

Amelia Gayle Gorgas: A Study of the Woman and Her Dress

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By the beginning of the 1850s women's skirts had reached a breaking point but new inventions allowed the skirts to continue to grow. In the midst of this change America was in the middle of the Civil War, which also had an effect on fashion and those who wore it. Amelia Gayle Gorgas, wife of a Confederate captain, was caught up in the war as she moved with her husband, Josiah, to assignment in Richmond, Virginia. We know from her letters that she was a seamstress and that she lost her sewing machine in the evacuation from Richmond. She followed Josiah in various jobs after the war, including as president of the University of Alabama. After he became ill and stepped down from the presidency, they moved to a small house on the campus where she served as post office mistress. This present day campus house museum was gifted several of Amelia's dresses, which show a small cross section of this woman's life.

An example of the antebellum to post-war transition is the Gorgas three-piece day dress made of striped moirè taffeta. The two and three-fourths inch wide stripes are composed of fourteen narrower satin stripes in chocolate brown that alternate with taupe moirè sections of three and three fourths inches in width. The capelet/collar and bodice are intact but the skirt has been deconstructed and left as a continuous circle of fabric. The capelet has a one and one-fourth inch wide black velvet ribbon trim along outer edge covering the application seam of black cotton lace edging that is four and a half inches wide. The bodice has three rows of black velvet trim that circumference the sleeve starting an inch from the dropped shoulder seam. There is a fourth line of velvet trim at the shoulder seam that starts at the front quarter point and ends on the back quarter point of the sleeve. The study is an attempt to reconstruct the original pleating of the skirt in order to develop the complete pattern for the dress through research to enable making a replica dress for the museum to display.

Each panel of the skirt is twenty-six and a half inches wide and forty-six inches long, except for one panel, which is only forty-two and a fourth inches long. The total circumference of the skirt is 159 inches or thirteen feet and three inches. This is in line with the reporting by Tortora and Marketti (2015): "Skirts widened throughout the 1850s and into the 1860s (some were 12 to 15 feet in circumference)" (p.368). There is no surviving waistband or placket. It is apparent that the entire skirt has been taken apart and re-basted to make the entire circumference. One section of pleating is pinned in position but it is not the original pleating since following that pattern of pleating it will not fit the waistline of the bodice. There are folds and tiny lines of stitching hole from the attachment of the waistband, but there is no clear indication of the depth of the original pleats.

The Carolyn Thomas Stewart Costume and Textile Collection had several examples of dresses dated as being from the 1850s and 1860s, which were referenced to help figure out how

to recreate the skirt pleating pattern. Of the five garments studied with waist line pleating, the first was cartridge pleated all the way around, second had multiple stacked knife pleats (5) at the back placket and then small darts were across the front of the skirt repeating on each side of center front. The third dress had thirteen inches of knife pleats across front waistband and then the rest of the waist was cartridge pleated. The fourth example, one piece brown taffeta dress from 1865, had thirteen cartridge pleats to the inch that went around the side to a flat front. The final example was brown-green, brocade taffeta with dobby stripes with green, brown, and gold floats. The skirt had double stacked inverted box pleats that started four inches off of center front and continued around the waist.

Using the brown-green brocade taffeta dress as an example as well as the information from the surviving panels of the Gorgas skirt, the mock-up had an inverted box pleat on each side of center front and an inverted box pleat at side seam. The back of the skirt has a set of four double-stacked pleats on either side of the back placket, giving the fullness that was popular throughout the crinoline age. The book Dressed for the Photographer Ordinary American and Fashion, 1840-1900 has a great example of what Amelia Gorgas's skirt might have looked like. "The skirt while not gored, flared because of double box pleats evenly spaced around the waist, with deep pleats at center back" (Severa 1995, 246). This is the same effect that was achieved in the mock up, using the same circumference width of the original six panels of fabric.

After all the research and examination of primary sources, one thing felt out of place in the back of the bodice, the presence of one inverted, box pleat on each side of a box pleat at center back that allows the chocolate brown stripe to run vertically at center back. Most surviving dresses from this time have a curved seam that starts in the armseye and then curves over to follow the princess seams ending at the waist. This line adds shaping to the back of the bodice and slims out the wearer hugging close to the corset. This bodice on the other hand has fullness in the back because of the box pleats and that beautiful line that is so popular in this era is lost. The total bodice waistline circumference was twenty and one half inches. Another interesting note is that the right back sleeve has been pieced four times and the front sleeve also has four piecing seams beyond the underarm seam which is piped in black plain weave cotton but the left sleeve does not have this piecing. This indicates that Amelia was perhaps reusing the fabric to fashion a more contemporary fashionable dress from the precious silk fabric. It is a questionable as to whether the skirt deconstruction is evidence of a possible third modification for the dress since there are multiple lines of stitching holes parallel to the hemline above the typical stitching lines indicating the removal of the usual wool braid that covers the hem fold and the wide width of chintz inside lining of the period.

Amelia was industrious, worked hard her whole life raising her siblings before marriage. In the post war era she was making-do and caring for her family and the students at The University of Alabama for many years. This dress illustrates how the fabric from the dress was remade once, maybe twice, to conserve resources in the reconstruction period.

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