

# Pattern Reviews IV

Welcome to part four of our Pattern Reviews, this month we are covering DAY / BEST DRESSES Part 1 of 2.

Now in the last article here is how I classified a WORK DRESS: A Work Dress (Camp Dress) is a dress you wear if your impression is keeping you close to camp. They are worn mostly with corded/quilted petticoats and not hoops so you can maneuver around the camp site and fire with more ease. The trim is very plain or none at all. A big difference is in the skirt. The length is approximately 2-4" shorter and they have a smaller circumference that those I'd make for wearing over a hoop. But the best part of all is that my work dresses are washable!

Here is my classification of a DAY DRESS: A day dress is the staple of most fashion shows. They allow a woman to show off her wealth and are usually trimmed out quite well. Day dresses can be made of cotton, wool, or silk. They are meant to be worn over a hoop or cage, and should fall somewhere near 2-3 inches from the floor. Find a dress type that flatters your particular figure, then choose a color that compliments your skin tone, and Viola! You now have your BEST DRESS.

For those of you who are new to my review articles, I am trying to give my honest opinion of patterns that are available to reenactors just starting out, so that YOU don't waste your hard earned money on bad patterns or ones that are too difficult to understand, like I did when I first started reenacting. I have enlisted the help of several close friends I call my "SECRET SEWING SOCIETY" and together we sew the patterns, compile our opinions, and let you know what we thought.

## **What specifically will the reviews tell you?**

**Pros & Cons:** any detail we think you'd need to know before buying the pattern. Plus what you may need to alter to make the pattern work better for you.

**Sewing Level:** No sense buying a totally authentic pattern if you can't understand the directions. We have Secret Sewing Society that are in each level of sewing: Beginner, Intermediate and Advanced. If we can't understand the directions we'll tell you about it.

**Sizing:** Are the size charts accurate by today's standards. I know size is a big issue with most women, so let me reassure you, I am no size 0 and all of the friends I have enlisted to help are over a size 10.

**Documentation:** Are the patterns based on original garments or would they be categorized as costumes.

**Expert Opinion:** Many patterns state "from an original". What they don't say is was that original from the 1840s or 1860s etc. . . . this person will help us.

**Overall Satisfaction:** We will rate each pattern

★ Not worth your time

★★ Not so great

★★★ Average

★★★★ Good

★★★★★ GREAT!

We'll also add notes as to what we've changed in the pattern to make it fit, personalized, or more period appropriate.

I have divided my series into several sections as Civil War Women have lots of layers. The categories are: Undergarments -- Part I & Part II, Work Dresses & Aprons, Day/Best Dresses -- Part I & Part II, Evening Dresses & Ball Gowns -- Part I & Part II, Outerwear, Wrappers, Riding Habits, Corsets, New/Missed Patterns, and of course the "Best-Of-The-Best" Award Winners where we'll pick our top pattern choices from each category.

Different social classes need different clothing items, but since this section is focusing on DAY / BEST DRESSES, I'll limit my suggestions this month to mid-upper class impressions. For the bare minimum to start out for an event weekend you will need:

2 drawers

2 chemise

2 pairs wool/cotton stockings & garters

1 modesty petticoat

1 hoop/cage 4 bone if under 5'6 6 bone if over 5'6

1 corset

1-2 day dress / best dress

1 evening dress / ball gown

1 pair dark colored boots

1 pair dance slippers

1-2 pair white cotton gloves

1 hairnet and 1 bonnet

*For colder weather -- I suggest a cape or paletot.*

WHAT TO SEW continued . . .

If you join a unit, they may have a "kitty" of spare clothing for you to borrow to start out. If you don't join a unit, that's ok, just puts a little more pressure on you to get sewing!

BUT before we get started on dress reviews, my Secret Sewing Society want me to mention the TWO BIGGEST MISTAKES made by new reenactors in regards to making/choosing their own dresses.

