

Bloomers

In the spring of 1851, Elizabeth Smith Miller, daughter of abolitionist Gerrit Smith, was working in her garden in Geneva, New York. She wore a typical dress, with a wide skirt that reached the ground. After several hours, she became “thoroughly disgusted” with the “heavy, untidy, and exasperating old garment.” With a pair of scissors, she came up with a new one: a shortened, below-the-knee dress worn over wide pants known as Turkish trousers. She wore the new outfit when she visited her Seneca Falls cousin, Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

Stanton was won over, as were fellow Seneca Falls resident Amelia Bloomer and a visitor to town, Susan B. Anthony. Bloomer’s name became linked to the outfit when she wrote articles about it in *The Lily*, the newspaper she published for women. With this national publicity, and with the sewing patterns also printed in *The Lily*, many women around the country adopted the new dress within months of Miller’s garden moment. Nathaniel Currier printed a lithograph of “The Bloomer Costume,” and sheet music appeared for “The New Costume Polka.”

Despite the attention, few women in any one location actually wore bloomers, and those who did were ridiculed. The laughter was often directed at the trousers, and husbands bore the brunt of “who wears the pants” jokes. The women associated with the new costume were also associated with the 1848 convention or its goals. So the bloomer ensemble was linked—negatively in many people’s minds—with the call for women’s equality. Believing it had become a distraction from the greater cause, Stanton stopped wearing the bloomer outfit in 1854. Elizabeth Smith Miller, Susan B. Anthony, and Amelia Bloomer soon followed suit.

The women who embraced the bloomer outfit liked the freedom, the comfort, and the fact that the skirts stayed clean. But their eagerness for this innovation was part of a larger story. The reform movements of the 1840s and 1850s radicalized many middle-class white women. They challenged everything—spiritualism, marriage, free love, capitalism, political rights, and the symbolism and limitations of women’s clothing. After the Civil War, women’s rights activists saw the power of constitutional

amendments that, with a stroke of the pen, freed slaves and gave black men the vote. They decided to focus all their attention on women’s suffrage, and put other reform efforts aside.

Discussion Questions

- ★ What made the bloomer costume appealing to women?
- ★ Why did women’s clothing become a political issue?
- ★ Men whose wives wore the bloomer costume were subjected to ridicule. What does that reveal about gender roles in the 1850s?

Sources: Lori D. Ginzberg, *Elizabeth Cady Stanton: An American Life* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009); Judith Wellman, *The Road to Seneca Falls: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the First Woman’s Rights Convention* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004).



N. Currier (firm), *The Bloomer Costume*, 1851, Lithograph, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington D.C., 90711963.