



**JANUARY 2026**

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**A Newsletter for the volunteers & friends of the Stephenson House**



# THE VOLUNTEER

## Federal Era Fashion on a Modest Budget



The enduring allure of the early nineteenth century, recently revitalized by the popular Netflix series *Bridgerton*, often leaves fans wondering how to recreate the on-screen glamour within their modern means. The Regency era (c. 1795–1837) in Britain (the Federal era (1790–1830) in the United States) represented a profound shift in aesthetics. Moving away from the rigid structures of the previous century, this

period embraced a neoclassical lightness inspired by the statues of Greek and Roman antiquity. As we prepare for the upcoming June 20 Jewels Ball, we'd like to invite you to our first workshop of 2026, "The Whole Look." Here we will explore how to achieve the iconic, high-waisted silhouette of the era without breaking the bank.

The grace of a ladies Regency/Federal-era gown is not just a product of the outer garment, but rather the result of a carefully constructed foundation. To achieve the signature high-waisted "Empire" line, one must begin with the 'shift', a simple linen or cotton base layer designed for comfort and hygiene. Over this, women wore 'stays', specifically designed to lift the bust and support the high waistline, which differed significantly from the more restrictive, hourglass corsetry of the later Victorian period. A bodiced or suspended 'petticoat' typically followed to smooth all the lines before putting on the outer layer.

The 'evening gown' itself was characterized by its ethereal quality, often crafted from fine muslin, silk, or

*(Continued on page 6)*

# New Year's in Early America: A Day of Calls, Cake, and Contradictions

In the early years of the United States, New Year's was not the midnight countdown we recognize today. It was a meaningful, and sometimes messy, day on the calendar that looked very different depending on who you were and where you lived. Diaries, letters, and newspapers from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries make it clear that January 1, not the night before, was the focal point. The day emphasized social visits, civic ritual, and reflection rather than fireworks, late nights, or a dramatic turning of the clock.

One of the most visible New Year's traditions of the era was the presidential New Year's Day reception. George Washington began the practice of receiving visitors offering compliments of the season during his presidency in New York and Philadelphia, but it was John and Abigail Adams who firmly established it in the new federal capital in 1801. They opened the President's House, still unfinished and sparsely furnished, to the public.

For more than a century afterward, the White House was, on New Year's Day, effectively open to anyone. Newspapers often marveled at the sheer endurance of the crowds. Thousands of ordinary citizens, diplomats, and officials crowded the halls, enduring long waits in winter weather for the sake of civic ritual and the chance to shake hands with the president. This exhausting tradition finally ended in 1932, when Herbert Hoover hosted the last official New Year's Day reception.



*Undated photo of the crowd lines up outside the White House for the annual New Year's Day*



Outside of Washington, the day was often devoted to what contemporaries called "making calls." In cities such as New York, where older Dutch customs still lingered, New Year's Day became a social marathon. Men dressed in their best clothes and traveled from house to house calling on friends, relatives, and business acquaintances. Women generally remained at home to receive visitors, offering refreshments such as cake, wine, punch, or spirits. Visits were brief, calling cards were exchanged, and a single afternoon might include dozens of stops.

This custom was most common in urban settings and far less widespread on the frontier, where winter weather, distance, and the practical demands of daily life shaped the holiday differently. In rural communities, New Year's often passed more quietly, marked by family meals, letters, or church observance rather than rounds of social calls.

Gift-giving also played a role in the season, though it bore little resemblance to modern commercial holidays. Long before printed New Year's cards appeared in the 1840s, Americans exchanged small, often handmade tokens of goodwill. These included needlework, pin cushions, and especially New Year's cakes, commonly known in period sources as seed cakes. At a time when Christmas had not yet become the primary gift-giving holiday, these modest offerings marked the turning of the year.

Seed cakes were a central part of New Year's hospitality. They were dense, sturdy cakes, closer to a modern pound cake or thick shortbread than anything light or frosted, designed to "keep" through a long day of visitors. Most were generously flavored with caraway seeds, whose slightly peppery, anise-like taste was immensely popular in the period.