**#1 -- FABRIC CHOICE!** Sounds easy right, but even the best patterns out there can be ruined if it is made with the wrong fabric. Now we're not saying that Big Name Stores don't carry good fabric for low prices, we're just saying try to be particular in your fabric selection. You don't have to go online and spend \$10/yard for good cotton fabric, but we also don't want you to buy a great calico print that has little scottish puppies on it.

One book that has really helped me is Textile Designs by Meller / Elffers. (available at amazon or barnes & noble) This book shows examples of original fabric, categorized by color, date, and patterns. It helped me to better understand what I should be looking for.

BUT on the other hand, we all make the \$1/yard bargain sale rack, and that "really close" cotton fabric will be mine if I beat you to the store!

**#2 -- SLEEVE CHOICE!** Again this sounds easy right? Just make any pattern out of any fabric, just like it is on the pattern cover , and Viola! But unfortunately, life is never that easy. Some patterns are designed to be a best dress made out of silk with fancy pagoda sleeves and lacy undersleeves. This particular pattern would not be as good made out of a homespun cotton with pagoda sleeves and lacy undersleeves.

To this end I have enlisted the assistance of someone with more knowledge than I. A few years back I attended the Midwest Civil War Civilian Conference and there was a presentation on "Sleeve Variations". Extensive research on sleeve types and variations of original garments was put into a chart she made, and she has graciously allowed me to reprint it for you. (see next page) This chart shows which dresses best match which sleeve pattern types, which were most common and which just weren't done. If you follow this chart you can't go wrong with sleeve choice! Trust me this chart will be invaluable to you from now on!

Ok enough chatter, let's get on with it, welcome to What To Sew . . . And What NOT To Sew: Part IV -- DAY/BEST DRESSES PART 1 of 2.

SPACE FOR AD

SPACE FOR AD

## When To Use Which Sleeve Style

The following table is based on the study of many extant garments, as well as those photographs where a fabric guess can be made with some certainty.

	Bishop sleeve	Shaped Sleeve Closed (coat sleeve)	Open (modified coat or pagoda sleeve)	Pagoda Sleeve	Open sleeve with undersleeve	Open sleeve, no undersleeve
<b>Wash or Work Dress</b>						
calico	yyy	yy	nn		nn	nn
cotton homespun	yyy	yy	nn		nn	nn
<b>Everyday dress</b>						
calico	yyy	yy	nn		nn	nn
homespun	yyy	yy	nn		nn	nn
wool	y	yyy	y		y	n
sheers 2)	yyy	yy	y		r	y
silks	yy	yy	yy		r	r
<b>Best Dresses</b>						
wool	r	yy	yy		yy	r
silks	y	yy	yy		yy	y
sheers 2)	yy	yy	yy		yy	yy
<b>Dinner Dresses</b>						
low neck	y	r	r		yy	yy
square neck	n	yy	r		yy	yy
<b>Evening Dresses (low neck)</b>	r	n	n		y	yy
<b>Ballgowns</b>	1)	nn	nn		r	yy
						3)

- |            |     |                                     |    |   |
|------------|-----|-------------------------------------|----|---|
| <b>Key</b> | yyy | most common style                   | 1) | <i>seen sheer long Bishop sleeves worn with ballgowns or dinner dresses</i> |
|            | yy  | common style                        | 2) | <i>Sheers may be cotton, wool, silk, linen, pinecloth etc</i>               |
|            | y   | fairly usual                        | 3) | <i>often sheer</i>  |
|            | r   | rare                                |    |   |
|            | n   | not seen any                        |    |   |
|            | nn  | not found any, and many have looked |    |   |

WHAT TO SEW continued . . .

**FIG LEAF PATTERNS 201  
DAY DRESS c.1857**

**Average Cost:** \$25.00  
**Sewing Level:** Int/Adv  
**Sizing:** Good

**Avg Fabric Yds needed: 9+**



**Description:** This front opening day dress has full bishop sleeves which are hand pleated and back stitched at the shoulder and cuff. The bodice is lined and boned and closes with hooks and eyes on the lining; pleat detail at center front waist. Piping on the neck, armhole, sleeve cuff, and waist. The skirt is made of five panels of fabric that is cartridge pleated into the bodice. The pattern contains two bodices. One regular and one maternity. Both bodices have all the original details and styling.

