

April 2009



A Newsletter for the Volunteers of the 1820 Col. Benjamin Stephenson House

The Volunteer

RoxAnn Raisner, Director

Dirty & Slovenly to a Degree

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by Jack Larkin

At the threshold of the 19th century Americans still lived in a world of small scale and scarcity. People, goods and information moved slowly. The tools they used and the routines of their work, their materials and sources of power, would have been immediately recognizable to a man or woman of the 17th century. The physical texture of American life was far closer to that in the villages of many third[-]world countries today than to anything in the present-day United States.

Early-19th-century Americans lived in a world of dirt, insects and pungent smells. Farmyards were strewn with animal wastes, and farmers wore manure-spattered boots and trousers everywhere. Men's and women's working clothes alike were often stiff with dirt and dried sweat, and men's shirts were often stained with yellow rivulets of tobacco juice. The location of privies was all too obvious on warm or windy days, and unemptied chamber pots advertised their presence. Wet baby "napkins," today's diapers, were not immediately washed but simply put by the fire to dry. Vats of "chamber lye"—highly concentrated urine used for cleaning type or degreasing wool—perfumed all printing offices and many households. "The breath of that fiery bar-room," as Underwood described a country tavern, "was overpowering. The odors of the hostlers' boots, redolent of fish-oil and tallow, and of buffalo-ropes and horse-blankets, the latter reminiscent of equine ammonia, almost got the better of the all-pervading fumes of spirits and tobacco."

Densely populated, but poorly cleaned and drained, American cities were often far more noisome than its farmyards. City streets were thickly covered with horse manure[,] and few neighborhoods were free from the spreading stench of tanneries and slaughterhouses. New York City's accumulation of refuse was so great that it was generally believed that the actual surfaces of many streets had not been seen for decades.

During her stay in Cincinnati, Frances Trollope was following the practice of the vast majority of American city housewives when she threw her household "slops" — refuse food and dirty dishwater—out into the street. An irate neighbor soon informed her that municipal ordinances forbade "throwing such things at the sides of the streets" as she had done; "they must just all be cast right into the middle and the pigs soon takes them off." In most cities hundreds, or even thousands



Mr. Shanghai tries another kind of work. Finds the odor unpleasant.

A cartoonist's view of life on a farm as glimpsed through the discomfort of Mr. Shanghai, a romantic urbanite who had an unrealistic notion of agricultural work (Harpers, 1856, XIII, 142).

of free-roaming pigs scavenged the garbage; one exception was Charleston, whose streets were patrolled by buzzards. By converting garbage into pork, pigs kept city streets cleaner than they would otherwise have been, but

the pigs themselves befouled the streets[,] and those who ate their meat—primarily poor families—ran greater than usual risks of infection.

Boston probably had the best sanitary regulations of any large American city; its scavengers' carts and manure-collecting farmers kept its streets, as the English visitor John Lambert noted, in 1808, "for the most part clean and in good order" by contemporary standards. Yet the city still made powerful assaults on the nostrils of its citizens. Dead animals were sometimes thrown in the Frog Pond on the Common, and the area around the wharves and Faneuil Hall market were putrid with the decayed residues of vegetables, meat and fish. Although Boston's hogs were not allowed to roam at large—comparing it to New York, the printer David Clapp called it the "swineless city" in his 1832 diary—one of the city's scavenging contractors often carted away the offal to feed his own large herd, kept in an unsavory and prominently situated pen.

The most visible symbols of early[-]American sanitation were those most anonymous of buildings, privies or "necessary houses." But Americans did not always build them or use them. Many rural households simply took the closest available patch of woods or brush, just as families in some traditional farming communities of Ireland do today. Extremely careful archaeological investigations of small farmsteads, for example, have often found no privy sites, and they were not usually built in slave quarters. Men and women working in the fields or traveling simply answered the body's call when and where they could. Lewis Miller's sketches provide graphic evidence that the male inhabitants of York, Pennsylvania, at times, relieved themselves in the street or against the walls of houses.