*(New Year's, Continued on page 3)*

(New Years, Continued from page 2)

The tradition had deep roots. Caraway seed cakes had been staples of British baking for centuries, often served at harvest celebrations or with afternoon tea. In the American colonies and early republic, Dutch immigrants brought with them their own versions, known as ‘nieuwaarskoeken’ (New Year’s cookies or cakes), especially influential in New York and surrounding regions. By the early nineteenth century, the seed cake had become a familiar and expected feature of New Year’s Day tables.

These cakes were often made in astonishing quantities. One traveler in 1830 New York recorded seeing a seed cake advertised at a bakery weighing 1,500 pounds; an extreme example, but one that reflects how closely these cakes were tied to public hospitality. Even household recipes assumed large gatherings and many mouths to feed.

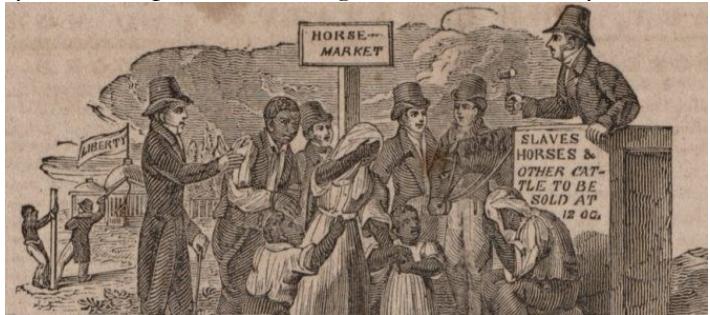
A well-documented example appears in Eliza Leslie’s *Directions for Cookery in Its Various Branches* (1840), which includes a recipe for New-Year’s Cake using large quantities of butter, flour, eggs, sugar, and caraway seeds. The recipe also calls for pearlash, an early chemical leavening agent, along with rose-water and brandy; ingredients that speak to both the flavor preferences and baking practices of the time.

New Year’s hospitality did not stop at cake. Punch was the real star of the day. In the early 1800s, households prepared for January 1 much as we might prepare for a large open house today: plenty of food, steady traffic, and something festive to drink.

Milk punch was especially popular. Though it sounds unusual to modern ears, it was prized for being cold, smooth, lightly sweet, and fortified with generous amounts of brandy or rum. It could be prepared ahead of time and kept well, making it ideal for a long day of receiving callers. Eggnog, often referred to in period sources as “egg punch,” was another winter favorite; rich, creamy, and finished with freshly grated nutmeg. For those who preferred something warm, many households kept a kettle of hot spiced punch ready, made with rum or brandy, citrus, and fragrant spices that filled the house with a welcoming aroma.

These drinks were more than refreshments. A full punch bowl was a visible signal of generosity and good cheer, an expression of hope that the year ahead would be as abundant as the hospitality offered that day.

Yet New Year’s in early America also carried a far darker meaning; one that cannot be separated from the holiday’s history. For enslaved African Americans, January 1 was widely known as “Hiring Day” or “Heartbreak Day.” In the South, this was often the date when enslaved people were leased out for the year or sold outright. Families were routinely separated, sometimes permanently, turning the start of the new year into a period of fear, grief, and uncertainty.



An 1831 illustration that appeared in the first issue of *The Liberator*, an influential American abolitionist newspaper published by William Lloyd Garrison and Isaac Knapp.

This grim association persisted well into the nineteenth century. Its meaning began to change only on January 1, 1863, when the Emancipation Proclamation took effect, transforming the date into a powerful symbol of freedom and hope for many formerly enslaved people.

Taken as a whole, New Year’s in the early nineteenth century was largely a daytime affair. Without standardized timekeeping or widespread public clocks, midnight itself held little significance. The year turned quietly, through letters, visits, handshakes, shared food, and civic ritual.

It was a holiday that reflected a nation still shaping its customs, and struggling with its contradictions, welcoming the new year with hospitality and optimism, even as it carried the weight of deep injustice alongside its celebration.