**Pros:** The instruction manual is exceptionally detailed. The first pages of the instructions give details on the original dress, then they describe sewing techniques, and how to read the pattern. Then the next pages tell you how to alter the pattern to fit your particular shape and size (including illustrations). The actual sewing instructions don't even start til page 21.

**Cons:** The original garment has a very weird sleeve lining. Our secret sewer would have liked an alternate lining or even suggested forgetting it altogether. This pattern did not go together in a day, so be patient and take your time.

**Documentation:** The original dress belonged to Elizabeth Ann Fullwood Aycok (c1828-1864) born in Sumter District in South Carolina.

**Expert Opinion:** Great Historical Southern provenance. This pattern goes to great detail to reproduce the original exactly.

**Overall Satisfaction:** ★★★★★

**PEACHTREE  
MERCANTILE 206  
DAY DRESS c.1860**

**Average Cost:** \$35.00  
**Sewing Level:** Int/Adv  
**Sizing:** Good

**Avg Fabric Yds needed: 9+**



**Description:** The bodice has an open, low v-neck front which is gathered at the waist and shoulders. The shoulder seams are set to the back and are extended beyond the normal shoulder line so that the sleeves begin below the shoulder line. The bodice waist is not level, but goes up at the side seams. It is also a bit higher in the back than in the front. Skirt is made of 5 panels of 27" fabric. Seam is an off-center front opening. Dress has one pocket.

**Pros:** The instruction manual is exceptionally detailed. The first pages of the instructions give details on the original dress, then they describe sewing techniques, and how to read the pattern. Then the next pages tell you how to alter the pattern to fit your particular shape and size (including illustrations). The actual sewing instructions don't even start til page 14.

**Cons:** This dress has a weird cuff on the sleeve, it turns out slightly pointed and sticks out.

**Documentation:** The original dress belonged to Anne Margaret Magill Smith (1807-1887). The original dress was featured on the cover of Historic Fashions Calendar 2001, "During War Times: 1775-1945." The original belongs to the Atlanta History Center.

**Expert Opinion:** Great Historical Southern provenance. This pattern goes to great detail to reproduce the original exactly.



**Overall Satisfaction:** ★★★★★

continued . . .

WHAT TO SEW continued . . .

## LAUGHING MOON #111 ROUND DRESS

**Average Cost:** \$20.00  
**Sewing Level:** Beg/Int  
**Sizing:** Good

**Avg Fabric Yds needed: 8+**

**Description:** All Views have a two dart front bodice and a classic curved V, tucked back. The darts are boned. The front of the skirt is directionally knife pleated, the sides are box pleated and the back is cartridge pleated (gauged). Finished Length of Skirt is 42" in front and 45" in back. The bodice, sleeves, and skirt are flat lined with polished cotton. The skirt has a pocket and is stitched to the bodice. The bodice has piping at the neck, armholes and waist. View A has coat sleeves, View B has pagoda sleeves, and View C has pleated pagoda sleeves.

**Pros:** I love the fabric suggestions on the back, they list silks, taffetas, wools, and specifically mentions "NO SLUBBY SILK" and not once mentions being able to use COTTON CALICO. I love that! I also love the fact that the skirt is not all one type of pleat. Most patterns take one type and that's it, this pattern specifically takes three different types to make the skirt. It takes a bit more time, but the overall outcome is worth it.

**Documentation:** View A is a copy of an extant period dress in the author's collection. Views B and C are copies of extant sleeves.

