FROM BLOOMERS TO FLAPPERS:
THE AMERICAN WOMEN'S DRESS REFORM MOVEMENT, 1840-1920

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of
The Ohio State University

By

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The Ohio State University

1998

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ABSTRACT

When American women attempted to adopt alternative clothing to nineteenth-century fashions, they attracted scathing attention from middle-class American society. Women in trousers were publicly scorned. Past investigations into the subject of nineteenth-century dress reform conclude that the movement failed when reformers, unable to accept the public's ridicule, returned to their long skirts.

In my analysis of the origins, development, and consequences of the U.S. dress reform movement from 1840 to 1920, I assert that dress reform was an evolution rather than a revolution. I argue that dress reform was not an isolated and failed attempt in the mid-nineteenth century, but that there were significant continuities among diverse groups of dress reformers from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. The number of short dress garments, organizations, and individuals discussed in this work demonstrates that dress reform extended beyond the women's rights movement. The movement involved people as diverse as health reformers and water curists, utopian community members and women's rights leaders, farmers and travelers on the overland trail, cyclists, clubwomen, and even flappers. Arguments for health, physical mobility, emancipation, and expense - as well as the persistent opposition denouncing reformers as immodest, immoral, rebellious and mannish - link reformers together across the decades. Sometimes they shared interests with other dress reformers. Other times, their ideas diverged sharply.
By exploring the dress reform movement from the early women's rights critiques into the era of the New Woman, my study expands the history of women's activism and contributes to our understanding of the relationship between social movements and social change. The commitment and innovation of the dress reformers, together with larger social forces, propelled the general public gradually to implement changes in women's dress by 1920.
To my father
who always wanted a doctor in the family

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is a pleasure to thank those who have helped me in the long project of researching and writing this dissertation. My greatest debt is to Leila Rupp, my advisor, who conceptualized the project and guided the research. My dissertation benefited immeasurably from her careful readings of drafts and meaningful suggestions. Leila's friendship and belief in my work kept me going over the years. I am obliged to my committee, Susan Hartmann, Mark Grimsley, and Patricia A. Cunningham, for their useful questions, insightful criticisms, and support. Also, I could not have undertaken this project without the expert help from librarians and archivists at The Ohio State University, The Ohio Historical Society, Boston Public Library, Schlesinger Library, Smith College Library, Cortland County Historical Society, Seneca Falls Historical Society, Historical Society of Middletown, and The George Arents Research Library at Syracuse University. I was fortunate to receive the Graduate School Research Grant from Ohio State University which permitted the opportunity to travel and do research. Finally, thanks to my husband, my mother, and my daughter. Their patience and support during this long process helped to make it all possible.
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PUBLICATIONS


FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: History
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Eliza Farnham came to California in 1849 to look after the farm her husband had left her in Santa Cruz. She migrated from the east with a friend and her two sons. What she found when she arrived was a rough dwelling without doors or windows. Eliza later tells of her endeavor to rebuild her new home:

I commenced my new business in the ordinary long dress, but its extreme inconvenience in displacing all the smaller tools, effacing lines, and flying in the teeth of the saw, induced me, after the second day, to try the suit I had worn at home in gymnastic exercises. It is the same that has since become famous as the Bloomer, though then the name had not been heard of. When I had once put it on, I could never get back into skirts during working hours.¹

Eliza at first was cautious never to be seen in her working clothes, but the comfort she felt soon overrode her embarrassment so that she wore her "bloomers" throughout the day. Eliza and other women who went west learned quickly that wearing trousers while traveling across the prairies and mountains or working in the mining camps or doing the daily outdoor work was more practical than long dresses and petticoats.

Even if only a handful of women took to wearing pants or "bloomers," that some did suggests that there is more to the story of the American Dress Reform movement than the calls for equal rights back east. Women's dress did change from the 1840s to the

1920s. The question is did dress reformers have anything to do with the changes in women's dress in the twentieth century? To answer one must consider who exactly were the reformers. If women adopted bloomers and a long tunic top, were they participants in the dress reform movement? Did their pants make a feminist statement or were they purely an adaptation to social changes? Is there a connection between changes in lifestyle and social movement activism?

I argue that women who donned pants and made public speeches were not the only dress reformers. If they were, then dress reform was an isolated and failed attempt in the mid-nineteenth century. Rather, dress reformers constituted many diverse groups from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century. There were women who adopted reform clothing for practical reasons but did not make public speeches. Likewise, there were women who continued to wear long dresses but took to the podium to argue for changes in women's dress. When women consciously chose to wear something other than fashionable garments, they were, whether they wanted to or not, active participants in the movement. My argument is that dress reform did not die out in the mid-nineteenth century as is generally assumed but that there are significant continuities among diverse groups of dress reformers. Arguments for health, physical mobility, emancipation, and expense - as well as the opposition stating that reformers were immodest, immoral, rebellious and mannish - link reformers together. Some connections are symbolic but important, such as the references to Amelia Bloomer throughout the movement. Simply, Amelia Bloomer and Eliza Farnham had something in common: their rejection of mid-nineteenth-century garments.

Fashionable dress reinforced and communicated the gender role of women as decorative objects. Upper and middle-class women were draped in six to eight heavy petticoats, long, dragging skirts, and tight sleeves. In the 1820s, the comfortable raised "empire" waistline dropped and in order to achieve the effect of an unnaturally narrow
waist, women resorted to tightly laced corsets stiffened with whalebone or steel. Fashion plates began to appear around 1827 in popular publications such as *Godey's Lady's Book* and *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. Most illustrations tended to emphasize elaborate extremes but they provided ideas for seamstresses and dress makers. Technological inventions such as power-driven looms made possible the production of greater quantities of fabrics in varied textures by 1850. The availability of sufficient material permitted the increase in the width and fullness of the skirt which characterized the fashions of the 1850s and 1860s. The plentiful supply of fabrics induced the use of yards and yards of material for fullness, flounces, ruffles, and decorative details.²

In addition, the invention of the sewing machine greatly influenced the making and design of clothing. Factories now made cheaper clothing more quickly. The chief use of the sewing machine from 1850 to 1869 was for the creation of decorative trimming. It was now possible to manipulate fabric and produce intricate stitchery. The amount of trimming greatly increased, and dress designs became even more complicated and elaborate. Decorations were most lavishly used and skirts were made their widest in the early 1860s.³ As one costume historian noted, "there never was a period when women... were more completely covered up."⁴

The introduction of the crinoline in 1856 did relieve many women from the weight of petticoats and outer skirts. The first crinoline consisted of gauze-like fabric stiffened by starch. Later the "cage" petticoat made of steel wires or hoops replaced the fabric crinoline. As the number of petticoats necessary to support the more decorative outer skirt decreased, the width of the skirt increased.⁵ While the crinoline eliminated the number of

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⁵See Norah Waugh, *Corsets and Crinolines* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1981) and
skirts worn and thus decreased the weight of women's garments, reformers did question the advantages of a veritable "cage" of twenty or thirty springs that kept increasing in size by mid-century. "In fact, crinoline of itself is a confession that the style of women's dress is radically wrong, for it is simply an attempt to relieve women of the effects of the wrong - successful so long as it stayed [sic] within the bounds of moderation, but now aggravating the evil it sought to remedy." The image and message was to have less of the woman and more of her clothing. "How vast is the dress and how small is the lady; she is quite put to shame by her own clothes," as one reformer put it.⁶

Gradually, women's bodies were uncovered by the beginning of the twentieth century. The question is whether the changes were due to a social movement or solely to social change. Women's historians have long recognized both the role of dress reform in the early women's rights movement and the relationship of changing styles of dress to women's expanded roles at the turn of the twentieth century and to the new freedoms acquired after the First World War. Images of "bloomers" and "flappers" are pervasive. Was there any connection? We do not know, for there is no comprehensive history of the United States dress reform movement from the early development of alternatives to restrictive Victorian clothing to the radical changes in women's dress in the early twentieth century. It is my assertion that dress reform was an evolution rather than a revolution and that it can only be understood by exploring the whole span of the movement. The roots of reform can be found in the mid-nineteenth century, in the arguments and actions of women's rights leaders, health reformers, women involved in utopian communities, and women crossing the plains as part of the great migration west. But a thorough study must enlarge the scope of the movement to include those women who might not have

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considered themselves participants in a social movement but yet were the moment they put on a pair of pants. Whether to milk a cow or to argue for women's rights, bloomers were an outward, public, and political statement.

Dress reform shared certain features that characterize all social movements: some degree of organization; a position outside the established order, which will mount some opposition to the movement's efforts; a focus on social change; and a reliance on persuasion rather than coercion to achieve its ends.\(^7\) Like many movements for social change, the women's dress reform movement was diverse, sometimes contradictory, and it changed its messages and tactics over its long history. Supporters defined and redefined their movement throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. In the early years, dress reformers connected women's clothing to women's rights. After 1860, the movement became much more conservative as women altered only those articles of clothing that the public could not see, their undergarments. To be sure, the dress reform movement had common aspects among its participants. Supporters questioned the practicality and meaning of women's fashions in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, reformers were always in the minority.

Examining the movement to reform women's clothing is complicated. The movement cannot be defined only by its leaders, or organizations, or ideology, for these aspects changed throughout the century. To focus solely on the formal organizations established to reform women's dress is to miss the true energy behind the movement, the ordinary women, who never were members of the National Dress Reform Association (NDRA) yet donned alternative styles of clothing. The NDRA was a significant organization but only one part of the movement as a whole. Most importantly, the demise of one group, or one individual returning to fashionable clothing, was not a measure of the

success or failure of dress reform as a whole. This study is not about one organization or limited to the women's rights leaders. I analyze the origins, development, and consequences of the American dress reform movement, broadly defined, from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century.

Researchers have evaluated nineteenth-century dress reform in two ways. Either they accept the dress reformers' line: that orthodox Victorian fashion was unnatural and unhealthy and that women's rights went hand-in-hand with the progressive reform of women's dress. Alternatively, researchers argue that the reform movement was antifeminist because it served as a movement for sexual oppression. They contend that Victorian fashion expressed neither the social nor sexual repression of women. Rather, nineteenth-century dress revolved around an ideal of feminine beauty, and fostered eroticism. Hence the role of the dress reformer is seen as an anti-sexual protest.8 David Kunzle attempts to link tight-lacing with emancipated views. He argues in his work, Fashion and Fetishism, that women of the late Victorian era tight-laced in protest against stereotyped social roles and in the hopes of attracting a man for whom companionship and erotic pleasures weighed more than parenthood and family.9

The battle between historians is over whether the reformers were working toward liberation from their dress in order to achieve greater equality or to achieve a greater sense of social purity. The earliest interpretations subscribed to the former argument and focused on the failure of the early activists. Eleanor Flexner's Century of Struggle and Catherine Clinton's The Other Civil War connect reform of dress and women's rights by stating that women such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Amelia Bloomer chose to wear


9Kunzle, Fashion and Fetishism, 45.
the loosely belted tunic and Turkish pantaloons because they were more comfortable, but more importantly because the costume served as a symbol of revolt against all senseless restrictions on women.  

10 For the public, "bloomers" were synonymous with equal rights. Consequently, the early reformers were the target of ridicule. Eventually the persecution became unbearable and the reformers saw "rational" dress as a handicap to the greater cause of women's rights.

An early but important article, Robert E. Riegel's "Women's Clothes and Women's Rights," continues this argument about the relationship between dress reform and women's rights. He argues that dress reform began in the 1850s and "failed" around the time of the Civil war.  

11 Again, the argument is that the women's rights advocates felt they spent more time justifying their garments and less effort on winning rights for women. The solution was to abandon the trousers. Riegel notes that women returned to the issue in the 1870s in an attempt to reform undergarments but he saw their efforts as insignificant and unsuccessful.  

12 Riegel concludes that once women received the vote and short skirts, they no longer needed to reform their clothing since it has been liberated over time without the help of dress reformers. While Riegel's early article is narrow in scope, it is still important to researchers today because he does acknowledge that what women wore could become a political issue.

Recently, nineteenth century dress reform has again captured the attention of historians. New literature builds on Flexner's and Riegel's work. Amy Kesselman argues in her article, "The 'Freedom Suit': Feminism and Dress Reform in the United States, 1848-1875," that the dress reform movement was not simply a fad of women's rights

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12 Riegel, "Women's Clothes," 395.
leaders, but rather a distinct movement with ties to three antebellum movements: the women's rights movement, the health-reform movement, and the Oneida community. Kesselman contends that the dress reformers and the women's rights leadership represented competing models of social change and concludes that women's rights was not a high priority for the dress reformers. Rather, good health and refined taste were their goals. Dress reformers believed that a few individuals who had the courage to accept reform garments could inspire enough other people to transform the world. On the other hand, women's rights leaders wanted first to change the social, political, and economic institutions; they thought personal changes, such as modifying one's clothing, would be possible. There existed a tension between personal transformation and social change.

Gayle V. Fischer agrees that dress reform is connected to "woman's rights agitation, health reform, and religious experimentation" in her dissertation, "Who Wears the Pants? Women, Dress Reform, and Power in the Mid-Nineteenth-Century United States." She examines the tension between the idea of separate spheres in the nineteenth century and the women who challenged that system by wearing a form of trousers. While I agree that there is an important relationship between women's rights in the 1850s and dress reform, when those proponents "gave up" the freedom dress at the end of that decade the movement continued, albeit less publicly. In her work, Fischer argues that the dress reform movement was more private in nature before 1851, with women wearing short dresses with pants for calisthenics but doing so behind closed doors. She continues by stating that after 1851, with the involvement of women's rights leaders, dress reform developed into a public and political display. But the movement continued after women's rights advocates abandoned their pants. In fact, dress reform after the Civil War focused

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on a more conservative strategy and less vocal tactics. My research argues that there is not a split between the private and public in terms of dress reform. Throughout its long history, the movement was both. Fashion is displayed and viewed by the public. What one wears is a public statement. Yet, personal motivations or the very body itself can be very private.

Whether the argument is about feminism or antifeminism, public or private, the fact remains that the dress reform movement was more than just a brief moment in which women's rights leaders donned their "bloomer" costume. There are many different participants. Questions of health and women's bodies, women's rights, and even aesthetics become part of the story. But one thread seems to hold the various aspects together: the challenge that dress reform made to gender boundaries. Mary W. Blanchard specifically addresses the aesthetic movement in the 1870s and 1880s in her article "Boundaries and the Victorian Body: Aesthetic Fashion in Gilded Age America."\textsuperscript{15} Blanchard argues that a shift in attitudes toward women's fashion during the Aesthetic movement centered around women's effort to create a form of dress that was an individual work of art. She notes that aesthetic dress is different from the movement to reform dress, for the emphasis was not on health, but rather on beauty.\textsuperscript{16} Yet the idea of the female body as a medium for beauty and the issue of the wearer creating an identity were present in the agenda of the dress reformers in the 1870s and 1880s.

The dress reform movement found new membership among the clubwomen of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Again, changes in strategies and theories developed with this new group of advocates. Karen Blair, in her work \textit{The Clubwoman as Feminist}, argues that clubs provided another opportunity for middle-class women to


\textsuperscript{16}Blanchard, "Boundaries and the Victorian Body," 23.
gain autonomy through collective action. Although one must hunt for references to dress reform, Blair acknowledges that clubwomen, with varying approaches, continued the message that women had the right to freedom of movement. Rather than argue for women's rights, they advocated sensible fashion for the improvement of women's health, motherhood, and finances. Women would then be freed for public work. Whereas the initial movement propounded a radical critique that contemporary dress was the result of a male conspiracy to keep women in an inferior position, followers in the 1870s and 1880s sought to increase support by concentrating on reforming clothing from the inside, beginning with the undergarments, and working their way out to the more visible garments. Middle-class clubwomen were less vocal about change in external clothing and believed that a more cautious approach would bring success. Furthermore, the later reformers found a new villain: big business. Journals and newspapers pointed to greedy manufacturers as the source of all evil in American society, and dress reformers applied the argument to their own agenda, stating that it was the male manufacturer who forced unhealthy fashions on women by controlling the marketplace. More women were willing to crusade for causes that attacked business, rather than fundamental assumptions about social conduct. Dress reform still questioned women's position in nineteenth-century society by protesting the mass production of "foolish frocks." But it was not as overtly connected to the position that men were the cause of women's suffering.

By the 1890s, economic and social changes in the United States provided a receptive atmosphere for the dress reformers. As white, middle-class women increasingly graduated from colleges, participated in the bicycle craze, and took advantage of new employment opportunities, women in larger numbers loosened their stays. Few


\footnote{Blair, *The Clubwoman,* 50.}
sources disagree that the sports enthusiast and her bicycle helped to open the way for popular use of the divided skirt. Richard Harmond wrote of the importance of the bicycle in his article "Progress and Flight: An Interpretation of the American Cycle Craze of the 1890's." By the closing decade of the nineteenth century, some progress had been made against the prejudice that had long limited women's participation in energetic outdoor activities. Women could now participate in such sports as archery, tennis, croquet and golf. But these activities did not acquire mass appeal. Cycling did. The bicycle not only allowed women to dress more comfortably, it also offered women more mobility than ever before. Some guardians of public virtue expressed alarm, but their protests had little effect on the women cyclists or the public in general. In the end, fashion took cognizance of middle-class women's physically active life.

Beginning around 1910, the "daughters" of the clubwomen grew to maturity and carried the movement another step further. While only a small percentage of women found the boldness of the early dress reform movement appealing in the 1850s, the "New Woman" sixty years later found a more receptive atmosphere that allowed her a more public voice. Women continued the struggle by pushing the boundaries that dictated their limited role in society in the hopes of rendering obsolete the notion of both fashionable nineteenth-century dress as well as the prescription that "woman's place is in the home." As women moved beyond the home in the early twentieth century, fashions began to mirror and express the new way in which women perceived themselves. Works such as Barbara Clark Smith's and Kathy Peiss' Men and Women: A History of Costume, Gender, and Power include the New Woman's break with tradition as she traded in her Victorian corset and crinoline for a form-fitting men's style white shirt and shortened,

20Bicycling World, 35 (July 23, 1897); Bicycling World, 36 (December 17, 1897); New York Times, May 16, 1899.
tailored straight skirt. But Smith and Peiss only view the New Woman in shops and parks and never connect her to any larger social movement. The fact that such changes in women's dress threatened not only the prescribed female image but also male status meant that she was part of a political movement. The sensible clothing introduced almost a half-century earlier and adopted by the New Woman reaffirmed the public fear that reform meant the rise of a "manly woman." She was publicly visible: engaging in public debates over the evils of drink or the question of women's right to vote; jostling other commuters to catch the streetcar to work; bicycling for pleasure in public parks; and moving from rooftop to rooftop as a public health nurse. While reform dress was donned by few in the nineteenth century, sensible clothing became widely accepted in the twentieth century.

What differentiated the New Woman from the earlier reformer was the adoption not only of bifurcated clothing but more importantly the adoption of new manners and new gender roles. Did the earlier reformers directly influence these changes? They certainly paved the way for the "flapper" who would radically shorten her skirts two decades later.

Dress reform was not an isolated and failed attempt in the mid-nineteenth century. The significant continuities among diverse groups of dress reformers becomes more apparent when you consider the call for a "healthy" style of dress in the 1850s as part of the same movement that engaged clubwomen in the 1880s. Those involved in the Symposium on Women's Dress sponsored by the National Council of Women of the United States in 1892 argued for reform of dress that would afford more freedom of movement and activity. They continued the discussion that began more than forty years earlier. In addition to the work of reformers over the decades, rapid social changes during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as the increase in prospects for women to earn wages, also shaped the new gender definitions and conventions of

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appearance. By 1920, the resulting change in women's dress was due to social forces and the efforts of reformers. Neither completely overturned the traditional role of women as wives and mothers, but both expanded opportunities for women. The flapper, an image established by 1920, was a young, energetic, independent and sensual woman who had a connection to a movement that began decades earlier.

Common threads held the dress reformers together. In essence, women's roles in nineteenth-century America were played out in their garments. My study argues that the dress reform movement not only brought out the issues of women's health and women's bodies, but tied these directly to the question of women's role. I intend to analyze the different discourses within the movement, all of which I argue were feminist in the sense of Linda Gordon's definition: "sharing in an impulse to increase the power and autonomy of women in their families, communities, and/or society." In other words, some reformers advocated healthy and practical dress. Those committed to arts and crafts ideals were concerned with an aesthetic and utilitarian approach to dress. Others believed that the purpose of change was to make women more "natural" mothers and better protectors of morality. For some feminist reformers, the current fashion was psychologically and culturally restrictive, and reforming dress would advance the public position of women in society. Even though reformers did not always agree on the extent to which dress should be reformed, they all shared a similar garment and a feminist conviction, the goal of personal autonomy and a collective consciousness, that helps us to understand the continuity of the movement.

The central task of my dissertation is to trace these discourses and the activities of dress reformers throughout the movement. The outlines are discovered in the journals of the movement and the details are located in the writings of the reformers and the diaries of

those women who put on alternative clothes for practical reasons. My sources include books, pamphlets, organizational records, correspondence, and the personal papers of individual women who chose to wear reform garments. Pioneer women of the West, farm women in the Midwest, and factory women in the East sometimes recorded the details of their daily lives in their journals. Many reformers were prolific writers and noted their ideas, agendas, and opinions in a vast array of published works. Dress-reform periodicals are especially valuable. Within their pages, reformers communicated their ideology and motivations to fellow reformers and the public. Likewise, I make use of other nineteenth-century periodicals, that reprinted many of the reformers' articles. These journals also provide insight into the public's attitudes concerning the movement. Their cartoons and editorials often serve as a useful source of the negative press.

It is not surprising that magazine writers and illustrators attacked the new fashions of the twentieth century. What is fascinating is that they reminded their readers that the freer modes of dress were not new. Such journals consistently argued that the nineteenth-century "Bloomerites" were the direct cause of twentieth-century changes in women's clothing. Yet the actual reformers in the 1850s abandoned their alternative clothing, fearing it would cost them the task at hand: women's rights. The vote and "rational" women's clothing would wait until reformers exploited a more receptive atmosphere, an opportunity not available seven decades earlier. Thus, there is a connection between the efforts of reformers and the change in women's dress. The adoption of more subtle methods and messages by the later reformers illustrates that they were conscious of the efforts of the earlier advocates and realized the effect of public ridicule. Were the changes in women's clothing simply inevitable? Or did the reformers' actions have impact on societal views? I believe that both dynamics came into play.

