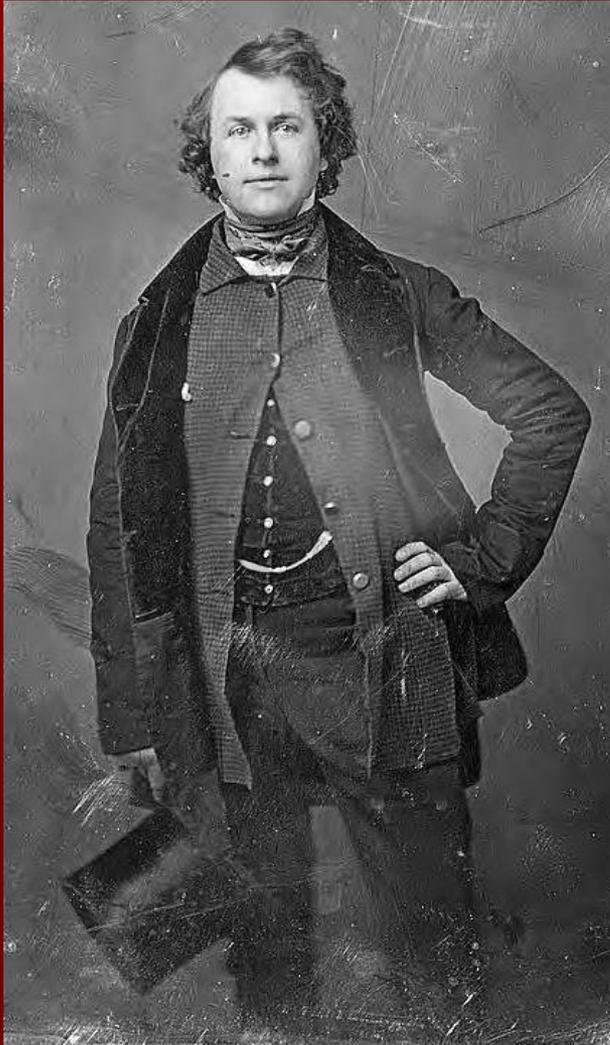


# How Clothes Speak

Men's Fashion of the Antebellum Era

# Men's fashion in general



- Just as in any era, men seek to communicate their status, their personal tastes, and their own, unique style through what they wear.
- During the early Industrial Age and antebellum period in America, more men had access to fashionable clothing than ever before.
- Cities, both in the settled East and the frontier West, sported burgeoning garment industries be they lone tailors or large-scale sewing operations.
- The advent of the water mill and power loom, sewing machines, and railroad lowered labor and materials costs for clothing. Now, a greater variety of fabrics could be obtained and fashioned into designs. Many of these designs originated in the fashion houses of Europe.

# Clothing as a sign of status



**A dignified gentleman  
of means**



**The classic frontier  
miner**



**The no-nonsense  
businessman of the  
frontier**



**A tough, city-wise  
fireman of the  
tougher areas of NYC**

# Fashion from head to toe

Buildings were typically not insulated like those of today. In addition, central heating often consisted only of a single fireplace. To combat disease, many believed that open windows or drafty rooms maintained a healthy environment. As a result, most men wore more clothing indoors than men do today.

In colder climates, men wore clothing constructed using patterned or solid wool fabrics. In warmer climates, they wore cotton linen fabrics or lighter weight wools.



**Men's slippers circa 1855**

Old Sacramento Living History Program

A man's daily wardrobe consisted of long underwear "drawers", a long-sleeve knit or wool undershirt, a pair of wool socks, a long-sleeve pleated linen or wool shirt, a starched white collar around the neck, one hand-tied silk or linen cravat, web suspenders or leather waist belt, silk or wool vest, wool trowsers, wool coat, hat, and outdoor overcoat.



# Hats and personal flair



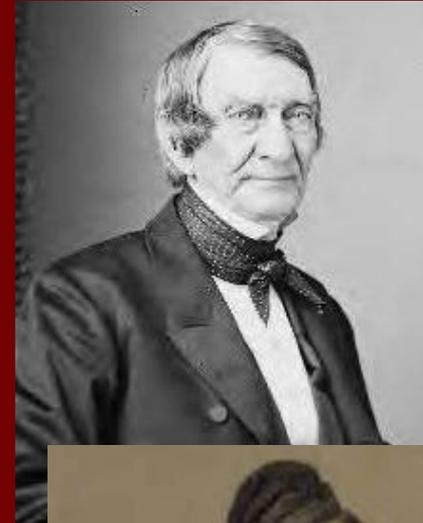
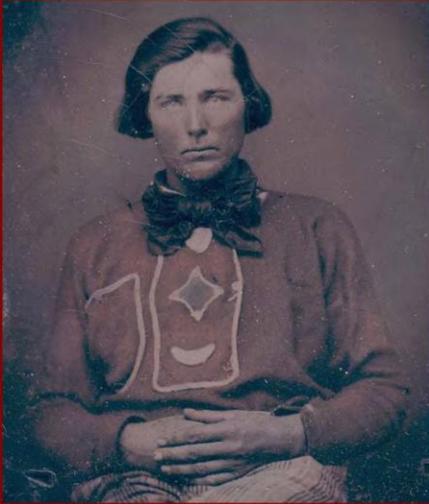
## Beaver felt top hat