**Overall Satisfaction:** ★★★★★

*ONE SECRET SEWER actually made this pattern into a black silk mourning dress and it worked wonderfully.*



## PAST PATTERN 801 FAN-FRONT BODICE 1841-1847

**Average Cost:** \$12.00  
**Sewing Level:** Beginner  
**Sizing:** Good

**Avg Fabric Yds needed: 3**

**Description:** The illusion of a small waist is created with tucks at the shoulders which are drawn into shirring at the center front waist. The bodice is mounted on a form fitting lining. The long form fitting sleeves may be made with or without a cap. The bodice is boned and closes in the back with hooks and eyes.

**Pros:** This pattern was pretty easy to put together and looked great when finished. The instructions also include how to make this pattern work over an 1840s corset. The instructions were clear and had many illustrations.

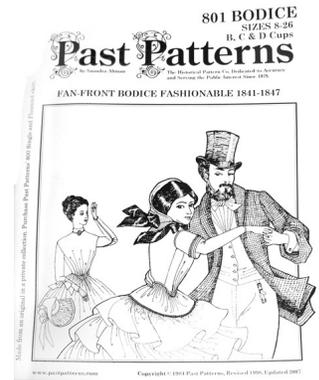
**Cons:** This pattern's bodice is for a fairly long torso, so petite women you may need to do some adjusting. BE SURE TO MAKE A MUSLIN FIRST as adjusting is easier to do on muslin than your fashion fabric. This pattern might turn out better if worn over an 1840s style corset.

**Documentation:** Please note that this dress is a bit early for CW era.

*\*\*Note The corset of the time flattened the front and lifted the bust above its natural position and lengthened the waist between the shoulder and natural waistline, thus resulting in a longer bust dart in the bodice circa 1841-1852.*

**Overall Satisfaction:** ★★★

*\*\*NOTE this pattern is only for the bodice, the skirt is not included. You must purchase it separately.*



continued . . .

WHAT TO SEW continued . . .

## PAST PATTERN 701 GATHERED BODICES 1858-1862

**Average Cost:** \$12.00

**Sewing Level:** Beg. / Int.

**Sizing:** Good

**Avg Fabric Yds needed:** 3

**Description:** The woman holding the fan is wearing a loose-fitting bodice with bishop sleeves. The front closes with buttons. The lady with the umbrella wears the same bodice but has chosen a one piece peg-top sleeve. The front of her bodice fastens with hooks and eyes. Both bodices are fitted into a waistband with gathering or plaiting.

**Pros:** One fitted this pattern was pretty easy to put together. And in the end turned out a really nice bodice.

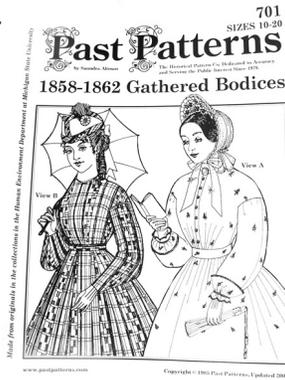
**Cons:** The waistband is somewhat more narrow than shown on the drawing. This pattern's bodice is for a fairly long torso, so petite women you may need to do some adjusting. **BE SURE TO MAKE A MUSLIN FIRST** as adjusting is easier to do on muslin than your fashion fabric. The front and back pleats will need to be fitted to each shape, then you can use the muslin as the pattern piece for the fashion fabric as well as the lining itself.

VIEW A's cuff is more of a post-war design with the turned up cuff feature.

### **Documentation:**

**Expert Opinion:** View A more closely resembles a post war design. The give-away is in the cuff design which was not popular until after the war.

**Overall Satisfaction:** ★★★



## PAST PATTERN 702 1858-1862 DARTED BODICES

**Average Cost:** \$12.00

**Sewing Level:** Beg. / Int.

**Sizing:** Good

**Avg Fabric Yds needed:** 3

**Description:** The seated lady wears full pagoda sleeves fashionable from the late 1850's to 1863. The standing lady wears modified pagoda sleeves which were popular from the late 1850's though 1863. Bodice fastens in the front with hooks and eyes.

