

It happens that I have done some research on Quaker plain dress because I got really obsessed with it for a couple months last year... I am not as encyclopedically knowledgeable as I am with worldly historical clothes, but with some help from my background historical dress knowledge, here follows my knowledge of Quaker dress. Mostly women's, but some things apply to men too.

When Plain dress was first developed, it was indeed “plain” “dress”– ordinary clothes but plainer. This starts at the time of George Fox, although to my knowledge Friends never required the wearing of plain dress for members of the church as with some of the anabaptist faiths. Even at the beginning, not all Friends wore plain dress (though a lot of them did). For this reason, “rules” about Quaker plain dress should be regarded more as guidelines.

Ways plain dress was different from worldly dress:

- Dresses were grey or brown, because both bright colored and black fabric were costly to dye and to maintain.
- They had no trim or piping in the seams.
- They closed with hooks instead of buttons, because buttons have a surprising history of being used to display wealth, especially when the Friends were first getting their start in the 1600s.
- There was theological debate over whether skirts and bonnets should be pleated or gathered. I do not think this debate was ever resolved. Both techniques require about equal labor, and the difference is often small.
- Hoop-skirts and bustles to support the skirt were usually not worn.

Ways plain dress was the same as worldly dress:

- The silhouette was usually close to the fashionable silhouette: the height of the waist, the poofiness of the sleeves, the length and fullness of the skirt. Unlike modern plain dress, which looks like it belongs in a “different time”, plain dress in the 19th century was essentially a simplification of what other people were wearing.
- The same kinds of fabric were used: silk, wool, linen, cotton, etc. The boycott of cotton during the early 19th century to protest slavery was taken up by Friends and worldly folk alike.
- Collars and cuffs: not all Quaker dresses had these, but many did, because a small white collar and cuffs basted into the dress would save the dress's neckline and cuffs from getting worn out.
- Underwear: aside from hoopskirts (too flashy), all the undergarments would have been the same as for worldly people. A chemise, some petticoats, and a corset. Corsets support the breasts and the back and

give a firm base to smoothly fit the dress bodice onto. Tight-lacing was definitely out, though, as that is thoroughly worldly (and a pretty bad idea...).

Aspects of worldly dress that “crystallized” in plain dress after fashion had moved on:

-The white shawl: this is a fashion from the late 1600s, slightly modified.

-The white indoor cap and black (or brown) bonnet: the shape of the Quaker bonnet dates from the 1840s, although the preference for black silk hats appears earlier than that. The white indoor cap (to cover the hair when the bonnet is taken off indoors) went completely out of fashion for worldly folks in the 1850s, but the Friends kept it.

-The white apron: in the 19th century, many worldly women chose colored or patterned aprons or aprons with bib fronts that cover the chest. I suspect Quaker women doing dirty tasks may have worn brown aprons, because white aprons are a pain to keep clean (and historical people were really obsessed with keeping their white clothes as white as possible)

The rate of “crystallization” for all the Plain dress groups increased as the industrial revolution sped up fashion's rate of change over the course of the 19th century. Friends would have looked decidedly old-fashioned by the 1880s. The emergence of department stores further drove the rate of change for worldly fashions, and since about the 1920s the plain dressing sects had been left so far out of date that most of them still look like they belong in about 1900.