



## SUTTER'S FORT CLOTHING – 1840s

### I. INTRODUCTION

The Environmental Living Program allows students to simulate life at Sutter's Fort in the 1840s. Wearing period-appropriate clothing not only enhances the experience but also encourages role playing. Parents and teachers are also expected to dress appropriately. Keep in mind that "appropriate" doesn't necessarily mean "perfect." If you start feeling overwhelmed, check out **Section IV. Close Enough**, on page 3.

The first step in costuming is to choose a character or occupation. Students are encouraged to choose a real person who was known to have been in northern California at the time. If that is not possible, choose a type of person who might have been in California. By choosing either a real person or the type of person who might have been in northern California in the 1840s, it will help students and parents avoid inappropriate clothing. For instance, the clothing worn in most cowboy movies is wrong since those movies are usually set in the 1870s – 1890s. Also, while denim cloth is an accurate fabric for the 1840s, denim jeans are not.

The following pages include more detailed descriptions and drawings for pioneer clothing (if you want to portray a Native American or Californio, you'll need to do more research), but some things to keep in mind:

- People of the 1840s wore more clothing than we do – high necks, long sleeves, long trousers for men and long skirts for women.
- Because there was no sunscreen and most people did not own sunglasses (although some early versions did exist), men wore hats and women wore bonnets to protect themselves from the weather.
- Most people of that period did not have as many clothes as we have; a farm woman might have only two dresses – one for everyday and one for good.
- Most people of that period did not discard their clothes when fashions changed; they might dye a dress, remake a dress or change the decorations (lace, braiding, etc.) to give a dress a new look.
- The first commercially viable home sewing machine was not patented until 1846, so clothing was all hand-sewn. We don't expect you to handsew your clothing, but try to avoid top stitching that is clearly machine sewn (e.g., denim jeans).
- Women generally let their hair grow. They wore it down as girls and up as adults.
- Closures such as zippers and snaps had not been invented. Buttons, hooks and eyes, and tapes (to tie things together) were commonly used. Also, some clothes were just pinned together.



- The industrial revolution had changed textile production – people in the 1840s wore a combination of garments made from handspun-handwoven cloth and from factory made cloth.

## II. PIONEER CLOTHING - MEN

Pantaloon or trousers	Loose fitting trousers of wool or cotton, button closures, generally in dark colors such as brown, gray and black.
Shirts	Loose fitting with dropped shoulders, opening only part way in front. Often checked, plaid or dyed dark colors such as green, blue or red. Generally cotton or linen, but wool shirts were worn in cold weather.
Vests	Commonly worn. Didn't necessarily match either trousers or coats.
Coats or serapes	Both were worn in California. Coats were similar to those worn today, although they appear baggier. Some coats had collars and lapels and some were collarless.
Hats	Large brimmed felt hats were usually worn. Men shaped the crown to suit themselves. Some wore cotton or silk bandannas under their hats in the California style.
Boots	Made from heavy leather with square toes. Turned down tops were common. (Pointed-toe cowboy boots are 30 years in the future.)
Boys	From infancy to toddler (until potty trained) – boys wore dresses. After that, some wore short pants, especially in the summer, until they were about eight. After that they generally dressed like their fathers.

## III. PIONEER CLOTHING - WOMEN

Dresses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Snug bodice, full skirt, long semi-fitted sleeves.</li> <li>• Bodice and skirt might be separate garments or sewn together.</li> <li>• Might open in the back or the front – closed with buttons, hooks and eyes, or pins (front closing only).</li> <li>• Skirt length varied – girls wore mid-calf length, city women wore ankle length, working country women sometimes wore skirts slightly shorter than ankle length because they had to navigate muddy farmyards.</li> <li>• Often cotton or linen in the summer and wool in the winter. Well-to-do women owned dresses made of luxury fabrics such as silk.</li> <li>• Solid colors, checks, stripes, plaids or prints were all common. Dark colors such as dark brown and blue were favored because they did not show the dirt as quickly as lighter colors.</li> <li>• Separate collars and cuffs might also be worn.</li> <li>• Worn with one or more petticoats to give the skirt some volume.</li> </ul>
---------	---