The dress reform movement included the promise of personal transformation and a radical vision for changing society. In tracing the history of the mid-nineteenth and early
twentieth-century efforts to reform women's dress, this dissertation focuses on the changes in strategies, arguments, and participants within the movement over time. I first examine the water curists who laid the foundation of reform with their call for women's right to good health in the late 1840s and 1850s. The women's right activists gave dress reform worldwide publicity in the 1850s. They argued for more than women's health; they challenged prevailing roles for women. The National Dress Reform Association organized reformers on a national level in the 1860s. Clubwomen, taking a more conservative approach by changing only the garments hidden by their long skirts, continued to spread the message that women had the right to freedom of movement during the 1870s and 1880s. In 1890s, the sports enthusiasts used the same message and applied it to the changing times of athletic activities. The New Woman of the early twentieth century advertised the challenge to the notion of femininity by visibly dividing her skirts and entering the public arena. Also important are the women who donned alternative clothing for personal reasons throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Pioneer women, farmer's wives, and female mill workers wore variations of reform dress not for ideological reasons but for pure practicality. All of these individuals were key players in the dress reform movement and all looked toward dress reform as a way of improving women's position either on a private or public level.

This investigation provides a comprehensive look at the American dress reform movement. The history of dress and the social rules that govern it suggests that dress matters a great deal in American culture. Fashion proved a powerful adversary to nineteenth-century feminism, but the dress reform movement continued to attract participants throughout the century. As women moved into the public world of factories, shops, offices, and the professions, their expanded activities created an environment in which some type of reform dress made sense. Even though the early Bloomer costume was not considered socially acceptable in its own time, the women's dress reform
movement had a permanent influence. The dress reformers concepts of more comfortable dress did eventually prevail by 1920. By exploring the dress reform movement from the early women’s rights critiques into the era of the New Woman, my study expands the history of women’s activism and contributes to our understanding of the relationship between social movements and social change.
CHAPTER 2

THE WATER CURISTS

Like Eliza Farnham, other women back east were experimenting with more comfortable attire. Theodosia Gilbert, a cofounder of the Glen Haven Water Cure, suffered from an illness that necessitated much walking. She wrote in the May 1851 issue of the Water Cure Journal:

I conceived the notion of getting up a suit expressly for walking . . . And what a deliverance was that! The suit consisted simply of a pair of cassimere [sic] pantaloons, a frock of woollen material, loose, plain waist, and sleeves, with a skirt reaching to the knees, of decent dimensions in width, thickly lined throughout, a light cap or hat upon the head, and thick-soled, high topped boots.\(^{23}\)

Gilbert went on to state that her new garments allowed her to "double the distance, in the same length of time, which had been the extent of my ability with the accustomed appendages, and what is more, with half the fatigue." She described the shocked reactions she received from the public as well as the eventual approval and emulation by many of the women at the Glen Haven resort. Gilbert continued, "One is altogether eased of an intolerant public opinion, and soon feels perfectly at home in the very comfortable newness of her attire."\(^{24}\) The reform atmosphere and the isolation of the water-cure establishments made them havens for dress reform.


\(^{24}\) Gilbert, "An Eye Sore," 117.
Often the dress reform movement is associated solely with the women's rights leaders. In fact, it was a distinct movement with roots in nineteenth-century health reform. Advocates of the water-cure philosophy challenged current fashions. They tied their ideas about water and reform garments to better health for women and men. The idea of water to help cure illness goes back to the days of antiquity. Jane Donegan, in her work, "Hydropathic Highway to Health: Women and Water-Cure in Antebellum America," notes that modern hydropathy, or "water cure," originated in early nineteenth-century Austria and was introduced into the United States in the 1840s. This health system championed water, exercise, and diet. Therapy combined various forms of water, such as baths, compresses, and wet sheets with an austere diet and temperance in all things. Hydropathists wanted to do more than cure the sick. Their larger goal was to change the lifestyle of Americans who had succumbed to "artificial habits" characteristic of an increasingly urban and industrial society. Convinced that American society could be rejuvenated, good health for the water curists was a moral imperative. Health was a matter of individual choice and responsibility. Furthermore, health represented a natural "right" to which women as well as men were entitled.

Water cure was extremely popular during the mid-nineteenth century and, as Susan Cayleff pointed out in her work, Wash and Be Healed: The Water Cure Movement and Women's Health, presented serious competition to the "regular" physicians. The Water Cure Journal, the voice of the health reform movement, was one of the most widely read health periodicals of its day. Water cure could be practiced at home, both with the

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26Mary S. Gove Nichols, Experience in Water-Cure: A Familiar Exposition of the Principles and Results of Water Treatment, in the Cure of Acute and Chronic Diseases (New York: Fowlers and Wells, 1851): 8-9.


assistance of hydropathic practitioners and how-to books. For those individuals who could afford it, two hundred water-cure establishments offered a chance to escape daily life. Health resorts could be found in New England, the mid-Atlantic states, the Ohio River Valley and even as far west as Oregon and California. New York state, a hotbed of social, religious and political activism, proved a plentiful source of new spas.29

Hydropathists inevitably focused on dress reform as a significant means of restoring and maintaining health. Initially the connection was between the urban middle-class woman's poor health and her dedication to fashionable clothing. Water curists warned that such garments interfered with pregnancy and could lead to miscarriages or premature birth.30 "Our present mode of dress," warned Rachel Brooks Gleason, a contributor to the Water Cure Journal, "forbids the full motion of one-half the joints of the spinal column, and . . . corresponding anterior and posterior muscles." The weighty skirts, fastened around the middle of the torso created excessive pressure on the abdomen and displaced organs. Gleason also argued that the diaphragm was compressed and thus respiration was hindered. The result was an "imperfectly oxygenized" blood supply. Indigestion, poor circulation, constipation, hemorrhoids, painful menstruation, uterine problems were all linked to women's restrictive clothing.31 One could not ignore the connection between women's poor health and their dress. Water curists found that they attacked not only fashion but also the prescribed role of middle-class women. The argument of "irrationality" and "restrictiveness" of women's garments in terms of health became quickly linked to the idea of sensible dress enabling women to move beyond the limiting role of women as decorative toys. The call for good health became political.

29Donegan, Hydropathic Highway, xiii.
Water curists encouraged women to discard constraining clothing in favor of a new costume. The proposed garment was a loose-fitting, short dress and a pair of trousers. It should be simple, comfortable, durable, and attractive. The dress of Quaker women, while "not perfect," provided a point of departure in that its construction was "more favorable for health than most other forms" of dress.32 The garment should be loose enough to permit "freedom of aspiration and motion." Layers of heavy, long skirts were to be replaced by a single "short skirt" which permitted "limbs . . . [to] move freely." Corsets should be avoided. "Rather than make your form fit the dress," Gleason suggested, "make your dress to fit your form."33

The interest in revising women's apparel antedated the more widely publicized Bloomer experiments of women's rights advocates such as Elizabeth Smith Miller, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Amelia Bloomer. It is difficult to pinpoint who wore "bloomers" first. But in the 1840s, water curists argued against tight lacing and confining clothing. The water cure's ideal woman collided with contemporary women's fashions that rendered women almost immobile and perpetually breathless. The heavy petticoats, constricting corsets, and long wide skirts seemed to water cure reformers the symbol of the helpless, feeble state of nineteenth-century middle-class womanhood. As one proponent of hydropathy pointed out, it was essential that all patients be "loosely clad" in order for "free and full expansion of the lungs [and] diaphragm" to take place.34 In 1847, an advertisement for the new Glen Haven Water Cure in New York stated that "females would not be compelled to sacrifice health to dress."35 James Caleb Jackson, a physician at Glen Haven, later recalled his objections to the fashions of the 1850s. Cumbersome clothing made "locomotion" so uncomfortable that women were "forced into sedentary

33Gleason, "Women's Dress," 81.
35Columbian, Skaneateles, New York, November 25, 1847.
positions." They avoided lifting "heavy objects," owing to the "difficulty of carrying them" when moving, just as they tended to stay indoors and to avoid using stairs whenever possible. Deprived of exercise necessary for the development of a sound circulatory system, Jackson considered "deranged circulation" a predisposing cause of several diseases induced and established by "woman's dress." Dr. Henry M. Foster in 1850 considered "Fashion...a tyrant," and insisted there could be "no objection in a lady's adapting her dress always" to achieve "health, comfort, neatness and economy!" Between 1850 and 1853, the Water Cure Journal was filled with dress reform arguments, fashion plates, and testimonials from women who had adopted the new dress. Water curists' reform dress did not differ substantially from the "bloomers" worn in the 1850s by women's rights advocates. The Water Cure Journal published an engraving of Amelia Bloomer dressed in a high-necked, long-sleeved dress which fell below the knees and Turkish trousers. Instead of terming this a "bloomer" the Journal labeled it "The American Costume."

Many women were introduced to reform dress when they visited one of the water-cure establishments. It was comparatively easy for them to attempt the experiment surrounded by women physicians and patients similarly attired. The relative seclusion of the resort offered a further asset. Reporting on a visit to Glen Haven, the Skaneateles Democrat observed that of the thirty women in residence, "nearly all [were] dressed in the Bloomer costume." Many of the patients continued wearing the reform dress upon returning home. Lydia A. Strobridge, later president of the Dress Reform Association, arrived at Glen Haven after suffering from consumption. She donned the short dress and

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39Quoted in the Syracuse Standard, October 10, 1855.
40Sibyl 1 (April 1, 1857): 151.
as a result found herself able to exercise more easily and was soon capable of walking for miles. Restored to health she remained an outspoken advocate, later serving as president of the National Dress Reform Association.\textsuperscript{41}

Some water curists used dress reform as a platform to argue for new freedoms for women. Mary Sargeant Neal Gove Nichols (1810-1884) was a pioneer practitioner in hydropathy. She was a follower of Sylvester Graham, one of the first advocates of health reform. Originally a temperance lecturer in Philadelphia in 1830, Graham began lecturing on frequent bathing, fresh air and sunlight, regular exercise, vegetarianism, and dress reform.\textsuperscript{42} Graham's activities provide an early example of how various reform groups were connected by similar issues.

Fascinated by medical books, Mary Gove Nichols read voraciously during her youth in New Hampshire. In order to please her parents, she married Hiram Gove in 1831. Trapped in a miserable marriage and troubled with poor health, Nichols continued to seek out medical treatises. She found the opportunity to put her medical knowledge to practical use when she was invited to deliver a series of lectures to the newly founded Ladies Physiological Society in Boston in 1838. Nichols lectured on Sylvester Graham's dietary and hygienic reforms as well as on female anatomy and pregnancy. Subsequently she left her husband and launched a career as health reformer and physician.\textsuperscript{43} Her health failed again and she traveled to a water-cure resort in Brattleboro, Vermont. As a patient, Nichols observed the treatments applied to herself and others and continued lecturing to women at the establishment. In 1845 she moved to New York State and joined the staff

\textsuperscript{41}Si\textsuperscript{2} 2 (July 1, 1857): 198.

\textsuperscript{42}For a brief biographical sketch of Sylvester Graham see, Susan E. Cayleff, Wash and Be Healed, 25-27.

as resident physician at Shew's New Lebanon Springs Water-Cure. In 1848, Nichols married Thomas Low Nichols, who was trained as a physician but preferred to work as a journalist and lecturer, writing and speaking on physiology, vegetarianism, and sanitary reform. After their marriage, Thomas resumed his medical studies and the couple continued to advance hydropathic reform. In 1851, they opened the American Hydropathic Institute in New York City.

The inaugural address delivered at the opening of the American Hydropathic Institute was reprinted as the lead article in the next month’s Water Cure Journal. Mary Gove Nichols used the argument of “Republican Motherhood,” stressing the moral and nationalistic reasons for dress reform. She did not challenge the primacy of women’s domestic role, rather she connected healthy mothers to strong, male political leaders. In order for women to be moral and patriotic citizens, they needed to change their garments. Nichols’ speech linked reform dress to women’s freedom, thus providing the movement a political meaning:

We want truer and more elevated ideas of womanhood. We must have free, noble, healthy mothers, before we can have men. The cramped waist, the crushed vitals, the loaded spine, the trailing skirts, the fettered limbs, the feeble, fearful being, who has no rights but to be maintained, protected, and doctored, can train us no Washingtons, Franklins, or Jeffersons, no wise or great men, and no women worthier the name than their mothers. We want women who can break the bonds of custom, who are great enough to be emancipated from all that weakens, degrades, and destroys, and who will teach others the holy lessons of a true freedom, not to be independent of man, but that man and woman should be mutually dependent.

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44 Water Cure Journal (December 1845): 15.
Mary Gove Nichols, with her evangelistic fervor, often compared the wearing of reform dress with a war for freedom and autonomy. She stated:

Every week that I wear my improved dress, gives me new health and courage. When I first put on the short dress, I was almost afraid of my shadow - at least I was afraid of the boys and rude women in the street, and used to beg my husband to go with me whenever he could. He said he "did not like a dress that had to be protected." I reminded him that our Republic had to be fought for and protected at first, and that all transitions were painful. Now, I hardly know fear, and we have outlived insult to a great degree.\(^47\)

Advocates of water cure argued for more than good health. A central theme was that dress reform was the first step necessary in elevating and revolutionizing women's self-image and cultural status. Mary Gove Nichols proclaimed, "I rejoice in all new freedom for women. We can expect but small achievement from women so long as it is the labor of their lives to carry about their clothes." Convinced that public reaction to dress reform revealed the power imbalance between the sexes, Nichols continued, "The new style is opposed by bad men and weak men - by those who wish women to be weak, sickly and dependent - the pretty slave of man."\(^48\) This same argument of women's dependence on men and fashion would be articulated by dress reformers forty years later.

Followers of the Nicholsons continued their message of reform throughout the nineteenth century. One student, Harriet N. Austin, went to work as a physician in charge of the "ladies' department" at the Glen Haven water-cure establishment in 1852. In addition to her life as water-cure physician, Austin was a prolific writer, energetic health reformer, and one of the nation's leading dress reformers. Instrumental in the formation


of the National Dress Reform Association, she served as its first president and was frequently listed as a member of its executive committee. Throughout her life, Austin lectured on dress reform in her sensible clothing. She believed that her work would not be completed until substantial modification of current fashions were made permanent. If reform costume were "the best dress to get well in," Austin observed, "surely it . . . [was] the best to keep well in." Austin understood that her "fanatical" position might damage her reputation, but she declared herself willing to sacrifice influence and popularity even "as a physician" for the "principle" of dress reform.49 Austin's unremitting dedication to dress reform had an impact on the movement. In 1880, her friend Clara Barton, founder of the American Red Cross, observed in an address that the "very freedom of dress" women were then enjoying had not been easily won. Barton praised Austin as deserving "all thanks [and] . . . honor," for it was she who had "trod the pioneer paths with bleeding feet in order that others might walk on flowers."50 Until her death in 1891, Austin continued to wear reform dress.

By the mid-1850s, when most of the women's rights advocates had abandoned the idea of short skirts and trousers, the water-cure dress crusade intensified. Water curists argued that health reform must take precedence for without it no changes in woman's social or political condition were possible. While water curists shared many of the political objectives of women's rights advocates, they did not want to be linked to the bloomrites. The term "bloomer" had been ridiculed by the public. The term "bloomerite" came to mean any woman in pants who argued for women's rights. Some advocates argued that if the opposition was too much to bear, than one could legitimately abandon the reform dress.51 Others noted that like water cure, dress reform would

49 Letter-Box 1 (February 15, 1858): 4-5.
51 Julia Kellogg, "Bloomers; or, Is It a Duty to Wear the New Costume," Water Cure Journal
eventually be seen as a must. Health reformers did not want the attention to dress reform to detract from the health issues they promoted. Yet water curists knew the two were intimately linked, and thus in the face of public opposition to dress reform in the late 1850s, hydropathists tried to combine the health question with an appeal to nationalism. Two arguments were used. The first stated that if American women, on whom the health of future generations depended, allowed their bodies to deteriorate, they would jeopardize the destiny of the nation itself. Water-cure dress reformers were the first to stress the connection between reform dress and a commitment to republican citizenship. Mary Gove Nichols compared putting on the American costume to women making "their Declaration of Independence." Secondly, women must not permit themselves to be manipulated by foreign, expensive standards, argued a correspondent to the Water Cure Journal. "When will they have broken the bonds which foreign fashions have thrown around them, and boldly declare their rights to dress as becomes true women... in accordance with the laws of health," asked one contributor to the Water Cure Journal. "I guess Uncle Sam's girls know what's what," insisted another. Keeping up with foreign fashions was expensive and consumed "too much of Uncle Sam's 'apple and tater money," continued the commentator.

Articles, poems, songs, and illustrations in nineteenth-century health journals highlighted the connection between dress reform and water cure as well as the growing adoption of sensible clothing. Furthermore, poetic additions to the journals enlarged not only the appeal of the reform but also the range of participants, since poems and songs probably came from different readers than those who submitted medical articles. Included
was a song, "Success to the Bloomers," complete with musical score that lobbied for the new style. One innovative reformer included "A Parody" in the Water Cure Journal:

To breath, or not to breath; that's the question
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fashion,
Or to bear the scoffs and ridicule of those
Who despise the Bloomer dresses.

In agony,
No more? - and, by a dress to say we end
The side-ache, and the thousand self-made aches,
Which those are heir to, who, for mere fashion,
Will dress so waspish.

Alongside the poems and songs, the Water Cure Journal used illustrations of reform garments and patterns. Often women in reform dress, hair loose, arms around each other are pictured alongside the "Allopathic Lady," dressed in fashionable finery. The latter has a tiny waist, a voluminous skirt that trailed the ground, and a parasol held precariously in one hand. There is a stern expression on her face. She is described as a "pure cod liver oil female," who patronized a fashionable doctor and considered it "decidedly vulgar to enjoy good health."

These not so subtle messages on the benefits of dress reform when combined with first-person testimonies, had a persuasive effect on the journal's readers. Women, famous and unknown, wrote in describing the liberation they felt when they adopted reform dress. One such letter quoted approvingly from a letter submitted by a "Country Girl." Her costume consisted of "stout calf-skin gaters; white trousers . . . loose, and confined at the ankle with a cord; a green kilt, reaching nearly to the knees . . . [and] confined at the waist.

58 Water Cure Journal 16 (November 1853): 120.
with a scarlet sash." Depending on the weather her bodice has either long or short sleeves. "With such a dress," she boasted, "I can ride on horseback, row a boat, spring a five-rail fence, climb a tree, or find my way through a greenbrier swamp." She also included the advantage of the "extra feeling of wild, daring freedom" she experienced when alone in the woods in this unrestricting garb.\(^{59}\) Again, dress is equated with freedom.

Yet there were boundaries to acceptable dress reform, even among the most ardent water curists. From the standpoint of health and comfort, water curists agreed that men's clothing was infinitely superior to women's. Yet they emphasized the importance of femininity and beauty and considered it unnecessary and inappropriate for a woman to dress like a man in order to avoid the medical consequences of being female. In 1864, the \textit{Herald of Health} recounted in great detail the case of Sallie M. Monroe of New Berlin, New York, a practicing physician, whose complete cross-dressing in male attire had deeply upset some conservative contemporaries, who lamented the influence of dress reform on femininity. The author stated that, \textit{"The said 'Sallie' is no woman at all, but a veritable man!"}\(^{60}\)

Another advocate of health reform who would later adapt male attire was Mary Edwards Walker. Born in Oswego, New York, in 1832, Walker was the fifth daughter born to farmers. Her parents believed in abolition, healthy clothing, and made sure their daughters were educated for careers. None of Abel Walker's daughters wore corsets. In later years, Mary Walker noted that her father played an influential role in shaping her ideas on dress. Walker embraced reform dress in the 1850s and continued to wear modifications of it for almost seventy years. She considered health, comfort, and principle inexorably bound, and in her view women had a "right to look to physicians for


\(^{60}\)"Another Female Gentleman," \textit{Herald of Health} 4 (November 1864): 163.
such examples."\textsuperscript{61} Walker graduated in 1855 from Syracuse Medical College. She experimented with several variations of reform dress and continued to wear short dresses with trousers while in medical school. She even wore a short dress and pants to her wedding, to the dismay of the bridegroom. Walker and Albert E. Miller set up a medical practice in Rome, New York, but within two years the couple separated. Walker moved to Iowa and secured a divorce from Miller in 1860. But while Walker was in New York, she became involved in woman's rights, the National Dress Reform Association, temperance and water cure.\textsuperscript{62}

Walker stepped beyond the boundaries set by most dress reformers when in the 1860s she gave up reform dress altogether and wore male trousers, coat, vest and even top-hat. "The great trouble with you Mary is you are not popular with those who sit in high places," wrote a long time friend in 1873. The letter continued by stating, "Don't get discouraged Mary tell the truth and shame the Devil." However this same notes ends with a P.S. that states: "This is a free country and of course you have a right to dress as you please, but it would please me and many others to see you off them funny looking coat and breaches."\textsuperscript{63} Walker was arrested in 1866 in Manhattan for appearing in public in her reform garments. \textit{The New York Times} reported that "a few rowdies, who were anxious to get a glimpse of her peculiar attire," followed Walker through the streets of New York.\textsuperscript{64} A police officer arrested Walker, charging her with "disorderly conduct and appearing in male costume."\textsuperscript{65} Walker refused the image of traditional femininity and,

\textsuperscript{61} \textit{Water Cure Journal} 33 (May 1862): 109.
\textsuperscript{63} Letter from B. M. Reese to Mary Walker, August 9, 1873. Box 2. The Mary Edwards Walker Papers. George Arents Research Library, Syracuse University.
\textsuperscript{64} \textit{New York Times} reprinted in \textit{The Circular} (June 18, 1866): 109.
\textsuperscript{65} \textit{New York Times} reprinted in \textit{The Circular} (June 25, 1866): 117.
claiming control over her body and self-image, wore men's attire in public until her death in 1919.

