



SEPTEMBER 2025

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A Newsletter for the volunteers & friends of the Stephenson House



Hand-Me-Down America: The Surprising Story of Second-Hand Clothes in the Early U.S.

When we think about thrift stores or vintage shopping today, it's easy to imagine them as modern trends. But in the United States of the late 1700s and early 1800s, second-hand clothing was everywhere—and it was essential to how people dressed, worked, and survived. Clothes rarely went straight from wardrobe to trash; instead, they moved through a long life cycle of reuse, resale, and recycling.

How Second-Hand Clothes Circulated

Clothing in the early republic rarely stayed with just one owner. Instead, garments followed winding journeys. At home, families passed down clothing to younger relatives or gave it to servants. Old coats or dresses could be pawned for quick cash, which then fed into the resale trade (Lemire 2012). In cities like New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, “old clothes men” operated stalls where working people bought affordable coats, hats, and boots. From the 1810s onward, many new immigrants—especially young Jewish peddlers from Germany—carried packs of used clothing into the countryside, selling to rural families who lacked access to city

shops (Diner). At the end of a garment's life, rag pickers collected scraps to sell to paper mills, turning fabric into pulp (Huber 2017). Every stage kept clothes in circulation, sometimes across decades.



City Rag Pickers Selling Their Gleanings To A Scrap Merchant. Wood Engraving, 1868

Who Bought Used Clothing

The short answer is almost everyone. Working people needed durable and cheap clothing for labor. Free and enslaved Black Americans often relied on hand-me-downs and old clothes markets as one of the few affordable ways to replace worn-out garments. Clothing access was shaped by racial and economic exclusion, and garments

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were often altered, repurposed, or shared within communities. Shane White's research on Black urban life in antebellum New York shows how clothing could signal dignity, resistance, or status—even when second-hand. Rural families bought from peddlers who brought city goods into the countryside. Second-hand markets also gave poorer buyers a chance to follow fashion trends. A slightly out-of-date jacket from London or Boston could still make someone feel stylish. Advertisements from the early 1800s show how even modest consumers sought items like velvet turbans or corsets that promised “youthful lines” and “grace over the hips.”



Old clothes” man selling his wares to a gentleman at his home, ca. 1820. (Courtesy of the Jewish Museum, London.)

The Ready-Made Revolution

America's clothing industry began shifting after the War of 1812—not with a bang, but with a quiet logistical pivot. During the war, the U.S. military began issuing ready-made uniforms to soldiers, produced in bulk and distributed by size categories similar to small, medium, and large. These garments weren't tailored to individuals, but they marked a crucial step toward

scalable clothing production (Resch 1999).

This wartime innovation laid the groundwork for a broader transformation. By the 1820s and 1830s, tailors and merchants in urban centers began experimenting with pre-cut garments for laborers, sailors, and enslaved people. These items were often sold in general sizes and altered at home. During the Civil War, the need for hundreds of thousands of uniforms pushed manufacturers to develop standardized sizing systems based on chest, waist, and inseam measurements. This was the first widespread use of consistent sizing in American menswear. After the war, these sizing systems spilled into civilian markets. Department stores and mail-order catalogs helped popularize ready-to-wear clothing, especially for men.

Historian Wendy Gamber calls this the “birth of the clothing industry” in the U.S.—not because it began suddenly, but because the Civil War accelerated a shift from bespoke tailoring to mass production (Gamber 1997). This meant more new clothes were available to buy, and more old clothes entered the resale market once fashions or fits changed. The second-hand trade grew right alongside the ready-made industry, feeding off its cast-offs and expanding access to clothing for working-class and rural Americans.

Women and the Second-Hand Economy

In early America, women's clothing rarely came in standard sizes. Most garments were handmade or custom-fitted, either by the wearer herself, a family member, or a local dressmaker. This meant that second-hand clothing for women wasn't just reused—it was adapted, altered, and reinvented.

Fit was flexible. Dresses were often constructed with adjustable features—drawstrings, pins, or lacing—making it easier to pass garments between women of different sizes. A gown might be let out for pregnancy, then taken in again for a younger sister. Alteration was expected. Second-hand dresses were routinely reshaped to match changing fashions. A high-waisted 1810s gown could be reworked into a lower-waisted 1830s silhouette with added pleats or a new bodice. Children's clothing followed age-based sizing, but even

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Get Ready for the Fall Sid Denny Memorial Antiques & Collectibles Auction!

As the leaves begin to turn and autumn settles in, the Stephenson House is once again preparing for one of our most anticipated traditions—the Fall Sid Denny Memorial Antiques & Collectibles Auction.

This annual event not only celebrates the life and legacy of our dear friend and supporter, Sid Denny, but also raises vital funds to preserve and share the history of the 1820 Col. Benjamin Stephenson House. Each donation and every bid helps us continue important restoration work and offer hands-on educational programs for the community.

Mark Your Calendar

The online auction will begin in October and wrap up in November (exact dates coming soon). Now is the perfect time to look through your attics, barns, bookshelves, and cabinets for treasures you'd like to contribute!