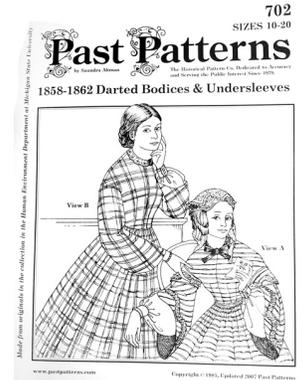
**Pros:** This pattern was pretty easy to put together and looked great when finished. The instructions were clear and had many illustrations. They include how to fit your pattern to you, and even a lil secret called "let-out seams" (something one might want "just in case" you might put on weight) which allows you to alter in the future much easier. Darts are boned, and there is self-fabric piping.

**Cons:** This pattern's bodice is for a fairly long torso, so petite women you may need to do some adjusting. **BE SURE TO MAKE A MUSLIN FIRST** as adjusting is easier to do on muslin than your fashion fabric. Our model over a size 16 noted that some of her pattern markings did not match up perfectly, so you may need to watch that. Some of the larger size models found that the neckline was a bit too baggy, but our size 10/12 model said the fit was fine around her neck.

**Documentation:** Made from originals in the collection i the Human Environment Department at Michigan State University.

**Expert Opinion:**

**Overall Satisfaction:** ★★★★★



continued . . .

WHAT TO SEW continued . . .

**PAST PATTERN 800  
SINGLE (1841-1847) &  
FLOUNCED (1848-1857)  
SKIRT**

**Average Cost:** \$16.00  
**Sewing Level:** Beg/Int  
**Sizing:** Good

**Avg Fabric Yds needed:** Single: 4 1/8  
Flounced: 5 3/4

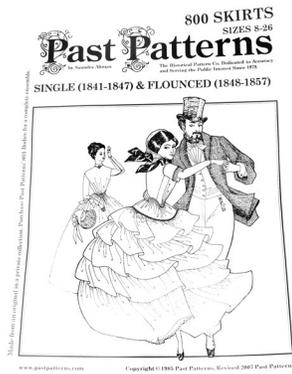
**Description:** The flounces on the flounced skirt are cut on the bias. The single skirt is without flounces. Skirt is gauged and closes with hooks and eyes.

**Pros:** This pattern was pretty easy to put together and looked great. Instructions were clear and included illustrations. Make sure you measure height before starting flounces, and you cannot alter later.

**Cons:** This skirt is gauged at the waistline, and that take a little bit more time and patience for the beginner sewers.

**Documentation:** The original skirt is a black silk taffeta. The original flounce skirt is a forest green and black stripe cut on the diagonal.

**Overall Satisfaction:** ★★★★★

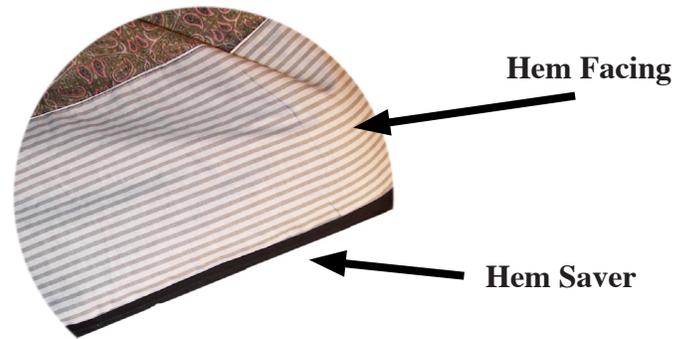


## SECRET SEWING SOCIETY FUN FACTS

This month our Secret Sewing Society are providing illustrations to some commonly used terms here in our reviews in case some new reenactors don't understand what we are talking about.

**Hem Facing / Protector** -- this term is what we call the 6-8" fabric we line the inside of each skirt with. It protects your fashion fabric from wear and tear and is great for those who kick the inside front of their skirts repeatedly.

**Hem Saver / Protector** -- this term is what we call the wool or cotton tape that makes up the bottom most edge of the skirt. It hold the fashion fabric and the hem facing together and also takes the brunt of the grass stains.



