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Mid-19th century women’s fashion in Alexandria

BY CHLOE MAZARIEGOS

The 1850s in the City of Alexandria brought about many changes from the previous decades. When Nathaniel Hawthorne published “The Scarlet Letter” in 1850, fictional stories like his weren’t the only products of the Victorian era with themes related to morality, social roles and societal judgment.

In the fashion industry, modesty was the driving force behind women’s clothing design and the popularization of garments such as multi-layered skirts and long sleeves. Feet, surprisingly, seemed to be an important indicator of status and femininity for the women in society. Variations for footwear included the famous Victorian boots, high-heeled walking shoes, oriental shoes and slippers, among others.

On May 16, 1853, the Alexandria Gazette published an advertisement for “H. Weirman’s celebrated Ladies’, Misses, & Children’s fine French Shoes.” The ad referenced the diverse options for footwear in stock, ranging from French gaiter walking shoes to white and black satin gaiters and slippers from H. Weirman from Philadelphia.

In the 1850s, American women were starting to steer away from the rigidity of mod-



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There were few shoe options for 19th century women as they began working outside the home.

esty and have more variety of clothing that helped them prioritize comfort. They also were more at ease with adapting the clothing to the way they aspired to be perceived by others, sometimes tightening their gaiter boots as tight as possible to show off their pretty feet and ankles and therefore appear as “more desirable.”

The Gazette’s advertisement also assures their readers that Weirman’s footwear was of better quality than the “slop shop” shoes. “Slop shops” were very popular in the 19th century, stores where people found very cheap, mass-produced clothing that was more affordable to people with limited re-

sources. However, as popular as they were, the stores had a reputation for very low quality.

After the Industrial Revolution, women became more likely to work outside of the home in places such as factories. By 1850, 15% of women had jobs other than being homemakers, and these more active lifestyles meant that comfort and durability became a far more relevant factor when choosing clothing in general, especially footwear.

Nowadays, women in Alexandria have a far wider variety of shoes to choose from. Gaiters are now more often associated with people who enjoy outdoor activities such as

hiking and trailing, instead of being used to cover up or as a show of modesty. Much like the role of women in society has shifted throughout time, so has women’s fashion, often reflecting how women in different eras have been allowed and able to express their individuality over time.

Historic Alexandria is proud to celebrate Women’s History Month in March. Find out more on Women’s History Month events in Alexandria at alexandriava.gov/WomensHistoryMonth.

Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.