Most water curists did not advocate male attire for their patients. Yet they did believe that dress reform was necessary before changes could be realized in women's social or political condition. As reformers, water curists did not always argue that men and women were equal; rather they maintained that there was a "natural distinctiveness." This difference meant that neither sex could represent the other properly. Thus women had the right to act as free moral agents on their own behalf. Sharing the objectives of political reformers, water curists called for the expansion of women's opportunities in the public arena. It was a woman's "most urgent right" to obtain and to maintain good health. Until women had learned how to take care of themselves and their dependents, they would never be free to determine their proper place in society. Self-reliance and confidence in one's own abilities were possible only in combination with good health and the stamina necessary to carry reform forward. Thus, water curists attempted to persuade women to capture control of their own lives by taking direct responsibility for their own bodies. The campaign to free women from restrictive clothing was a key aspect of this vision.

While the call for "woman's rights" in the Water Cure Journal does not directly encompass formal political issues and strategies, it does include actions that greatly affect social policy and customs; thus, the water curists were political. These rights include the right of women to practice medicine, to participate in a family's economic decisions, and the right to be respected by other members in society. Practitioners supported political activities. Many health reformers were active in the women's rights movement. But the

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vision for water curists entailed improved living through healthful conditions of life, not formal politics. Some advocates feared that other aspects of hydropathic reform principles were overshadowed by the dress question and the controversy it continued to excite. Most saw dress and health reform as synonymous. Water curists, on the whole, believed that fashionable clothing was a continuing symbol of women's subservient position in American society. Such a condition could only be modified through collective action.

Throughout the 1850s and even during the tumultuous years of the Civil War, water curists attempted to keep the dress question before the public. The war did exact a heavy toll on reform activities in general, but the water curists pursued dress reform in their articles and in their participation in conventions held throughout New York. Many demonstrated their support for dress reform by becoming active participants in the National Dress Reform Association in the 1860s. But by 1870, hydropathy, as an alternative medical system, had lost much of its appeal. Medicine moved toward a clinical and scientific approach, and most of the "unorthodox" nineteenth-century medical practices could not compete. Those water-cure establishments that survived in New York well into the twentieth century evolved into sanitariums focusing on hygiene, prevention, and recuperation. Although water therapy remained a part of the program, it was no longer central. In regard to change that health reform brought to woman's dress and her subsequent role in society, reformers most often blamed women themselves for their failure to achieve "emancipation." They noted that too many of them lacked "ambition" and passively accepted their station in life. Women had to learn to develop their potential. "I would have woman aspiring," Harriet Austin wrote, for it "is her sphere to do what she desires to do." Summarizing the hydropathic reform ideology for her generation, she stated, "When woman, as a whole . . . wishes to stand on an equality with man in every
department of life, that will be her sphere, and it is not in the power of man, even if it were in his heart, to hinder her."

The hydropathic dress reformers' sense of expanding opportunities and life choices for women encompassed the personal, social, physical, and at times political realms. While urging women to become everything within their capacity, the leaders identified the need for several cultural and institutional changes to implement their philosophy. It is no wonder, then, that hydropathic writings conveyed a certain ambivalence that reflected both the empowerment and powerlessness of women. Clearly, health and dress reform offered one of the few ways for Victorian women to exercise and experience power. By encouraging dress reform, the water cultists took a step toward redefining traditional female roles. The adoption of reform dress complemented the reconceptualization of woman's physiology, intellectual abilities, and social roles. The hydropathic movement's emphasis on reforms strengthened its commitment to and conception of opportunities and choices available to women. The movement sanctioned choices not usually offered to nineteenth-century women: choosing not to marry and acting as gender-conscious leaders. While they couched their activities often in moral terms, the water cultists developed an identifiable network that embodied both an extension of gender specific spheres as well as the opportunity for autonomy.

Possibilities for power at times seemed just beyond the dress reformers' reach in the late 1840s and into the 1850s. But their reform efforts would continue with the women's rights leaders of the next decade. While water-cure publications and practitioners agreed with the supporters of women's rights that women needed social parity with men, they argued that health was the means to the goal. With the women's

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rights advocates, the issue of women's dress moved beyond the confines of the sanitarium to become politicized in the public arena.
CHAPTER 3
THE BLOOMERITES

Elizabeth Smith Miller, daughter of the reformer Gerrit Smith, had an outfit made for her after visiting a Swiss sanatorium for women recuperating from the effects of tightly laced corsets and lack of exercise. In an undated manuscript Miller said she adopted the "short skirt" in the fall of 1850, citing "years of annoyance" with the "long heavy skirt" and "dissatisfaction" with herself for "submitting to such bondage." She convinced Elizabeth Cady Stanton, her cousin, that reform dress was comfortable and convenient. Stanton quickly saw the contrast between her own trailing skirts and her cousin's Turkish trousers: "To see my cousin, with a lamp in one hand and a baby in the other, walk upstairs with ease and grace, while, with flowing robes, I pulled myself up with difficulty, lamp and baby out of the question, readily convinced me that there was sore need of reform in woman's dress and I promptly donned similar attire." By 1851, reform dress was worn for not only health and practical reasons but as a political statement.

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Elizabeth Cady Stanton recorded that reform dress was worn by farmers' wives, gymnasts, tourists, and patients at water-cure establishments.\textsuperscript{72} The garments adopted by the women's rights advocates were similar to ones worn by the health reformers. Mary Gove Nichols addressed an audience in Hope Chapel, New York, on June 26, 1851 on "Woman's Dress." She stated that the new garments had become equated with the women's movement. Nichols hoped that the women's rights leaders would help the cause for dress reform. She argued that women had been made weak through their clothes because their "manifest destiny" had become "crushing corsets, horrible whalebones, the arms pinioned, padding and plaits," and "the penance of walking in a bag, wiping and gathering all the dirt of the side walk and crossings."\textsuperscript{73} A Water-Cure Bloomer as defined in the Water Cure Journal was "one who believes in the equal rights of men and women to help themselves and each other, and who thinks it respectable, if not genteel, to be well!"\textsuperscript{74} Water curists placed equal rights within a health context. Women's rights advocates argued for good health within the context of equality.

There are conflicting theories as to who originated reform dress and introduced the idea to the public. Certainly the water curists and women in the Oneida utopian community were some of the first to adopt the garment in the 1840s.\textsuperscript{75} Elizabeth Cady Stanton considered the issue of reforming women's dress several years before she attended the first Woman's Rights convention in Seneca Falls in 1848. She wrote a letter to Lydia Maria Child on March 24, 1844 whereby she stated that "the question of reforming our female attire is not new to me." Stanton mentions that Lady Stanhope, a

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{72}Stanton, \textit{Eighty Years and More}, 202.
\item \textsuperscript{73}Nichols, "The New Costume," \textit{Water Cure Journal} 12 (August 1851): 34-36.
\item \textsuperscript{74}\textit{Water Cure Journal} 16 (November 1853): 120.
\end{itemize}
niece of William Pitt, the Prime Minister of England, lived for more than twenty years in Syria and continued to wear "the costume of an Arabian chieftain." 76

In 1849, Fanny Kemble, a British actress who was married to an American, caused a stir in Massachusetts by wearing what the press called "male attire" in public. The outfit was "a loose flowing dress falling a little below the knee, and loose pantalettes or drawers confined to the ankle [sic] by a band or cord." 77 Amelia Bloomer mentioned Fanny Kemble's garments in The Lily: "She was ridiculed, laughed at, and condemned for being so masculine as to put on pantaloons." 78

Bloomers were named by the press after the editor and reformer, Amelia Bloomer, who began publicizing them in her journal, The Lily. In 1851, Amelia Bloomer, even before donning the trousers herself, had informed her readers that the leaders for reform dress were not the women's rights advocates:

True we shall be met with ridicule and accused of a desire to usurp the dress of men. Already we see the press in some places protesting against any change, and the advocates of "Woman's Rights" are accused and denounced as the leaders in the movement. We wish this were true, but it is not. We hope however, that at the next Woman's Convention the subject will be brought up and acted upon. 79

In the June issue of the same year in an article entitled "Who Are the Leaders," Bloomer attempted to establish the facts as to who first wore the reform dress and where the style for the garment originated:

We are unable to say who was really "the leader" in introducing the improved style of dress. The first we heard of it, it was worn as an exercise dress at the "Water

77 "Miss Kemble and Her New Costume," The Lily 1 (1 December 1849): 94.
78 Amelia Bloomer, "Female Attire," The Lily (February, 1851): 13.
Cures"... The first person we saw wearing such a dress, was Mrs. Charles D. Miller [Elizabeth Smith Miller] of Peterboro, daughter of Gerrit Smith, who has worn it for the last five or six months. We learn from the Water Cure Journal that Theodocia Gilbert of Glen Haven has been wearing the short dress for eighteen months; and we recently received a letter from a lady in Wisconsin, in which she states that herself and others have worn them for the last nine or ten months... While we should be proud to admit that we were the leader in this great reform, justice demands that we render to others what is justly their due.  

Amelia Bloomer's periodical educated and inspired those women who could not be tapped by other means. Controlling the content herself, she could give the cause of dress reform the fullest and most sympathetic coverage. The biggest endorsement came when Bloomer donned the trousers and tunic herself in 1851. In response to her readers' requests, Bloomer published a woodcut of herself in her new dress and an article on her own adoption of the "sensible" style in *The Lily*. Her article was picked up by the *New York Tribune* "and made known to its thousands of readers... and from this it went from paper to paper throughout this country and countries abroad... I was praised and censured, glorified and ridiculed, until I stood in amazement at the furor I had wrought by my pen while sitting in my little office at home attending to my duties." Bloomer continues by stating that she and others wore the new garment "because [they] found it comfortable, convenient, safe, and tidy - with no thought for introducing a fashion, but with the wish that every woman would throw off the burden of clothes that was dragging her life out." 81 Bloomer, Stanton, and other contributors to *The Lily* crafted the image of "the sensible woman." Bloomer conceived of this new woman as energetic, healthy, and capable of considerable activity. This "sensibility" was promoted and visibly symbolized by wearing practical dress. Not to embrace reform dress was to be tied to an older style of

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80 Amelia Bloomer, "Who Are the Leaders," *The Lily* (June 1851): 45.
81 *The Lily* (April 1851): 22.
woman who was frivolous, gossipy, and both physically and mentally weak. As Stanton wrote in *The Lily*, "I do hate a sickly, sentimental, half-developed, timid needle-loving woman."\(^{82}\)

The intense interest created by bloomers was nationwide. From Maine to California, the question of female dress dominated the press, journals, and even sermons, creating "a most furious excitement among old and young ladies, bachelors and married men" and "outstripping interest in all other matters."\(^{83}\) Hundreds of letters were written to Bloomer inquiring of the style of the dress and asking for patterns. Bloomer took advantage of the publicity to increase the circulation and printed an offer in *The Lily* "that to anyone sending us one dollar for four subscribers, for the remainder of the year, we will, if requested, send patterns and full directions for making the dress."\(^{84}\)

Articles and comments in the newspapers of the 1850s and responses sent to *The Lily* indicate a growing acceptance of reform dress. Bloomer writes, "We have reason to know that several women in our village are ready to assume the Turkish dress as soon as a sufficient number will join them, or they can muster courage to be independent; and we hope and believe that ere long it will be generally adopted."\(^{85}\) Papers were filled with news of "Bloomerites" appearing in public. Bloomers became the common term for all reform garments; journalists were not concerned with the wearer's personal reasons for wearing the dress. Thus Bloomerites may or may not have been connected to the women's movement. Reports stated that bloomers were spotted at churches, on picnics, at holiday celebrations, and theatrical presentations. There were even melodies and dances written for the new mode of dress.\(^{86}\)

\(^{82}\) *The Lily* (May 1852): 39.
\(^{83}\) *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, June 11, 1851.
\(^{84}\) "An Offer," *The Lily* (June 1851): 47.
\(^{85}\) Bloomer, "Female Attire," 21.
\(^{86}\) See *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, July 14, 1851; *Ohio State Journal*, July 17, 1851; *New York Tribune*, July 18, 1851, August 26, 1851, and August 27, 1851.
Many of the dress reformers came from small towns. Often their fathers were professionals rather than laborers or farmers. Apparently few immigrant women participated in the movement and fewer still did so at the leadership levels. Few were Catholic. Most reformers came from Pietist or Calvinist Protestant homes. Hence the reform-oriented women came from native-born Protestant, middle-class families that were typically of strong social conscience.\textsuperscript{87} This was the case with most of the nineteenth-century reforms. Women of the new middle class, struggled to define themselves and carve out a public place located between the private sphere of the home and the public life of formal politics. Such was the case with Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone, Lucretia Mott, Amelia Bloomer, and countless other women who participated in the movement for women's rights and freedom of dress.

Women's rights advocates who chose to wear reform dress recruited supporters by continuing the arguments made by the water curists: bifurcated garments were both healthier and more practical. These Bloomerites argued that women should adopt the reform dress on the grounds of health, good citizenship, and convenience. They noted that the lack of laces, stays, and whale bones would provide immediate improvement in the health of American women. Healthier women would be more productive workers. One journal noted that the adoption of bloomers would "do more for the national wealth than the mines of California, and more for the national health than all the discoveries of medicine since Galen."\textsuperscript{88} Even popular magazines often supported the reformers' position. The fashion editor of Harper's New Monthly Magazine commented in the September 1851 issue that "Health and good taste demand a reform and common sense will doubtless second the demand with powerful effect."\textsuperscript{89} An editorial in Godsey's Lady's

\textsuperscript{87}The Sibyl attempted to keep track of members in the National Dress Reform Association. See Fatima B. Cheney, "Reforms and Reformers," The Sibyl (October 15, 1858): 445.
\textsuperscript{88}Boston Commonwealth, reprinted in New York Tribune, June 10, 1851.
\textsuperscript{89}"Fashions for September," Harper's New Monthly Magazine 3 (September 1851): 575.
Book remarked that women's garments should be constructed so a woman could dress herself without assistance, an impossible feat with the fashionable garments having back lacing and fastenings.⁹⁰

Another argument developed by dress reformers was the idea that women should adopt the Bloomer costume for moral reasons. A reporter noted that a group of "very intelligent appearing, lady-like women" met in Milford, Massachusetts, in July 1852. The purpose of their meeting was to consider the propriety of adopting bloomers. The women unanimously passed a resolution approving the costume, declaring the existing fashion to be "moral evils," and arguing that the Bloomer would facilitate women's efforts to engage in good works."⁹¹ Elizabeth Cady Stanton maintained, as did others, that "every part of a woman's dress has been faithfully conned from some French courtesan," and was "a direct and powerful appeal to [man's] passionable nature."⁹² "Shamefully indecent" hoops and long skirts "excited" men, charged a writer to The Revolution who also supported a change to reform dress. The writer concluded by stating that "no virtuous woman ought to wear them."⁹³ The argument was whether bloomers or long skirts were immodest.

The opposition argued that instead of taming men's passions, the Bloomer costume seemed to arouse them. One editor noted that "he wished during those brief opportunities to see as much of them [dress reformers] as he could with propriety, and therefore he was decidedly a short dress man."⁹⁴ Public denunciations of the costume on the grounds that it was corrupting the public morals were increasingly made. Critics argued that prostitutes and dance hall girls were wearing bloomers, warning that "women of true modesty and stainless purity" should not don the outfit. Dress reformers

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⁹⁴Cleveland Plain Dealer, June 19, 1851.
countered by stating that prostitutes also wore long skirts.\textsuperscript{95} Critics shot back that the exposure of the ankles and legs to public view was the first step on the road to moral degeneracy. Mrs. Jane Swisshelm, a well-known writer for \textit{The Pittsburgh Visitor}, wrote:

There must be constant care and use of the hands to insure that the skirts do not lodge on the knees, but fall over. If they do not, one may exhibit her trousers to the waist; and when a woman exhibits her form with no other covering than trousers, we do not want to be there.\textsuperscript{96}

Amelia Bloomer countered by stating that women expose more of their leg when they lift their skirts to avoid debris on the streets. The editor of a newspaper in Oregon reprinted Swisshelm's comments and urged his reader to remember that "a leg is a leg whether on a man or on a woman." He suggested that his audience should "contemplate a pair of legs in trousers with as much calmness [as] a pair of bare arms or shoulders."\textsuperscript{97} But a leg was very different from an arm in the nineteenth century. The exposure of the ankle and the definition of the legs lent an outfit an erotic quality.

Dress reformers also used the argument of morality when applied to working-class women. According to L. P. Brockett, working women loved clothing. Brockett envisioned that working women who loved fashion would discover that they could make more money with "a single smile" than working for a month. Eventually, the smile would lead to greater indiscretions, and the young working woman who loved "finery" would find herself a victim of the worst kind.\textsuperscript{98} Clothing could drive a woman to a life of

\textsuperscript{95}\textit{Alta California}, July 8, 1851; \textit{The Lily} (July 1851).
\textsuperscript{96}\textit{The Pittsburgh Visitor}, November 11, 1851.
\textsuperscript{97}\textit{The Oregon Spectator}, September 9, 1851 and November 11, 1851. See also \textit{The Lily} (November 1851).
sin. Critics worried that middle-class women would express their sexuality and that working-class women would act on their sexuality and fall into a life of prostitution.

Fashion not only harmed women's health and compromised their values, it was expensive. Although styles worn by upper-, middle-, and working-class women did not differ dramatically, the cut and fabrics they used did. Most women did not possess the skill to cut and fit women's dress. Thus, wealthier women who had skilled dressmakers wore better-made dresses. These became a sign of class status. Reformers warned that the cost of fashionable dress was connected to the rising "class of the unmarried." Young men could not hope to marry because their new wives had clothing aspirations beyond a middle-class man's salary. Others exaggerated the extent to which men would go to pay their wives' dressmaker bills, positing an increase in "bank robberies, stock speculations, and gambling losses, and false entries in books." 99 Others noted that dress and its expense further divided the classes. Yet the fact that dress did reinforce the differences in class helps to explain why dress reform had a difficult time finding a following in the 1850s.

In addition to health, practicality, propriety, and cost, patriotism was another argument in favor of adopting the Bloomer costume. The Madison Press of Iowa notified its readers that women had already begun wearing the new garments in June 1851. The editor noted that the Bloomer costume reflected "the American standard of taste, economy, utility, and comfort, adopted to the habits and peculiarities of American society." 100 In St. Louis, an editor told his readers that the Bloomer costume was "better suited to American wants, American tastes and American independence." 101 Likewise, a

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100 Madison Press, reprinted in New York Tribune, June 12, 1851.

101 Missouri Republican, June 21, 1851.
Massachusetts editor stated that the Bloomer costume was not, as the term "American Costume" had already suggested, "Turkish, nor Persian, but American: the outgrowth of our own wants, the product of our skill, and the sign of our independence."102

Besides these positions in favor of the Bloomer costume, women's rights advocates added that current modes of dress restricted women's movement and thus their freedom. There is no doubt that now women's dress was politicized. Leaders stated that there was no reason for women to burden themselves with debilitating clothing while men had styles that gave "freedom of limb and motion." These dress reformers continued the arguments of the water curists. Bloomer, herself, stated that a woman might become the "free, healthy being God made her instead of the corseted, crippled, dragged-down creature her slavery to clothes had made her."103 Elizabeth Cady Stanton argued that "the drapery is quite too much - one might as well work with a ball and chain."104 Stanton connected reform dress and women's desire to escape nineteenth-century prescribed roles. In essence, the women's rights advocates challenged the separation of spheres. And when they stood on the podium demanding full participation in public and civic life for women, they did so in reform dress. Their clothing went beyond the "healthful" or "moral" garments worn in private homes or closed retreats and communities. Now their garments were public and political, inextricably linked to the fight for women's rights. As one woman wrote in a letter to Harper's: "We are emancipating ourselves, among other badges of the slavery of feudalism, from the inconvenient dress of the European female. With man's functions, we have asserted our right to his garb, and especially to the part of it which invests the lower extremities."105

102*Springfield Republican*, June 12, 1851.
While the Bloomerites argued that their long skirts symbolized women's bondage, like the water curists, they did not promote adopting complete male dress. In her description of the new costume, Amelia Bloomer concluded that "Our dress is thus far a mere experiment, and not what we think it should be. It takes time to revolutionize one's wardrobe, as well as one's opinions."\(^{106}\) When Bloomer called for a revolution, she did not advocate adopting men's garments. She wrote:

It is generally known that Miss Weber has adopted the male attire throughout. We agree with her as far as the right to wear such a dress goes, and in regard to its utility, but we have no desire to follow her example. We think something may be substituted far prettier than the common coat and vest, and high crowned hat worn by men; there is a stiffness about them unsuited to a lady's taste.\(^{107}\)

The nineteenth-century system of prescribed gender roles was believed to be ordained by God and confirmed by science. Women were submissive, men aggressive. Women were moral, men corruptible. Women were emotional, men rational. Women were domestic, men were ambitious in the marketplace. Women were wives and mothers. Men were providers and politicians. And most definitely, men wore the pants. As one dress reformer remarked, "there are still some of that class remaining who will think that if women wear clothes that will allow them to walk, they will walk away from their duties."\(^{108}\) While dress reformers argued for equal legal rights for women, they did not plan on changing the inherent nature of men and women. Bloomerites denied the charges that they were destroying the fabric of American society. In 1856, a group of reformers passed a series of resolutions, one of which stated: "Resolved, That in addressing Reform in Dress for Woman, our object is not to advocate for her positions of

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\(^{107}\)Helena Maria Weber was an earlier reformer. "Our Dress," *The Lily* (May 1851): 38.

singularity, eccentricity, immodesty, or to get her out of her 'appropriate sphere,' but to enable her to act with that freedom needful to find out what her 'appropriate sphere' is. Their position was that women would remain the pure and civilizing influence of society but with legal rights they might mitigate men's power by injecting some of women's values into national affairs. Wearing reform dress was not meant to change the roles of the sexes. However, the dress reformer in bloomers represented a contrary image to the prevailing view of the modest woman whose place was in her home, not creating a stir in public.

