

# Documents from the Tailoring Trade as a Research Source

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## Résumé

*Les publications en anglais répertoriées dans le cadre de la recherche effectuée pour un mémoire de maîtrise peuvent être utiles aux historiens du costume qui étudient l'évolution des vêtements pour hommes confectionnés par des tailleurs aux XIX<sup>e</sup> et XX<sup>e</sup> siècles. La production de systèmes de dessin de patrons a commencé au début du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle et s'est intensifiée avec le temps. Les publications professionnelles pour tailleurs et les planches de mode ont proliféré avec l'augmentation des publications techniques à la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Des listes de prix énumèrent des vêtements fabriqués par l'industrie avec les prix demandés. L'auteur a repéré quelques manuels d'instruction. On retrouve de ces sources dans les bibliothèques et les musées. Elles fournissent toutes des renseignements détaillés sur la mode, la confection et les problèmes d'ajustement, de même que les tissus et l'équipement utilisés par les tailleurs dans la production de vêtements de qualité pour hommes. Ces sources se révéleront utiles aussi bien pour l'histoire du costume que pour le choix des matériaux et des techniques à employer dans la reproduction de vêtements d'époque.*

## Abstract

*English-language printed materials located during a master's thesis research project have potential for the study of nineteenth and twentieth century men's tailoring by costume historians. Pattern-drafting systems were produced beginning in the early nineteenth century and increased in numbers as the century progressed. Tailors' trade journals and fashion plates proliferated with the general increase in technical journals of the late nineteenth century. Bills of prices listed garments made by the trade and prices charged. Some instructional manuals were located. Sources can be found in libraries and museums. All sources contain detailed information about styling, construction, fitting problems, and fabrics and equipment used by tailors in the production of men's fine clothing. They are useful both for costume history and for specifying materials and techniques for costume replication.*

## Introduction

Our inheritance from the nineteenth and twentieth century technological revolution in the tailoring trade is a wealth of printed materials that prescribe fashion, cut, fabric, mode of assembly and prices charged for work. These trade materials are rich in costume detail: styling, construction particulars, and insight into the lives of the makers of men's fine clothing. During 1989 and 1990, a sample of printed materials of the tailoring trade between 1800 and 1920 was examined and analysed during research for the author's Master of Science thesis. The central goal of the study was to examine a range of materi-

als in order to see what information they contained for use by costume historians.

The study sought specific information about evidence of intellectual development within pattern-drafting systems (how did the systems provide instructions for drafting, how did tailors address the fitting problems of posture and corpulency), references to the trade in Canada, workshop practices of tailors, and contemporary labour issues and working conditions. The fashion continuum of the study period was not addressed.

Sources produced as early as 1805 indicate that the trade was literate. A large number of journals and pattern-drafting systems

were published during the nineteenth century in Britain and the United States. Printed sources grew and proliferated until by the late nineteenth century many trade periodicals, pattern-drafting systems and instructional manuals were available. David Williams, writing in 1895, noted the growth of the technical press in America. Between 1872 and 1895, the number of (industrial) trade and technical periodicals published increased by approximately 700 per cent.<sup>1</sup> Edward Giles, writing in 1887, commented on a similar increase in publication in the previous quarter century in Britain.<sup>2</sup> The Journeymen Tailor's Union of America published a newspaper from 1887 until 1938. Professional associations were formed and meetings were reported in trade journals. Proceedings were also published.

Primary source materials were collected through inter-library loan, through the co-operation of other scholars, and also studied at the Library of Congress and the Division of Costume, Smithsonian Institution, in Washington, D.C. Canadian documents were sought, but not found in Canada. Both American and British sources were found in Canadian archival holdings and libraries. Ninety per cent of the drafting systems studied were American. Most of the instructional manuals studied were British, but none of the trade journals were. All of the bills of prices examined were American. References to Canadian subscribers, Canadian graduates of drafting schools and Canadian executive members of professional organizations, as well as advertisements from Canadian tailoring supply houses were found in American publications. British fashion plates were found in archival holdings of Gibb and Company, Tailors and Shirtmakers of Montreal, at the McCord Museum. Both the British and the American trade affected the practice of tailoring in English-speaking Canada. Canadian researchers must remain aware of the large amount of material that exists about Canadian trades in both American and British libraries. Tailors in Canada subscribed to British and American trade journals and joined American organizations. Canadian libraries and museums have somewhat spotty collections of these publications. Libraries in the country of publication often have more complete collections.