Aprons	Commonly worn. Both skirt-only aprons and pinafore aprons (with little bibs pinned to the dress bodice) were worn.
Scarves or shawls	Wool shawls were commonly worn for warmth when a coat was not necessary. Some women also wore cotton or linen neck scarves.
Bonnets	Outdoors, women generally wore bonnets to protect themselves from the weather. Both fabric and woven straw bonnets were common. Women with more money might also purchase felt bonnets.
Day Caps	Some women also wore day caps – generally of white cotton or linen. These were close fitting caps that were worn indoors. Bonnets were placed over the day cap when the woman went outside. By the 1840s, day caps were becoming slightly old fashioned. However, this is a handy way to hide modern short hair.
Shoes	Commonly flat soled, tie up, in brown or black leather. Some women had rawhide boots made for the journey west.
Girls	Little girls generally wore mid-calf-length unfitted dresses. By their mid-teens, they dressed like their mothers.

#### IV. CLOSE ENOUGH . . .

Men	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cover your modern trousers with a long shirt to hide the zippers, pockets and belt loops.</li> <li>• Over your shirt wear a leather belt or fabric sash and tie on a pouch.</li> <li>• Square toed boots or moccasins.</li> <li>• Wide brimmed felt hat.</li> <li>• Fly-front trousers can also be disguised by sewing buttons on top.</li> <li>• Vests, scarves and suspenders are appropriate.</li> <li>• An old wool blanket can be made into a serape.</li> </ul>
Women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Long, full skirt</li> <li>• High necked, long sleeved blouse</li> <li>• Apron</li> <li>• Fabric bonnet</li> <li>• Square toed boots, moccasins, or flat-heeled black or brown lace-up leather shoes</li> <li>• Shawl for cold weather – you can make one out of a square piece of fabric folded into a triangle.</li> </ul>

- Cape for cold weather – any length from waist to ankle is appropriate. Materials may include blanket, corduroy, velvet, velveteen, wool.

Cold weather gear

The Fort gets very cold and wet in the winter. Under your costume, you can wear thermal underwear. Bring extra pairs of socks for yourself and your children to change into. Nylon ponchos and umbrellas can be used on nightwatch.

Carriers

Remember journals, pencils, cups, trade store purchases, craft items, etc. have to be carried somehow. Baskets, pouches, and canvas bags work well.

**FIRE SAFETY**

If you will be working around an open fire, consider your costume carefully.

- Wool is safest.
- Cotton and linen burn like grass unless they have been treated.
- Polyester will melt onto your skin.
- Tight sleeves are safer than loose sleeves.
- Women can partially protect themselves by wearing a long full wool apron over their skirts.
- If the worst happens, remember what you teach your children – stop – drop – roll –

If you're planning to sew

Fabrics – cotton, linen or wool in plain weave, twill or corduroy are all fine. Solid colors, checks, stripes and plaids are fine. Calicos with small prints and limited colors are also fine – e.g., ground color plus not more than 4 other colors.

Closures – hooks and eyes, buttons of metal, bone, mother of pearl, horn, leather, wood, crocheted thread.

Patterns – some currently available

- Sutter's Fort Trade Store carries several patterns
- Folkwear – <http://folkwear.com/>
  - Kinsale Cloak (# 207, 208)
  - Missouri River Boatman's Shirt (#204)
- Past Patterns - <http://www.pastpatterns.com/>
  - Fan front bodice and skirt (#800, 801)
  - Small fall trowsers (#008)
  - Two mid-19<sup>th</sup> century shirts (#007)
  - Several of the ladies underwear patterns are ok



- Simplicity - <http://www.simplicity.com/>
  - Pioneer dress, bonnet, apron (#3723) – just use hooks and eyes on back seam in place of zipper
- McCalls - <http://www.mccall.com/>
  - Early American (#4547, 4548)