But in more densely settled communities, and [in] regions with colder winters, privies were in widespread use. They were not usually put in out-of-the-way locations. "The fashion of some" Northern farm families, according to the *Farmer's Almanack* in 1862, had long been to have their "necessary planted in a garden or other conspicuous place." Other country folk went even further in turning human wastes to agricultural account, and built their outhouses "within the territory of a hog yard, that the swine may root and ruminate and devour the nastiness thereof." The *Almanack* was a longstanding critic of primitive manners in the countryside and roundly condemned these traditional sanitary arrangements as demonstrating a "want of taste, decency, and propriety."

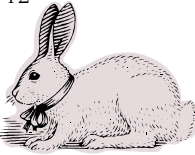
Families following Thomas's advice and trying to exemplify "decency" were becoming concerned about shielding privies from sight, or at least ensuring that they did not take too prominent a place among their farm buildings. Some larger and newer Northern farmhouses were built with necessities made architecturally invisible by attachment to the house; they were separated from the living quarters by a succession of work and storage rooms. Catherine Beecher's *Treatise on Domestic Economy* of 1841, a bible of refined domesticity, actually included a plan for such an indoor privy. Rural sanitation, however, had its advantages. With their abundance of room, farm house-

(Continued on page 3)



APRIL 2009



SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
			1 Book Club	2 School Tour School Tour	3 School Tour School Tour	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12 	13	14	15	16 School Tour	17 School Tour School Tour	18 Betsy Workshop (at LCCC Nelson Complex)
19	20	21	22 School Tour	23 School Tour Adult Tour	24 School Tour	25
26 Sewing Circle	27	28	29 School Tour	30 School Tour	May 1 School Tour School Tour	May 2 Betsy Workshop (at LCCC Nelson Complex)

Calendar Activities

- April 1, **Book Club**, 7 p.m. This month's selection is *Burr* by Gore Vidal. Everyone is welcome to participate.
- April 2, **Cassens Elementary School**, 9:45-11:45 a.m., ±27 5th grade
- April 2, **Cassens Elementary School**, 12:15-2:45p.m., ±27 5th grade
- April 3, **Cassens Elementary School**, 10 a.m.-12p.m., ±27 5th grade
- April 3, **Home School group**, 1 p.m., 3 students
- April 12, **EASTER**. Stephenson House will be closed in observance

of the holiday.

- April 16, **Woodland School**, 10 a.m.-12 p.m., ±50 3rd grade
- April 17, **Goshen School**, 10 a.m.-12 p.m., ±52 K
- April 17, **Goshen School**, 12:30-2:30 p.m., ±52 K
- April 18, **Clothed in Modesty** (Betsy Workshop), 12-4 p.m. This class is offered in conjunction with Lewis & Clark College. Two sessions are included with fee. Sessions conducted at N. O. Nelson Complex of Lewis & Clark College. To register call 618-468-2222.
- April 22, **Cassens Elementary School**, 10 a.m.-12 p.m., ±50 3rd grade
- April 23, **Woodland Elementary School**, 10 a.m.-12 p.m., 22 3rd

grade

- April 23, **Alpha Delta Kappa**, 6 p.m., 40 adults
- April 24, **Woodland Elementary School**, 10 a.m.-12 p.m., ±30 3rd grade
- April 26, **Sewing Circle**, 1-3 p.m.
- April 29, **Cassens Elementary School**, 10 a.m.-12 p.m., 51 4th grade
- April 30, **Cassens Elementary School**, 10 a.m.-12 p.m., ±47 3rd grade
- May 1, **Trinity Lutheran School**, 10 a.m.-12 p.m., 21 5th grade
- May 1, **Goshen Elementary School**, 12:30-2:30 p.m., ±21 K
- May 2, **Clothed in Modesty** (Betsy Workshop, session II), 12-4 p.m.



Creamware chamber pot made in England in the late 18th century with a canary luster glaze freehand decorated. With a molded frog inside and the bawdy verse, this chamber pot illustrates a traditional earthiness also found on other ceramic forms like puzzle jugs (trick drinking vessels). (OSV Collections 51.28.8)

(Continued from page 1)

holds could avoid putting living quarters, well and kitchen too close to the "back-house." Rural privies could be moved when the pit filled up and had to be covered over; on some farms a succession of fruit trees around the home lot marked previous locations.

