



AH—fashion choices—what a quandary! Short skirts, knee-length skirts, spanx, camisoles, scarfs, sleeveless, with sleeves, jackets, no jacket, flats, pumps, 4-inch heels and more! Women in the 21st century have the luxury of dealing with all of these fashion decisions. For many years, fashion was much more proscribed and, for middle-class and upper-class women, included the dreaded corsets! For this issue, we discuss some of the significant milestones and contributors to the

evolution of women's clothing and clothing design from the middle 1800s through the end of the 20th century. You'll learn about Amelia Bloomer, Ellen Curtis Demorest, Mary Phelps Jacob, and Elizabeth Claiborne Ortenberg.

But first, the corset! Remember the marvelous scene in the movie *Gone With the Wind* where Mammie (played by the first African-American to win an Oscar, Hattie McDaniel) is

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tightening the corset on Scarlett O’Hara? In those days, it often took more than two hours – and assistance – for women to get dressed and put up/dress their hair. Much of this time was devoted to arranging what we now know as seven to ten pounds of underwear, including the corset. Women’s waists were nipped in at least four inches from their natural size by tightening metal and whalebone stays and

laces and exerting anywhere from twenty-five to eighty pounds of pressure per square inch on the body. Corsets permanently altered the location of women’s organs, such as their stomachs and liver, and compressed their ribs. Little girls did not develop normally, as they began to wear corsets at age five.

Fortunately, women started to rebel against the fashion norms of that day. One such rebel was **Amelia Bloomer**. In 1852, she advocated for dress reform. Bloomer thought women’s attire would benefit from a shorter, less restrictive skirt and pantaloons, instead of heavy hoops and stays. Bloomer began working for women’s rights about a year after attending the first women’s rights convention in her hometown of Seneca Falls, New York in 1848. She created a temperance newspaper *The Lily* in 1849, and then, with the encouragement of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, focused on “women’s issues” of the day. Through her advocacy for women’s dress reform (she thought women would be much more comfortable in skirts that ended at the knee with pantaloons below), the pantaloons became known as “bloomers.”

She received much mail from women who were ready to be rid of the long, heavy skirt which was the fashion at that time. After her move to Iowa in 1855, Bloomer worked to help women get suffrage, particularly in Ohio in 1873.

In order to make their own clothes,

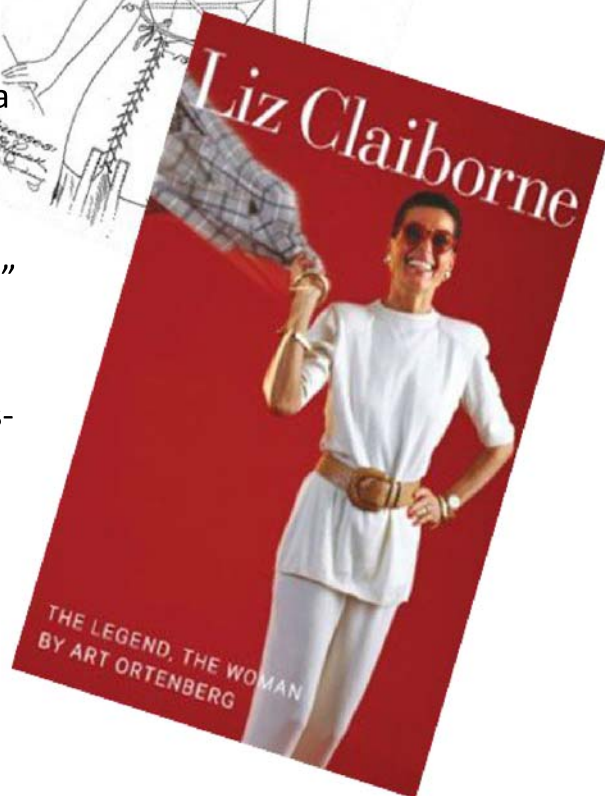


restrictive and corseted or not, middle and upper class women used dressmakers. It was a revolutionary idea when the concept of patterns for women's clothes was developed. This meant that many women who did not have access to fine dressmakers could make their own clothing. In 1860, businesswoman **Ellen Curtis Demorest** became the first person to create and distribute accurate paper patterns for home dressmaking. In that year, she opened Madame Demorest's Emporium of Fashions on Broadway (in New York City) with her husband.

