



**18th Century
Shortgown**



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The elaborate fashions that define 18th style are certainly a sight to behold, but far from practical for daily life. Fabric was expensive and the complicated styles of fashionable gowns had to be made by trained seamstresses, making them far too expensive for the average woman to own. That was just as well, since the average woman would have found it rather difficult to raise her large family, tend her small farm, and help her husband with his trade while wearing a fancy gown.

The mid-18th century saw the emergence of what we now refer to as the shortgown, a casual jacket like garment that seems to have developed from the longer bedgown worn earlier in the century. It was generally cut out of one piece of fabric and then fitted to the body with pleats, drawstrings, or a combination of the two. They required minimal sewing skills, for contrary to popular thought, not every woman from this time period was an adept seamstress. Shortgowns were usually fastened in the front with pins or drawstrings, not buttons, and an apron tied on over it helped to keep it shut. Designed for comfort and economy, shortgowns were usually made from fabrics such as wool, linen, or linsey wooley, which was a combination of the two fibers. More well-to-do women used hand printed cotton, an expensive luxury fabric at the time, and dressed up their shortgowns with extra pleats, cuffs, and trims to make them more elegant. Loose, comfortable, and economical, shortgowns were the denim shirts of the day - workhorses with a touch of class.

Benjamin Franklin knew the value of hard work and while he enjoyed the pleasures of his success, he never forgot the lessons of frugality, industry, and common sense he learned along the way. From 1732 to 1758, he published his immensely popular Poor Richard's Almanack, which offered a mixture of seasonal weather forecasts, practical household hints, puzzles, and witty phrases that have lived on in the contemporary American vernacular. Scattered throughout the pages, Franklin extolled the virtues of industry, economy, and prudence. A successful life, he believed, was not one of leisure and idleness; leisure is time for doing something useful. He warned against too many frivolous fripperies, and praised simplicity. The elegant gowns of the 18th century certainly had their place, but it was the work done while wearing the simple frocks that made it possible to enjoy them.



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