## Step Back into Regency Splendor: The Jewels Ball Arrives in Edwardsville, June 2026



There is a buzz growing in Edwardsville as the community prepares for one of its most unique social events in years. This summer, the city will trade modern bustle for 19th-century elegance at The Jewels Ball; a night dedicated to elegance and the timeless charm of the Regency era.

On Saturday, June 20, 2026, the 1820 Col. Benjamin Stephenson House and the St. Louis Historical Sewing Society will host an immersive experience that feels like stepping onto a film set. Whether you're a lifelong historian or just a fan of the *Bridgerton* aesthetic, the evening is designed to be accessible and genuinely fun.

The festivities take place at the Leclaire Room at Lewis & Clark College (Edwardsville campus), a space known for its architectural character. The evening features live music and period dancing guided by Dance Mistress Deborah Hyland. If you've never tried Regency dance, don't worry, Hyland is known for making the steps easy and engaging for everyone. To add to the atmosphere, Queen Charlotte will be in attendance to preside over the night's events.

Beyond the dancing and period-inspired menu, the

evening serves a vital purpose. All proceeds directly benefit the preservation and educational programs of the 1820 Col. Benjamin Stephenson House, helping to keep one of Edwardsville's most important landmarks open to the public.

It is time to start thinking about your gloves, gowns, and tailcoats. Whether you are coming from across town or traveling in for the weekend, here is what you need to know:

**Tickets:** You can secure your spot today at:

<https://givebutter.com/TheJewelsBall>

**Accommodations:** A block of rooms is available at the Holiday Inn Express & Suites in Edwardsville.

**Community:** For costume inspiration and to meet fellow attendees, join the Jewels Ball Facebook Group.

The Jewels Ball is shaping up to be the highlight of the 2026 social calendar; a rare chance to let history and imagination take center stage for one night.





# Sewing Saturday

Come sew with us January 17.

Join us for a relaxing day of sewing on Saturday, January 17 from 11 am—3 pm. This month we're making shortgowns for the wardrobe and working on unfinish projects. We'll provide the fabric and pattern; you bring a sewing kit (or use what we have). Please let the director know if you plan to help.

## A Note From the Director

Happy New Year to each of you. As we step into 2026, I want to take a moment to thank you for everything you bring to the 1820 Col. Benjamin Stephenson House. Your dedication, your kindness, and your willingness to share history with our guests are the heart of this museum.

As we move into the winter season, a gentle reminder: if you're feeling sick, please stay home. Truly—rest, recover, and take care of yourself. Even if you think, "RoxAnn will be working by herself," stay home. I promise, I'll manage. Your health matters far more than any shift and honestly, I don't want it.

During January and February, the museum will be open weekends only, and we will need volunteers to help keep the house running smoothly. If you're able to take a shift or two, your support during these months is especially appreciated.

I also want to highlight our upcoming period-cloth-ing workshop. While it's perfect for those who are

new to dressing in early 19th-century fashion, it's also a wonderful refresher for our seasoned

interpreters. Whether you've been dressing in period clothing for years or you're just beginning, this workshop offers updated guidance, helpful reminders, and a chance to fine-tune the details that make our tours and demonstrations shine.

Thank you again for all you do. I'm grateful for each of you, and I'm looking forward to another year of meaningful work together.

Warmly,  
RoxAnn





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cotton. Finishing touches, such as long gloves, shawls, and eye-catching jewelry and hair ornaments like diadems, coral, pearls, or feathers, elevated the ensemble. For the budget-conscious, it is worth noting that the structural integrity of the stays and petticoat is far more vital to the overall "look" than the cost of the outer gown's fabric.

While women's fashion looked to the ancient world, men's evening wear moved toward a more subdued, tailored style unlike the foppish fashion of the previous century. The foundation of the gentleman's attire remained the crisp, white, full-sleeved 'shirt' of linen or cotton. The most expressive element of this wardrobe was the 'neckcloth', usually a length of starched linen that could be knotted in various complex styles to signal the wearer's sophistication.