In their peak year, 1876, three million patterns were sold. Demorest also worked for the betterment of women. She employed many women, and paid African-American women on the same terms as the white women. She was active in the management of the New York Medical College for Women and the Welcome Lodging House for Women and Children. In 1868, she helped organize Sorosis, a social club. She sold her business in 1887, after it had declined due to competition.

And, believe it or not, the bra had yet to be invented. That would occur in 1914. That was the year that **Mary Phelps Jacob** received a patent for her "backless brassiere." This was the first patent for an undergarment that used the word brassiere. Before her invention, women wore corsets whose whalebones and steel rods poked into their torsos and held their bodies in a very uncomfortable position. Jacob was inspired to do something as, in her position as a New York socialite, the steel rods poked out of her evening gowns! She took two silk handkerchiefs and together with her maid sewed them together with ribbon and cord. Her invention was a runaway success and she patented it. She sold brassieres under the name Caresse Crosby. Bras became a "go-to" undergarment during World War I, when the government asked women to stop purchasing corsets in order to conserve metal!

From undergarments, we move to fashion as we think about it today—the time of massive fashion options. In 1976, **Elizabeth Claiborne Ortenberg** founded the fashion house, Liz Claiborne, Inc. After 25 years as a fashion de-



signer who worked for others, she established her own firm. Liz Claiborne is credited with revolutionizing the women's apparel business. She first designed stylish, moderately priced sportswear that freed working women from their plain, dark suits. Then, she expanded into menswear, accessories and perfume. She also collaborated with department stores to show her entire collection in one area, instead of broken up into separate departments (e.g., pants, dresses, suits, etc.). This, too, was a novel idea. By 2006, hers was a nearly \$5 billion

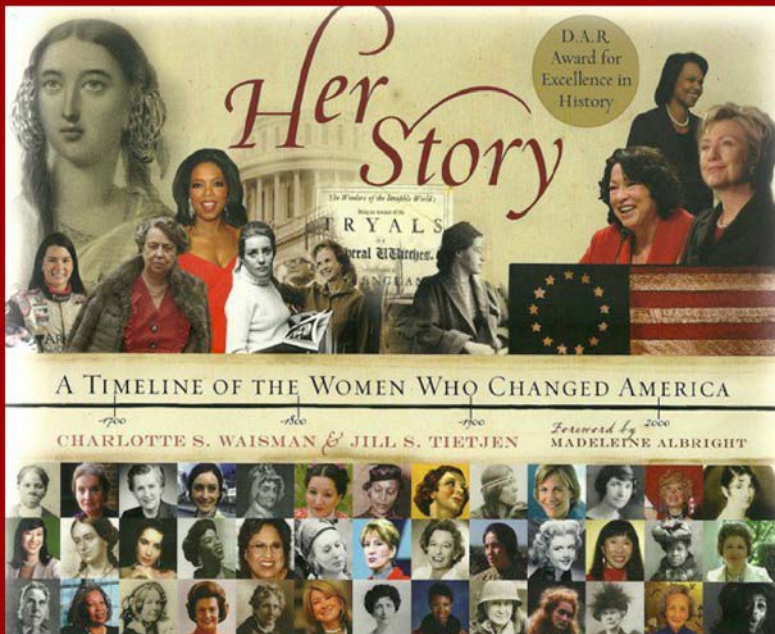
company. Liz Claiborne Inc. broke into the Fortune 500 list of "America's largest corporations"—becoming the first company founded by a woman to be so honored. Claiborne, herself, served as head designer for 20 years.

When you look into your closet and decide what you will be wearing for your next adventure, you can thank these women – and many others – who enabled us to clothe ourselves today in comfort, style and variety.

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Her Story: A Timeline of the Women Who Changed America Written by Charlotte S. Waisman and Jill S. Tietjen, with a foreword by Madeleine Albright, *Her Story* is a vivid documentation of the breadth and diversity of American woman's achievements throughout U.S. history since the 1500s. The women featured in *Her Story* range from writers, artists, actors and athletes to doctors, scientists, social and political activists, educators, and inventors, and include women of all backgrounds and philosophies.

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