Living in much closer quarters, urban families were often painfully conscious of their privies, which usually sat in their small backyards. The better-arranged necessities of the prosperous emptied into vaults which could be opened and cleaned out. The dripping horse-drawn carts of the "nocturnal gold finders," as a Boston newspaper called them in 1800[,] who emptied the vaults and took their loads out for burial or water disposal—"night soil" was almost never used as manure—were a familiar part of nighttime traffic on city streets. Those privies more poorly constructed sometimes opened directly on a stream or pond, or simply overflowed their pits, making the yard "a sink of filth."

The humblest pieces of American household furniture were the chamber pots that allowed people to avoid a dark and often cold nighttime journey outdoors. Kept under the bed or in a corner of the room, "chambers" were used primarily upon retiring and arising, or by invalids unable to walk to the privy. Collecting, emptying and cleaning them out were an unspoken but daily part of every housewife's routine.

Americans were not "clean and decent" by today's standards, and it was virtually impossible that they should be. The furnishings and use of rooms in most American houses made more than the most elementary washing quite difficult. In a New England farmer's household, wrote Frances Underwood, in *Quabbin: The Story of a New England Town* (Boston, 1893), each household member would "go down to the 'sink' in the lean-to, next to the kitchen, fortunate if he had not to break ice in order to wash his face and hands, or more fortunate if a little warm water was poured into his basin from the kettle swung over the kitchen fire." Even in the comfortable household of the prominent minister Lyman Beecher in Litchfield, Connecticut, around 1815, all family members washed in the kitchen, using a stone sink and "a couple of basins."

Southerners washed in their detached kitchens or, like Westerners in warm weather, washed outside, "at the doors ... or at the wells" of their houses. Using basins and sinks outdoors or in full view of others, most Americans found anything more than "washing the face and hands once a day," usually in cold water, difficult, even unthinkable. Most men and women also washed without soap, reserving it for laundering clothes; instead they used a brisk rubbing with a coarse towel to scrub the dirt off

their skins. The minority of Americans who used soap joined the English travelers who so frequently surprised everyone by asking for it at taverns.

Most Americans were dirty by modern standards, but black Americans came in for the harshest scrutiny and description. Judging by the standards of upper[-]class London or Philadelphia, there were native and foreign observers who found field hands and house slaves "perfectly filthy in their persons and clothes" and "intolerably offensive." Of all Americans, slaves had the most meager utensils for washing and laundering and the most limited opportunities to keep clean. Southern blacks and whites alike shared a climate that fostered insect life and heavy sweating. White masters may have washed more frequently, but these same "offensive" slaves were a routinely accepted part of the plantation's domestic environment, and came into the closest physical proximity with white family members as waiters at table, cooks, wet nurses and sometimes even bed partners. Surely, ethnocentric commentators found it considerably easier to describe how black folks looked and smelled than how white back-country farmers or urban laborers did.

In matters of cleanliness, the practice of the most advanced American households differed sharply from that of the majority. Catherine Webb was the daughter of a wealthy New York City merchant who boarded with the Beechers for a time; she found these arrangements "a great trial" because it was impossible to take anything like the complete bath to which she was accustomed—and [to which] the Beechers clearly were not. Pioneers in cleanliness sometimes suffered derision. When Frances Kemble Butler bathed her two young children during a Philadelphia-Savannah boat trip in 1838, a fellow passenger thought it "excessively ridiculous;" Butler noted that her critic had completely "abstained" from washing even her hands during the two-day journey.

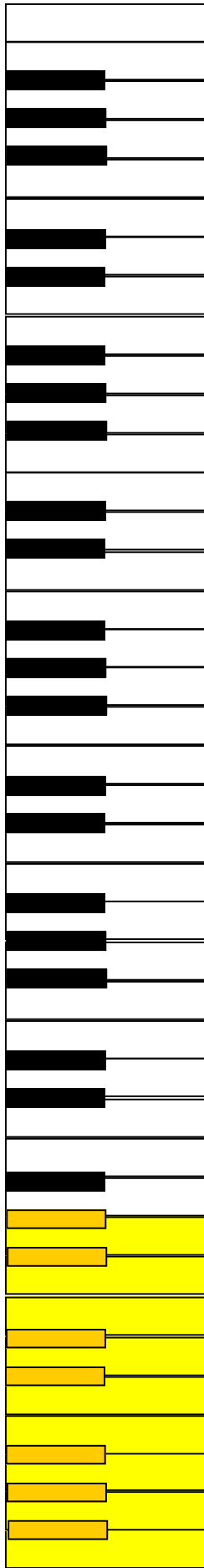
But gradually Catherine Webb's practice of complete bathing was spreading beyond the topmost levels of American society and into smaller towns and villages. Increasingly this became possible as families moved washing equipment out of kitchens and into bedchambers, from shared space to space that could be made private. As more prosperous households furnished one or two of their chambers with washing equipment—a washstand, a basin and a ewer or large-mouthed pitcher—family members could shut the chamber door, undress and wash themselves completely. The daughters of the Larcom family, living in Lowell, Massachusetts, in the late 1830s, began to bathe in a bedchamber in this way; Lucy Larcom described how her oldest sister began to take "a full cold bath every morning before she went to her work...in a room without a fire," and that the other young Larcoms "did the same whenever we could be resolute enough." By the 1830s better city hotels and even some country taverns were providing individual basins and pitchers in their rooms.