Data collection for the study comprised two parts: 1. an analysis of 102 pattern-

drafting systems, and 2. an examination of materials pertaining to labour issues, the Canadian trade, and workshop practices within the trade. The pattern-drafting systems were studied by "content analysis" (a systematic set of questions). Basic bibliographic questions gave a breakdown of place and date of publication and sex of author. The study questioned to whom (cutter, tailor, home sewer) the drafting systems were directed. It questioned whether authors of the drafting systems applied the sculptural considerations of postural assessment and corpulence in their draft. Many of the drafting systems studied appeared to invent unusual methods for drafting and were marketing with great claims for their product's reliability. The question was posed, were the printed instructions provided sufficient to generate pattern pieces? A subset of thirty-three systems was randomly selected and tested by actually drafting according to the printed instructions.

This rigorous means of examination meant that it was possible for the researcher to work through a large volume of material in a consistent manner. A pilot study helped to formulate questions that could extract meaningful data. The resulting information was numerically coded for computer analysis.<sup>3</sup>

Other printed materials – bills of prices, instructional manuals and conference proceedings – were examined and analysed. A large number of trade journals were also examined. The sources offered information about construction techniques, styles, labour issues, and billing practices.

Trade journals lend themselves to a cursory examination by content analysis. Most articles are titled and included in a table of contents. Journals could be examined to determine the amount of material that each publication contains on a number of issues – for example, salesmanship, styling, construction methods. This kind of data could be used to track the use of journals in the trade – whether for fashion news or technical information. Interestingly, the number of articles on business practices increased as the custom trade declined in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

### **Evolution of the Tailoring Trade**

During the nineteenth century, the method of production of many goods changed radically.

The holistic practice of the craftsman was replaced by a process-oriented assembly system.<sup>4</sup> In the tailoring trade, the small shop tailor was replaced by the factory system of garment production. The early nineteenth-century custom tailor cut garments, assembled them and then fit his clients, as well as managing his own small business. By the beginning of the twentieth century, even custom clothing was likely to be made according to the sectional system.<sup>5</sup> The merchant tailor's client chose fabric and styling assisted by a tailor/salesman. Garments were assembled according to the "efficiency" system by skilled and semi-skilled operators in a factory.

In 1800, in the United States and Britain, most of men's fine outerwear was made by hand under the supervision of a master tailor. The tailor might employ a number of journeymen in his shop, or depend upon the labour of his wife and children to help him with his work. But as the population increased in America and urbanization occurred in Britain,<sup>6</sup> a greater supply of clothing was required. More cost-effective ways of production began to be developed. Even before the development of a commercially viable sewing machine, clothing was made by the sectional system, either in small manufactories or in the worker's home (outwork). Workers specialized in pockets, or sleeves, or hand finishing, and were supervised by the former master tailor, now the merchant tailor. He was responsible for obtaining materials, cutting the fabric and parcelling out the work to semi-skilled workers in an effort to maximize his profit and ensure reliable delivery of his product. The advent of the sewing machine enabled garment producers to train workers to an even smaller subdivision of tasks, and to increase speed of production.

The result of these changes in the process of construction meant that the traditional roles of the tailor were being divided into lesser tasks, filled by more workers. Specifically, two positions replaced the early nineteenth-century master tailor: the cutter and the sewing tailor. The sewing tailor was highly skilled at the moulding of woollen cloth to fit the variety of human forms. He might become the foreman of a factory of hand- or machine-sewing tailors or the foreman/contractor for menswear-producing outworkers (homeworkers).<sup>7</sup> The cutter made the patterns and fit the client of the merchant

tailor. The cutter, working within the new sectional system of garment production, might combine the skills of salesman, measurement taker, maker of patterns and cutter of the cloth. He (or his assistant, the trimmer) would make up the work bundles of the cut-out garment components and its trimmings, carefully marking with an order number and any special fitting instructions to be executed by the sewing tailors.<sup>8</sup>

This evolution of two distinct job descriptions led to the development of a parallel set of printed resources for cutters. The term "cutter" began to emerge in the context of pattern-drafting systems about 1850.<sup>9</sup> Many pattern-drafting systems of the early twentieth century were addressed to the factory cutter of garments (custom or ready-to-wear). The cutters developed their own associations for the improvement of their membership. They published journals and organized conventions. At least one group, the International Custom Cutters' Association of America (ICCAA), published the proceedings of their annual conventions.

