

COSTUME IN DETAIL

The MHS has an astounding collection of historic costumes ranging from the early 1700s to the 1960s. This online publication explores pieces from the Society's collection. Each issue spotlights a different garment.

Issue 14 | Chloe Roxanna Coe's Wedding Ensemble | 1866

About:

The MHS

The Madison Historical Society, a nonprofit organization founded in 1917, preserves, collects, interprets, and promotes the history and heritage of Madison for present and future generations.

About:

The author

Clare Barnett is an intern at the Madison Historical Society. She focuses her work on the reorganization and cataloging of the costume collection housed at the Allis-Bushnell House Museum. She is particularly interested in historical dressmaking processes.

Ensemble, November 1866, silk, lace, and cotton.

Accession # 2023.030.001

Left: Back detail. Above right: Back detail. Below right: Skirt detail.

Photos by Bob Gundersen.



Looking Forward

When I am researching the costumes featured in "Costume in Detail," an issue I often confront is lack of provenance. Without this key information about its ownership, a garment is stripped of its history and some of its power. Outdated museum protocols or a donor's lax approach to collecting provenance is often the source of this challenge. Recently, however, donors and collectors have begun to focus more attention on recording these important details.

This wedding ensemble, originally belonging to Chloe Roxanna Coe, is a triumph in the Madison Historical Society's latest efforts to secure the provenance of items in its collection. It shows that knowledge of an object's history is essential to our understanding of it.



Worn by Who – and Where?

BACKSTORY | Chloe Roxanna Coe

Chloe Roxanna Coe (1821-1904) wore this ensemble at her wedding to John Morrison Meigs (1813-1896) in November, 1866. Before, John was a widower with several children. Both lived in Madison, Connecticut. Roxanna lived in town with her father, William Coe, next door to her brother Elias. While unmarried, she was employed as a housekeeper. She possibly worked for her father, for other families, or both.

Roxanna married at age 44, which was very late for the women of her era; in 1870, the median age for a first marriage for women was 23¹. It is likely that Roxanna married in part to support herself after her father's death in 1864, as most women could not financially survive on their own. In marriage, Roxanna continued to do the domestic work in her own household, perhaps with the help of a servant.



MET Costume Institute Fashion Plates, Women 1866 Plate 026.

At the time, Madison was a small town economically dependent on farms, shipyards, and trade enabled by the new railroad. Wealth clustered in ancestral families, to which Roxanna and John belonged. Roxanna's ensemble illustrates this affluence. Above is a fashion plate from *Petit Courrier des Dames*, a magazine that circulated fleeting popular fashions. In its design and accessories, Roxanna's ensemble is remarkably similar to the red gown in the plate. Although Roxanna's skirt is comparably smaller than the one shown above, her Chantilly lace shawl – an expensive commodity – is even larger than the one in the plate.

¹Hacker, J David et al. "The Effect of the Civil War on Southern Marriage Patterns." *The Journal of southern history* vol. 76,1 (2010): 39-70.

Looking Back

Roxanna's dress was made to be versatile. For instance, it could also be worn as a reception or visiting dress, especially since daywear required long sleeves. Diaries of the time² indicate that receiving and going visiting was a common occurrence, making this dress a practical investment.

Fashionable details about the dress include decorative self-fabric buttons down the bodice front, which in fact closes with hooks and eyes. The triangular skirt shape and pleated hem ornament are also contemporary. The innermost double box pleat is pressed downward at the top to create visual interest.



Ensemble, November 1866. Accession # 2023.030.001. Photos by Bob Gundersen.

Another interesting aspect of the garment is its pin-scarring, of which there is a profusion around the center front of the neckline and below the last button. The former indicates the use of a brooch at the neck, and the latter may allude to the use of a belt, and explains why the buttons seem to terminate too soon.

The provenance recording Roxanna's age makes the ensemble unique. Without this information, it would be a typical example of daywear. The dress also proves to us that women's experiences in the past were not monolithic. Their experiences varied, and their garments were unique to the lives of their owners.

² Mary Dwyer McLoughlin, *Diaries of Mary Dwyer McLoughlin*. 1871 – 1872. Madison Historical Society, Collective Access.