At a far remove from "primitive manners" and "bad practices" was the genteel ideal of domestic sanitation embodied in the "chamber sets"—matching basin and ewer for private bathing, a cup for brushing the teeth and a chamber pot with cover to minimize odor and spillage—that American stores were beginning to stock. By 1840, a significant minority of American households could show chamber sets and washstands to hold them in their bedchambers. For a handful, there was the very faint dawning of an entirely new age of sanitary arrangements. In 1829, the new Tremont House hotel in Boston offered its patrons indoor plumbing; eight chambers with bathtubs, and eight "waterclosets." In New York City and Philadelphia, which had developed rudimentary public water systems, a few wealthy households had water taps and, more rarely, water closets by the 1830s. For all other families[,] flush toilets and bathtubs remained far in the future.

The American people as a whole moved only slowly toward cleanliness. In "the backcountry at the present day," commented the fastidious author of the *Young Lady's Friend* in 1836, custom still "required that everyone should wash at the pump in the yard or at the sink in the kitchen." Writing in 1846, William Alcott rejoiced that to "wash the surface of the whole body in water daily" had now been accepted as a genteel standard of personal hygiene. But, he added, there were "multitudes who pass for models of neatness and cleanliness, who do not perform this work for themselves half a dozen times—nay once—a year." As the better-off became cleaner than ever before, the poor stayed dirty. In cleanliness, as in much else, Americans' material lives were becoming increasingly unequal.

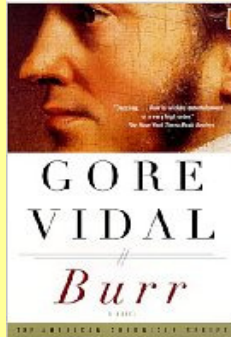
Miss Durable, a woman of fashionable dress and hairstyle, but a late-comer in matters of personal hygiene, is asked whether her tea was agreeable. Her response, undoubtedly, a toothless lisp: "O perfectly, but I am very careful not to take anything hot, it is so bad for the teeth." David Claypool Johnson's tart observations on fashions and everyday life are found in his drawings and cartoons, many of which were published in Scraps for 1839.





Book Club Selection

Burr by Gore Vidal



Anyone who loves books is welcome. Book club will meet April 1, 7-9 p.m. Call 618-692-1818 for more information.



Volunteer Recognition

The following is a list of the top ten volunteers of the month. This list is based on the number of hours each volunteer worked and recorded in the volunteer hours log book. We appreciate all the time our volunteers give each month, regardless of total hours worked. Thanks to each and every one of our volunteers!

1. Bob Jurgena
2. Rudy Wilson
3. Maxine Callies
4. Amy Mullane
5. Karen Mateyka
6. Walt Raisner
7. Diane Schrader
8. Ellen Nordhauser
9. Carol Wetzel
10. Sam Forehand

Left: Valerie Klebenow and Sam Forehand are discovered in their secret hiding place. The space under the bed in the master bedroom is the perfect spot to hide from boys in blue trucks—or RoxAnn.

Piano Forte Repair Fund

To date, twelve piano forte keys have been purchased by donors, making our total funds raised \$240. Each month the *Volunteer* will display the keyboard (left) with the number of sold keys colored yellow, and a list of donors who have contributed to the project. The repair fund goal is \$1000.

