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The Colonial Tailor

By: Laurel Straka

“Few lived so self-sufficient an existence that they wove cloth, carved buttons, and stitched together fabric in front of the fireplace.” Said Ed Crews, author of *Tailor Made for History*. Instead, most colonial Americans bought their clothes from the tailor. The colonial tailor fit people for clothes, sewed clothes, cut patterns and added small details including lace and trim. As quoted above, very few others had the skills of a tailor to make their own clothes, so a tailor was a necessity for everyone who wanted to look presentable.

The tailor was a requirement for everyone because every person needed clothes. If you wanted to wear more than rags, you had to go to the tailor. Imagine walking into your favorite clothing shop, only to find that it had been transformed into a colonial tailor’s shop. The shop would have wide windows to let the sunlight in, so there was plenty of light to sew with. The tailor would be sitting at a wide table under the window, either stitching together clothes or measuring a customer. This is a typical scene in a tailor shop. According to the article, *Tailor Made for History* by Ed Crews, “Guests find the tailors at their table before a large window where there is light for cutting and sewing.” Some of the daily duties a tailor would perform include measuring customers, sewing the simple frame of clothing, cutting pieces for the clothing, and adding fancy trim

such as buttonholes and lace. There were also many tools a tailor used to help them perform these duties.

A tailor did not need an immense amount of tools to perform their trade. However, fine fabric was a must. A colonial tailor would typically get their fabric from merchants. These fabrics would include wool, silk, and cotton. For example, according to Ed Crews, “They varied in price, style, quality, and material which included silk, cotton, and wool.” A colonial tailor would also need to possess a needle, thread, and scissors. Bits of lace and fabric were also handy to have around for adding fancy bits to plainer clothes.

The tailor sewed clothes for everyone including children and slaves. In colonial times, children wore “stays” to help their posture. Stays also allowed an open rib cage for good breathing. For example, according to the article, *Tailor*, “Stays helped perfect the posture and allowed a broad, open rib cage for proper breathing, thus ensuring good health.” The colonial tailor lived in their shop and the word “tailoring” means the art of cutting. Since tailors do have to do a lot of cutting in their trade, this name makes sense. Everyone benefited when there was a tailor around.

In conclusion, tailoring was a very important trade in colonial times because they would make clothes for the entire village. Today, tailoring is still practiced, though it was drastically changed by the invention of the sewing machine and the ability to print designs on fabric. There are many modern tailor shops in Humboldt County such as Silver Threads Sewing and Alterations, Buttons, Tailor Maid, and Sew What. I would enjoy to perform this trade because I like to sew. It is

important to learn about this information because we can look back in history so we can see what affects our actions will have on daily life, as well as the advances we've made. The tailor was one of the most important trades in colonial times.

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