Opponents played on the fears of Americans who were undergoing tremendous economic and social change in the years between 1830 and 1860. The peaceful home, guarded over by a virtuous woman, provided an alternative to a society that many saw as splitting apart because of industrialization and the question of slavery. Public opposition to reform dress began as a murmur but quickly turned into a roar. An Arkansas editor said that the costume was spreading throughout the nation "like wildfire," and that everywhere a Bloomer appeared she created "the most furious excitement." Even though many of the dress reformers held positions in society, reactions to their garments were harsh. Amelia Bloomer continually addressed the public's opinion in *The Lily*. She wrote, "Our having donned a short dress and trousers is made the subject of much newspaper comment. Some of our editorial brethren commend us highly, while others cry out against this usurpation of the rights of man." Bloomer reminded her readers of the convenience and comfort of the reform dress for women's daily chores and noted that the movement to reform dress will not "die out." She wrote, "All the ridicule which low minded men and simple women, and their ill mannered boys see fit to indulge in at our expense, will not induce us to lay it aside... We should like to know from whence men

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110 *Arkansas State Gazette and Democrat*, July 4, 1851.
derived the exclusive right to wear the bifurcated garment."\textsuperscript{111} But as one correspondent to an Ohio newspaper noted, "to be the subject of newspaper comment and street remark" can "deter most women from the movement . . . To attempt to storm the fortress of public opinion is not womanly or becoming and savors of fanaticism."\textsuperscript{112}

Those reformers who did adopt bloomers had to endure public ridicule. In Massachusetts, it was reported that several women wearing alternative garments "were insulted and hooted at by a parcel of boys and graceless fellows."\textsuperscript{113} In New York City, a couple of Bloomerites found themselves accompanied by "a curious crowd of men and boys who indulged in audible criticism of the new costume." The mob increased in size and rudeness until the police finally interfered and broke it up.\textsuperscript{114} In response, a group of women in New York made a written statement whereby they insisted on their rights:

\begin{quote}
We wish now to understand whether we have a civil and political right to wear a decent and healthy dress, and whether we are to be protected in the exercise of this right, or whether the New York public is a mob by majority? We assert, humbly, yet \textit{firmly}, that we wear the improved dress in obedience to conscience and the dictates of common sense, and that we are not only willing to live for the principle of freedom, for which our fathers bled and died, but to \textit{die for it also}, if need be . . . We ask help from our brothers, because we are suffering for freedom, for God, and the right!\textsuperscript{115}
\end{quote}

Despite the arguments of good health and freedom, the prevailing ideology, combined with public opposition, kept many women from participating in the movement.

A common explanation of contemporaries for the reason more women did not don the

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{111} "Our Dress," \textit{The Lily} (May 1851): 38.
\textsuperscript{112} \textit{Ohio State Journal}, June 28, 1851.
\textsuperscript{113} \textit{Springfield Republican}, June 5, 1851.
\textsuperscript{114} \textit{New York Tribune}, June 26, 1851.
\textsuperscript{115} Quoted in M. Angelia Merritt, \textit{Dress Reform Practically and Physiologically Considered} (Buffalo: Jewett, Thomas and Co., 1852): 134-36.
\end{footnotes}
costume was because it was "bad fashion," unattractive and inappropriate for women. Critics declared that dress reformers were advocating a progress that "tends to barbarism." Were the citizens of "civilized and Christianized America to go to the heathen, semi-civilized or savage nations for models in dress and manners?" If women began to wear the clothing of men then chivalry and gallantry would die. Gerrit Smith, while a vocal supporter of reform dress, reminded his cousin, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, that, "No longer would she [woman in a rational dress] present herself to man, now in the bewitching character of a plaything, a doll, an idol, and now in the degraded character of his servant. But he would confess her transmutation into his equal; and, therefore, all occasion for the display of chivalry and gallantry toward her on the one hand, and tyranny on the other, would have passed away." Stanton replied:

Chivalry died long ago. In social life, true, a man in love will jump to pick up a glove or bouquet for a silly girl of sixteen, whilst at home he will permit his aged mother to carry pails of water and armfuls of wood, or his wife to lug a twenty-pound baby, hour after hour, without ever offering to relieve her. If a short dress is to make the men less gallant than they now are, I beg the women at our next convention to add at least two yards more to every skirt they wear.

It is no surprise that the most vocal argument made against the Bloomerites was the connection between dress reformers and the women's movement. The public believed that women's rights activists were trying to alter the traditions of a great society by creating a new social order that went against the laws of God and the principles of Americanism.

116Baltimore Sun, June 18, 1851.
117J. W. H., Ohio State Journal, June 24, 1851.
Professor William Nevin wrote an article for a woman's magazine in which he advised potential Bloomerites that the costume was only one indication of the "wild spirit of socialism or agrarian radicalism which is at present so rife in our land." To the degree that the radicals were successful in "destroying natural distinctions of character and sex between us," he wrote, to the same degree they would succeed "in destroying all moral government and civilization." The fear was that the Bloomer costume would obliterate all distinctions between the sexes. Women who wear bifurcated clothing "can perch their feet about on highback chairs, railings, mantel pieces and window sills without hindrance - in short, they can sprawl their pedal extremities about promiscuously, miscellaneously, masculinely and generally," wrote one journalist. Trousers turned "all the women into men." Nelson expressed his conviction that women would continue to masculinize their appearance until they were carrying canes and smoking cigars. It is no surprise that more than one illustrator echoed Nelson's fears by depicting women as he described them: wearing trousers, carrying canes, and puffing on cigars.

The perceived reversal of gender roles was captured in satirical form. Several newspapers reprinted a fictional store advertisement. Women could purchase a Bloomer outfit, complete with the related goods of boots, pants, vests, dickey, canes, cigars, and razors in the shop. The proprietress informed her customers that in her absence at women's rights conventions her husband was her authorized agent. He could be found in the shop or working in the adjoining kitchen. The store's address was Hen Peck Lane.

Cartoonists capitalized on the public's paranoia. One cartoon printed in Harper's New Monthly Magazine depicted a woman proposing marriage to a man who informed

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120 The Ladies' Wreath 6 (September 1851): 253.
121 St. Louis Intelligencer, June 11, 1851.
123 The Lily (June 1851).
124 The Oregon Spectator, December 23, 1851.
her that he needed to get permission from his mother. Another image from *Harper's*
depicted two confident women in bloomers accosting a meek young man in the street,
offering to give him a ride home. He can only weakly plead that his mother is sending a
coach for him. He begs them to leave him alone.125 In both cases, the cartoons depict
dress reformers as usurpers of men's authority.

The Bloomer costume, particularly its most controversial feature, trousers, stirred
up the public's fears about femininity, masculinity, and the division of labor. To appear in
a garment exclusively worn by men in the nineteenth century was to be masculine. If
women were masculine, what were men? To accommodate women wearing trousers, the
meaning of masculinity and femininity needed redefinition. Few, including dress
reformers, were willing to question these conventions in the 1850s. The belief was that
women were not merely adopting male attire and mannerism but that they wanted to share
male prerogatives. Bloomerism, it was cautioned, was just the initial stage in the demand
for women's rights - demands that would take women out of the home and into politics
and public debate. An Ohio editor, who had initially supported dress reform, came to the
conclusion that the women's movement had gotten out of hand. Alarming symptoms of
change were beginning to appear. The symptoms were not of great significance by
themselves, but when combined, they took on considerable importance. One illustration
of a symptom was a group of women from Pendleton, South Carolina, who formed a
military organization and applied to the governor "to furnish them with light carbines for
use upon horseback - astride, we dare say." Another example the editor cited was Fanny
Lee Townsend, who attended a meeting in Danville. She "talked down the preacher, and
finally drew off the biggest part of his congregation, mounted a stump, upset the

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125"Harper's New Monthly Magazine" (February 1852): 432.
minister's tenets completely, and swayed the crowd to and from with her eloquence." Fanny Lee was wearing the Bloomer costume.

The reform dress became a symbol of everything that was threatening about feminism: women shaping their lives in accordance with their own needs; women declaring independence from male approval; women doing or wearing what had been traditionally reserved for men. "If the Bloomer costume had come from a Paris milliner," wrote Angelina Grimke, one of the few women's rights advocates to continue wearing the costume after 1855, "it would have been welcomed in Boston, New York and Philadelphia, but as it is the only dress which has ever been adopted from principle, from a desire in woman to fit herself for daily duty - as it is the outbirth of a state of mind which soars above the prevalent idea of the uses of woman, therefore it shocks the taste." 127

Dress reformers in the 1850s argued that they had as much right to health, comfort, and freedom of movement as men. Opponents, on the other hand, believed that bloomers represented a subversion of the natural order of the sexes. Proponents used the language of freedom and slavery, life and death, health and illness, and patriotism. Opponents used terms such as un-American, seditious, immoral, and radical. Mary Gove Nichols found it unbelievable that women were not adopting the new costume in great numbers. In her letters in the Water Cure Journal, she encouraged, coaxed, conjoled, and chided her "dear Sisters" to overcome "public prejudice" and choose freedom of movement over fashion. She warned them, "Be assured this fight against the Bloomer dress has a deeper significance than appears." If it failed "consciously or unconsciously," it meant that women would remain "an appendage - a parasite - property." 128 The debate

126 Cleveland Plain Dealer, September 20, 1851.
over women's dress was more than a question of style. The Bloomer controversy involved the search for identity and women's "appropriate role." While reform dress subjected the wearers to ridicule and abuse, it represented an empowering vision of a world of diminished gender distinctions.

By the mid-1850s, the Bloomerites believed that the costs of continuing to wear reform dress were greater than the benefits. The women's rights leaders, according to Stanton:

Soon found that the physical freedom enjoyed did not compensate for the persistent persecution and petty annoyances suffered at every turn. To be rudely gazed at in public and private, to be the conscious subjects of criticism, and to be followed by crowds of boys in the street, were all, to the last degree, exasperating.129

Susan B. Anthony recalled, "The attention of my audience was fixed upon my clothes instead of my words."130 One by one, most of the Bloomerites lengthened their skirts and were relieved to be able to move through the world again "unnoticed and unknown."131 Women's rights leaders argued that more basic changes would have to occur before women would be able to challenge conventional notions of beauty. Anthony believed the vote must come first and then women would be able to define themselves and their clothing. Reflecting later, Anthony commented:

I learned the lesson then that to be successful, a person must attempt but one reform. By urging two, both are injured, as the average mind can grasp and assimilate but one idea at a time. I have felt ever since that experience that if I wished my hearers to consider the suffrage question, I must not present the

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131Stanton and Batch, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 174.
temperance, the religious, the dress, or any other besides, but must confine myself to suffrage.\footnote{132}{Quoted in Harper, *Elizabeth Cady Stanton*, 117.}

For Stanton, it was the institutions and beliefs that perpetuated marriage and maternity as the sole objects of women's lives that needed to be altered first. For Bloomer, it was the "superficial and trivial" education of women that made it impossible for most women to "feel the need" and "understand the benefits" of dress reform.\footnote{133}{See letter from Amelia Bloomer to Edwin Houghton, November 16, 1857: 2. The Jeanette Bailey Cheeck Papers. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.} Stanton stated that their actions were the result of "the tyranny of custom," that "to escape constant observation, criticism, ridicule, and persecution, one after another gladly went back to the old slavery, and sacrificed freedom of movement to repose."\footnote{134}{Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, *History of Woman Suffrage*, Vol. I (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1881): 471.} Most agreed with Lucy Stone that women's "miserable style of dress" was "a consequence of her present vassalage not its cause" and that social and political institutions would have to be changed before most women would challenge prevailing standards of femininity for the sake of health and freedom.\footnote{135}{*Sibyl* 1 (July 1857): 197.}

Amelia Jenks Bloomer wore the dress longer than any of her contemporaries. When she eventually gave up the short dress that bore her name, eight years after she put it on, she said it was for "practical reasons." In 1855, Amelia and Dexter Bloomer moved to Council Bluffs, Iowa. Bloomer continued to wear short skirts but the high winds "greatly annoyed and mortified" her when they blew her skirts up over her head. Determined not to give in to nature, Bloomer loaded the hem of her skirt with shot.\footnote{136}{Bloomer, *Life and Writings*, 71-73.} Despite the weight in her hems, the wind continued to whip her skirt about causing her
legs to bruise. At the same time that Bloomer experienced these difficulties with her short skirts, the light-weight wire hoop skirt began replacing petticoats. In 1858, Bloomer decided that the new crinoline embodied dress reform ideals and laid aside her reform garments. She insisted that she did not compromise her ideals in giving up the short dress. "I was determined that I would not be frightened from my position," she wrote, "but would stand my ground and wear the dress when and where I pleased, till all excitement on the subject had died away."\textsuperscript{137} It would be half a century before excitement would even wane.

In the end, a combination of forces led Stanton, Anthony, Bloomer, and others to return to long skirts. Historians have interpreted this move as the failure of the dress reform movement. Rather, the women's rights activists of the 1850s understood the political strategy necessary to win their battle and they recognized that their dress kept many women away from their movement. In essence, if they wanted their words to be heard, and thus win economic and political rights for women, they believed they had to change their clothes. But dress reform was more than a passing phase of a few leaders of the women's rights movement. The dress reform movement consisted of a much larger following. The women's rights leaders gave dress reform nationwide publicity. Knowledge of the new dress style made its way across the continent, and many wore the Bloomer costume in the 1850s who were not directly involved with the fight for suffrage. Lucy Stone argued that action was necessary that would benefit all women. She stated, "I do not expect any speedy or widespread change in the dress of women until as a body they feel a deeper discontent of their entire position."\textsuperscript{138}

\textsuperscript{137} Bloomer, \textit{Life and Writings}, 73.
Unlike other reformers, the supporters of dress reform were easily recognized. Dress reform was not an abstract philosophy, rather it was a visual, outward statement. The experiences derived from the Bloomerites' attempt at dress reform served as a valuable indicator of public reaction and as a guide for the direction of later reformers. Into the next decade, dress reformers continued their quest for comfortable and practical clothing. They argued the same position that reform dress meant good health and freedom of movement. Dr. Mary Walker argued that "The greatest sorrows from which women suffer today are those physical, moral and mental ones, that are caused by their unhygienic manner of dressing. The want of the ballot is but a toy by comparison."¹³⁹ This did not mean the franchise was unimportant to Walker or other dress reformers; rather the movement would now focus on a personal transformation rather than on a larger social and political change in society. The challenge for these continued dress reformers was to encourage women to change their lives as fully as possible, at the same time making the movement more accessible and sympathetic to women who chose various approaches to personal change. Those women who adopted reform dress and wore it in public had "done more for the universal elevation of women in the past dozen years than all others combined," claimed Walker in the dedication of her 1871 book, *Hit*. Here she acknowledged: "You, who have lived the precepts and principles that others have holy talked, who have been so consistent in a manner to fit you for the duties of a noble and useful life."

CHAPTER 4
TROUSER-CLAD WOMEN AT WORK

In 1854, Rosa Ann Ditch worked the family farm with her father in Rome, Ohio. In a letter she wrote to the Water Cure Journal in March, Rosa noted that she is "a farmer's daughter, under twenty-eight years of age, am not handsome, but rather plain looking." Her letter details the chores she is capable of performing such as milking cows, making cheese and soap, and preparing foods. Rosa, who wore a short dress with straight-legged trousers underneath, noted, "As for dress, I will dress just as I have a mind to, in spite of all the men!"\textsuperscript{140} In the 1850s, reform dress could be found from the east coast cities across the midwest farms to the streets of San Francisco.

Water curists and women's rights advocates continued to wear their version of reform dress, at least for a time, after 1850. These same dress reformers were in the forefront of the dress reform movement during the mid-nineteenth century. Yet other less well-known women took the opportunity to try reform garments. Their reasons varied. In contrast to the water curists and women's rights leaders, many women who wore reform dress did not do so for ideological reasons. Instead, this dress reformer put on short skirts and trousers for practical reasons. Women often attributed their private decisions to wear reform dress to the way it eased the burden of physical chores. Many of these working women did not identify themselves with dress reform or as dress

\textsuperscript{140}"Matrimonial Correspondence," letter No. 24, Water Cure Journal 17 (March 1854): 60.
reformers; they simply chose to wear a short dress with trousers. However, given the public's ridicule of any woman in reform dress, to don the garments was a public and political act. Mary Gove Nichols and other dress reformers in June 1851 hoped that "all women" would soon accept the new dress because its advantages seemed so obvious.\textsuperscript{141} It was simple: women could make the decision without the permission of legislators nor an amendment to the Constitution. They just had to cast off the fetters of fashion and wear a garment that was "pretty" as well as practical and allowed for their free movement in society. While it did not require legal changes, adopting dress reform did demand public opposition to a system of traditional beliefs and values.

Work emerged as a strong personal motivation urging individuals to change their clothing. Farmers' wives became frequent examples documenting the comfort and convenience of reform dress. Many sent letters and articles into the dress reform journals, perhaps representing hundreds more who adopted reform dress. In 1864, Margaret E. Bennett wrote to \textit{The Sibyl} expressing her hope that "the example of . . . women farmers" would encourage the spread of dress reform. Bennett noted the chores improved by wearing the dress, "washing, cleaning house, making butter and cheese, taking care of children, & c."\textsuperscript{142} Wearing a shortened skirt and trousers, Mrs. Whittlesey enumerated all of the tasks she could perform: "I can do the work for 16 cows, and 18 persons in the family; can walk 7 miles and be none the worse for it."\textsuperscript{143} \textit{The New Yorker} reported decades later that "country women were particularly grateful" for the costume, because "it was wonderful for milking."\textsuperscript{144} The association of farm work and a rural lifestyle with the short dress and pantaloons worked against its greater acceptance and use, in part, because

\textsuperscript{142}"From Margaree E. Bennett," \textit{The Sibyl} 8 (June 1864): 1243-1247.
\textsuperscript{143}Mrs. N. Whittlesey, "Undaunted and True," \textit{The Sibyl} (September 1, 1858): 423.
\textsuperscript{144}"That was New York: Mrs. Bloomer's Pantaloons à la Turk," \textit{The New Yorker} 16 (June 29, 1940): 41-42.
of the bias against "country folk" evident in much of the mid-nineteenth century literature on fashion. Yet, even in remote areas, the issue of dress reform was at hand. Perhaps especially for farm women, this question of appropriate attire was of immediate concern. Their arguments for an alternative mode of dress were based on practical and medical grounds. Still, the inclusion of these women's writings in dress reform journals is significant. It illustrates not only the pride in and sometimes criticism of women who adopted sensible dress for practical reasons, but more importantly the connection between both groups of supporters of dress reform. Women in trousers working the farms knew of the movement to reform dress and wanted their stories to be included. The fact that they were included shows the existence of a network among dress reformers.

Some modification of trousers were adopted by pioneer women traveling west. In one pioneer journal, the author, Cora Agatz, noted:

Among the party from the same town who joined us were five other women, who conceived the idea, that their gymnasium costumes would be the habit par excellence, for comfort, cleanliness and health. These costumes consisted of short gray wool skirts, full bloomer pants of the same, fastened at the knee, and high laced boots.¹⁴⁵

Women brought with them these same "gymnasium" outfits that they wore back east. Others sewed their own garments. Patterns were quickly available on the west coast. A dress shop in San Francisco had reform dress in its window in July 1851. The owner, Mrs. Cole, wore the Bloomer outfit as well.¹⁴⁶ Although there was occasional criticism, most thought the garments were practical and appropriate. Cora Agatz continued, "When

compared to the long, slovenly soiled calico gowns worn by the other women of the train, these simple costumes elicited many favorable remarks."\textsuperscript{147} Julia Archibald Holmes, later to be secretary of the National Woman Suffrage Association, wore bloomers for traveling by wagon train from Kansas to Colorado. Holmes reported, "I found it [reform dress] to be beyond value in comfort and convenience."\textsuperscript{148} In 1858, Holmes scaled Pike's Peak in a similar bifurcated outfit.\textsuperscript{149}

Frontier responses to reform dress varied over the next decade. "Bloomerism has done wonders for Oregon," wrote an observer in 1853. "All the women emigrants, who cross the plains, dress in that style."\textsuperscript{150} By 1860 a traveler reported that "the bloomer costume is considerably in vogue, and appears peculiarly adapted to overland travel."\textsuperscript{151} And not all women chose to return to fashionable dress upon arriving in the West. In her short dress and trousers, Eliza Rusco helped her husband clear out forest and build a home in the west. She encouraged women in the city and in the country to wear dress suitable to outdoor activity and seek "a trinity of blessings: health, self-reliance and personal independence."\textsuperscript{152} Many, like Eliza Farnham, continued to wear bloomers under a short skirt for carrying out farm and ranch chores.\textsuperscript{153} "I laid down my hammer after a

\textsuperscript{147}Agatz, "A Journey," 172.
\textsuperscript{149}Holmes, A Bloomer Girl, 18.
\textsuperscript{152}"Frontier Life," The Sibyl 15 (June 1858): 358. See also, "Kenosha Ahead As Yet," The Lily 3 (June 1851): 48.

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few minutes, took off my nail-pocket, and, the carpenter being absent, descended the ladder with the help of my visitor's hand," Eliza wrote in 1856. "This was early in my experience as a roofer. Afterward I could go up and down alone with perfect freedom and ease." Eliza continued, "When I reached the ground, I did not apologize for my dress, because, novel as I knew it must look, I felt assured its fitness would be appreciated."154

Likewise, Miriam Davis Colt noted that wearing a reform outfit suited the "wild life" on the trail. She felt able to "bound over the prairies like an antelope" and did not worry about "setting her clothes on fire while cooking when these prairie winds blow."155 And others who supported reform dress, yet illustrated the prejudice of the nineteenth century, hinted that western women had a special need for the costume, for it aided women when they had "to flee from those savages who abound in those regions, and who have already murdered and made prisoners of numberless women."156 Presumably, reform dress facilitated women in the tasks of moving westward. One man recalled an episode when he passed a woman in reform dress "who, while her better half was soundly sleeping in the wagon, was walking and driving the oxen."157

The stories attesting to the popularity of reform dress on travels west may be exaggerated. Yet the transference from east to west, complete with patterns, was remarkably fast. Public opinion often stated that traveling women, after establishing a homestead in the west, should return to fashionable dress. In August 1851, Elizabeth Gunn arrived in San Francisco, where she was met by her husband. Lewis Gunn had heard of Cole's bloomer display and wanted to visit the shop before they traveled on to the home he built in the mountains. Elizabeth informed him that she did not want to take the

154Farnham, California In-doors , 144.
time to stop just then, for she had already a bloomer costume in her trunk, which she had packed six months prior in Philadelphia. Despite the fact that she approved of the garment, Elizabeth was reluctant to wear it in the mining town. Writing to her sister in Philadelphia, she confessed that "I have not had mine on yet, but if you could see the dust here, you would think it was the dress for this country, both in wet and dry season." She continued, "I should like it to work in, but I really think the long skirt is more graceful. I will get mine out some day when we are settled." The consensus was that short dresses were appropriate for women crossing the plains just as long as women resumed their middle-class respectable attire upon arrival in the frontier settlements. Louise Clapp talked to many women on their arrival in California from the east and approved their adoption of the bloomer for travel however "frightful as it is on all other occasions."