Donors to date:

- Ed & Candy Wentz
- Kathy Schmidt
- Elizabeth & Bill Bowling
- Dr. Robert Malench
- Brenda Knox & Matt Crowe

Keys are \$15 each

To purchase a key, send donations to:

Piano Forte Repair Fund
c/o. 1820 Col. Benjamin Stephenson
House

P.O. Box 754
Edwardsville, Illinois 62025

Checks should be made payable to
Friends of the Col. Benjamin Stephenson House.

News & Needful Things

THANKS:

Thank you, Maxine Callies, for the candle wax to be used for demonstrations.

WANTED:

- seamstress willing to oversee the construction of a Father Christmas robe
- medium-weight linen for ladies' mitts
- seamstresses to sew men's aprons and trousers and ladies' shifts for the wardrobe
- seamstresses to work on construction of summer bed linens and draperies
- monetary donations to buy two period men's coats.
- cutting knives with wooden handles (no serrated edges)
- period silverware for the dining room
- old wool clothing with a 95% or greater wool content for use in a rug-hooking class
- child's and male dress forms (torsos)
- period forks and knives
- tin plates
- straw brooms (historical construction)

FYI:

- Historical clothing patterns are available for sign-out by people to make their own garb. Contact RoxAnn for a list of patterns and for fabric swatches.

NOTICE:

- Interpretive training booklets are available for volunteers to sign out, to study the basic history of the house. The booklets contain the basic house tour and various information from the interpretive tour conducted at the house on a daily basis. Anyone interested in becoming a historical interpreter, or in reviewing the tour information, may contact RoxAnn to check out a booklet.



Left: Two young visitors try out their laundry-washing skills during Family Fun Sunday, March 15. These two spent at least 25 minutes making as many suds possible. The day was a great success, with good weather and tons of visitors.

New to the Inventory

Recently added to the wardrobe is this lovely day cap, modeled by docent Amy Mullane. The cap was made for Stephenson House by Su Miller of Custom Vestments. Our cap is made of a starched cotton organdy and features a hand-pinked, sheer ruffle on the crown and front edge. It is based on a cap detailed in *Workwoman's Guide*, an 1830s publication. This is truly an exquisite cap.

Docents looking to upgrade their wardrobes can visit the Custom Vestments website at www.customvestments.com. The company is operated by Su Miller and Joseph Kleffman. They specialize in historically accurate garments for men and women. There are several advantages to purchasing period garments from a company like Custom Vestments. You will

receive a garment based on extant pieces, each item is tailor made to your body, and ultimately you will look appropriate to the period. It is well worth the investment.





The Needler by Elizabeth Bowling

Descriptions of Early-Nineteenth-Century Frontier Clothing

The following period descriptions of Euro-American frontier clothing are interesting for their detail.

Please note that certain fabric and garment names had a specific, historical meaning for items available at that time.

Bergopzoom – presumably a clothing-weight fabric made in, or imported from, Bergen op Zoom in the Netherlands—an area known since the Middle Ages for the production and trade of wools

Gingham – cotton cloth woven with dyed yarns, in either stripes or checks

Calico – cotton fabric resembling linen, available plain or with printed or colored, woven designs

Muslin – fine, sheer cotton

Tarlatan – fine, sheer cotton

Lawn – fine, sheer linen

Vest – either a sleeveless waistcoat, or a short coat or under coat with sleeves, worn by both men and women; in women's case, it may have resembled either a fitted, sleeved bodice, or a more loosely fitting short gown or bed gown

Jacket – a short coat with sleeves, worn by both men and women; in women's case, possibly resembling a fitted bodice or a more loosely fitting short gown or bed gown

Breech maker – a combination tailor and leather worker, trained in the specialized production of leather clothing

French engineer Nicolas de Finiels travelled the Louisiana Territory 1797-1805. His travelogue *An Account of Upper Louisiana* (n.p.: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1989) describes concessions to native fashion made by Frenchmen of upper Louisiana at the very end of the eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth:

They were compelled to adopt many Indian customs and clothing styles: the breechclout took the place of colottes [breeches]; leggings replaced stockings; doeskin moccasins succeeded European shoes; a loose[-]fitting tunic covered the rest of the body; a blue kerchief wrapped about the head completed the costume. When cold weather renders this



Detail of a man painted by Maria von Phul, c. 1818 (Missouri Historical Society).

dress inadequate, a cloak of bergopzoom or rough blue fabric, fitted with a hood, protects the body... (112).

