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How To Choose Pioneer Clothing Patterns

Everyone has a different level of interest in wearing historic clothing. If you are excited by the idea, and daydream about using your pioneer clothes over and over, you may be most interested in highly accurate clothing from the skin out. If you'll be dressing as a pioneer only once or twice, and don't really consider yourself the "time travel" sort, you can get a good pioneer flavor without worrying over every historic detail—and without being so obviously modern that you're visually jarring for others.

You can use the free patterns at www.mormontrek.org to create many easy, accurate pieces of a pioneer wardrobe. On the site, you'll find free patterns (which you can photocopy and share!) for things like:

- Aprons & pinafores
- Sunbonnets & caps
- Petticoats & dress skirts
- Shawls
- Neckerchiefs
- Chemises & underdrawers

Copyrights

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Right now, it's not possible to give full dress, trouser, vest, and coat patterns to print at home, so you'll want to choose some commercially published patterns for those items. Please keep in mind that purchased patterns are protected by copyright, just as these free patterns are. It is important to observe the Church's policy on use of copyrighted patterns, as well as the copyright restrictions from each publisher. In general, for any of the patterns listed below, plan for each family to buy their own patterns. Making photocopies or tracings of the patterns listed below, or copying the instructions or illustrations, violates US copyright law, even if you are not selling the copies.

General Notes

With any pattern you use (historical or modern costume), plan to make up a test version of the basic pieces in scrap cloth. Every body is unique; you'll have small changes to make in order to get a comfortable fit that looks like real clothing, rather than a stage costume. Changes to bodice and hem length, sleeve details, precise dart placements, and neckline curves are very common places to alter any pattern.

If you want to use your dress more than once or twice, and are still growing taller, plan growth tucks into your skirt length (add 2" of length for every 1" finished tuck.) With growth tucks, you'll be able to let out your skirts and petticoats very easily as you get taller, without remaking anything. The tucks are also rather pretty, and a common way to embellish an everyday dress.

Historically Accurate

For the most historically-accurate feel, you'll be happiest using documented, researched historic patterns from small publishers. Small publishers tend to keep their pattern line stable; you'll find the same styles available ten years from now. You'll be buying from living-history merchants, or on-line in most cases, so plan a cushion of a few extra weeks in your projects. Historic pattern lines generally run between \$8 and \$20 each, but they usually include research notes and more detailed instructions than "Big 4" patterns. And, you can often contact the designer personally for help if you get stuck (or, ask Sister Clark for help on the Trek Tech support forum.)

These patterns will use historic sewing techniques, and usually are designed from original garments from the era. (And if you need some help on the sewing end of things, visit the free Trek Tech support forum on the website.) Remember, if you're sewing for a young woman, shorten the hems to youthful lengths (lower calf to within a hand-span above the ankle bones.)

Past Patterns (www.pastpatterns.com)

- 001: 1820s-1840s Corded Stay
- 003: 1830-1836 Gown
- 708: 1840s Corset
- 801: Fan Front Bodice, 1840s
- 803: Everyday Round Dress, 1840s/1850s
- 806: 1830s Dress
- 808: Sacque and Petticoat (skirt)
- 006: Men's Underdrawers
- 007: Mid-19th Century Shirts
- 008: 1830s-1840s Small Fall Trouser
- 009: Summer Paletot (suit coat)
- 014, 015: Summer Trousers
- 018 Waistcoat (vest)

Homespun Patterns (www.jamescountry.com)

- W001: Work Dress
- M004: Frock Coat

Patterns of History (www.jamescountry.com)

- 1840 Day Dress

Period Impressions (www.jamescountry.com)

- 440: 1830 Day Dress & Pelerine
- 445: 1837 Day Dress
- 447: 1845 Day Dress
- 448: 1859 Modified Fan Front Dress
- 702: 1858 Frock Coat

Historic Moments (adult & teen dressmaking books, infant and children's patterns. www.thesewingacademy.com)

If you need a pattern fast, turn to page 2!

At the Local Fabric Store

These are patterns you can find at the local stores. While not historically accurate, they *can* be used for pioneer clothing with some modifications (changing zippers to buttons or hooks, for instance, using bias bindings instead of facing pieces, and skipping any modern serger or zig-zag finish instructions.) Buy them on the \$2 pattern sales—they don't include enough detail to be worth more than that.

I've included only those patterns that actually bear a resemblance (both in the finished garment, and in the basic lines) to actual historic clothing suited to the pioneer trek (in other words, hardworking historic clothes, not "high fashion."). Stick to the list below to avoid being a visually modern "jolt" on the trek. Pattern numbers and availability are accurate as of Spring 2006.

