

Straw Hats

by Carrie Crane



Plaited straw hat with large maroon satin ribbon band and bow. Black lace veil.

Circa 1930-40

In the middle of the 19th century, when Boylston reached its peak of agricultural employment, 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. While the business did not last long, having disappeared from records by 1850, in its busiest year, 1832, 3000 straw hats were produced.

The straw hat history is closely linked to agricultural history because of course, to make a fine straw hat, you must first have straw. Straw is the hollow stalk of cereal grains such as rye, wheat, barley, or oats, grains. These grains were first domesticated as early as 9,000 years ago with the beginning of agriculture in the fertile crescent of the Middle East. It is likely that using straw as a fiber for making textiles also started around that time but due to the biodegradability of straw, there are no artifacts. However, evidence is provided by other means, including ancient artwork. For example, the Tanagra statues from Greece in the 3rd century BC depict people wearing straw hats woven into a conical shape.

As agriculture spread across the world, so did the cultivation of cereal grasses. The crops differed by location as did the quality of the straw, some stronger, some softer, some lighter, or darker in color. Straw was used around the world for hat-making, the earliest process was based on shaping dampened, woven sheets of straw around a form to create the shape of the head. During the 16th century, something new developed. The district of Florence, Italy in 1574, established itself as a center for hand manufacture of a particular style of straw hat, one made from sewn together bands

of braided straw, or plaits. It is said that around that same time Mary, Queen of Scots, on a visit to the area, discovered these new straw hats and found them quite to her liking. She then brought the style and manufacturing technology back to Scotland.

Eventually, the trade moved south to England where the climate was more suitable for both the workers and the cultivation of straw. The trade was well established in the area of Dunstable by the mid-17th century. Much of the straw was still being imported from Italy, but a fine, light-colored straw was being developed right at home. Luton, England, nearby Dunstable, became the center of the straw hat trade by the 1800s. Complimentary industries such as straw dying and bleaching, hand plaiting, handcrafted decorative elements of ribbons and flowers all thrived as well.



Straw hat, hand sewn, made using the Dunstable or Luton plait.

Made from whole straw. Faded green-blue ribbon band and trim with a buckle-like jewel in front. Elastic chin strap. Inside label says Henrietta, date unknown.

Until the mid-1700s, straw plaiting was made with the whole flattened stalk. This made a coarse braid and a heavy hat. As the popularity of these hats grew, moving away from function and into fashion, the demand for a more delicate material grew as well. Straw workers began to experiment with splitting the straw into finer strands called *splints*. These splints could be dyed and pieced together in elaborate patterns to create very fashionable hats which then fed popularity further. The demand for raw material pushed manufacturers to consider materials in addition to straw and they began to include silk and other fine fibers such as hemp and cotton in the plaiting. Japan and China, where woven straw hats had been made for thousands of years, had a great mastery of these techniques and became fierce competitors in the plaited straw market.



A fancy antique original 1880's Victorian straw bonnet

The straw has an intricate pattern. The bonnet is trimmed with brown velvet and striped satin ribbon and rosettes of silk hydrangea flowers. The bonnet has brown velvet chin ties.



**Purple dyed, plaited straw hat with silk floral embellishments and bright green lace veil.
Circa 1930**

In 1865, mechanized sewing of the plaits was introduced and soon many hats were being produced in this way but hand-made millinery¹ was still a prosperous industry in both America and abroad and was predominantly well-paid women's work.

¹ Millinery, the work of making hats. Originally referring to women's fashion imported from Milan, Italy but eventually came to mean hat making.

For much of the 1800s through the 1950s, hats were considered an essential part of a woman's wardrobe and to leave the house without some kind of headdress was considered an indiscretion. As with most women's fashion throughout the ages, the style of hats, including straw hats, varied widely from decade to decade, if not year to year. The hats became larger, then they became enormous, then smaller, then larger again, with greater or lesser embellishments in turn. They ranged from colorful to subdued, with a veil or not. The straw hat followed all the same fashion trends.

The Boylston Historical Society Museum has a fine collection of hats, many of which are made from straw. These hats date from 1880 to the mid-1900s. While none of these hats were likely made at Straw Hollow, they do capture the diversity of styles of their time.



On left: **Woven straw wide-brimmed sun hat with brown and navy-blue ribbon. C. 1910-18.**

On right: **Gardening bonnet with woven straw brim and blue and white polka dot cotton body. c. 1910**

You will notice that several of these hats are adorned with fine lacy veils. The veil had re-emerged as a fashion trend in the 1930s, the function of which was limited. In some cases, it helped, along with the hat pin, to hold the hat in place, but mostly it was an alluring look that was fueled, to a great extent, by Hollywood movie stars. By the end of the 1940s the trend had lost its edge. Today, with hat wearing for women at a low, you can still savour the art of hat wearing, straw or otherwise, at a few important occasions including the Kentucky Derby in the United States and events of the royal family in Britain.



On left: Straw-like plaited hat with an open crown, maroon band and bow, black lace veil. c. 1930.

On right: Sold by the R H Stearns company of Boston, a woven and molded straw hat with a brown velvet ribbon and yellow silk flower. C.1950.



Acknowledgements:

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