According to de Finiels:

Female costumes have the same simplicity: a skirt of blue gingham and a short calico vest in the summer or wool in the winter; a sort of long cotton cloak...; a blue or sometimes white kerchief knotted over the forehead...; this constitutes daily dress. Calico dresses with dyed designs, and some silk dresses in the antique style that suggest a bit of opulence, make up holiday clothes (113).

However, even by this early period, more fashion-conscious women were already abandoning the styles of their elders and adopting the neoclassical, high-waisted fashions that had appeared in Europe c. 1796:

Young women and maids already disdain the costumes of the mothers and have relegated them to old age for covering their wrinkles and the ravages of time. Embroidered muslin, tarlatan, fine and brilliant silk, and lawn cloth have replaced modest cotton, printed calico and bergopzoom. Elegant corsets gallantly delineate waistlines that were once covered by jackets and suggest the seductive figures that they scarcely conceal. Long tresses of hair are no longer restrained with cotton kerchiefs; they float in voluptuous swirls or are artfully braided. Ribbons and flowers are skillfully added... (115).

According to de Finiels, some men were at this early date a bit slow in adopting the new fashions. They continued

to wear clothes that are practical in the woods, and shed them only reluctantly. [But] these clothes are becoming unfashionable in the capital [St. Louis]..., where some dandies can already be seen. Soon they will be driven from the towns and will be found only in the villages, woods, and hunting canoes. There they will be hidden from society whose sense of refinement is becoming offended by their rusticity (115).



Portrait of a woman by Maria von Phul, c. 1818 (Missouri Historical Society).

Christian Schultz, who visited southern Illinois's Fort Massac in 1807, recorded his experiences in *Travels on an Inland Voyage Through the States of New-York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Ohio, Kentucky and Tennessee and Through the Territories of Indiana, Louisiana, Mississippi and New-Orleans...* (Ridgewood, N.J.: Gregg Press, 1968). According to Schultz, the Cherokee women and girls living near the fort were

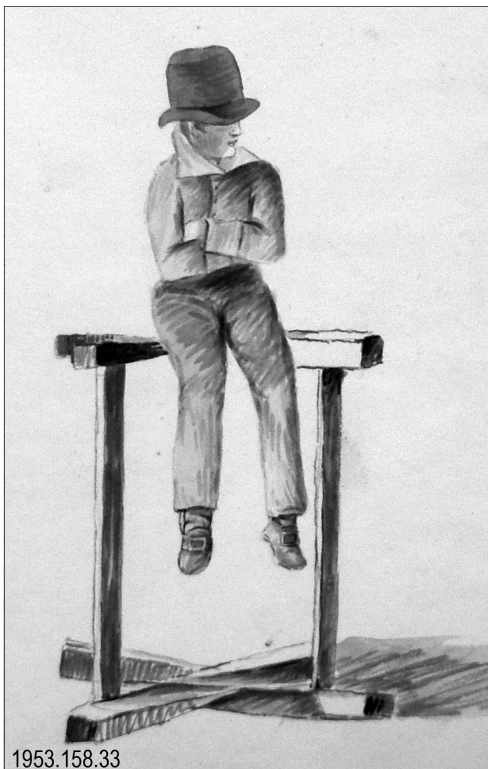
all habited in short gowns and petticoats, after the fashion of the white people...; from homespun cottons of their own manufacture; but instead of the hat and stocking, they use a cloak and moccasin (8).

Only a few years after the transfer of the Louisiana Territory, fine goods and professional garment-making services were widely available in the St. Louis region.

According to 1809 advertisements in the St. Louis *Missouri Gazette*, clothiers included Frenchman Bernard Lalende, "lately arrived from Bordeaux," who practiced tailoring "in all its branches, ac-



Portrait of a woman and boy by Maria von Phul, c. 1818 (Missouri Historical Society).