The *Alta* suggested that San Franciscans were predisposed to accept "bifidity" because they were accustomed to seeing Chinese women on the streets in trousers. But it could not resist poking fun at the garment. "The adoption of the new dress," it said, "will destroy some of the poetical ideas which have associated themselves with the long skirts. The old couplet: 'Her feet beneath her petticoat / Like little mice stole in and out,' will have to be changed to something like: 'Her feet from out her trouserloons / Hang like the cars from air balloons.'" In the East, Adela Orpen recalled the public's negative response to her reform dress. She wrote that little boys often took stones and hurled them at women on the Kansas frontier who appeared in reform dress. To be the first dress reformer to enter a frontier town or village required a great deal of courage or "a very obviously strong man as escort." In Laurel Town, Kansas, a man burst out angrily after a woman in

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160 *Alta*, July 11, 1851.
161 Adela Elizabeth Richards Orpen, *Memories of the Old Emigrant Days in Kansas, 1862-1865*
reform dress walked by, "They ought to catch that woman, and cut off her legs to match her skirts." Frontier responses to dress reform were not unlike the reactions reformers received elsewhere.

It would seem that reform dress had a better chance of being accepted in the West and on the trail than in other parts of the country due to the general upheaval of traditional living patterns. But most women who migrated west wanted to replicate aspects of their former lives. Dress offered an opportunity to maintain a sense of their identity. One opponent of short dresses claimed that she had never found her long dress to be the least inconvenient. Furthermore, she questioned the propriety of wearing a short dress and trousers, especially "for a woman among so many men." Although many women rejected reform clothing, other working women extolled the virtues of such garments.

There was greater acceptance of reform dress when it concerned pioneer women or farmers' wives. Their work provided special circumstances that demanded special clothing. Prominent dress reformers in eastern metropolitan cities did not find the same support for their new look. However, they were able to find followers in the Lowell mills of Massachusetts. In December of 1851, a representative of The Lowell Bloomer Institute sent to The Lily a copy of the constitution of a newly formed union of female mill workers. The association was "in favor of Costumal Reform, and sympathizing with other movements in behalf of Womanly Independence." Their object was "Emancipation from the thraldom of that whimsical and dictatorial French goddess Fashion, and an exemplary enforcement of the Right and Duty to dress according to the demands and proffers of Nature." Amelia Bloomer responded by stating that "we feel highly honored

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in having our name given to an organization" and "we give the Lowell ladies cheer in their noble enterprise, and pray that they may remain steadfast, unwavering in the good work to which they have set their hearts and hands - and they will receive their reward in seeing the results which will follow their labors." Many mill girls in Lowell adopted a shorter skirt. They argued that it was not only "their right and duty" but it was safer when working with the looms. Owners of the mills even promoted reform dress. For example, an agent of a Massachusetts mill promised a dinner to all women who adopted the Bloomer costume on or before July 4th. And The Lowell Journal of 1850 stated that on the Fourth of July a procession of "Bloomerites" filled the streets. A factory setting seems a logical place to find a garment that made it easier for women to work.

Mary Gove Nichols, water curist and dress reformer, felt compelled to speak out against the danger of working-class women wearing heavy and confining garments while performing their physical tasks. She spoke of the "weight of quilts and skirts," the "fetters" that women carried around their ankles, the difficulty of going upstairs, and the injuries that Lowell women factory workers sustained when their long garments caught in the machinery. References to bloomers and mention in the Oneida Circular that the short dress "has been adopted by some of the factory girls in New England" illustrate that those interested in sensible clothing were aware of other dress reformers.

Life in utopian communities was not unlike that experienced by women on the frontier or in rural settings. Communities' survival depended on women taking "part in

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164 "The Lowell Bloomer Institute," The Lily (December 1851): 93.
many kinds of industry usually considered masculine," and the short dress, "adopted as a matter of convenience," enabled them to do that.\textsuperscript{170} Women in several communities donned short dresses and straight-leg trousers because they were practical. Long skirts got in the way of their work. Women's increased freedom of movement enabled communal societies to work at breaking down the sexual division of labor.

Versions of pants and short skirts were worn first at the New Harmony Community in New Harmony, Indiana, in the 1820s. Robert Owen, the founder, believed in an egalitarian society. This meant that "the happiness and well-being of every man, woman, and child, without regard to their sect, class, party, or color" were equally important.\textsuperscript{171} Owen viewed fashionable clothing, with its expense and excesses, as divisive and contrary to true equality. Karl Bernhard, a European visitor, described the women's costume as "a coat reaching to the knee and pantaloons, such as little girls wear among us."\textsuperscript{172} Men were also encouraged to alter their clothing but they still wore a basic outfit of trousers and short jacket. Owen did not convince all the women to wear the new clothing. Sarah Pears, an Owenite follower, remarked that "the young girls . . . here think as much of dress and beaux as in any place I was ever in."\textsuperscript{173}

Later dress reformers do not mention New Harmony as a source for their own reform garments. For one, Owen's experiment was short lived; New Harmony dissolved in 1827.\textsuperscript{174} Furthermore, many utopian women, like the water curists, did not travel or

\textsuperscript{170} "Oneida Short Dress," \textit{The Circular} (March 26, 1866): 13.
\textsuperscript{174} Many reasons are given for the failure of New Harmony: Owen's absences in the early
visit outside their community while wearing their costume. Yet knowledge of their reform dress spread to the public. Publications from the utopian communities, visitors to the resorts, and commentators in newspapers brought the discussion of reform dress to the forefront. Consequently, Owenite dress reformers and later dress reformers shared a similar argument against fashion: the expense. Throughout the nineteenth century, the price of women's garments increased with each ornament, design detail, and yard of luxurious fabric. Given the financial struggles in New Harmony, this argument in favor of plain dress made sense. In the 1850s, dress reformers stressed health and freedom of movement but also incorporated cost into their position against fashionable dress. By the end of the century, the extravagance of women's clothing was central to the dress reformers' platform.

John Humphrey Noyes, leader and founder of the Oneida Community in New York, encouraged his followers to dress in the Owenite costume in 1848. He had studied the teachings of Robert Owen and believed that a contemporary woman's dress denied that she was "a two-legged animal," but was instead "something like a churn, standing on castors!" He wanted a costume for women that would allow them to take "part in many kinds of industry usually considered masculine."175 At Oneida, women wore "trowsers [sic] and loose, short gowns, like children's, that thus clad they could regain health and equilibrium of forces adequate to the high influence they must wield in the harmonization of society."176 Noyes' wife, Harriet Holton Noyes, and a favored lover of Noyes, Mary Cragin, developed the new costume for Oneida. With encouragement from John Noyes, other women followed the example of the female leaders until frocks and loose pantalettes

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176 Tillotson, Progress vs. Fashion, 23.
became the typical attire in the community.\textsuperscript{177} No official rule ever made the short dress compulsory at Oneida. Recommendation for men at Oneida to adopt an alternative costume based on children’s clothing never received support.

While one can find women in the utopian communities wearing variations on the short dress, there is little evidence that southern women wore reform clothing. Dr. Mary Walker, taken prisoner during the Civil War, wrote that she met many women who had never seen a reform costume. The dress surprised them because "it looked so feminine." She also mentioned a young soldier who assured her that "his mother and several other ladies of wealth and standing" wore the reform garments in New Orleans. "Brave men always have brave mothers," Walker concluded.\textsuperscript{178}

Some modest dress reform did take place in the South, within the privacy of the home. Southern dress reformers took off their corsets and loosened the cut of their dress. It was not a radically new outfit, such as the bloomers advocated by Northern reformers. But it did allow for some relaxation in the fit, thereby enabling a woman to work more comfortably.\textsuperscript{179} The connection between dress reformers is the argument that sensible clothing equals comfort. In other words, pants equal freedom of movement.

Little is known of women of color in the North or South who found the benefit of wearing pants during the Civil war. One record does show that Harriet Tubman found it difficult to conduct her activities on the Underground Railroad while wearing long skirts. A letter dictated by Tubman provides a rare perspective of one African-American woman’s views on dress reform:

I want, among the rest, a bloomer dress, made of some coarse, strong material, to wear on expeditions. In our late expedition up the river, in coming on board the

\textsuperscript{178}"Letter from Dr. Walker," \textit{The Sibyl} (November 1862): 1092.
boat, I was carrying two pigs for a poor sick woman, who had a child to carry, and
the order "double quick" was given, and I started to run, stepped on my dress, it
being rather long, and fell and tore it almost off, so that when I got on board the
boat there was hardly anything left of it but shreds. I made up my mind then that I
would never wear a long dress on another expedition of the kind, but have a
bloomer as soon as I could get it.  

Tubman wore her bloomers a number of times while helping escaped slaves before
leaving South Carolina in May, 1864. It was later reported by one of her neighbors that
Tubman "was proud of the fact that she had worn 'pants'."  

Arguments against reform dress in the South were not much different in than they
were in the North or West. Opponents incorporated ideas about spheres, class, and
modesty. One author wrote his reactions to the Northern dress reform movement in the
Southern Literary Messenger. He clearly stated that Southern women, no matter their
color, were not adopting Yankee reform dress:

This reform of course does not thrive at the South. Our ladies blush that their
sisters any where, descend to such things. Our ordinary women much prefer to
follow the example of genuinely womanly feeling, set by the ladies around them,
than that set by northern ladies, and so they are above this reform. And we fairly
believe that a stout old Southern man was not far wrong, who vociferated, not
long ago, in our hearing, that our servant women were above this reform.

The exact number of women who filled the ranks of dress reformers in the mid- to
late nineteenth century cannot be calculated. Indeed, dress reform was not for everyone.
Most never seriously considered the idea of reforming their dresses. Others perhaps tried
short dresses but ultimately returned to their long skirts. Some wore reform garments to

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180 The letter was dictated on June 30, 1863 in Beaufort, South Carolina. It is reprinted in
Dorothy Sterling, ed., We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century (New York: W.
181 Sterling, We Are Your Sisters, 260-61.
ease the burden of physical work. A few women committed themselves for their lifetime. Those reformers who adopted alternative dress at all times had little tolerance for those who only wore reform clothing for work. Fatima B. Cheney noted that where she lived "a score or more" women wore the dress for working. However, Cheney decided that she would send only the names of "those who appear in public with it on, as well as at home" for inclusion in the list of dress reformers published in The Sibyl. The concern was that part-time reformers diluted the political potential of reform clothing.

One might ask why reformers criticized any other dress reformer at all? Was not one of the goals to see as many different women in trousers as possible in order to spread the word of good health and freedom of movement? Reformers hoped that rational clothing would be worn by women beyond the cloistered communities. Were not farm and pioneer women who adopted reform dress examples of the success of the movement thus far? The answer lies in the women's motivations for wearing reform dress. If the objective was renewed health or breaking the chains of fashion, then anyone who adopted rational clothing received some emotional and health benefits. But leaders in the dress reform movement were not satisfied with the "one person at a time" approach to breaking down the old fashion system. They expected more from dress reformers than individual conversions. While wearing trousers for personal reasons of comfort and convenience contributed to spreading the message, sometimes this was not enough for those directly connected to the movement.

Despite disputes, women who chose to wear alternative garments, whether for practical or political reasons, had to deal with some sort of harassment for daring to defy accepted ideas about what women could and should wear. Thus, dress reform, unlike other nineteenth-century reforms, was not an abstract philosophy or set of beliefs. It was

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183Cheney, "Reforms and Reformers," The Sibyl, 445.
a visible protest to contemporary ideas of gender roles. Simply, the reformers' garments united participants into a movement. No matter the reasons or agenda, the moment a woman put on reform dress she was a dress reformer. The loose boundaries of the dress reform movement meant that many could participate. Water curists, pioneer and farming women, and individuals involved in the utopian communities all introduced reform dress as an option to nineteenth-century fashion. Women's rights leaders then recognized the political force behind dress reform and made it public. The publicity in the 1850s allowed a number of women to become acquainted with reform garments, thus drawing them into the movement. All the while, journals connected the reformers together and permitted a forum to discuss and debate dress reform. The question before all dress reformers now was whether a vision of personal change could develop a movement that was capable of changing the political and social institutions of society. The answer, they believed, lay in their new organization, the National Dress Reform Association.
CHAPTER 5
THE NATIONAL DRESS REFORM ASSOCIATION

Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck became acquainted with reform dress in the spring of 1851. When she read the description of the bloomers costume in the public press, she was suffering from "weakness and debility, produced by protracted illness, which seemed only destined to carry [her] onward to the consumptive grave." She tried many remedies but found no relief. She decided that she needed to seek out and obey the "laws of nature," and this included adopting trousers and a tunic top.\textsuperscript{184} Hasbrouck's health returned and she began to study medicine. But she also found the same public ridicule that followed other dress reformers. She was refused admission to the Seward Seminary in Florida simply because she wore bloomers. "This treatment anchored [her] into the ranks of women's rights advocates, and as [she left the school she] registered a vow that [she] would stand or fall in the battle for woman's physical, political, and educational freedom and equality."\textsuperscript{185} Hasbrouck and other dress reformers continued the arguments of good health and freedom. The common thread was the belief in the superiority of reform dress over contemporary fashionable clothing. In 1856, dress reformers from several backgrounds created one of the few formal dress reform organizations, the National Dress Reform Association. Its ideology was a mixture of women's rights and health reform

\textsuperscript{184}"Experience of Mrs. L. A. Strobridge," \textit{The Sibyl} 15 (September 1857): 289.
fused by the belief that social change began with the individual. Lydia Hasbrouck would be one of the organization's presidents.

Water curists, women's rights advocates, and other dress reformers came together at the Water-Cure Festival in 1851. Here Dr. James C. Jackson, a hydropathist at Glen Haven, was introduced to Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Amelia Bloomer in reform dress. Jackson, a major supporter of dress reform, proposed the formation of an organization designed to inform the public, strengthen the growing dress reform movement, and provide a growing network of women ready to adopt the new costume. Not until February 1856 did the newly formed National Dress Reform Association meet at the Glen Haven Water Cure. The Association's founding by a water curist influenced by the reform garments of women's rights leaders illustrates the continuity of the dress reform movement. Although Jackson initiated the organization and the NDRA did recruit men, women presided over and led the official conventions, made up the majority of the speakers, and made decisions of policy. Besides Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck, Dr. Harriet N. Austin and Dr. Mary Walker, both water curists, served as president of the Association.186 The object was to induce a reform in women's dress "especially in regard to long skirts, tight waists, and all other styles and modes which are incompatible with good health, refined taste, simplicity, economy and beauty."187

The National Dress Reform Association meet annually from 1856 to 1865, with the exception of 1862. Conventions were held in central New York on the third Wednesday and Thursday of June. Officers were elected, consisting of a president, ten vice-presidents, one recording secretary, one chief and nine assistant corresponding secretaries, one treasurer, and an executive committee of five. The committee was

186 The Presidents of the NDRA include: Charlotte Austin Joy, 1856 and 1859; Dr. Lydia A. Strobridge, 1857 and 1858; Dr. Harriet N. Austin, 1860 and 1861; Dr. Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck, 1863 and 1864; and Dr. Mary Walker, 1865.

empowered to call meetings, engage lecturers, publish tracts, and promote the Association. All official business was conducted at the meetings. The president opened the meeting with a speech setting forth the objects of the NDRA. Letters addressed to the Association were read; they were usually from members unable to attend the meetings but wishing to send their support. The evening sessions consisted of lectures, speeches, and testimonials from recent converts to dress reform. The second day was devoted primarily to the discussion and passing of resolutions, the most important business of the conventions. The resolutions were the formal expressions of the NDRA's opinion on topics ranging from health to women's rights. Conventions provided dress reformers the opportunity to share ideas and stories with others.\textsuperscript{188}

Members of the NDRA argued that permanent change in women's dress or her position within society could not come from a few leaders in the women's movement. Instead, change had to come from all the different elements of society working together for a common goal. For these reformers, mass organization was key:

\begin{quote}
Knowledge must be diffused, practical methods submitted, dressmakers trained, inventors encouraged, vehicles of communication established. The necessary means of culture must be widely distributed. True culture is not that of a few privileged individuals but that of many. We shall establish a bureau of intelligent fashions only as we make it absolutely democratic. Not what the "élite" but the multitude wear is really the fashion.\textsuperscript{189}
\end{quote}

At the convention in 1857, Dr. James Jackson announced that over six thousand American women from east to west had adopted a "reform costume." He confidently predicted that ten times that number would have converted by the following year. This was not to be a gathering of "wild radicals" but rather one of individuals who possessed a

\textsuperscript{188}"Constitution," \textit{The Sibyl} 15 (September 1856).
"great regard for propriety," "calm courage," a faith in what was right, and an "ardent desire to move forward in judicious plans for women's elevation." Jackson continued his plea that it was useless to try to act alone. For reformers to succeed they "must come in contact with others . . . [and] feel the process of mutual absorption going on so strongly as to establish large and common sympathy." That accomplished, the reformer had a duty to "go out among her fellows' not as a representative of "her own individual opinions" but rather as one representing the "ideas and opinions" of the group as a whole.  

Membership in the National Dress Reform Association was simple: members had to be over twelve years of age, sign the constitution, and declare themselves in agreement with its objects. Membership records and minutes from the meetings show that white, middle-class, and married women made up the largest portion of the Association. By 1864, the NDRA's membership included representatives from nineteen states. Central New York was the heart of the movement but the midwest also had significant number of members. Wisconsin, Ohio, Michigan, and Illinois had the most members, while California, Indiana, and Missouri had the fewest. Exact numbers were not recorded, but the Association estimated that between six and eight thousand women joined. The crowds at the conventions ranged in size from two hundred to four hundred people. The number of members versus the number of curious onlookers is impossible to discern. Besides meetings, dress reformers also stayed connected through Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck's own paper, The Sibyl, A Review of the Tastes, Errors and Fashions of Society. Publication began in 1856 in Middletown, New York. Harriet Austin, the water-cure physician, edited another journal, The Laws of Life, in Dansville,
New York. The publications provided their readers detailed descriptions of bloomer construction so that women could sew their own garments, inspiring letters from reformers that encouraged women to adopt reform dress and ignore the jeers from the public, satirical poetry, and proceedings of the meetings of the NDRA.

Dress reformers hoped actively to recruit men into the movement. If they could convince men of the evils of women's clothing, they believed that both men and women could effect change. It was assumed that women dressed for men who could, therefore, affect women's clothing choices. In a speech, reformers stressed men's importance:

What excuse can men offer for consenting, approving and upholding their wives and daughters in dressing as they do, and living as they do. Scarcely a woman can be found who does not live in open and shameful violation of the cardinal laws of her organization. Certainly may men with propriety go so far at least as this, as to encourage their wives to a more rational way of life, and if their wives and daughters or sisters are disposed to do so, show them sufficient regard to attend this meeting [NDRA Convention, 1857] with them.193

Dress reformers saw themselves as participants in a crusade to create an ideal society in which women and men were equal and lived in harmony with nature and blessed by God. Here dress reformers shared the ideology of many of the utopian communities. The battle ground of this crusade was not the courts but the daily life of individuals. Before women could be accepted as autonomous beings, according to the dress reformers, they had to develop new attitudes and behaviors. They argued that a woman would remain dependent "until she could by her own efforts prove to be self reliant and self supporting which she could never do with her present style of dress." The NDRA believed that both women and men were responsible for the condition of women,

"men for oppressing and women for consenting to be oppressed."¹⁹⁴ Men set the ridiculous standards and cultivated the artificial tastes and styles. Yet women would remain dependent "until she could by her own efforts prove to be self reliant and self supporting which she could never do with her present style of dress."¹⁹⁵ Women's rights, they believed "have their root in character and not in legislative enactment."¹⁹⁶

Different theories and priorities were articulated by the women's rights movement and the National Dress Reform Association. Women's rights activists sought a broad base of support in the 1850s. The dress reformers saw themselves sustained not by a popular movement but by their sense of personal development. Social change, the dress reformers believed, would occur as a result of the exemplary behavior of reformers. If a few women had the strength to act in accordance with the laws of nature and God, the rest of society would ultimately be inspired to emulate them. Dress reform would eventually lead to women's suffrage.

The National Dress Reform Association never forgave the women's rights advocates for abandoning reform dress. They called them "traitors" and accused them of damaging the movement. For Lydia Hasbrouck, women's rights advocates had made a "weak effort" to "triumph over error." Each person who entered "the till-ground of reform" must be prepared to meet "attendant annoyance." To make "a great flourish of arms," as women's rights leaders had done, and then retire from battle "at the first onset of the foe" showed a "cowardice for which they should blush."¹⁹⁷ Hasbrouck reminded her readers that she, too, had encountered "censure and ridicule" during the early dress reform years, but she had not wavered. NDRA members discounted the argument that the

¹⁹⁴The Sibyl 1 (September 1856): 36.
¹⁹⁵The Sibyl 1 (July 1859): 36.
¹⁹⁶The Sibyl 1 (July 1859): 36.
harassment was too great, for they believed that all "true" reformers must endure unfavorable public opinion in order to reach the goal.\textsuperscript{198}

That we deeply pity those women, who, having worn a Reform Dress, became convinced of its superior fitness as an apparel over that commonly worn by woman, yet, have allowed themselves to put it off, and put on again the long skirts and tight waists; and we assure them that they have given fresh evidence to all who know them of the instability of woman, of her want of faith in the right, of her fear of public opinion, of her subjugation to MAN, of her lack of principle, of her defective character, and of her unfitness to contend with and correct great social evils; and that just as far as they assume to be, or are taken to be representatives of "Women's Rights," the public judgment must irresistibly and inevitably carry over the evidence of their weakness and want of principle to the CAUSE for which they plead.\textsuperscript{199}

Dress reformers and suffragists debated which needed to occur first in order to achieve change in society: the vote or dress reform. In the 1850s, Gerrit Smith believed that a woman could not be elevated to an equal position with a man until she dressed as if she could do something. Others, including Stanton, disagreed: "We have no reason to hope that pantaloons would do more for us than they have done for man himself. The negro slave enjoys the most unlimited freedom in his attire... yet in spite of his dress and manhood, too, he is a slave still."\textsuperscript{200} Women's rights activists such as Stanton, Anthony, and Stone returned to wearing fashionable clothing by the end of the 1850s. They believed that the public ridicule they received was taking too much energy away from their goal of achieving women's suffrage.