I'm not keen on any of the little girl's "historic" or "pioneer" dress patterns put out by these companies. If your young woman is not yet into adult sizes, you'll get a better result using any of the "Design Your Dress" type everyday patterns, leaving off any collars, and choosing back-buttoning styles with full gathered skirts and to-the-waist bodices. Remember, if you're under 18, shorten the skirts of any pattern to "youth" hem lengths. Use the instructions in the free pattern "How to Make Pioneer Petticoats" to measure, shorten, and balance your skirts.

Simplicity

Simplicity has one set of patterns that actually use historic shapes and many historic techniques: the Martha McCain Fashion Historian series. Not all work for "everyday" trail-worthy clothing, however—you won't need an 1860s ballgown on the trail! These do make the grade:

- S4551: Three sleeve options and a dress that works well for "generic mid-19th century" cotton dresses. Hem appropriately shorter for teen girls.
- S5726: Corset and Chemise only.
- S7215: Another style for Corset and Chemise.
- S7212: View B for working wear, hemmed appropriately shorter as needed.

For a full review of the patterns above, visit the Clothing Articles section at www.thesewingacademy.org.

The Martha McCain Fashion Historian men's patterns seem to be out of print—if you can find this specific line, it can be used for boy's and men's clothing (all except a coat). Simplicity does have an out-of-print buying option on their site; search for #5023, 5033, 5035, 5037.

McCalls

- M4548: Dress only. Eliminate growth tucks if you're over 16; if under 16/17, hem to an appropriate length (lower-calf to a handspan above the ankle). Finish the neckline with a self-fabric bias binding (skip the collar.) Add another skirt panel; 85" is far too narrow for the pioneer era, unless you're four years old.
- M3669: Dress only. Skirt widths are more realistic, but use the XL skirt for all adult and teen dresses, and hem girl's and teen's dresses to an appropriately shorter length; women's dresses to the ankle or top of foot.

Butterick

Only a very few Butterick designs are helpful; sadly, the "Making History" line is one of the worst for any accuracy level in women's or girl's clothing.

- B4254: Corsets: the shaped corset can give basic mid-century support. Careful fitting adjustments are vital; when laced snugly, there should be an even 2" gap at the center back.
- B3648: Men's Tail Coat & Trousers. This does not use historic shapes or techniques, but the "tailcoat" look is a style inspired by men's fashions in the 1830s.
- B6816: View B dress only, with no collar or sleeve ruffle, zipper changed to buttons. Hood with deep curtain is reminiscent of an accurate hood for cold-weather wear mid-century.

Fabrics

Use only 100% cotton, wool, silk or linen (silk will be very rare!) for your pioneer clothing. Man-made fibers pose a safety and fire hazard, and should not be used.

Your most economical choice is usually cotton. Many fabric stores carry documented historic printed cottons in the quilting section, as well as "homespun" woven plaids and checks—these are well suited to historic clothing use. (Solid cotton colors don't wear well, and were not commonly used for dresses in the period.) You can often find these in the \$1 to \$3 per yard range. An average woman's dress will take 6 yards with careful cutting; a teen's dress can be made with 4-6 yards printed cotton. Men's shirts will use 2-3 yards of cloth; trousers can generally be made with under 2½ yards of duck (a mid-weight cotton canvas) or other "bottom weight" cotton.

Solid color wools, as well as wool plaids and checks (and tweeds for men), are common. Wool does not need to be heavy to be useful; look for wools in the "tropical" or "summer" weight categories, as they make for lighter, low-bulk clothing similar in weight to the originals. Wool will be harder to find in chain fabric stores; check the MormonTrek website Resource section for links to on-line shops that carry good quality, historically-appropriate wools

You will not need lace or other "fine" trimmings for trail clothing. You may find places to wear finer things (such as historic villages or fine events), but the trek was not a place for delicate items that require special care. If it can't withstand dust storms, sage brush, mud, wind, and sun with the chance of laundry every few weeks, it doesn't belong in an emigrant's trail wardrobe!

With steady sewing sessions, and some patience, you can create a highly accurate, comfortable, functional historic wardrobe!

About the Author

Elizabeth Stewart Clark is a 19th century dressmaking instructor and historic pattern designer. A member of the LDS Church, she is always interested in helping others more fully appreciate our pioneer heritage. Find more patterns, articles, and books related to living history and the 19th century at

www.elizabethstewartclark.com