

# British Consumer Products in Late Eighteenth Century America

Elizabeth Duncan

## Learning Objectives

- Understand changing attitudes toward British consumer goods in late eighteenth century Harvard/America, through a focus on objects of fashion and personal adornment
- Consider more broadly the importance of material culture in daily life and identity.

## Time

- 15-20 minutes (can be extended)

## Recommended Number of Participants

- Minimum of 6 students

## Materials

- Handouts
  - Mid-Century (2 pages)
  - Pre-Revolution (3 pages)
  - Post-Revolution (3 pages)



- From left to right:
  - 2014.14.815
    - Cufflinks
    - Pewter, gem-shaped cut glass on both faces
    - 1700-1820
  - 2014.14.769
    - Shoe buckle
    - Frame fragment, lead alloy, molded design
    - 1680-1790
  - Wig Curler (Reproduction)
    - 18<sup>th</sup> Century
    - Modeled after original found in colonial Williamsburg

## Procedure

- Lay out objects. Have class walk around and look closely at the objects, trying to guess what they are and noting features such as materials, design, etc. **(1-2 minutes)**
- When everyone is finished looking, go through the objects one by one and get students to decide as a group what each one is and provide their rationale. As each object is discussed (and if projecting equipment is available) project an image of the object so that everyone can see it clearly. When group has come up with an identification for each object, reveal what each one actually is. **(3+ minutes)**
- Ask class to decide as a group where they think these objects were made and what period they are from, and to explain why they think this. Reveal they were made in Britain but were excavated in Harvard Yard, and discuss how American manufacturing was not particularly developed in the eighteenth century (and was more expensive) so most consumer products came from Britain. **(1-2 minutes)**
- Introduce learning objective. Ask students to think about the value of investigating objects of fashion and adornment as opposed to other consumer products. **(2 minutes)**
- Divide class into three groups. Assign each group a time frame: Mid-Century, Pre-Revolution, and Post-Revolution. Provide them with the handouts that apply to their time frame. Using the information provided in the handouts, have each group discuss how they, as Harvard students of that time period, would have viewed these three objects, and whether/with what feelings they would have used/worn them. **(4-5 minutes)**
- Have each group briefly present the attitude during their time frame toward these three objects, sharing examples from the handouts. **(3-4 minutes)**
- Ask students for their reactions to the attitudes toward these objects that existed during these three time frames. Did anything surprise them? *If students are surprised by the popularity of British imports after the revolution and if time permits, this could lead to a discussion of the role of material culture in national identity, both in America as a new nation after the revolution and in the world today.* **(2-3 minutes; can be extended if time permits)**
- Conclude by reinforcing that these objects of fashion and adornment were imbued with very different meanings at different points in the late eighteenth century due to political changes, and that as pieces of fashion and adornment these particular objects came to be both tools of personal expression and political ideology. **(1 minute)**

Object Photograph:  
Cufflinks



Object Photograph:  
Shoe Buckle





Object Photograph:  
Wig Curler  
(Reproduction)





## About a Boy and a Wig Curler

### *Fashion*

Diana DiPaolo Loren  
September 8, 2017

Archaeological small finds can tell us a great deal about how status, gender, and identity are situated in and on the body.

In December 1759, [John Page noted in his diary](#) that after studying his bible in the morning, he traveled to residence of one Mr. Wallen. Page paid Wallen 15 pounds for his first great coat, a new pair of breeches, a pair of knee buckles, and half a cake of soap. From there, he returned to Harvard, to conclude his studies on “an exceedingly cold day.” Page was 21 years old upon purchasing his new coat and in his second year of study at Harvard. He received his AM in 1764 and later became a minister in Danville, New Hampshire. His diary includes bits of intriguing detail about his daily life as a student—the amount he owed to the college butler for his consumption of coffee, tea, and chocolate; medicines used for alleviating his sore throat; his time spent attending lectures; and the nine shillings he paid to a Mr. Merrill for a pair of curling irons for styling his wig.

*How one covers and adorns the body is a powerful statement of political and personal identities.*

Dress was a notable part of Page’s life, as much as it is often notable in our own. We all wear clothes: to survive the environment, for bodily comfort, to distinguish “self” from “other,” for modesty and allurements. Dress is personal, symbolic, and multifaceted; it is tied to taste, emulation, production, and consumption. How one covers and adorns the body is a powerful statement of political and personal identities. Page’s great coat must have been a welcome sight after trudging through the streets on that exceedingly cold day, but it also marked him as a young scholar in Cambridge, where a modest uniform was prescribed by college rules that reflected the institution’s Puritan beginnings.

Loren, Diana DiPaolo. “About a Boy and a Wig Curler.” *Anthropology News*, vol. 58, no. 5, pp. 62–67. [anthrosource-onlinelibrary-wiley-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu](http://anthrosource-onlinelibrary-wiley-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu), doi:[10.1111/AN.604](https://doi.org/10.1111/AN.604).