\textsuperscript{200} Two important letters in this debate were exchanged between Gerrit Smith and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. They were reprinted in the Woman's Advocate 2 (February 1856).
Dress reformers committed to changing women's position in society differed from those involved in the women's rights movement in their interpretation of the role of fashion in women's oppression. The NDRA believed dress must be changed first before women would receive emancipation, while the women's rights advocates argued that legal change had to occur first in order to create a receptive atmosphere for changes in women's clothing. When women won the vote, they claimed, they could wear anything they pleased. Both wanted freedom for women, but they had different priorities. When it became clear that the women's rights movement was not placing dress reform as a high priority, dress reformers organized their own association.

At the NDRA's 1857 convention, Lucy Stone explained the women's rights leaders' position on the question of fashion. She stated that she held no expectations for a quick or extensive change in women's dress until "as a body" women "feel a deeper discontent with their present entire position." Stone stated:

While they suffer 'taxation without representation,' and are thus placed, politically, lower than thieves, gamblers, and blacklegs, and bear it without murmur; while, as wives they quietly surrender the name their mother gave them, and prefer to be called that of their legal owner, and to change it as often as they change husbands... They who can bear all of this are not in a condition to quarrel with the length of their skirts.

The NDRA fired back that if women changed how they dressed, then the vote, economic opportunities, and political offices would open up for them.

These two groups did not end their relationship. Both sides realized that they needed the other's support. In fact, Amelia Bloomer was elected one of the ten vice presidents at the first annual convention. Bloomer accepted the honorary position

\[201\] A letter first given at the National Dress Reform Association and later reprinted as "Letters Read at the Convention," *The Sibyl* 1 (July 1857): 198. 76
although she never attended any of the meetings. She did write, however, expressing her support for the new organization. She suggested that the NDRA "learn wisdom from the experience of the past" and not promote any particular style of dress. Rather she suggested that dress reformers remove "ali excrescences" from fashionable dress. 202 Bloomer wrote to Edwin Houghton on November 16, 1857 from Council Bluffs, Iowa. She stated:

I have learned through public prints, and private letters, that an attempt is being made, by the forming of associations, holding of conventions and otherwise, to revive the matter of a reform in woman's costume... It would be fortunate indeed if this discussion should result in securing a reform in all those styles and modes of woman's dress which are incompatible with good health, refined taste, simplicity, economy and beauty; and it is to be hoped that the labors of the associations formed for that purpose, may be so discreetly directed and faithfully prosecuted that they may go far to the accomplishment of that end.

While Bloomer noted that she "fully approve[d] of the object, and of every laudable effort in its behalf." she was not hopeful that "any great good will be accomplished by this new movement." Her reasons included that the work she and others attempted years earlier "met with signal disapprobation on the part of the public, and especially from my own sex. I see no good reason for supposing it will meet with anymore favor now; or that the people are ready to embrace what they but yesterday, as it were, so decidedly condemned." Bloomer continued, "It is idle to talk of materially reforming the dress of woman, or of introducing any permanent style of costume, so long as her education and employments are as superficial and trivial as now." Bloomer reminded reformers that first women must "feel the need of such reform, and understand the great benefits to her health and personal comfort that will accrue from it." Then

202 "Mrs. Bloomer on Dress Reform," The Sibyl 1 (September 15, 1856): 43.
women must "have the courage and independence to live up to her convictions and needs, ere any real, permanent reform can be accomplished."203

Letters passed for years between members of the National Dress Reform Association and the women's rights movement.204 Yet they could not agree on priorities or even a definition of women's rights. The dress reformers believed that fashion represented the single greatest source of women's oppression but did not agree on what rights, if any, women needed. Some NDRA members did support economic independence for women and women's suffrage. Other members were angered by the public's view that reform dress was directly tied to political demands made by the women's rights movement. Even Amelia Bloomer herself admitted that "in the minds of some people, the short dress and women's rights were inseparably connected."205 Since both reformers wore a similar type of trousers, whether full or straight-leg, it was impossible to convince the public that the NDRA did not share the ideology of the women's rights movement.206 The Association wanted to distance their costume from their politics. But in the nineteenth century, clothing was gender specific. By wearing a bifurcated garment of any kind, women appropriated male dress and thus, by connection, male privilege and power.

Although members of the National Dress Reform Association did not openly state that they wanted to wear pants because they wanted more power, their agenda did. In 1857, the NDRA passed a resolution asserting their belief that women had "RIGHTS to

205Bloomer, The Life and Writings, 70.
206For a complete look at the design origins and construction techniques of reform costumes see Gayle Fischer's, "Pantalets' and 'Turkish Trousers': Designing Freedom in the Mid-Nineteenth-Century United States," Feminist Studies 23 (Spring 1997): 111-140.
be secured and wrongs to be abolished." The resolution stated that the "TRUE way" to arrive at these rights lay in the improvement of women's health.\(^{207}\) The result is that women were asking for greater control over their bodies and in effect greater control over their lives. In 1859, the NDRA added an amendment to their constitution stating that "the objects of this Association are . . . to promote a better observance of the laws of health and the freedom and elevation of woman generally."\(^{208}\) Since supporters directly correlated fashion's excesses and women's oppression they increased their efforts to awaken women to the realization that fashion not only robbed them of their health but of their rights as well. Dress reformers combined both the arguments of health reformers and women's rights activists.

Between 1855 and 1860 dress reform proponents held conventions in Glen Haven, Canastota, Syracuse, Cortland, Skaneateles, Auburn, and Waterloo. Although a small group convened in Middletown in 1861, the announced larger gathering was canceled due to the outbreak of the Civil War. No convention was held the following year, but in 1863, the National Dress Reform Association announced plans for a convention in Rochester.\(^{209}\) In spite of the war, which did exact a heavy toll from reform activities in general, the Rochester meeting suggests that dress reform was still very much alive. Between six to eight hundred women and men filled Corinthian Hall during the two-day session. Many of the women appeared in their reform garments. Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck was elected president for the following year and plans were laid for an 1864 convention in Middletown, New York.\(^{210}\)

\(^{208}\)"Dress Reform Convention," The Sibyl 4 (July 1, 1859): 577-584.
\(^{209}\)The Sibyl 5 (May 1861): 932, 940; The Sibyl 7 (May 1863): 1140.
\(^{210}\)The Sibyl 7 (July 1863): 1153-1154; The Sibyl 8 (May 1864): 1236.
Although the Civil War interrupted the work of dress reformers, the movement did not disappear. The executive committee report at the 1863 NDRA convention stated that there had been more converts to dress reform in the past twelve months than in the previous twelve years. Whether or not this was a direct response to the war is not clear. Individual reformers, such as Dr. Mary Walker, did voice their opinions publicly. Walker, who became an unofficial doctor in the army field hospitals in Virginia in 1862, was officially appointed assistant army surgeon with the Fifty-second Ohio Regiment in 1863. She wore the same uniform as that of her fellow officers. In regard to her war experiences, Walker wrote to The Sibyl, "I fully believe that this war will do much for the reform dress, and much for the equality of sexes." Walker spoke at length about her service during the Civil War at the National Dress Reform Association's convention in Syracuse in 1866. Members asked if Walker would be willing to speak: "We have watched with interest your course in helping put down the tyrant in the South and now we much desire your aid in crushing the tyranny of Fashion." At one point during her speech, Walker proposed that since the public was so agitated over what to do with Jefferson Davis, she believed the worst punishment would be to dress him in hoops and long skirts and require him to do the work of a woman managing a four-story house. Such a punishment Walker believed would exceed any other that could be devised. Wild applause followed her suggestion.

The Civil War provided dress reformers new hope for liberation from their fashionable garments. Although the war brought a halt to direct efforts to gain women's

212 "Letter from Dr. Walker," The Sibyl (November 1862): 1092.
rights, it did expand women's "sphere" of activity. Dress reformers saw their work intimately tied to the war effort. Dress reformers believed that the "movement for a Reform in Woman's Dress [was] an important item in this great warfare." Speaking for the NDRA, Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck stated how fashion hindered women's lives, especially if women wanted to be a part of the war effort:

The cry of "Invasion" is heard in the land... The men of the North have not yet learned the full need of women's help, but they may come to it soon. Women and Negroes have been held politically in the same scale for a long time; but as we can now see very evident signs that the "irrepressible nigger" is to be made the most of, we, too, may be called upon to do something besides scraping lint and sewing shirts... Helpless, dependent beings that we are - shackled and bound down by false customs and fashions.

Dress reformers borrowed ideas from abolitionists and incorporated slave images into their official rhetoric. Previous references to women's enslavement to fashion were not uncommon, but with the coming of war, they exploded and became more explicitly related to slavery in the South. Women were told to cast away their own "chains" and to let go of fashion's control over them and adopt the freedom of rational dress. The NDRA adopted the women's rights activists' argument that physical emancipation equaled political emancipation.

With many young men dying in battle, the dress reformers made it known that it was more important than ever that women be as fit as possible and that they give birth to healthy infants. Hasbrouck urged women to be aware of their "motherly and womanly duties and responsibilities" in times of war. "Nothing," she told her audience, "will so

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bless yourself and aid your country" as adopting the American Costume. Hasbrouck took advantage of the upheaval caused by the war to expand the arguments made by the water-cure dress reformers, that dress reform was a patriotic duty. Nineteenth-century fashion jeopardized the strength of families and the stability of the nation.

Shortly after the Civil War, the National Dress Reform Association decided not to meet. Although it is not clear why, internal rivalries may have played a role. Jackson and Hasbrouck, the major leaders, disagreed about the rationale for dress reform. While Jackson believed that the organization should stress health issues, Hasbrouck wanted the force of the movement to be connected to women's rights. By 1864, members remained in one organization but divided into these two sides. That same year, The Sibyl ceased publication due to the increase in production costs and a decrease in subscriptions; it had been the glue that held the Association together. Approximately three months after Lee surrendered to Grant, the National Dress Reform Association met for the last time in Rochester, New York, on June 21, 1865.

While hydropathy lost favor, the women's rights leaders returned to their long skirts, the utopian communities broke apart, and the National Dress Reform Association disbanded, the dress reform movement did not end. Reformers continued to capture the attention of women and men, but in the 1870s would transform the tactics of the movement. The water curists' emphasis on pure life made them seem hopelessly sectarian as the reform movements of the post-Civil War period sought to influence public policy and to appeal to a broader spectrum of people. The health reformers still championed dress reform and women's right to a healthy, active life, but their primary commitment was to hygiene and natural living rather than to the emancipation of women.

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The women's rights activists tried to find broad-based support in the 1850s, but unfortunately in the period during which they wore the reform dress they found themselves alienating their constituency. Their primary focus was women's rights and for them, their reform clothing obstructed that goal. Members of the National Dress Reform Association believed that they were sustained not by mass support but rather by their sense of personal development. The rest of society would emulate their example. The ultimate goal for them was the adoption of moral, rational clothing. Other social changes for women, including the vote, would follow. By the end of the 1860s, dress reformers had become isolated from both the women's rights movement and also the water-cure community. The NDRA clung so tightly to the belief that fashionable dress was to blame for many of society's evils that it became rigid and inflexible. As an organization, the National Dress Reform Association was not willing to compromise. But in the 1870s, the club movement took up both personal example and broad support for the dress reform movement. Clubwomen's approach would prove more pragmatic and would enhance the reformers' chances of influencing prevailing fashion.
CHAPTER 6
THE CLUBWOMEN

In 1866, Eliza Hurd De Wolfe was arrested on a misdemeanor charge for wearing men's clothing in San Francisco, California. The law stated that women were not allowed to appear in public in male attire. De Wolfe appeared in court to answer the charge. De Wolfe's husband argued that every article of Eliza's clothing with the exception of her pantaloons, was precisely the same as those ordinarily worn by women. Thus her attire corresponded to the female sex. Eliza made no attempt to conceal her gender, "for the boys in the street recognized her at once and showed their ill-bred by shouting. 'There goes the woman in man's dress.' "220 Eliza Hurd De Wolfe did not receive a fine, but the judge encouraged her to change her style of dress. Although De Wolfe believed herself to be attired in gender appropriate apparel, observers saw a woman dressed in clothing of the opposite sex. De Wolfe's case represents the continued belief that pants belonged to men and that if women adopted trousers then they denied their femininity or, worse, became men.

Clubwomen stated over and over again that they had no intention of trying to persuade women to dress like men. Abba G. Woolson, chairman of the Boston Reform Committee, stated, "It is asserted that they who preach dress reform for women desire

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merely that they shall dress like men. Heaven forbid! is our response." Woolson added that perhaps the only feature of men's clothing the reformer envied was the pockets. The problem for these new dress reformers was that the public still connected short dresses with Amelia Bloomer and Dr. Mary Walker. Reform garments continued to be an object of ridicule no matter what they were called or the reasons for wearing them. Throughout the late nineteenth century, dress reformers continued to draw large and sometimes hostile crowds when they appeared in public. Rather than dispersing the mobs, police officers often arrested the women dressed in short gowns and pants, thereby making arrest a risk dress reformers commonly took. The jeering laughter of the crowds, the physical attacks, and the satirical poems and articles published in magazines and newspapers wore away at dress reformers. Some women succumbed to the pressure and returned to their socially acceptable long dresses. Others were invigorated and renewed their commitment to the reform. These new reformers understood the "implied idea that pants are allied to power" and that to wear pants openly was to question the nineteenth-century gender system. But they believed that the earlier dress-reform efforts had "unquestionably delayed the advent of ... a permanent reform of the dress of American women." Where the new dress reformers chose to start was to resign themselves to the "necessary evil" of skirts and to focus their attention on what they could hide under their skirts: their underwear. They encouraged women to shorten their skirts from four to six inches above the ground and to discard their corsets. To alter those garments not immediately visible to the eye did not visually challenge the gender system. The dress reform movement would find success by changing women's garments slowly from the inside out. Perhaps the new dress reformers were sacrificing the visionary context in

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223 Woolson, *Dress Reform*, xi.
which dress reform had been argued by the members of the National Dress Reform Association. Working toward a world of diminished gender distinctions seemed impossible. But creating more healthful underwear that allowed women to be more comfortable seemed possible. In fact, one could argue that dress reformers had made some progress based on the large display of rational undergarments at the Centennial Exhibition in 1876.

This new wave of reformers wanted to disconnect themselves from the earlier "radical" reformers. Yet many of the same arguments for alternatives to women's dress continued. Repeated were the ideas already expressed in the literature of the health reformers. Contemporary fashions promoted bad taste, bad hygiene, and bad morals. In a lecture before the New England Woman's Club, Frances E. Russell summed up the arguments against the nature of women's dress in the nineteenth century:

When I see women's skirts, the shortest of them lying inches deep along the foul floors . . . and from which she sweeps up and carries to her home the germs of stealthy pestilences; when I see a ruddy, romping school-girl, in her first long dress . . . afraid of the stone walls in the blueberry fields, or standing aloof from the game of ball, or turning sadly away from the ladder which her brother is climbing to the cherry tree . . . When I consider these things, I feel that I have ceased to deal with blunders in dress and have entered the category of crime.224

Women had long been involved in voluntary philanthropic and reform associations, but the clubs of the second half of the nineteenth century brought to the forefront a more confident, secular-minded woman, determined to cement existing links between the home and the public sphere. Two of the best-known of these clubs were Sorosis in New York (1868) and the New England Women's Club (1868) in Boston. Sorosis originated as a

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protest by women against their exclusion from a dinner in honor of Charles Dickens.\textsuperscript{225} Its members were business and professional women who supported greater opportunities for their gender. The club's "purpose is to assist women to combine their best efforts instead of working in isolated endeavor year after year and generation after generation."\textsuperscript{226} The New England Woman's Club had its beginning later that same year in Boston. Both were committed to members' self-improvement and community service. Both were involved in dress reform.

Not all clubwomen of the nineteenth century dedicated themselves to dress reform. Furthermore, many women who came together in clubs did so without declared feminist intent. Yet the clubwomen involved in Sorosis and the New England Women's Club were nonetheless feminists, women with varied motives working together to enhance female self-awareness and solidarity. The challenge before these new dress reformers was to encourage women to change their lives as fully as possible, at the same time making the dress reform movement accessible and sympathetic to women who made various approaches to personal change. The difficulty they encountered was sustaining a vision of personal transformation while building a movement that was capable of changing the political and social structures.

The remedy for women's condition, reformers believed, lay in continued group action. Many had been members of the National Dress Reform Association a decade earlier. Dress reformers hoped to establish committees within women's voluntary club organizations. One influential group in the movement was the Dress Reform Committee established within the New England Women's Club under the directorship of Abba G. Woolson. The committee recommended that women abandon the corset, simplify the


dress, shorten the skirts, and hang everything from the shoulders. The committee of women also developed a new undergarment that they called the "chemise," which was a combination of chemise and pantaloons. To attract attention the committee sponsored and then published in book form a series of lectures, four by eminent female physicians and a fifth by Woolson herself, on the hazards of fashionable dress.227

Several clubs across the country looked to the examples in the East in order to establish their own dress reform committees. One group in Des Moines, Iowa, wrote to the Dress Reform Committee seeking assistance. Abba Woolson replied stating that perhaps in Des Moines the changes in women's dress could be more radical but "We in Boston can do but little for no place is more conservative than one of our old and large New England cities. We find conservatism even in the Woman's Club; and to make our work generally acceptable to all the members, we have to proceed slowly and cautiously."228 Woolson continued:

In wise hands any dress reform to-day which offers healthful, serviceable and beautiful attire to women in place of this present, unhealthful, hampering and hideous garments cannot but succeed. Only let somebody invent, make and display such a costume. ... I believe it would be adopted by a sufficient number to insure its final acceptance by all. Till such a costume appears, we must do our best to remodel and improve the old. I long, however, to see it supersede entirely by something better than we have yet seen.229

Dress reformers now called for a "strong" yet "subtle coup d'état." In her March 1873 address to the New England Women's Club, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps called for

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227 Abba L. Woolson, *Dress Reform: A Series of Lectures Delivered in Boston on Dress as It Affects the Health of Women* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1874).
229 Letter from Woolson to Harbert: 2-3.
clubwomen to come together in order to reform fashionable American women into "rational creatures." In suggesting a garment, Phelps thought that "something of the nature of the American costume- gymnasium dress, beach suit, the Bloomer, call it what you will - must take the place of our present dress, before the higher life - moral, intellectual, political, social, or domestic can ever begin for women." She admired the earlier dress reformers. Phelps told her audiences that "unlike your grandmothers, who dressed sensibly and accomplished so much," you are "dressed to kill." But Phelps was more pragmatic in her approach. She, like other dress reformers, were aware of the public ridicule that had damaged the efforts of earlier reformers. They realized that public opinion had to play a role in the direction the movement would take in the late nineteenth century. Consequently, later reformers were less vocal about change in public. They would work within their own organizations to convince women to turn away from fashion and embrace independence and freedom. Gradual change was the key for these dress reformers. The report of the Dress Committee of the New England Women's Club stated, "Our committee thought it wise to conform as far as possible to the prevailing modes, and to abandon such only as were irreconcilable with that health, beauty, service and economy which it should be our aim to seek." Abba Goold Woolson stated that even if radical reforms were desirable, they were not possible. Remembering the defeats of the past she wrote, "Any endeavor to introduce it [radical dress] today would only invite another defeat, to dishearten reformers in the future." Woolson continued by stating that "a marked and sudden alteration in her appearance would find favor with but a few

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230Elizabeth Stuart Phelps speech "Woman's Dress" was later published under the title, *What to Wear* (Boston: Osgood and Company, 1873).
231Phelps, *What to Wear?*, 33-34.
and that these few, however heroic, must ultimately yield to the prejudices of the many."  

Clubwomen did not want to be directly linked to the early women's rights activists. Sorosis stated that the club was "in no sense a 'woman's rights' association, for while the question has its strong advocates in the Club, it also has its decided opponents." Yet, in their choice of undergarments, the Boston Dress Reform Committee endorsed a "hygienic" full undergarment made of cotton or linen, known as the "Emancipation Suit." It was invented by Susan Taylor Converse and among the special features noted in the advertising was a bodice arranged so that the breasts were free from "compression and irritation," and a set of buttons to which skirts could be attached in a neatly layered fashion.  

The clubwomen might have feared that discussions of religion, politics, or women's rights might divide the organization, but the language of the earlier reformers was still contained in their agenda. Members made it clear that "neither does Sorosis meet for the purpose of showing off its pretty dresses... The gauge of worth is brains not dress. If the wearer of an alpaca suit writes an essay or poem, she stands upon equal footing with the woman of the same intellectual caliber clad in silks and velvets."  

Whether the reformer wore alpaca or silk, she was a woman of the middle to upper-middle class. Indeed, these women had the most to change about their fashionable garments. Yet clubwomen also believed that there was a certain kind of woman who could best carry out the task of reforming dress. The ideal clubwoman possessed all the traits required, including social leadership, a desire to work for the betterment of society, and strong-minded intelligence. Leaders believed that if enough clubwomen banded

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233Woolson, Dress Reform, viii.
234The papers of the Dress Reform Committee, the New England Women's Club, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.
together in the spirit of reform, they could resist the forces of fashion and make it acceptable for everyone to dress reasonably and hygienically. Fanny Steele, a Chicago clubwoman, encouraged her sisters to "Let the rich--let the makers of fashion be moved for the good of humanity in this thing." 236

In 1873, Julia Ward Howe addressed the First Woman's Congress of the Association for the Advancement of Woman in New York. She cautioned women not to wear fashionable "dresses of the costliest make and fabric." Howe continued by stating that the most useful lesson for clubwomen is "to care for objects wiser and more generous than the adornment of their own persons at undue expense and trouble." Reform dress provided a simpler and less costly alternative for women. The second objective of the association of women is "to make a generous use of the money saved from superfluous adornment, by investing it in enterprises useful to society, and helpful to the work of women in particular." 237 Howe's message was clear in 1873:

Our present habits of dress are so exorbitant that men, when they have given us more jewelry than they can afford, and more silk dresses than we can wear, providing for us expensive households, full of bad order and worse economy, think that we have had our share of such profits as their business can bring them. . . Of one thing let us always be mindful, in our teaching and in our practice: extravagance and meanness usually go together, and the woman who has too much on her back is apt to have little in her pocket and less in her heart. The saving of money from waste and useless expense is an object which should be set before Associations of Women. 238


237 Julia Ward Howe, "How Can Women Best Associate?": 9. Speech presented at the First Woman's Congress of the Association for the Advancement of Woman, 1873. The Advancement of Women Papers, Box No. 1a, Folder 2, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

238 Howe, "How Can Women Best Associate?": 9.
This idea of "extravagance" and "useless expense" was an argument used by many of the earlier dress reformers. Likewise, the notion of "conspicuous waste" will find resonance with dress reformers in the 1890s.