For a formal ball, a high-waisted 'waistcoat' (aka vest) in cream or white was layered beneath a dark 'tailcoat', typically in navy, black, or deep green, which

featured a high-cut front and long tails. Depending on the specific decade one wished to evoke, legwear transitioned from traditional 'knee breeches' to the increasingly fashionable 'trousers' of the late 1810s. Polished black shoes and a subtle watch fob provided the necessary finishing details to a look that remains the basis of modern formal wear.

The secret to a successful historical ensemble lies in understanding that the Regency/Federal silhouette is a sum of its parts. Accuracy does not require an unlimited budget; rather, it requires an eye for proportion and a commitment to the correct layers. In our upcoming workshop, we will examine the process of adapting modern materials to create these historical shapes, ensuring that your final ensemble is not only visually stunning but also comfortable and dance-ready.

Whether you are a museum volunteer seeking to create an ensemble that can be worn at the museum or a guest attending your first ball who isn't worried about historical accuracy, we are here to help you navigate the overwhelming options. History doesn't have to be boring, and we want it to be open to everyone. You have to start somewhere, so why not begin with our workshop on January 24.



# News & Needs

## ***Our Community Is Growing—Fast!***

What a remarkable season of growth it has been. The majority of last year, our Facebook page followers numbered around 2,500 followers. Something amazing happened at the beginning of December and we're thrilled to announce that more than 29,000 people are now following the 1820 Col. Benjamin Stephenson House—and the number keeps climbing.

In recent weeks, our Facebook Reels have taken on a life of their own, reaching audiences far beyond our region. Our TikTok channel has also grown from a few thousand to almost 117,000. Your likes, shares, and comments have helped introduce thousands of new friends to us.

Thank you for being part of this incredible momentum.

## ***Needs...***

- Volunteers to help on weekends and with group tours.
- Please return Volunteer Training binders and sewing pattern, if you have any.

## ***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>

# Upcoming Events, Tours & Activities

- January & February, **Winter Hours at the Museum**, Saturdays (10am-3 pm) and Sundays (12-3 pm)
- January 10, **The Jewels Ball planning meeting**, 3 pm—this is an in person meeting with a Zoom option. If you are feeling ill, please attend virtually.
- January 11, **Trivia Through the Decades planning meeting**, 3 pm—this is an in person meeting with a Zoom option. If you are feeling ill, please attend virtually.
- January 17, **Sewing Saturday: Shortgowns**, 11 am—2 pm—Please let RoxAnn know if you plan to attend.
- January 19, **Playing the Past** (Girl Scout Program), 12-3 pm., 12 girl scouts
- January 24, **“The Whole Look”: A Jewels Ball & Regency Workshop**, 9 am-4 pm. Reservations required. Space is limited. For more information visit [www.stephensonhouse.org](http://www.stephensonhouse.org)
- January 27, **Board of Directors Meeting**, 7 pm.—this is an in person meeting with a Zoom option. If you are feeling ill, please attend virtually.
- January 29, **Adult Group Tour**, 10 am-12 pm, 15+/- adults

# JANUARY

**Sun**   **Mon**   **Tue**   **Wed**   **Thu**   **Fri**   **Sat**

				1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10 Trivia Night Planning Meeting 3 pm
11 Jewels Ball Planning Meeting 3 pm	12	13	14	15	16	17 Sewing Saturday 11 am
18 Playing the Past 12 pm	19	20	21	22	23	24 The Whole Look workshop 9 am -4 pm
25	26	27 Board Meeting 7 pm	28	29 Adult Tour 10 am	30	31

# 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](http://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

## 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.



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



## Our Board of Directors & Staff

Muriel Jones, *President*

RoxAnn Raisner, *Site Director*

Peggy Emling, *Vice President*

Phil Stack, *Bookkeeper*

Rachel Hill, *Treasurer*

Stacey Lipe, *Secretary*

Sean Goding

Andrea Miracle

Kathleen Schmidt

Jaclyn Wallace

Leslie Wood



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