**Self Piping** -- this term is what we call the fabric that is used to reinforce curved seams on period garments. It is made by taking a thin cotton string and sewing it between the fabric to make a fashion fabric piping.



And here's last month's stats from our Secret Sewing Society to refresh your memory

80% always add self-fabric piping  
20% follow the directions from the pattern

80% always add a hem facing / hem saver  
20% follow the directions from the pattern

continued . . .

## WHERE TO FIND THESE PATTERNS

Butterick, McCalls, & Simplicity can all be found in the BIG NAME STORES, but here is where you can find some of the other patterns we mention in our reviews.

Elizabeth Stewart Clark's Free Online Patterns  
[www.ElizabethStewartClark.com](http://www.ElizabethStewartClark.com)

Fig Leaf Patterns            [www.Originals-By-Kay.com](http://www.Originals-By-Kay.com)

Galla Rock                    [www.GallaRock.com](http://www.GallaRock.com)

Harriets                        [www.Harriets.com](http://www.Harriets.com)  
[www.VictorianTreasuresByMary.com](http://www.VictorianTreasuresByMary.com)

Heidi Marsh Patterns        [www.fcsutler.com](http://www.fcsutler.com)  
[www.JamesCountry.com](http://www.JamesCountry.com)

HomeSpun Patterns         [www.JamesCountry.com](http://www.JamesCountry.com)

Laughing Moon Patterns    [www.lafnmoon.com](http://www.lafnmoon.com)

Old World Patterns         [www.JamesCountry.com](http://www.JamesCountry.com)

Past Patterns                 [www.PastPatterns.com](http://www.PastPatterns.com)  
[www.Originals-By-Kay.com](http://www.Originals-By-Kay.com)

Peachtree Patterns         [www.Originals-By-Kay.com](http://www.Originals-By-Kay.com)

Period Impressions         [www.abrahamslady.com](http://www.abrahamslady.com)  
[www.JamesCountry.com](http://www.JamesCountry.com)

Truly Victorian             [www.trulyvictorian.com](http://www.trulyvictorian.com)  
[www.VictorianTreasuresByMary.com](http://www.VictorianTreasuresByMary.com)

## MEET CHERI FRY

She lives in a small ranch style house in Jacksonville, IL.

Her new home is much closer to work, and has a fully functional sewing room that is completely filled with fabrics and trims.

Cheri lives with two male cats that she has rescued. They are always near her feet as she sews.

They love playing with any trims or ribbons that may happen to fall off the table.

Cheri has been Civil War reenacting since June 2004. Her main interest is women's clothing. Cheri does both a middle-upper class & working class impression.

Cheri's real life job is as a Graphic Arts Specialist for Bound to Stay Bound Books in Jacksonville, IL. BTSB specializes in binding quality children's books for schools and libraries. [www.btsb.com](http://www.btsb.com)

Cheri is a driving force behind Veterans Remembered, which honors veterans from all wars. She is also on the General Grierson Days committee. More information can be found on these committees on a web site she designed [www.griersonsociety.org](http://www.griersonsociety.org)



In the next article I will continue on BEST/DAY DRESSES focusing on Simplicity patterns. Our Secret Sewing Society will continue to sew, and we look forward to filling our closets with new stuff!

Each new review might include new season stuff as well, as the major name brands have new patterns due out in Spring/Fall seasons. So if you see a pattern # and cannot find it in stores check EBAY. If a new pattern comes out midseason and we've passed that layer, one of our last articles will cover "missed patterns".

If for any reason you miss one of the reviews, don't fret. The last article in our series will highlight the "Best-Of-The-Best Top Picks" from each category.

Please feel free to contact me if you know of a pattern line we are missing. I love new patterns! And if you happen to see me out & about stop by to chat, I'd love to hear your opinions on fabric and dress patterns too! I listen to it all: the good, the bad, and the ugly.

And if you hear of a really great fabric sale, I'll see you there!