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A hat defined the man and its shape was important. Men of the period wore wool or fur-felt hats that expressed the personality of its wearer. A hat, through its shape, or personal touches applied by the wearer told the viewing public the economic status, occupation, and demeanor of the man's head that it sat upon. Men didn't simply "wear" a hat, they tilted it forward and back, to the side, and often shaped it to suit their personal whims.

# Neckties and attitude



**Neckwear for men has evolved over time. These images depict the evolution of neckwear from the late 1840s to the mid-1860s. The larger bows show the earlier style. By the 1860s, the ties themselves were often quite a bit smaller.**



# Clothing of the working man



**Wool overshirts, jean-cloth overalls, vests, neckties, linen shirts, and rough-hewn trowsers marked the dress of the laborer. Note the absence of coats or jackets!**

# The Vest as a statement

Vests were a must for both the laborer and the gentlemen. Fashion dictated that a man's braces and shirtfront be covered when in polite society. Vests also provided men with the opportunity to inject more color and dramatic flair into an otherwise drab sea of solid-colored wool coats and trousers. Vests were double and single breasted, could be made of silks, linens, or wools, and they often featured a variety of collar options.



**1840s waistcoat**

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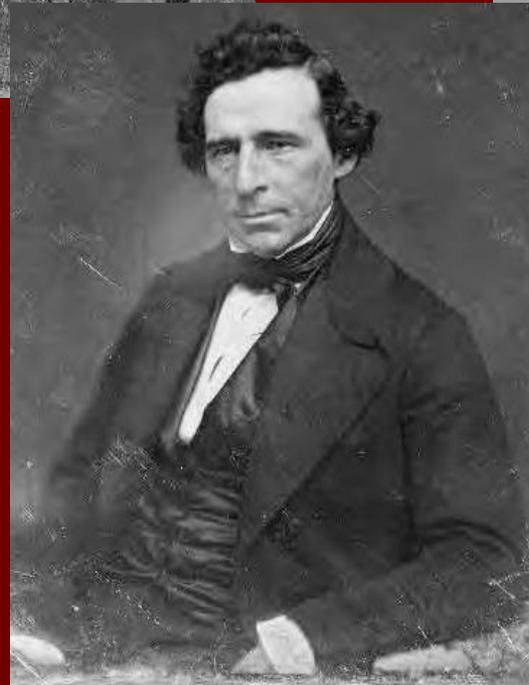
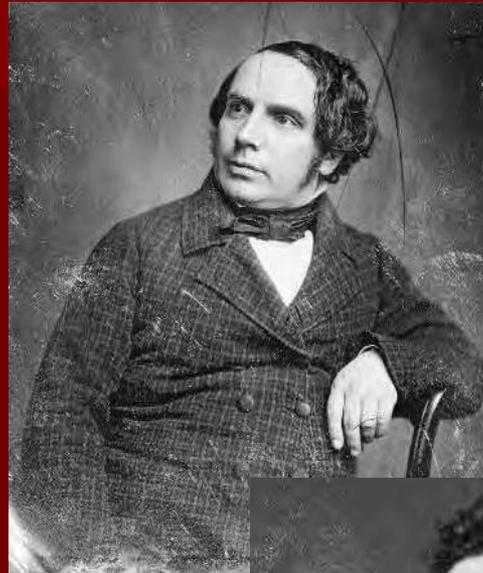
Close-up shots edited by Marc Hermann of Myrtle Avenue Clothiers

# The Gentleman's Coat

The coat was the ultimate fashion statement in a man's wardrobe of this period. Constructed of the finest broadcloth or wool that could be afforded, lined in either silk or polished cotton, the coat was often tailored to fit the gentleman who wore it.

Coats typically featured wide lapels, long skirts, and fabric-covered buttons. Frock coats were often custom-tailored and made up of many individual pieces of fabric. The paletot was a more comfortable departure from the frock. The sack coat, the forerunner of today's sport coat, was the utilitarian alternative to the more expensive frocks and paletots.

The coat was typically the most expensive single clothing item worn. As a result, most men may have owned no more than two or three in their closets.