**W**HEREAS this Province labours under a heavy Debt, incurred in the Course of the late War; and the Inhabitants by this Means must be for some Time subject to very burthensome Taxes: And as our Trade has for some Years been on the decline, and is now particularly under great Embarrasments, and burthened with heavy Impositions, our Medium very scarce, and the Balance of Trade greatly against this Country:

WE therefore the Subscribers, being sensible that it is absolutely necessary, in Order to extricate us out of these embarras'd and distressed Circumstances, to promote Industry, Oeconomy and Manufactures among ourselves, and by this Means prevent the unnecessary Importation of European Commodities, the excessive Use of which threatens the Country with Poverty and Ruin, DO promise and engage, to and with each other, that we will encourage the Use and Consumption of all Articles manufactured in any of the British American Colonies, and more especially in this Province; and that we will not, from and after the 31<sup>st</sup> of December next, purchase any of the following Articles, imported from Abroad.

Loaf Sugar, Cordage, Anchors, Coaches Chaises and Carriages of all Sorts, Horse Furniture, Men and Womens Hatts, Men and Womens Apparel ready-made, Household Furniture, Gloves, Men and Womens Shoes, Sole-Leather, Sheathing and Deck Nails, Gold and Silver and Thread Lace of all Sorts, Gold and Silver Buttons, Wrought Plate of all Sorts, Diamond Stone and Paste Ware, Snuff, Mustard, Clocks and Watches, Silversmiths and Jewellers Ware, Broad Cloths that cost above 10s. per Yard, Muffs Furrs and Tippets, and all Sorts of Millenary Ware, Starch, Women and Childrens Stays, Fire Engines, China Ware, Silk and Cotton Velvets, Gauze, Pewterers hollow Ware, Linseed Oyl, Glue, Lawns, Cambricks, Silks of all kinds for Garments, Malt Liquors and Cheese—And we further agree strictly to adhere to the late Regulation respecting Funerals, and will not use any Gloves but what are Manufactured here, nor procure any new Garments upon such an Occasion, but what is absolutely necessary.

BOSTON, OCTOBER 28, 1767.

John Steel	John Armer	John Sulor
John Hubbard	M <sup>r</sup> Cookson	Rob <sup>t</sup> Whortley
Sam <sup>l</sup> Jantzen	Paul Prevere	John Gray
Richard Bright	J <sup>n</sup> Tymmes	Henry Abby
Jabez Bradbury	Joseph Snelling	Sath <sup>l</sup> Ridgway
John Pulling	John Mackett	Daniel Barker
Will <sup>m</sup> Jasper	<del>_____</del>	Asa Grodner
John McKean	<del>_____</del>	W <sup>m</sup> Hill
W <sup>m</sup> Boyce	Benj <sup>n</sup> Anderson	Caleb Champey
John Boyd	Benjamin Clark	Joseph Bonnet
Jonathan Cary	Edward Procter	Jacob Holland
Andrew Gillespie	Sath <sup>l</sup> Warner	George Bright
Clement Collins	John White	She <sup>l</sup> Bradford
Thos <sup>l</sup> Linnimon	Alex <sup>r</sup> Campbell	Joseph Clark
James Bell	James Lockman	Samuel Gooding
Ozra Collins	Abra <sup>m</sup> Joss	W <sup>m</sup> Bell
Isaac Greenwood	Joseph Beeth	Thomas Sargent
W <sup>m</sup> Machay	Andrew Hall	John Grant
Alex <sup>r</sup> Chamberlain	Stephen Vaz	John L. du
	Moses Bennett	John Golemitth
		William Stone



Excerpt from a letter to the publisher in the Boston-Gazette, Dec. 28, 1767

This Gentleman, and another, who in the B. Gazette of November 2d, signs HENRY FLYNT, advises us to “lay aside our present Cloathing, and Dress” intirely and universally in “the Manufactures of America”. How far this is practicable, at present, we shall leave to the Gentlemen to determine. How far (if practicable) it is prudent, we must take the Liberty to judge ourselves, since we do, or at least ought to know, what our own Circumstances as to the Means of Purchasing are; or in other Words, whether we can afford to let our Garments lay useless, and buy new in their Room. As yet we are inclined to think we cannot evince a more discreet Conduct than to wear our old Cloaths, as long as by good Housewifery we can make them look decent, sparing no Pains to clean and to mend them, and when any are worn out, supply their Place with the Produce of our American Manufactures, altho’ meaner, and at the first dearer than those of foreign Places, reversing that Part of the old Proverb, “Far fetch, is Food for Ladies”.

*The Annotated Newspapers of Harbottle Dorr: The Boston-Gazette, and Country Journal, 28 December 1767 (Includes Supplement).* <http://www.masshist.org/dorr/volume/1/sequence/793>. Accessed 29 June 2018.