In 1873, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps wrote to the Association for the Advancement of Women's Committee on Dress, established by Sorosis, reminding them of the urgency with which women's dress must be altered and that a model of reform was not the members of the organization but rather the working-class woman. She wrote, "If our 'low born' lady can wear her dress five or six inches from the ground, her clothing hung throughout from her shoulders, drapery to the extent only of two light, unlined skirts, no corsets. . . . if one lady can do so much as this, what could not one hundred, one thousand do!"239 Phelps argued that the First Woman's Congress in 1873 could find the answer to the question of "Woman in Relation to Her Dress" by simply adopting rational dress. But it is this connection of comfortable garb to working-class women that made the reform of women's clothing that much more difficult. Phelps was firm in her letter to her fellow upper-middle-class women. She reminded them that they did have a role in the reform of women's dress. Past reformers and contemporary models, such as working-class women, provided the examples, but clubwomen provided the numbers needed to make reform dress a reality for women:

It is not to be denied that a large or influential body of women might do more to remedy the abuse of their dress than is herein suggested. I speak from the confidence of experience when I affirm that if they cannot do as much, their stock of invention and determination is smaller than I give them credit for.240

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239 Letter from Elizabeth Stuart Phelps to Ladies of the Committee on Dress, September 1873: 1. Sorosis Papers. Folder 2, Box 1A. Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.
240 Letter from Phelps to the Committee, September 1873: 2.
A place to start, noted Phelps, was for "five hundred women to remove their hats in church."\textsuperscript{241} Certainly many more would follow, and shortly skirts would reach the top of boots and corsets would be abandoned. Phelps was confident that more would come from this act than all the efforts of reformers thus far combined.

Yet dress reformers were concerned over women's accessibility to reform dress due to cost. The law required designers of reform garments to obtain a patent on their patterns. The manufacturer paid a fee for the privilege of using the pattern, and this fee was passed on to the consumer. Reformers fought against having to get patents because they feared the cost would prevent reform garments from becoming universal. In a letter to the \textit{Woman's Journal}, one woman expressed the feeling that there was a monopoly on the reform garments which kept them from reaching the women who needed them most, working-class women. The Boston Dress Reform Committee admitted that the garments in their store cost more, but denied that there was any kind of monopoly. The Committee argued that as long as the demand for reform garments was low, they could not sell them for less. Besides the expense of patents, there was another reasons for the increased cost of reform clothing. The fit was an important consideration. For best results, seamstresses made the garments to fit the individual and this increased the cost of the clothing. But these made-to-order items were recommended over ready-to-wear clothing.\textsuperscript{242}

The New England Women's Club opened a store, called a Dress Reform Room, in order to give advice, demonstrate various garments, provide patterns, and take orders for healthful and rational undergarments. Besides making reform dress more available to women, the store was a profitable commercial venture for the clubwomen. As new business women, the reformers employed seamstresses and approved patterns. Later the

\textsuperscript{241}Letter from Phelps to the Committee, September 1873: 2.
\textsuperscript{242}A Dress Reformer, "Dress- Reform Monopoly," \textit{The Woman's Journal} 10 (February 1879): 57.
store grew in size and needed to be moved to larger quarters. In fact, the establishment relocated at least three more times over the next decade.243 More women were hired to sew the garments, for orders had exceeded the capacity of the staff. However, Boston's Dress Reform Room was not without its obstacles. The Committee recorded problems with construction of some garments and several returns. There were problems with the account books and difficulties with management. There was the question of patenting the undergarments such as the emancipation suit and chemiloons and patterns that the Dress Reform Committee endorsed in order to avoid lawsuits by others who claimed the garments as their own.244 Yet, advertisements and notices in The Woman's Journal showed that other cities across the country, including Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, had dress reform stores and seamstresses of their own.

While dress reformers wanted to make available affordable, comfortable garments, they did not advocate abolishing class distinctions in dress. Dress should be healthy and attractive for all women, but each economic level should have its own distinctive attire. Annie Jenness Miller argued that this would prevent a working woman from having to spend so much on clothing. Miller used her cook as an example:

I do not regard my cook as well dressed when she wears a satin dress, at seventy-five cents a yard, trimmed with cotton lace, to church and for holidays, and since she cannot afford to buy a better quality I do not consider that satin belongs to her position. She is well dressed when she wears a serviceable cotton or woolen fabric only.245


Unfortunately, Miller's intentions point to an elitist attitude shared by many dress reformers. Club rhetoric was well intended but still patronizing to the working class. Clubwomen did not respond to the needs of the lower-class woman beyond telling her what to wear and why. Most lectures were in large cities; few reformers went into rural areas. Working-class women or farmers' wives were never actively incorporated into the clubs. In the end, fashion divided middle-class women from the other classes. Some reformers might have wanted to challenge that system but most sought reform without ending class distinctions.

Dress reformers realized that working-class women were not bound to restrictive fashions. In fact, there was a connection between rational dress and working-class or immigrant women. Examples of comfortable clothing surrounded them everyday. Helen Campbell, a dress reformer, tells of a scene in New York Central Park of "a fashionably dressed child sadly watching a little Italian girl, whose scant clothing was no hindrance to her rolling on the grass and dancing with the flying leaves." The young girl kicked her hat and screamed that she hated her clothes. "A little respite, a small bit of comparative freedom had this poor rich child when her grandpapa, arriving on the spot, demanded that her long cloak should be taken off and her long frock pinned up." Yet, Campbell stated that the child's freedom lasted only a short time, for "the unfortunate girl baby went back into bondage, the slave of fashion."246

Clubwomen needed to take these examples and rework them in order to appeal to white, middle-class women. The tactic of the dress reform movement was to distribute information and patterns. With increased knowledge and access to the garments, the clubwomen believed that American middle-class women would change their fashions. As mentioned, clubs sprang up across the country using the New England organizations

as examples. Abba G. Woolson wrote to a fellow club member, Miss Peabody, in 1875
and noted that "When I go out of Boston and talk Dress Reform, I rejoice at the
enthusiasm created, and think the adoption of the chemiloon by all human beings is but a
question of time." Woolson lectured across the country to young women about
adopting reform dress. She displayed examples, offered patterns with instructions, and
continued the arguments made by earlier reformers. In another letter to Miss Peabody,
Woolson stated that advertising was key to the movement. Woolson met with a woman
in Portland, Oregon, who had great business success with her Dress-Reform room. "I
hope this spring to give a talk on Dress Reform in Portland, as very many ladies came to
me when I was there three weeks ago and requested me to lecture them upon the matter. I
was surprised to find how well our work was known there." On the other coast,
Woolson received a letter from a woman in Candia, New Hampshire. After one of her
lectures, Woolson left several patterns of the Committee's garments to be borrowed by
anyone who wished them. One thankful woman wrote to tell Woolson that "eight ladies
of the village have cut patterns from them, so I fancy there will be some chemiloons seen
this spring on the clothes line in that remote town. Long may they wave!"

Some members of the Dress Reform Committee in Boston worried that their
ideas would be skewed, misrepresented, and cost them sales of their own reform clothing.
Woolson argued that it was her policy to spread dress reform everywhere, that they
should be "missionaries and not merchants." She sought "to lead every woman to wear
chemiloons and sensible clothes who could be induced to do so, and to that end,
welcoming gladly the offer of any good worker woman anywhere to make them at her

247 Letter from Abba G. Woolson to Miss Peabody, February 28, 1875. Dress Reform
Committee Correspondence 1874-1876. Box 11, Folder 57. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.
248 Letter from Abba G. Woolson to Miss Peabody, March 26, 1875: 4. Dress Reform
Committee Correspondence 1874-1876. Box 11, Folder 57. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.
249 Abba G. Woolson noted the New Hampshire's woman's letter in a letter to Miss Peabody,
March 31, 1875. Box 11, Folder 57. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.
own wish, and to sell them if possible." Woolson did not believe in patenting patterns or restricting their sale. "I [will] give away all I have time to cut, and shall always give them away." Woolson believed that, from Oregon to New Hampshire, exposure to sensible clothing was all that was needed to bring success to the movement. Dress reform was "to be a broad, benevolent, national reform, which should be spread aboard by every means at my command." The goal for Woolson was "not only a room in Boston, but a depot for such garments in every principal city in America and no selfish, money-making spirit of any one dealer anywhere shall prevail with me to turn the earnest labors of the past decades to years into a narrow endeavor to fill one woman's bucket." Believing that universal adoption of reform dress was around the corner, Woolson could not imagine altering the goals of the Committee from one of adoption of rational clothing to one of money. Ultimately there was a division within the Boston club. But most shared Woolson's feelings when she stated that she would not "surrender our long-sought aims." She vowed to "oppose with every bit of force there is left in me, mind or body. To build up branch-rooms in Portland, in San Francisco, in Cincinnati, in New York, [this] is the one great need of Dress reform."\textsuperscript{250}

Woolson and other reformers were frustrated by the cautious nature of the clubs involved in dress reform. They wanted major changes in women's outer garments. They found it unfortunate that:

A body of women... like the New England Women's Club, concludes, after a summing up of the evils of our present mode of dress, which is an indictment against every woman conforming to it, of helping to make both woman and the future child weaker in health and morals: "We women of the present century must attempt no marked alteration in our present appearance."\textsuperscript{251}

\textsuperscript{250}Letter from Abba G. Woolson to Miss Peabody, April 21, 1875. Box 11. Folder 57. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.

\textsuperscript{251}Augusta Cooper Bristol, "Enlightened Motherhood," 17-18. The Association for the Advancement of Women Papers, Box 1a, Folder 2. The Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.
For these dress reformers, radical change would have to wait for the next generation. Augusta Cooper Bristol, a member of the New England Woman's Club, argued that if clubwomen could convince the younger generation to adopt sensible clothing, then significant changes would take place in women's dress. She wrote "a recommendation and request to the young ladies in graduating classes in all our institutions of learning that they will pledge themselves to unite with them in abating these evils by wearing lighter, looser and simpler garments, gradually working towards an undraperied costume, and discarding all prominent devices to distinguish sex, they will take one of the most effective steps towards the emancipation of woman and promotion of enlightened motherhood."  

A letter from Mrs. Kendall to Mrs. Wolcott, both members of the New England Woman's Club, continues the argument.

For myself I fully believe that perfection may such be reached in many years. . . I saw a baby up at Vassar College, 16 mos. old, who had been dressed in reformed clothing from his birth! He never had any regular baby clothes made for him! The mother was teaching another young mother to do likewise. That's the way things spread.

Women were to use their moral superiority and their influence upon their children to create change: "An attempt to revolutionize the habits, tastes, and inherited tendencies of the present, seems a hopeless task. But the pliant, unbiased mind of the child and youth are the ground in which seeds of truth may be planted with hope."

Northampton, Massachusetts.

253 Letter from Mrs. Wolcott to Mrs. Kendall, June 7, 1875. Box 11, Folder 57. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.
Historiography credits the bloomer costume of the 1850s with the origin of bifurcated garments for women, but suggests that after the demise of the fad by the end of the decade, reform dress for women disappeared for almost a half of century. Such was not the case. Clubwomen of the 1870s and 1880s continued the dress reform movement. These women were aware of the earlier campaign to reform dress and saw themselves as simply using different tactics toward the same end. While clubwomen might have preferred that the public not connect their efforts to the Bloomerites, the connection was still there. Frances Russell wrote in 1895:

> It was especially against this infringement by social tyranny of woman’s right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" that the first crusade had been made in the fifties. The seeming failure of that effort seemed to many to be a final decision. But the world is coming to understand at last that those early reforms were simply in advance of their age. Could their counsels have prevailed, as time would have modified them, very different might have been the present condition of our country - a better fulfillment of its early promise.²⁵⁵

Dress reform by the end of the nineteenth century would take off in many different directions, yet still focus on the goal of healthful garments that permitted freedom of movement. A woman we know only as S. P. Fowler from Vineland, New Jersey, wrote in 1878: "Think I have never talked with a stranger who was prejudiced against the dress without making the path easier for the next one he may meet in the American costume."²⁵⁶ In one instance, bloomers worn in the women's college gymnasiums, survived into the twentieth century. A modification of the outfit went to the seashore in the form of a swimming suit. Another garment would develop that would allow women to take


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advantage of a new form of mobility, the bicycle. And a New Woman would be riding
the cycle in her bifurcated skirt.
CHAPTER 7
THE NEW WOMAN

In 1895, Lenore Sherwood, a writer for the National Tribune, a weekly newspaper for Union army veterans and their families, described the New Woman:

She belongs to clubs, leagues and reform movements, she talks State and National politics, city government and social ethics. She wears common-sense shoes and dresses sans corsets and heavy clothing. She walks with a spring, her body yielding to every motion of her supple figure. She superintends her home and directs her household, is a companion for her husband and a mentor for her children, and still finds time to read, study and observe and keep in touch with the times... Another glory of the new woman is her absolute independence. She goes to concerts or the theater unattended, or with one of her own sex, without fear of unkind criticism.\(^{257}\)

For Sherwood, the New Woman of the late nineteenth century existed as a real person, an individual who did not endure public ridicule. But whether image or reality, she did spark furious public debates.

The New Woman symbolized the innovative period of cultural unrest for both women seeking alternative models and for society as a whole. This new image for women focused on distinctive external characteristics associated with changes in appearance and behavior: the all-American "Gibson Girl" was wearing a bifurcated

garment and riding a bicycle. These external modifications were controversial because they symbolized the social, cultural and personal changes that seemed at the time to have transformed the very meaning of womanhood. In 1890, an editorial in *Life* magazine likened these changes in women to a revolution:

There is coming in this American Republic a struggle compared with which the late War of the Rebellion was a mere boxing match... Increased education and closer association with men at work is showing the majority of women what slaves they have been to fashion, and before long there is going to be a revolt of strong-minded women.  

The New Woman did not appear with any consistency in the newspapers and magazines until the 1880s in America, and the term itself did not gain widespread use until the 1890s. She was young and independent. She was comfortable in public places. And she wore a shirt-waist blouse and split skirt. Frances Russell, the dress reformer, wrote, "The newspapers deserve our thanks for giving us, along with fashion illustrations of dehumanized proportions, which disgust more than they please, pictures of bicycle and gymnasium suits which do not interfere with freedom of movement and do not strike the observer as immodest." The New Woman might not have called her garments reform dress, but overall her simplified clothing reaffirmed the public fear that reform meant the rise of a hybrid, the "manly woman," who advertised the abandonment of her domestic role by dividing her skirts and taking to the streets as career woman, clubwoman, and student. The woman who put on divided skirts and took to the roads on her bicycle decided where she wanted to go and what she planned to do when she got there, regardless of a male companion, or lack of one. "Reform, ladies, and be reasonable, but leave man undisputed possession of his breeches. You can be reasonable in dress without

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258 *Life* (November 27, 1890): 302.
these," pleaded one journalist in 1891. Remember, the outfit that announced subliminally that a man was in control carried the same message when a woman wore it.

The fact was that women's position had changed. Nineteenth-century voluntary associations, female colleges, and reform movements provided a base from which women could support each other in developing new ideas, experimenting with new possibilities in dress, and launching political arguments in their defense. Women's involvement in reform movements, including dress reform, consolidated the collective power of female organizations and "furnished women a base of expertise from which to shape public policy for a generation." Women were graduating from colleges, participating in the bicycle craze, and taking advantage of new employment opportunities. Increased movement outside the home affected dress; tight lacing, high-heeled boots, and wide hoops gave way to "rational" dress more appropriate for walking or riding in public. Despite attacks by contemporary illustrators and writers, women moved away from a stereotype that bound them exclusively to the home. In 1893, Harper's Weekly noted that the "evolution of sensible dress" had kept pace with women's expanded participation in colleges, professions, and the work force.

Reformers believed that changes were inevitable. In 1891, the first convention of the National Council of Women was held in Washington, D.C., and members appointed a Dress Reform Committee. The committee presented its conclusions and recommendation in 1892 at Chicago as a Symposium on Women's Dress. The participants gave credit over and over to the growing women's education movement and the need to dress

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262See Flexner, Century of Struggle, 179-181.

263The proceedings were published in The Arena 6 (September 1892): 488-597; 6 (October 1892): 621-644.
comfortably when in competition with men on campuses. They expressed hope that with education women would "reach a plane where fashion will no longer enslave her." Reformers encouraged every college woman to wear a modified form of the gymnasium costume in the streets. Through their example, reform dress would soon be accepted by all. One veteran reformer noted, "just imagine the college girls and society belles, who are already emancipated from the long drapery and corsets for the business of physical culture, simply extending the occasions upon which a comfortable and convenient costume may be worn." This extension of the garment would mean "the high-school girls would follow the college girls, and the clerks, typewriters, and all working girls would be with them; and you and I, with gray in our hair, would soon join in the glad procession." The world was changing enough to allow women to participate in some active sports and thus wear bloomers for home wear and outdoor exercise in the 1890s.

Greater acceptance of higher education for women provided an environment that encouraged physical activity. Arguments made by health reformers for almost half a century, that illness and invalidism was high among middle-class women because of the lack of physical exercise, was finally reaching an accepting ear. Likewise, the 1890s saw the explosion in popularity of all major sports by both men and women in the United States. Tennis, swimming, and especially bicycling were widely adopted throughout the middle class. Tennis required mobility; swimming required buoyancy; and bicycling demanded interaction of the female clothed body with a machine. Each activity required appropriate clothing.

The popularity of the "wheel" was an important link in the shortening of skirts and loosening of bodices in the twentieth century. The "bicycle girl's" bifurcated outer

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264 The Arena 6 (September 1892): 493.
265 The Arena 6 (September 1892): 503.
266 The Arena 6 (August 1892): 338.
garments fit the dress reformer's goal of clothing that allowed for freedom of movement. Mary Sargent Hopkins wrote an article in *The Ladies' World*, a Boston publication, on "rainy-day dress" in 1898, suggesting that dress reformers owed much to the bicycle:

So much freedom has been conceded to the bicycler in the matter of abbreviated skirts... So the women who are obliged to be out in all weathers owe much to the wheel, or it is a great comfort to be able to walk the streets in a comfortable, short skirt and not be the cynosure of all eyes, both masculine and feminine... Talk about the emancipated woman! The right to earn her own living on terms of equality with man, to vie with him in work, sport or politics, to vote, to hold office to be president as well as queen and empress, would never bring the blessed sense of freedom that an outdoor costume, sans trailing skirts and entangling folds and plus a short skirt and bloomers, gives to the average woman.267

References to women's involvement in sports and the related subject of clothing usually focus on the 1890s. Yet as early as the 1840s, dress and health reformers had advocated the need for exercise and consequently a change in appropriate dress for outdoor activities. But participation was private, behind the closed doors of colleges or retreats. When interest in exercise reached "craze" proportions in the decade of the 1890s, visibility was inevitable. Riding a bike was a public physical performance. Reform clothing was no longer confined to the private boundaries of utopian communities, college gymnasiums, or water-cure resorts. Consequently, one result of this public participation in sports was an increase in acceptance of the changes in women's clothing by the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. As their lives changed, so did women's clothing. Dress Reformers of the 1890s gained greater public acceptance to cast off whalebone and cycle down the street. An 1895 *Life* cover provided an image exemplifying the New Woman as fashionable, gender-bending rebel: She stood proudly, even defiantly, behind her fallen cycle, dressed in shirt and bloomers, with her wardrobe...

of man-tailored shirtwaists, collars and cuffs, and athletic gear falling out of her suitcases. The bicycle served as a symbol of freedom of movement and liberation from numerous restrictions on women’s behavior. Dress reformers were jubilant over the gains at the end of the century: “The corset has practically disappeared except so far as the individual chooses to retain it. As the old cramping machine it does not exist.” Women had gained freedom of movement. "The old and the new must meet and shake hands in the dawn of the twentieth century.”

Yet the cycling phenomenon and the changes in women’s dress were not without opposition. Conservative groups such as the Boston Women’s Rescue League denounced cycling as unwomanly and rallied against its demoralizing influence. In 1895 a Long Island school board forbade female teachers to ride bicycles to school on the grounds that "see[ing] their lady teachers... dismount from a bicycle is conducive to the creation of immoral thoughts.” The image of women in pants continued to threaten traditional gender roles. In an 1895 article entitled "The Evolution of Dress," women were warned that "the wearing of such garments will do more to unseat womankind and rob her of that innate modesty which is her greatest charm than aught else.” Issues regarding morality and women’s reform dress had been around since the days of the water-cure dress reformers. Little had changed in the arguments, but now proponents outnumbered opponents. The wheel, like reform dress, was credited with curing a seemingly endless list of mental and physical infirmities, many of which were gender-related. In an 1895 article for Cosmopolitan, an ardent cyclist described its benefits. Mrs. de Koven stated that cycling exercised every muscle, expanded the lungs, strengthened the uterus, cured

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268Life (June 27, 1895).
270Life (June 27, 1895): 418.
indigestion and insomnia, reduced flesh, and "in its applicability to nervous and mental troubles, it may almost be regarded in the light of a specific cure."272

Some have argued that women who were wearing bifurcated garments did so because they wanted a comfortable "uniform" while cycling.273 Of course this was a motive, but the arguments for and against the extension of alternative garments into the public link the "cycling costume" to the bloomers of the 1860s. "I also remember with what derision the bloomer costume of women was received, not many years since," wrote Willis Barnes in an article for a health reform magazine. The journalist continued:

But what a change has come! Public sentiment is a queer autocrat. Today on almost any of the streets and grand avenues of the city of New York, and in other cities of this country and Europe, may be seen hundreds of women in male attire. Baggy pantaloons, short jackets, and hats or caps are now the accepted fashion for bicycle riders.274

The popular press might suggest that it was merely a craze but soon cyclists were everywhere. They formed clubs, founded associations, and opened instruction schools to promote the new sport. Isaac Potter of the League of American Wheelmen estimated in 1896 that there were "over 2,500,000 bicycle riders in the United States."275 Women cyclists accounted for a large percentage of that number - a fact that escaped no one's attention. "Bicycle-riding has changed the habits of hundreds of thousands who formerly took little or no exercise in the open air... Women have taken to the sport with no less

enthusiasm than men."276 Alice Stone Blackwell, Lucy Stone's daughter and a suffragist, stated that "the great and growing popularity of the bicycle with women is another factor not to be overlooked... The bicycle is one of the many agencies acting for reform."277 Dress reform received an unexpected boost from a simple recreational device. Not all bicyclists would consider themselves dress reformers, but dress reformers saw the bifurcated cyclist costume as achieving the goal of the movement. The wearing of alternative clothing meant you were a dress reformer, whether you wanted the label or not.

