



Bonnets

Modesty or Practicality?

by Patricia Kelleher Bartram



The word “bonnet” has various meanings including: 1) a British term for the metal cover over a car engine (which we in the U.S. call the car’s hood); 2) an accomplice of a gambler, auctioneer, who entices others to bet or to bid (obsolete slang term); 3) helmets (Scottish); or 4) the second stomach of a ruminant (an even-toed ungulate mammal that chews the cud regurgitated from its rumen – think cows, sheep deer.) For purposes of this article, we use the term bonnet in what the Oxford Dictionary defines as: *Bon-net* /'bänət/ a woman's or child's hat tied under the chin and with a brim framing the face.

The genesis of the bonnet as headwear is not clear. But early bonnets (17th, 18th centuries) were generally brimless coverings secured by ties under the chin and worn both indoors and outdoors. Christian women likely wore bonnets to be in keeping with the Bible teaching that women should display modesty and subservience by covering their heads (Corinthians 1:11). But they also wore them for practical reasons, such as protection from the sun, glare and wind when outside, and from the dust and cooking products they used inside such as flour and other milled grains.



CHRISTIAN STYLE BONNET
Worn by Mrs Ward Cotton
The wife of Rev. Cotton
4th Minister of Boylston
Church
BHSM Photograph Collection



WIDOW'S BONNET
BHSM Artifact Collection

Widows wore somber bonnets, especially when outdoors or visiting, as a sign of mourning their husbands. Married women wore caps and bonnets as a show of modesty and submission to their husbands.



MODESTY BONNET
Worn by Esther (Hastings)
Moore
Wife of Selectman Pitt Moore
Mother of First Homeless
Person in Seattle,
Washington*
BHSM Photograph Collection

Bonnet Styles

Bonnets became larger and more elaborate as time went on. The “calash” bonnet became stylish and popular in the mid-1700s. It was larger in scope and made of ruched (tight elastic folds) and stiffened material attached to arched frames that were collapsible, like the roof of a French carriage, a “calèche.” This bonnet style better accommodated women’s hairstyles that were by then becoming bigger and more elaborate, while providing the cover needed for protection and decency. This style continued to be popular into the 1800s because of its practicality and convenience for weather and travel, and as time went on bonnets became as much a fashion item as a practical head covering. The most fashionable bonnets were, of course, worn by wealthier women.

Another popular style was the “poke” or Neapolitan bonnet. It had a small crown and a wide, rounded front brim, usually jutting beyond the wearer’s face (think Jane Austen characters). By the 1830s this style had also become very fashionable, with more colors, styles and trimmings introduced.

Increased Availability

The Industrial Revolution increased production and lowered the cost of hats, making attractive hats and bonnets more available to lower middle class and working-class women. By way of illustration, by the 1850s the production of straw bonnets was the major manufacturing business



GARDENING BONNET
with wide straw brim
c. 1910
BHSM Artifact Collection

in Framingham, Massachusetts. As production increased, ready-made hats could be stored and sold to wholesalers and in the latter part of the century, department stores in large and small cities began to feature millinery departments.

As noted in the Friday’s Fascinating Find “*Straw Hats*” by Carrie Crane:

“... Straw Hollow, a village in the south corner of Boylston, (Stiles Road and Reservoir Road) had grown to be a significant commercial dairy and orchard center. For a brief period, from 1830-1840, Straw Hollow was also the home of a moderate straw hat industry....”

*For the fascinating history of this family See “*Early Families of Boylston, Massachusetts*,” Filgate et al, published 2022, Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Inc.

Bonnets remained popular throughout the 19th century, but as parasols and umbrellas became items of choice as protection from the sun, bonnets became smaller and smaller until they could only be secured on the head with hairpins. Hats also came back into style. Also, bonnets had drawn connotations of something that a widow or dowager would wear. Bonnets eventually waned in popularity and were only worn as part of prairies or country wear ensembles, or in religious communities.

BHSM Collection of Bonnets

The collections of the Boylston Historical Society and Museum (BHSM) include several women's bonnets with under the chin ties dating from the 1800s. They include a black mourning bonnet with a neck flap at the back, a cotton brown and white checkered sun bonnet, a blue and beige striped silk bonnet, a black wool bonnet, and a white bonnet with a matching apron. One bonnet in the BHSM collection is cream-colored cotton with ties that belonged to Henrietta E. (Sargent) Morgan, born 1859 in London, England. She married Frank J. Morgan, her second husband, in Worcester in 1882. None of these bonnets are particularly fancy, which would align with mid-1800s Boylston being largely an agricultural community with some light manufacturing. Boylston women of this period were wives and mothers of farmers and millers and boot and shoemakers, not fashion leaders.



SUN BONNET
19th Century
BHSM Artifact Collection

The Easter Bonnet... With All the Frills Upon It

One type of bonnet remained popular well into the 20th century, the Easter bonnet! The version of what we think of as the “Easter bonnet” originated with the “Easter Parade” that began in New York City on the first Easter Sunday after the end of the Civil War. The crowds carried flowers and clothed themselves in pastel colors as a sign of joy and the renewal of life. The parade ultimately became an annual ritual for the wealthy and social elite to attend Easter church services and afterward promenade down Fifth Avenue to show off their new Easter hats and bonnets, which became more elaborate as time went on. Of course, the Easter Parade still takes place in New York City annually and Easter Sunday may be the one and only time of year women still wear hats.



ORNATE BONNET
Francis & Eva (Kendall) Dunbrack
BHSM Photograph Collection



While we can't be sure they were necessarily worn at Easter, there are several wide-brimmed straw hats with ribbons and flowers in the BHSM collection that are good candidates!

Acknowledgements:

Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Inc. Artifact & Photograph Collections, Boylston, Massachusetts
Editor, Nancy O'Loughlin Filgate, Director, Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Inc.

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Published

Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Inc.

13 January 2023