1953.158.33

Portrait of a boy by Maria von Phul, c. 1818 (Missouri Historical Society).

cording to the latest fashions of Paris and London.” Lalende also offered fabrics and assorted ready-made sundries. His competitors included both L. T. Hampton, who offered “Skin Dressing, Gloving and *BREECHES MAKING*” services, along with ready-made sundries, and Hampton’s co-tenant, one Michael Dolan, a “Taylor and Habit-Maker.” By 1811, St. Louis had a full dozen mercantile businesses, offering assorted goods. (See Cathy Johnson, “Civilian Clothing on the Frontier,” *MOMCC Magazine* XIX:1 [1998].)

Interestingly, L. T. Hampton’s 1809 advertisement specifically stated that each of his offerings could be purchased with deer skins. This shows that both fashionable goods and fashionable finished items were readily available to customers who were cash poor, but had something to barter.

By the 1820s, even the frontier fashion hold-outs described by Nicolas de Finiels had adopted mainstream style. According to English traveller Basil Hall, who recorded his experiences along the Ohio and Mississippi rivers in *Forty Etchings from Sketches Made with a Camera Lucide, in North America, in 1827 and 1828* (Edinburgh: Cadell & Co., 1829),

[I]t is notable that the backwoodsmen here have beaver hats of the style worn in more civilized areas but in a dilapidated condition[. There is] nothing characteristic about their costume-wear, [which is] a medley – a bad imitation of all fashion in English Towns.

(See Robert A. Braun, “‘The Appearance of a Brigand’: A Primer on Men’s Clothing...,” *MOMCC Magazine* fall 2001.)

Volunteer of Excellence

This month’s Volunteer of Excellence is Bob Jurgena. Bob has been volunteering at Stephenson House since the site opened in March 2006. He has been a reenactor for many years and, through research, has amassed a selection of appropriate garments. Pictured here are two of Bob’s most recent acquisitions: a reproduction straw hat, made in 2008, and a walnut-dyed short coat based on a Kannik’s Korner pattern. *Looking good, Mr. J.!*



Michael Rockwell (right) instructs families in the art of quill writing during Family Fun Sunday.



The kitchen was a colorful place on Family Fun Sunday. Rudy Wilson and George Edwards educated visitors about natural dyes by allowing families to color boiled eggs.

From the Hearth: Hot Cross Buns

1 cup milk
2 Tbsp yeast
1/2 cup sugar
2 tsp. salt
1/3 cup butter, melted and cooled
1 1/2 tsp. cinnamon
1/2 tsp. nutmeg
4 eggs
5 cups flour
1 1/3 cups currants or raisins
1 egg white



Glaze

1 1/3 cup confectioner's sugar
1 1/2 tsp. finely chopped lemon zest
1/2 tsp. lemon extract
1-2 Tbsp milk

This may be difficult for younger children to do themselves, but they'll enjoy helping to mix and measure the ingredients, kneading the dough, forming the dough into balls, and adding the glaze.

In a small saucepan, heat milk to very warm, but not hot (110°F if using a candy thermometer). Pour warm milk into a bowl and sprinkle yeast over. Mix to dissolve and let sit for 5 minutes.

Stirring constantly, add sugar, salt, butter, cinnamon, nutmeg, and eggs. Gradually mix in flour; dough will be wet and sticky. Continue kneading until smooth, about 5 minutes. Cover bowl with plastic wrap or a lid, and let it rest for 30-45 minutes.

Knead again until dough is smooth and elastic, about 3 more minutes. Add currants or raisins and knead until well mixed. At this point, dough will still be fairly wet and sticky. Shape dough in a ball and place in a buttered dish. Cover with plastic wrap or a lid, and let rise overnight in the refrigerator. Excess moisture will be absorbed by morning.

Let dough sit at room temperature for about half an hour. Line a large baking pan (or pans) with parchment paper. (You could also lightly grease a baking pan, but parchment works better.) Divide dough into 24 equal pieces (in half, half again, etc.). Shape each portion into a ball and place on baking sheet, about 1/2 inch apart. Cover with a clean kitchen towel and let rise in a warm, draft-free place until doubled in size, about 1 1/2 hours. In the meantime, pre-heat oven to 400° F.

When buns have risen, take a sharp or serrated knife and carefully slash buns with a cross. Brush them with egg white and place in oven. Bake for 10 minutes, then reduce heat to 350° F and continue baking until buns are golden brown, about 15 minutes more. Transfer to a wire rack. Whisk together glaze ingredients, and spoon over buns in a cross pattern. Serve warm, if possible.

The Volunteer

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