What We're Looking For

While antiques are always a favorite, we are no longer limited to them—our auction has grown to include a wide variety of unique, quality items. Popular donations that tend to draw enthusiastic bidders include:

- Sturdy, well-crafted furniture
- Musical instruments of all kinds
- Rustic and charming kitchenware
- Beautiful pottery pieces
- Vintage and collectible books
- And, of course, other one-of-a-kind finds full of character!

(Please note: donations should be in good condition—no broken, nonfunctional, or heavily damaged pieces.)

To ensure your gift makes the greatest impact, some donations may also be offered through other platforms in addition to the auction.

How to Donate

Ready to send your items our way? We're happy to answer questions and arrange pickup and drop-offs:

- Call: (618) 692-1818
- Email: stephensonhouse1820@yahoo.com

Donation Guidelines:

- All items must be in usable condition.
- Donations become museum property (no 50/50 splits).
- Unsold items will not be returned.

Why Donate?

Every donation is tax-deductible and directly supports the Stephenson House's mission. Your generosity fuels:

- Historic restoration projects, preserving this important 1820 landmark.
- Educational programming, bringing early Illinois history to life for students and visitors alike.

This fall, help us fill the auction with charm, character, and history. With your support, we can make November's event one to remember!

Donate today and be part of the story.

Ghost Hunts at the Museum

October 11 (Sold Out!) & November 8
6:00 PM – Midnight | \$40 per person |
Ages 13+

Think you're brave enough to spend a night with the spirits of the past? This fall, the historic Benjamin Stephenson House is opening its doors after dark for two exclusive Guided Paranormal Ghost Hunts in partnership with the Midwest Paranormal Investigators Consortium.

Built in 1820 by Ben and Lucy Stephenson, the house has long been rumored to host more than just history. Guests and staff alike have reported strange phenomena: a woman in white drifting across the grounds, unexplained footsteps echoing through the halls, doors that refuse to stay shut, and chilling "fainting spots" where visitors are suddenly overcome.

On these hunts, participants will investigate reported hot spots throughout the property—including both floors of the original 1820 home, the detached kitchen and quarters above, and the servants' cabin. The consortium will provide professional ghost-hunting equipment, though guests are welcome to bring their own. No prior paranormal experience required—just curiosity and courage.



Details:

- \$40 per person (nonrefundable)
- Space is limited to 10 participants per hunt
- Ages 13+ (under 16 must be accompanied by an adult)
- Location: 409 S. Buchanan St., Edwardsville, IL

Our October 11 ghost hunt is already sold out, but a few spots remain for November 8. Reserve yours before the spirits do!



Greetings from the President

Dearest Gentle Volunteers,

Happy It's About to Be Fall!!! And a sad goodbye to Summer. I am a summer girl. But I can't help but be reminded that Fall brings temperate weather, golden landscapes and all things Pumpkin.

This past summer has been filled with all things wonderful including the 20th anniversary of our esteemed Executive Director, RoxAnn. Her celebration was lovely including a garden area dedicated to her. When coming to the house, look for her area.

Upcoming this Fall is the Guided Paranormal Ghost Hunt, the Mourning Col. Stephenson Special Exhibit and our annual Christmas Candlelight Tours. If you haven't been to one of these events, know that the Stephenson House events are not just educational, they are really fun. I promise you will have a blast.

Also don't forget to indulge and stroll through the gardens while they are still in bloom and fruitful. Smell a flower, hug a tree and enjoy the florals and fruits that were here 205 years ago!

Have a beautiful September now!

Yours Truly,
Lady Blue

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Houndsditch (London) market for old clothing

these garments were often reused across siblings, patched and resized as needed.

For working-class and rural women, second-hand clothing was a lifeline. Peddlers and old-clothes dealers offered access to garments that could be refashioned into something wearable—or even stylish. As historian Beverly Lemire notes, “women were active agents in the second-hand trade,” not just consumers but skilled recyclers who extended the life of garments through creativity and labor (Lemire 2012).

Even enslaved women participated in this economy, though under vastly different conditions. Tiya Miles’s *All That She Carried* tells the story of Rose, who gave her daughter Ashley a cotton sack containing a dress, pecans, and a lock of her hair—a second-hand garment imbued with love, survival, and memory. Such stories remind us that reused clothing wasn’t just practical; it was deeply personal.

Immigrants and Opportunity

By the 1820s and 1830s, Jewish immigrants were especially prominent in second-hand clothing and peddling. Historian Eli Lederman shows how these small-scale dealers often worked in “rag districts” near city docks before opening shops of their own (Lederman 2011). For many newcomers, selling old clothes wasn’t just survival—it was a way to climb the economic ladder.

Reputation and Regulation

Despite its importance, the trade wasn’t always respected. Authorities worried that thieves used old-clothes dealers to get rid of stolen goods. Later in the century,

health officials raised alarms about disease spreading through used garments. Still, regulation rarely stopped the trade. People simply depended on it too much (Lemire 2012).