# Colors in men's fashions



**A Fishing Party Off Long Island**  
by Junius Brutus Stearns, 1860.

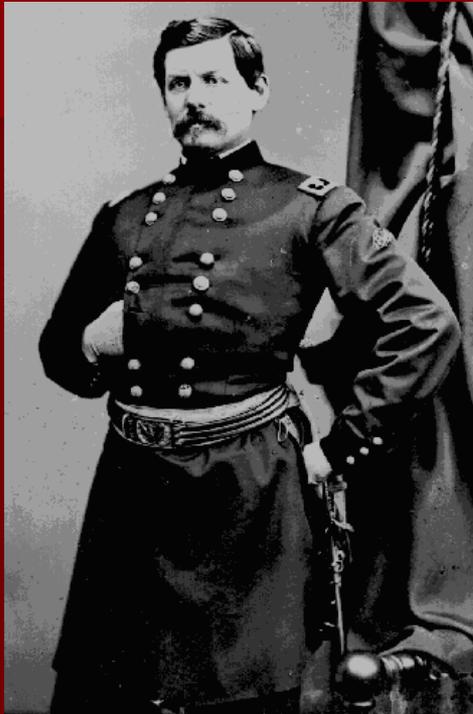
Oil on canvas, on display at The Minneapolis Institute of Arts

# Fashion in wartime

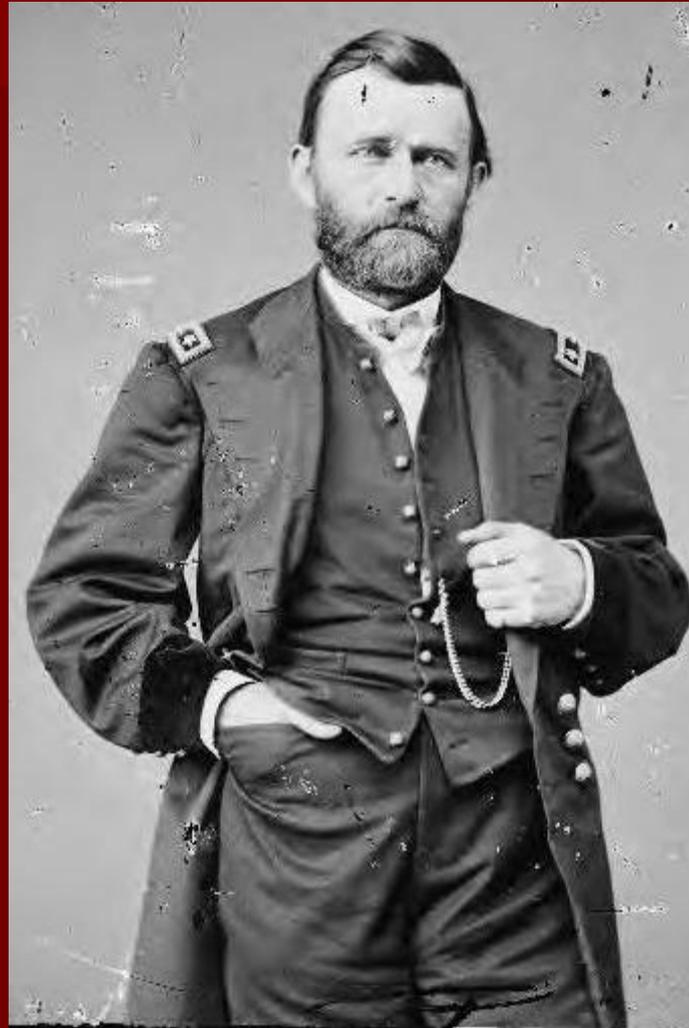


Confederate soldiers in camp early in the Civil War. Note the absence of uniforms. Also note the variety of hats worn as well as the finely-dressed man standing to the right of the barrel.

# Grant introduces the relaxed look



**Gen'l McClellan epitomized the sharp-dressed general early in the Civil War. His focus on "looking good" may have belied a flaw in his generalship.**



**Ulysses Grant brought a more relaxed, civilian look to his general's wardrobe. Grant's no-nonsense, pragmatic approach to prosecuting the war is reflected in his working attire!**

# Civilian Men in 1865



Library of Congress CALL NUMBER: LC-B817- 7826[P&P]

**Note the variety of clothing styles, hats, and postures taken in this photograph. Some men have buttoned their coats while others have left them open. Also note the variety of hairstyles present in this gathering.**

# Conclusions and ideas

- What general observations can you make from the photos you have just seen?
- How has clothing changed? What has remained the same?
- If given the choice, how would you have dressed during this time period?
- What could someone say about fashion today?

# A Final Image . . .



**In Color!**