

Civil War Era Ladies Head Wear

By Joanne Shelby

Thinking like a lady of the 1860's is important when putting together appropriate head wear. The general rule was anytime a lady left her home, she would have some type of head covering on. As re-enactors we should try and follow the same rules. It makes sense that if you are staying in camp (or at home so to speak) near your tent or the campfire you can have your head uncovered since that is your "home" for the weekend. If you leave the 9th's camp site (or civilian camping) to visit another camp site, the sutlers, or the battle then your head should be covered with appropriate headwear since you would be outside your home. The type of head wear you use should be determined by the type of dress you are wearing.

In general the following rules apply:

1. If you are in camp in a dress without a hoop or with a corded petticoat or are portraying a nurse, you would not wear a fancy hat or bonnet. A simple flat straw hat with little or no decoration would be appropriate. More accurate would be a slat bonnet or work bonnet that shields the face from the sun. Think of the camp dress minus a hoop as your work dress. Therefore a work type headcovering would be appropriate if you are leaving the campsite (Home). IN camp, while working, cooking or sitting around the campfire you would wear your hair confined in a period appropriate style, either with or without a simple hairnet (snood). If you are visiting the camp for the day or a time period and you are dressed in the work dress (camp dress) style a simple straw hat or slat bonnet would be appropriate.
2. If you are wearing a hoop or a crinoline then it is appropriate to wear a fancier hat or bonnet. A slat bonnet or work hat would not be appropriate. The fancier the material used in the making of the dress, then the more ornate and fancy the bonnet or hat can be. A fancier hair net would also be more appropriate in these situations.

The most commonly asked question is which is more "period correct" a hat or a bonnet? The answer is both. In general at this time, a lady would wear a bonnet, but hats were just coming into acceptable fashion and would be worn by younger women and more fashionable ladies with very updated wardrobes.

BONNETS: The most common type of bonnet was the SPOON BONNET. To the modern woman, the bonnet does not seem very flattering. Bonnets were intended to frame the face and cause the face to be round and full. This was the most desirable look back then. The spoon bonnet could go up very high over the head allowing space for decorating inside the bonnet and framing the face with laces, flowers (both silk and real) fringe, even spun glass crystal. The more elaborate and ornate (busy to us today), the more correct for the time.

In summer bonnets would be made of straw or lightweight fabrics and were more simply decorated. In winter you would see velvet, satin, moiré and heavier materials and would be much more lavishly decorated.

Bonnets were the one part of the ladies wardrobe that could be most easily updated. They could be taken apart, made over and redecorated much more easily than a dress. The bonnet allowed the lady to express individuality.

There were other types of bonnets as well:

- ❖ Cottage bonnet
- ❖ Carriage bonnet
- ❖ Drawn Bonnet
- ❖ Godeys bonnet

HATS: Hats were worn by the younger and more fashionable ladies. They were just coming into vogue during our time period. In most social circles they were considered to be informal head wear or less dressy. Even so they could be very ornate and elaborately decorated with ribbons and laces, flowers, fruits and veils.

1. A nice, wide brimmed straw hat is very nice for summer and does keep one cool and protects the skin from the sun. The key is a hat with a lower crown. Keep the decorations simple with lace and flowers or a simple ribbon. A wide ribbon may be used to tie the hat under the chin.
2. Glengarry Caps: inspired by the Military. Was usually made of wool but can be made of other sturdy material. Usually it would be worn with a zouave or other military style outfit.
3. Pillbox hat: Pillboxes of the period were worn forward on the head not on the back of the head ala Jackie Kennedy or Nancy Reagan. While they appear early on in fashion magazines, they weren't popular here until 1863 or later (based on photographic evidence) and would have been worn by younger ladies and only the most fashionable from larger cities.
4. Riding hats: may have resembled top hats or may have been low to the head with both brims turned up and feather and netting trailing down the back. These were very fashionable hats. They are also the most fun to wear.

I hope that this inspires each of us to re-create the correct headwear and usage for our impressions. It gives us an opportunity to express our individuality and also educate the public about what was worn.