Excerpt from “Harvard College on the Eve of the American Revolution” by Sheldon S. Cohen

One reflection of the Stamp Act Crisis was recorded by an undergraduate [at Harvard] on 18 March 1768: “This being the day of the Year the Stamp Act was repealed [Thomas] Colman went about and collected Money and they bought a quantity of Fagots and made a Vast Number of Crackers and Serpents and set them on Fire in the Evening.” The previous autumn Harvard seniors, in protest against the Townshend Duties, voted to abstain from tea drinking and wearing imported British clothing at their commencement. The theses and *Quaestiones* at the 1768 commencement were even printed on paper manufactured in New England. The following year the seniors repeated those actions and also gave notice of their refusal to do further business with John Mein, a bookseller and printer of the *Boston Chronicle* who had opposed nonimportation policies and their advocates. It was also apparently as a result of the Townshend crisis that a militia company was organized at the college in 1769 or 1770. And, on 1 March 1775, the protests of a considerable number of students caused Harvard’s administration to warn against bringing India teas into the Commons.

[...] Yet it would be inaccurate to infer from these reports that political considerations dominated student concerns. Despite their proximity to the center of crucial events, there was apparently no organized participation by Harvard students in episodes such as the Stamp Act riots or the Boston Tea Party. (176-178)

Cohen, Sheldon S. “Harvard College on the Eve of the American Revolution.” *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, vol. 59, 1982, pp. 172–91

Non-importation agreement retrieved from:

*Whereas This Province Labours under a Heavy Debt, Incurred in the Course of the Late War : And the Inhabitants by This Means Must Be for Some Time Subject to Very Burthensome Taxes ... Boston :* [S.n.], 1767. AB7.B6578.767w. Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL.HOUGH:10873406>. Accessed 29 June 2018.

Ac. 1717

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all colours.  
Blankets.  
Crapes.  
Corded Poplins.  
Denmark Lustres.  
Double Camblets.  
Striped and plain Cambletteens.  
Black Lastings, and Sattinetts.  
Durants.  
Tammies.  
Callimancoes.  
Corduroids, of all prices.  
Men's plain black and white silk  
Hose.  
Ladies' fine Cotton, ditto  
Men's fine and coarse Thread and  
Cotton, ditto.  
Plain black Worsted, ditto.  
Patent ribbd and plain, dark and  
light grey, ditto.  
Qualities.  
Coat and Shoe-Binding.  
Black and white Gauzes.  
Black and white Gauze Handker-  
chiefs.  
 $\frac{3}{4}$ ,  $\frac{7}{8}$ , and yard wide black silk  
fring'd, ditto.  
Bandanoes.  
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Cotton Shawls.  
Sattins.  
Modes.  
Lustrings.  
Ell wide Taffaties.  
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Tafte, pearl and plain edg'd, of  
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Mitts.  
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ours.  
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Fancy, Death-head, and other  
Buttons.  
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and prices.  
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Thread Edgings, and Blond Lace  
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White and coloured Ostrich wa-  
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Black waving, and common, dit.  
Ladies' English Russet Shoes, cross  
cut and court Heels.  
Morocco, red and green, ditto.  
Hyson, Souchong, and Bohca  
Teas, of the first quality only.  
Loaf-Sugar.  
Nutmegs. Cinnamon.  
Mace. Cloves.  
Pepper. Allspice. Indico.  
Glas & Yellow Ware, &c. &c.

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Excerpt from *The Politics of Fashion* by Kate Haulman

A letter addressed “To the Working People of Maryland,” penned by Sidney, opined, “I should be sorry . . . if the threads in your garments being somewhat larger might distress such men as you who lately, being poorly clad and directed by a Man so plain that almost all his family wear homespun, rescued your children from the high-dressed armies of Great Britain.”<sup>84</sup> Whereas working people had grown luxurious in the postwar period, great men such as George Washington retained their humble habits, Sidney claimed. Washington’s example was powerful enough to be used by a hatter in an advertisement claiming that the leader, the officers in the Continental army, and most “ladies and gentlemen of consequence in the United States” had patronized him for years.<sup>85</sup> Others, however, were not so convinced of the leader’s sartorial virtue. Although not mentioning him by name, a piece from New York clearly targeted Washington: “When we see a citizen who has frequently exposed his life in the cause of freedom, dressed in the manufactures of foreign nations, have we not reason to suppose that either he does not understand the welfare of his country or that he totally disregards it?” Despite his eloquence in stressing patriotic duty, “almost every article which he wears is repugnant to his words,” the author argued, leveling a charge of hypocrisy at the newly elected president.<sup>86</sup>

Washington responded by donning a suit made of domestic cloth from Connecticut for his inauguration on April 30, 1789, just two weeks after the critique appeared. Newspapers now rejoiced in the hope that “this laudable example in the first and best of men” would make “industry and economy fashionable in the United States.” Yet there was no need to sacrifice elegance, for Washington’s “complete suit of homespun cloathes” was of “so fine a fabric and so handsomely finished that it was universally mistaken for a foreign manufactured superfine cloth.” (213-214)

Haulman, Kate. *The Politics of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century America*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2014.



Portrait of John Adams by John Singleton Copley, 1783



Harvard. *From the Harvard Art Museums' Collections John Adams (1735-1826).* <https://www.harvardartmuseums.org/art/299877>. Accessed 29 June 2018.