some who go to extremes to prove a point, and the women's movement has not been without exception, all women (including Christians) in America today reap the benefits of the women's movement and are indebted to the first courageous women who took up the fight for women's rights. In countries like modern Iran young girls have had acid thrown in their faces for just trying to go to school. I thank God for my rights and that we are a FREE NATION.

If you have read anything in this article that has enlightened you, please take the time to send me your feedback. I would love to hear from you.

“You fight for a place in business;
You fight for a chance to speak;
You fight for the right to study
With men their Latin and Greek,
You fight for a seat in the street car;
You fight for the Ayes and Noes;
You fight for our reformation;
You even fight for our clothes.”

--TRUTH, March 23, 1895

-
- ⁱ “Pantaloon and Power”, by Gayle V. Fischer, p3
- ⁱⁱ “Women in Pants”, by Catherine Smith & Cynthia Greig
- ⁱⁱⁱ “Women in Pants”, by Catherine Smith & Cynthia Greig
- ^{iv} “Pantaloon and Power”, by Gayle V. Fischer, p1
- ^v John Tagg, “The Burden of Representation” (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 37
- ^{vi} “Women in Pants”, by Catherine Smith & Cynthia Greig
- ^{vii} “Pantaloon and Power”, by Gayle V. Fischer, p52
- ^{viii} “Women in Pants”, by Catherine Smith & Cynthia Greig
- ^{ix} “Women in Pants”, by Catherine Smith & Cynthia Greig
- ^x “History and women”; <http://www.historyandwomen.com/2012/04/woman-and-pants.html>
- ^{xi} “Pantaloon and Power”, by Gayle V. Fischer, pp83, 85, 87, 89, 4
- ^{xii} “Dress in American Culture,” edited by Patricia A. Cunningham & Susan Voso Lab; “The Gym Suit,” by Patricia Campbell Warner; p144, 147
- ^{xiii} “Dress in America Culture,” edited by Patricia A. Cunningham & Susan Voso Lab; “The Gym Suit,” by Patricia Campbell Warner; p164
- ^{xiv} “Women in Pants”, by Catherine Smith & Cynthia Greig
- ^{xv} “Pantaloon and Power”, by Gayle V. Fischer, p141; Judy Yung, “Unbound Voices: A Documentary History of Chinese Women in San Francisco” (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp99, 158; Yung, “Chinese Women in America: A Pictorial History (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1986), p30
- ^{xvi} “Women in Pants”, by Catherine Smith & Cynthia Greig
- ^{xvii} “Women in Pants”, by Catherine Smith & Cynthia Greig