From Cast-Offs to Capitalism

By 1840, the second-hand clothing market had become a hidden engine of early American life. It helped working families stay clothed. It offered immigrants a path into business. It fed America’s growing industries by recycling scraps into paper. It also reflected the values of thrift, reuse, and resourcefulness that shaped early capitalism. As Daniel Walker Howe notes, thrift was a contested but central virtue in the early republic—tied to religious morality, economic survival, and civic identity.

As historian Beverly Lemire reminds us, old clothes weren’t marginal. They were central to the economy and culture of the time.

Takeaway for Today

The next time you shop vintage or donate clothes, you’re part of a tradition that stretches back over 200 years. In early America, second-hand clothes weren’t just fashion—they were survival, opportunity, and industry all stitched together.

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- John Resch, “Supplying the Troops: The Quartermaster Department and the War of 1812,” in *The War of 1812: Conflict and Deception* (1999)
- Daniel Walker Howe, “The Controversial Virtue of Thrift,” in *Thrift and Thriving in America* (Oxford University Press, 2011)
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Growing Cotton at the Stephenson House

By Ronnie Stellhorn

An early history of Madison County tells us that the first settlers grew cotton and flax for making their own clothes. Other than that, information about growing cotton in the area of Southwestern Illinois is quite scarce. We can assume that the cotton grown in early Madison County was grown for local use and not exported to the New England states or overseas.

Very little cotton was grown in the U.S. before 1790. In that year, total U.S. cotton production was around 3,100 bales. (A bale of cotton weighs approximately 500 pounds.) However, by 1860, U.S. cotton production had reached approximately 4 million (4,000,000) bales. Cotton had become the major crop of the U.S. and the major export of the country,

This rapid expansion of cotton agriculture was due to two events of the 1790's: the invention of the cotton gin (a machine that cleans the cotton fiber) and the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in the U.S. (textile mills in New England).

Cotton is a perennial plant, but is mostly grown as an annual as it cannot withstand frost. Ideally, the soil and air temperature should be 70⁰ F. when cotton seeds are planted. Four to five months of frost-free temperatures are needed for plants to mature and produce cotton. In recent years, the climate in the area of Edwardsville has been warm enough for our plants to produce usable cotton fiber.



News & Needs

Reminder for Interpreters:

Please review the mourning tour materials. The “Mourning Col. Stephenson” exhibit opens next month, and all tours will focus on this theme.

Needs...

- Volunteers to help at the museum giving tours, covering the gift shop, and cleaning.
- Someone to split firewood.
- Do you need service hours? We can help! There are a variety of jobs and projects we’d love to have help with.
- Please return Volunteer Training binders, if you have one.

Wanted...

- **Spring, Summer, Fall 2026 Internship Alert!**
Make history come alive at the 1820 Col. Benjamin Stephenson House! We have three internships available:
 1. Videographer – Film stories & events
 2. Social Media – Share history with style
 3. Admin – Learn museum & nonprofit ops**Apply now:** <https://stephensonhouse.org/internships-%26-volunteers-1>

Meet our new Historic Administration Intern, Ted!



He’s a student at SIUE and will spend the semester learning all aspects of museum life—from research and collections to programs at the Stephenson House. Say hello when you see him—he’s eager to dive into history with us!

Upcoming Events, Tours & Activities

- September 13, **SIUE History Class Tour**, 9 am– 11 am, 12-15 students
- September 17, **Home School Day at the Boone Home**, 9 am-4 pm. We will be conducting a hands-on laundry demonstration for visiting home school groups.
- September 23, **Board Meeting**, 7 pm

September

Sun Mon Tue Wed Thu Fri Sat

	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13 SIUE Class Tour 9 am
14	15	16	17 Home School Day (Boone Home) 9 am	18	19	20
21	22	23 Board Meeting 7 pm	24	25	26	27
28	29	30				

Be Our Friend...

*Renew your membership or become a new Friend.
Fill out and mail the following information to us.*

YES! I want to help. Enclosed is my contribution:

Name: _____

Street Address: _____

City, State & ZIP: _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

Amount Enclosed: _____ Membership Level: _____

Please send me information about volunteering at Stephenson House.

Checks should be made payable to the:

Friends of the Col. Benjamin Stephenson House

Payments may also be made in our online store:

www.stephensonhouse.org

***Memberships are from January to December.** Benefits of membership are extended to an individual and his/her immediate family. We accept cash, check or credit card donations. Memberships are extended for monetary donations only. The Friends of Col. Benjamin Stephenson House is a 501c3 not-for-profit organization FIN 37-1395804



**Send your membership to the
Friends of the Col. Benjamin
Stephenson House
P.O. Box 754
Edwardsville, IL 62025**



Membership Levels

Friend of Ben & Lucy
\$25

Stephenson Family Friend
\$50

Landmark Friend
\$100

Heritage Friend
\$250

Living History Friend
\$500

Founding Friend
\$1,000 or more

**Corporate membership information
available upon request.**

Our Board of Directors & Staff

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Peggy Emling, *Vice President*

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Rachel Hill, *Treasurer*

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