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Women's Studies

Pantaloons and Power: A Nineteenth-Century Dress Reform in the United States
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"I can see no business avocation, in which woman, in her present dress, can possibly earn equal wages with man—and [I] feel that it is folly for us to make the demand until we adapt our dress to our work." That was the opinion of Susan B. Anthony, one of the early leaders of the campaign in America for women's rights, on the subject of females in the early to mid-1850s wearing the "freedom dress"—a short skirt over Turkish-type trousers.

Fischer, a history professor at Salem State College in Massachusetts and author of many articles that look at the historical context of women's dress, examines the ramifications of such divisive clothing on the nation's social fabric.

She traces the early attempts by various and disparate organizations to get women into clothing that was much less constraining, more functional, and that allowed the wearer more mobility.

Several of these groups included many religious and utopian communities such as Robert Owen's colony at New Harmony, Indiana, in the 1820s; John Humphrey Noyes' Oneida society in upstate New York; the Germanic-based Amana Colonies in central Iowa; and the "Strangite" Mormons who followed "King" James Jesse Strang to Beaver Island, Michigan, after the 1844 death of Mormon founder Joseph Smith.

Within the confines of these groups, women members wore shortened dresses with "pants" beneath, which made it easier to help with the work needing to be done in their community. Members usually wore, however, the traditional dress of the day when outside the community, to "avoid being singled out or made the object of ridicule."

Three other groups—the women's rights movement, a national movement in the 1860s promoting dress reform as a health matter (the National Dress Reform Association or NDRA), and the Seventh Day Adventists—also pushed the "pantaloons" agenda for their own specific reasons. Ironically, Amelia Jenks Bloomer—another women's rights advocate—wasn't even the

first to wear the clothing item that has become inexorably intertwined with her name.

All these early attempts weren't complete failures—they did get the concept of a change in women's clothing out in the open. According to Fischer, however, the notion that the sex/gender system was fragile and could easily be toppled because females wore pants was such a scary one that the nation could not actually contemplate it until well into the twentieth century.

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