

## "Weeping Sad and Lonely" \*\* Mourning in America

Much information on mourning in modern sources refers to British customs rather than American. The over-whelming influence of British sources on current research may be due in a part to the untimely death of Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's beloved husband. Her excessive mourning solidified & elaborated on existing customs. Much of what we think of as 'period' mourning is of post war vintage, when the mourning industry had greatly expanded. This article will discuss clothing customs for women documented to America during the Civil War.

Men had it easy when it came to mourning. Wearing a black arm band or a wide black crepe hat band for as few as 3 days to six months or so was all that was expected in most cases for a widower. If he had young children, society encouraged him to remarry as soon as possible so the children would have a mother to raise them. On the other hand, a woman was not to consider remarriage for at least a year, if not longer. No one said customs were logical!

Mourning customs and clothing, as with so many things, depend on 'who' you are, 'where' you are, and 'when' you are. "Who" you are includes your age. A young woman would \*tend\* to stay in mourning for the minimum expected period. Older women tended to stay in mourning much longer for a husband, with some older widows never fully leaving mourning. Your social class would definitely have an effect how you dressed for mourning. A poor woman might be lucky to have a new dress for mourning. There are diaries and other accounts of poorer women dyeing the one good dress they had black, and were glad they could even do that. Some women could only mourn in their hearts as they could not afford the outward trappings of mourning.

Another factor is, for whom are you mourning, and how long have you been in mourning. The customs for mourning varied depending on your relationship to the deceased. The longest and deepest mourning was for the death of a husband. The standard period of deepest mourning lasted a full year. Lest anyone think a woman was leaving deep mourning too soon that year often extended a bit beyond that year. Another year or two of decreasing degrees of mourning followed deepest mourning among those women who followed social rules to an exacting degree.

Lighter mourning meant initially adding more white to the black and less crepe trim. Gradually, adding other mourning colors such as gray, lavender, purple and more white as time passed allowed a woman to finally, fully, reenter society.

Full mourning means wearing a dress of very dull black material such as paramatta, bombazine, barege or grenadine, with deep gathers of black crepe covering at least the lower third of the skirt. Folds of black crepe in other areas of the dress such as on sleeve edges, belts, etc. are the only other 'approved' trimmings. According to *Beadle's Dime Guide to Dressmaking and Millinery* (a very popular book of the early 1860's) black crepe collar and cuffs were typical in America, but other countries preferred plain white. ("Where" you are!) In any case, the dress should be of the plainest style with no bows, ribbons or other trim than crepe.

Bonnet trims (no hats!!) should also be limited to folds of black crepe, with the brim filled in with white trimmings. Widows often wore a 'widow's cap' of black lace &/or crepe with white crepe or tarleton (a loosely woven, crisp material) trimming and lappets hanging down each side. These caps were sometimes worn under a bonnet. This is the only time I'm aware of that wearing a cap under a bonnet was acceptable. Widows wore these caps during the day, even after wearing caps had gone out of fashion (i.e., by the war years) for all but invalids and very unfashionable elderly women. The white trims inside mourning bonnets could serve in lieu of this cap.

Wearing short veils was a very popular 'fashion statement' of the time and for traveling, but crepe mourning veils served a totally different function. Typically, American women wore extremely long mourning veils for deep mourning. An original in my collection extends to the waist in front and back and over the shoulders at the sides. It has a hem over 4" deep on one end with only a 2" hem on the other end. Women often used modest size blued-steel straight pins with black glass heads to hold these long veils in place.

Some women who could afford it sometimes added black borders and ribbons to the bottom of their mourning petticoats in case a peek of it would show. Solid black underpinnings were NOT typical of the period, if for no other reason than the instability of black dyes at the time. The dyes often would bleed over everything when wet. To help control the problem of bleeding onto underpinnings, *Beadle's* recommended lining mourning dresses in gray with a narrow black hem facing in case that portion of the lining should show.

"Where" asks if you portray an urban or rural person, or more importantly, are you Northern or Southern. This is also where the "when" comes in. Are you doing early war? If yes, the where doesn't really matter so much, as noted in this earlier war advertisement from Athens, GA newspaper:

THE SOUTHERN BANNER, Dec. 3, 1862, p. 3, c. 5

Ladies' Mourning Dress Goods, Wm. Shear, Augusta, Georgia.

Has just received French Bombazine, of extra quality; Plain French Black Mousseline DeLaine, double width; Superior French Drap D'Ete, for Ladies' Mourning dresses; Plain Black Grenadine, or Iron Berage, of superior quality; Black Crepe Maretz and plain black barege' Superior 4-4 and 8-4 Barege Anglais, for second Mourning Dresses; Black Love Veils and dark gray Alpaccas; Ladies' black Kid Gloves, of assorted sizes.

If you are doing later war, the blockade would have a definite effect on the availability of mourning materials, along with most other fabrics, for many Southern women. These few quotes from the diary of Kate Stone are typical of the situation in the blockaded South less than a year later:

September 11, 1863 (Lamar County, Texas). Mamma and I are busy remodeling a secondhand green silk. I will be forced to take off mourning this winter since I can get nothing black to wear. We are thankful for any kind of cloth.

October 30, 1863 (Tyler, Texas) I have been forced to take off black. None to be bought.

Jewelry had its own rules. At most, jewelry for full mourning generally included jet, "French" jet (black glass), hard rubber, bog oak, or other black jewelry. Memorial jewelry such as black or pearl edged (pearls representing tears) hair or photo brooches, etc. were also very likely "allowed" in deep mourning.

Whenever you see a woman in all black, don't assume she's a widow. She just may be wearing a good black dress, especially if fashionably trimmed and the fabric has a sheen. Even if she is clearly wearing mourning black, she could be in mourning for another relative or a very close friend. Apparently, only widows wore black and white crepe caps as a sign of their special status. The formal period of mourning was also shorter than for a husband. The only references I've found to set periods of mourning for relations other than a husband are all from well past the war years when the more formal British standards finally made their way over here. I suspect those and other 'rules' were actively encouraged by the 'mourning industry' to increase sales.



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