Despite greater public approval, female cyclists were cautious in their approach. Often they would wear trousers but would cover them with a separate skirt as soon as they dismounted from their bicycles. Many women chose to wear their more conservative skirts while cycling, despite the obvious hazards. Marguerite Lindley, in an article to the New York Times, warned women to wear modest clothing while riding their bicycles. She advocated a "skirt... long enough and stiff enough in texture so that the limbs need not to be too clearly outlined." Lindley reminded the readers in 1896 that:

We have already heard of the grief which has overtaken some of our advanced dress reformers. I am advanced myself, for that matter; but I say, taboo knickerbockers every time. Susan B. Anthony and Dr. Mary Walker, strong-minded and noble women, tried this mannish costume, and we all know the indignities to which they were subjected. The Knickerbocker age has not yet arrived.278

To many minds, the "wheelwoman of the 1890s" was synonymous with the "Bloomer Girl." Just as it had forty years earlier, the popular press reported on society's shocked reactions to seeing women on bicycles in rational garments and printed humorous cartoons, songs, and poems satirizing the female cyclist. The conservative

277 The Arena 6 (October 1892): 640.
New York periodical, *Truth*, published the following "suggested epitaph" to Amelia Bloomer:

Here lies  
(Quite safe at last from reckless rumors)  
The erst well-known  
and  
Well-abused  
Miss Bloomer  
Living too long,  
She saw her once bold coup  
Rendered old-fashioned by the Woman New.

By noisy imitators vexed and piqued,  
Her fads out-fadded  
and  
Her freaks out-freaked,  
She did not die till she had seen and heard  
All her absurdities made more absurd.

In short,  
She found Dame Fortune but ill-humored,  
And passed away  
In every point out-Bloomered.\textsuperscript{279}

The notion of women clad in bloomers astride their bicycles suggested the possibility of vigorous campaigns for rights and renewed efforts to introduce bifurcated garments for women. The popular press reminded its readers over and over again that these new styles of dress were not actually new. *Truth* agreed that rational dress was an established fact and hardly a new innovation in 1895. A published poem entitled "Half a Century of Bloomers" proves this point:

The Bloomer Girl of '58 with righteous anger frowns,

\textsuperscript{279} *Truth*, January 17, 1895.
To see Amelia Bloomer in her pair of hand-me-downs. "Am I awake," she loudly cries, "or am I in a trance? O is it true that 'gents' are not alone in wearing pants."

And then Amelia Bloomer hides behind her "umbrella" The day her startled optics see the modern Daisy Bell; "Alas!" she cries, "Put up your wheel, you really hadn't oughter Until you've coaxed 'em down a bit, my brave, misguided daughter."

But Daisy Bell is not abashed and merely cries "For shame, To criticize the bloomerloons that bear your honored name! We're pushing on, and when at last we women get our rights I'll be surprised if men object to see us ride in tight!" 280

Connections existed between women who adopted reform dress in the 1890s and the earlier reformers. "More and more - and rapidly - is the world of women veering into the channel so gracefully opened years ago by women who could see father than their fellows," wrote one dress reformer to Amelia Bloomer in the 1880s. 281 In 1892, Mrs. Delight Phelps wrote to Bloomer thanking her for the photographs of Amelia in reform dress in the 1850s. Phelps, herself, wore bloomers both in private and in public for eleven years. She notes what "a wonderful change there has been in the last 80 years. . . the young people at this time, little know the ridicule that woman [sic] had to endure, that advocated a larger sphere for woman in those days." Phelps wrote that she would speak to her organization about Bloomer's and other early dress reformers' work in order "to encourage in continued work the change [in women's dress]. Although it seems that everything moves slow to us that are waiting." 282 Absent in the letter is any mention of why Phelps stopped wearing reform dress. Perhaps the ridicule was too much for her in

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280 Truth, April 13, 1895: 12.
the 1850s and 1860s. Perhaps she focused on the question of suffrage and did not want her garments to detract from her message. But she was still a dress reformer forty years later.

Perhaps these dress reformers had surpassed even the most radical reformers of the 1850s. The movement, first radical, then moderate, was once more becoming public and political. Efforts made by earlier reformers had made a difference. They introduced reform clothing options and articulated arguments in favor of changes in women's dress. The publicity, while mostly negative throughout the nineteenth century, still disseminated the information and exposed more women to the dress reform movement. At the Columbian Exposition in 1893, women demanded patterns for "rational" garments, and reform dress stores sprang up as well as mail order catalogs.\(^{283}\) Butterick began issuing "rational" dress patterns in 1893. While the corset industry was still manufacturing its product, their sales had declined.

Why was it that the New Woman was able to challenge publicly women's dress and her role in society when the women's rights advocates were condemned? First, forty years of activism on the part of the dress reformers paved the way. More women adopted some form of reform dress and the public became more accepting. "The Bloomer costume of the present period is much less undesirable than that worn by Mrs. [Elizabeth] Miller. It is even better than that adopted by Dr. Mary Walker," noted one journalist in 1896. "A very becoming medium between those grotesque dresses and the unhandy long, trailing skirt for street wear could be devised." The author expressed the growing awareness that women's role had changed and "it will soon be a necessity" to change women's dress as well.\(^{284}\)

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The New Woman had loosened her stays and on occasion divided her skirts, but dress reformers knew that more needed to be done. Certain economic and social changes had occurred providing women with more opportunities by the end of the century, but women still found themselves encumbered by the bustle, corsets, and long skirts. Paddings, linings, and stays assisted in producing the fashionable curves. The "hobble" or straight narrow skirt assured the silhouette. Sleeves were fitted close at the shoulder and upper arm, but they flared wide at the wrist. Frequently decorative trimming on the lower sleeves repeated decorations on the skirt. There were several versions of the bustle based on size, placement, and manner of manipulation of the fullness of the skirt.\textsuperscript{285} Frances Russell noted with despair that contemporary fashions still told women to "stay in the house." Russell continued by stating the dress reformers work was not completed. Women were still wearing clothes that were "antagonistic to physical development and healthful beauty" and fashion was still saying that woman's chief use was "to exhibit dry goods fantastically arranged on her person."\textsuperscript{286}

Women's fashions represented the "conspicuous consumption" of the 1890s. Many yards of material and quantities of decoration were put into completely useless adornments. To Thorstein Veblen, dress had become synonymous with "display of wasteful expenditure."\textsuperscript{287} Fashionable dress proclaimed the increased wealth of the era through extravagances that only the rich could afford. This was an era when the ability to acquire money and power had to be shown to others. Ostentatious display dominated the decorations of the home and body for women. Men were able to use women's bodies in

\textsuperscript{285}Nugent, "The Relationship of Fashion in Women's Dress," 87-95.
\textsuperscript{286}Symposium of Women's Dress," \textit{Arena} 6 (September 1892): 500.
order to display their own wealth. Veblen argued that the "theory of woman's dress quite plainly involves the implication that woman is a chattel."288

This idea that women's clothing implied "that she is a chattel, is by no means new," noted Frances Russell. She continued:

Her tight waist and long, trailing skirts deprive her of all freedom of breath and motion. No wonder man prescribes her sphere. She needs his aid at every turn. He must help her up stairs and down, in the carriage and out, on the horse, up the hill, over the ditch and fence, and thus teach her the poetry of dependence.289

Dress reformers of the 1890s were well aware of the arguments made by earlier reformers. Yet reformers, like Russell, were optimistic. "The chattel idea of woman is gradually disappearing with the barbarous laws that have legalized her subject condition. This perhaps is one reason why a dress which gives her the appearance of freedom is not now as formerly called 'unbecoming.' "290

While dress reformers realized more work was needed in reforming women's clothing, they believed that at least some beneficial changes had taken place at the end of the century. In her very outspoken way, Walker stated that women "crawl into the loop-the-loop skirt and squeeze themselves into the most distressed looking creatures."

Although she felt the narrow skirt and bustle was not the dress reformers' answer, it did prove that women were dissatisfied with current fashions and that the "hobble is a move in the right direction. Even if it means a slow movement of hobbled spirited women."291

The New Woman had pushed the boundaries of gender identity, represented sexual and economic freedom, and her style of clothing served as a critique of Victorian fashions and culture. But just when the public was feeling comfortable with the New

291 Times Union. Albany, New York (March 17, 1911).
Woman and her bifurcated skirt, the modern woman of the twentieth century cut her hair short and took to loose-fitting clothing and low cut dresses. By 1915, women's clothing styles had already begun to change: high necklines had disappeared, blouses of transparent silk or cotton were becoming popular, and hems had risen above the ankles. The gray spats constituted a last attempt by Victorian culture to cover that space between skirt and street. By 1920, those spats were only seen on "old maids." Colleen Moore, film star of the 1920s, reassured her fans when she said, "Don't worry, girls. Long skirts, corsets, and flowing tresses have gone. . . The American girl will see to this. She is independent, a thinker [who] will not follow slavishly the ordinances of those who in the past have decreed this or that for her to wear."

Liberated from restrictive dress, from laces that interfered with breathing, and from hoops that needed managing suggested liberation of another sort. The newfound freedom to breathe and walk encouraged movement out of the house, and the Flapper took full advantage.

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CHAPTER 8
CONCLUSION

In 1926, at the age of 54, Ina L.C. Lane was doing graduate work at Columbia University. She wrote a term paper on Dr. Mary Walker and entitled it "A Nineteenth-Century Flapper." Lane had met Walker at the close of the last century at a Presbyterian church in Oswego. Lane wrote that Walker had resented and then rebelled against the imposed fashions of her day:

Men's clothing looked so much more comfortable than her own that she tried it. Having tried it, she liked it and, liking it, she wore it throughout her life, shocking all who knew her. What would those shocked people think if they could see our girls and women today?\textsuperscript{293}

What brought Walker to mind, Lane notes, was the "sight nowadays of bobbed hair, knickerbockered girls on the tennis court, on the highway, on the golf course, going their own sweet way without hindrance of criticism." Lane was concerned that women in the 1920s did not realize the efforts and sacrifices made by women in the previous century who "paved the way for their freedom, who refused to be cowed by criticism, who fought for her rights and theirs."\textsuperscript{294} Lane reminded her readers that the fight for freedom of movement had begun long before the 1920s.

\textsuperscript{294}Lane, "A Nineteenth-Century Flapper," 42.
Clothing has frequently been linked to personal freedom. Susan Brownmiller proclaimed in her work, *Femininity*, "Every wave of feminism has founndered on the question of dress reform." What began in the nineteenth century, according to Brownmiller, "as a personal convenience" developed into a political statement. Dress reform was considered such a crucial matter that in 1890 the International Council of Women concluded that there existed "no question of greater importance to civilization than that of dress reform." But by the early part of the twentieth century, suffragists, the loudest voice of all the feminist organizations, appeared to ignore questions concerning dress. The single goal for this group of reformers was the vote. They neither attacked current fashions nor praised any changes in women’s dress. For the most part, the public debate over dress reform was over by 1920. By the end of World War I, clothing styles were becoming more functional for women: skirts shortened and the corset, while still manufactured, was losing sales. Attitudes towards women were also changing. There was a shift in the early part of the twentieth century away from clothing that was incapacitating towards styles that allowed more freedom of movement. The image of woman, helpless in her corset and floating skirts, was gone. In her place stood a woman who was young, single, independent, and sexually active - the flapper.

The flapper’s attire and mannerisms caused a heated debate that began during the war years and peaked in the mid-twenties. In the years before World War I, increasing numbers of young, white, middle-class women, labeled "flappers" by the mid-1910s, imitated the more rebellious behavior of their wage-earning sisters. They learned of new sexual possibilities from urban working-class women, who had questioned the conventions of the middle class prior to the widespread subculture of youth in the

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1920s. Women began to adopt low-cut dresses, short skirts, and finally abandoned the corset. In the public's opinion, flappers were now wearing the clothing of prostitutes.

Women's fashions had been transforming since the beginning of the century. Before the war, women's bodies still were formed into a silhouette of curves. After the war, the curvaceous form gave way to a smooth, simple, "modernist" style. In her book *The Psychology of Dress*, published in 1929, Dr. Elizabeth Hurlock stated that women were finally "emancipating themselves from the tyrannical forms of dress imposed for generations to keep them 'feminine,' [and] seeking a freedom which has been denied them since the beginning of time." This had been the goal of dress reformers from the beginning.

When Mary Walker dressed as a man in the 1850s, she was considered an isolated phenomenon. When Coco Chanel, the youngest and most daring of the French designers, did the same in the 1920s, she was imitated throughout the world. Chanel removed the waistline, radically shortened the skirt to well above the ankle, and adopted male fashions - short hair, ties, collars, long tailor-cut jackets, and even pajamas. Chanel's boyish look peaked in popularity at mid-decade and maintained its dominance in the fashion world until 1927 or 1928. Walker's trousers had pushed the boundaries too far. Society was not ready to accept comfortable and practical clothes for women in the 1850s. Chanel, on the other hand, "expresse[d] the heart and soul of the modern woman." 

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300 Title, *Vogue*, October 1923.
Like the women who adopted alternative clothing in the 1890s, the flapper was indeed out to challenge traditional gender assumptions. Critics of the new fashions for women used the same argument that opponents had used against bloomers almost a century earlier. Women were becoming indistinguishable from men, in their appearance as well as in their possession of traditionally male powers. The political was directly linked to the debate on fashion. Postwar critics predicted the erasure of sexual difference. In addition to the "masculine" nature of the new fashions, opponents found the lack of modesty particularly offensive. One writer noted that flappers tend "to ape men in everything" and to "intrude into what formerly was man's exclusive domain" as well as their demands for "complete equality, not only in politics and industry, but also in physical appearance and social opportunity."

Fashion received a lot of attention throughout the twenties because critics interpreted it as a visual indication of postwar changes. It was a symbol of alarming new behaviors on the part of women - their rejection of motherhood, their economic independence, and their political participation. If we believe the critics of fashion, the new styles challenged traditional notions of gender difference as well as conventional modes of dress. Critics objected to what they saw as the loss of feminine beauty. In a 1923 article, "How I Like a Woman to Look," Dr. Frank Crane declared that the essence of womanliness consisted in the demonstrable "desire to please men. . . When it is absent she is not exactly human." This statement only continued the argument made by men for the past half century. "Men and women are different. Therefore their dress should be different." C. H. Crandall stated that he did not object to the divided skirts but to the loss of femininity. "It may be stated emphatically, however, that almost all men abominate all

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302 Dr. Frank Crane, "How I Like a Woman to Look," The American Magazine (November, 1923): 43.

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forms of woman's attire that merely aim to be 'mannish,' that are adopted only for the sake of making a 'smart' appearance." Femininity "must always be one of the greatest charms of womanhood." Again, women found themselves continuing the struggle for self-definition.

In 1921, Mrs. H. Fletcher Brown, a forty-year-old woman from Wilmington, Delaware, remarked, "Now that I'm climbing in and out of automobiles, skirts can't be too short for me. Legs ain't no threat [sic] to anybody any more, thanks be, and we girls can go on about our business with our minds undistracted from the business of the moment by the petty details of our clothes." The war, the automobile, and the vote provided new opportunities and often demanded new clothing. Modernity meant speed and mobility. One contemporary commentator stated: "The changes in her coiffure, her complexion, her frocks, are but the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual revolution. It is no mere coincidence that the vote and the short skirt... arrived simultaneously, that the corset and the 'Woman's place is in the home' legend faded out together." However, these changes did not take place in the span of a few short years. Rather this was all part of a process, an evolution that had been going on for some time.

While the new clothing styles were liberating in comparison to the corseted, weighted fashions of the nineteenth century, the narrow tubular skirts and high heels of the twenties were not all comfort and mobility. The look required enormous amounts of time and effort. In addition, the style of dress required excessive thinness and no bustline. While traditional types of corsets were no longer in use, women wore new constraining undergarments such as the straight elastic girdle and brassieres in order to acquire this

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304Mrs. H. Fletcher Brown, "Personal Glimpses" *Literary Digest* 70 (July 9, 1921): 35.
new, flat and thin figure type. Women were spending money on makeup and skin-care products and spending time shaving the hair from their bodies. One could argue that far from enjoying freedom, women who bought into this desire for beauty found themselves tied to a time-consuming and expensive constraint.

So if the postwar fashion was not as "liberating" as it appears, why did women who wore the styles present them as affording such mobility and freedom? By wearing these clothes, women could project the image of freedom. Here was a visual declaration of sudden change in women's lives as well as in fashion. To wear the new clothing was to support publicly the already established cultural meaning of fashion: the blurring of sexual difference in the eyes of the critics and a declaration of independence from social constraints from the defender's view. To purchase and wear the new styles in public was to make a conscious political choice, just as dress reformers had done for eighty years. The new fashions created both an image of freedom and the reality of a strong political effect in their ability to scandalize and infuriate American society, just as short dresses and trousers did in the mid-nineteenth century. If changes in women's clothing did not in some way profoundly threaten the traditional notions of female identity, in the 1850s or in the 1920s, why was the public so outraged by the new styles?

The women who wore the new fashions of the twenties were certainly rebellious, but was this rebellion a conscious political choice as it was for their great-grandmothers? Were they participating in a social movement to reform dress? The flapper would say no. Her bobbed hair, powdered face, and shorter skirts represented her desire to have fun, not politics. But as she danced, smoked, and flaunted her sexuality, her contemporaries saw the flapper, especially her clothing, as political. The flapper openly questioned gender roles as did dress reformers since the mid-nineteenth century. Clothing of the twenties represented changes long under way. Combine that evolution with an emerging urban mass culture that emphasized consumption, sexuality, and individualism and the result is a
more accepting atmosphere for the rising hemlines and slimmer silhouettes. Alternative
dress, once considered on the fringe of society, eventually became more acceptable to
white middle-class America. Indeed, these changes eventually became the fashion.

Social historians, art historians, fashion and textile historians, sociologists, and
psychologists have all attempted to explain the forces behind change in fashion and to
evaluate the success of movements that called for a reform of dress. The traditional
conclusion is that dress reform failed as a movement, that nineteenth-century efforts to
change women's garments remained unobtainable until the 1920s, when the flapper cut
her hair, raised her skirts, rolled her stockings, and danced to a new beat. According to
this interpretation, the efforts of the early dress reformers had no connection to the
changes in clothing or attitudes in the twentieth century.

However, dress reform was not an isolated and failed attempt in the mid-
nineteenth century. It was more than the "bloomer costume." The number of short dress
garments, organizations, and individuals discussed in this work demonstrates that dress
reform extended beyond the women's rights movement. While negative reaction to the
costume due to the connection between changes in women's dress and changes in societal
norms kept many from either joining the movement or abandoning their reform garments,
many still were a part of the dress reform movement. Over their long struggle, dress
reformers shared arguments, strategies, garments and endurance for public ridicule.
Dress reform involved people as diverse as health reformers and water curists, utopian
community members and women's rights leaders, farmers and travelers on the overland
trail, cyclists, clubwomen, and flappers. This diverse group of women wore their dresses
for reasons connected with health, women's rights, work, cost, morality, religion, and
physical activity. Sometimes they shared interests with other dress reformers. Other
times, their ideas diverged sharply. But all of the dress reformers committed themselves
to alternative clothing for women. For the dress reformers, their commitment and

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innovation, combined with larger social forces, propelled the general public gradually to implement changes.

It is true that "bloomers" never became fashionable garments, but most reformers did not make this a goal of the movement. Therefore the success or failure of dress reform should not be judged in these terms. Some advocates hoped to alter women's role in society through their clothing. This also did not happen. The relationship between gender roles and dress was too complex. But because the early reformers were unable to change the reality of women's status does not mean that the movement failed. Dress reform did provide the opportunity to redefine the image of femininity and women's roles. Women in bifurcated garments challenged the nineteenth-century gender system regardless of the reformers' intentions. If they had not, there would not have been the reaction from the public. Even those women who did not intend to participate in a public movement for social or political change, but rather adopted reform dress for practical reasons, still made a difference. Dress reform, whatever the wearer's motivations, provided an opportunity to question publicly the appropriate roles for women.

What clothing one sees on a feminist in the 1990s, or on a flapper of the 1920s, or even on a Bloomerite walking the streets in the 1850s is the sum total of layers of past beliefs, agendas, rejections, and a gradual evolution in women's dress. Every one of these reformers sought to reduce the bulk of clothing that the traditional code had insisted was necessary for modesty. Each attempted to establish women's equal claim to particular rights such as good health, the right to vote, and freedom of movement. While not all these women would agree, they all were dress reformers. Their clothing was debated, challenged, and ridiculed over the decades. And while a bloomer or a flapper's dress is not "politics," the debates in American society over women's clothing was political.

The movement, its participants and tactics, changed slowly over time. The collective action of dress reformers and the large-scale social and economic forces worked
together in bringing about change in women's dress by the early twentieth century. Throughout this evolution, a common thread ties the reformers together and even connects them to ourselves: Our clothing is both an extension of ourselves and the first layer of the society outside our bodies. Women's dress, and how it constricts the body or frees it, covers the body or reveals it, has been of great concern to women and men throughout our history. Indeed, a woman's dress is an indicator of her role in society. Thus this study argues that dress reform has as much to do with perceptions of women's roles as it has with fashionable clothing. While reformers did not convince most women to change their dress, the movement did open a public debate about what was gender appropriate behavior. Fashion was the vehicle that dress reformers used to challenge long-held beliefs about women and their place in society. And as each group of reformers came of age, they helped to undercut the strength of the old social values.
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