### **The Variety of Menswear Sources Available**

Trade journals, pattern-drafting systems, price lists, style books and fabric-sample books indicate the fashion and construction methods of their time.

Sources for the examination of mass-produced menswear are held by libraries, museums, and archives. Trade periodicals were collected by libraries. The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. has a particularly strong collection of American publications. Other libraries may have occasional numbers of a variety of periodicals. Pattern-drafting systems were "copyrighted" in the United States by registration at the Library of Congress – over 400 systems are available there for study. Museums have collected drafting systems as well. Occasionally, instructional manuals and style books have been collected by libraries. Three major bibliographies aid access to these materials.<sup>10</sup>

### **Style Books and Trade Journals**

Style books were provided by mail order and travelling custom tailors, indicating the most popular lines of the current year. These style guides are sometimes combined with fabric samples. These fashion plates endure as a

mass influence on male fashion from the mid nineteenth century until the present day. Styles were also conveyed as part of a trade journal or "fashion magazine."

Valuable styling and fabric information is illustrated and discussed in trade journals. The issues of fit and controversies over the correct solutions to these age-old postural problems are also discussed and illustrated in trade journals and proceeding of the ICCAA. An early journal, Genio Scott's *Mirror of Fashion*, was a combination of gentlemen's magazine and tailor's guide. In the 1840s and 1850s it offered fiction, news, fashion trends and illustrations, and drafts for fashionable garments. Canadian subscribers are among the printed lists of agents for the sale of the publication and systems of cutting. The 1870s and 1880s saw the *Mirror of Fashion* giving only fashion information, drafting instruction for the garments featured and some tailoring news.

Between 1880 and 1890, a full range of trade journals became available to the practising custom tailor and cutter. A few publishing houses located in New York City and Chicago dominated the commercial production of garment trade menswear journals, fashion magazines and pattern-drafting systems. They often also ran pattern-making schools. Trade journals are useful, not only for the styling information they contain, but also for the advertisements of tailors' suppliers. Advertisements for fabrics and trimmings indicate popular fabrics and innovations in materials for linings, buttons, and other supplies.

The following trade journal sources were identified in the course of the study project. *Clothing Designer and Manufacturer: Clothing Trade Journal*, published for the ready-to-wear trade from 1912 to 1920 by the Clothing Designer Company of New York, claimed Canadian subscribers in an advertisement.<sup>11</sup> The journal was intended for cutting and allied industries and was edited by Harry Simons. *The Clothing Gazette* was published between 1880 and 1903 in New York. The journal was directed to large custom tailoring houses and is useful for its colour illustrations of fabrics and fashion. It was edited by Jos. W. Gibson.

The Jno. J. Mitchell Company was the most successful of the American publishing/cutting school businesses. Mitchell pub-

lished *The American Fashion Review* from about 1874 until 1895. It was replaced by the *Sartorial Art Journal* published until 1929. Both these journals offered fashion plates and descriptions of fashionable menswear. Unfortunately, as is often the case with women's fashion publications, the fashion plates or posters were removed from publications now housed in libraries;<sup>12</sup> but most publications also include a miniature black and white reproduction of the fashion plates and these remain for costume historians. Mitchell also published a technical journal from 1880 to 1916 – *American Tailor and Cutter*. This publication offered information on fit and assembly techniques and would be of use in the study of historic costume. Mitchell also ran the Mitchell School of Cutting and published his "Standard" pattern-drafting systems which remain for examination in libraries. The "Mitchell system" name remained associated with many pattern-drafting systems into the mid twentieth century, published by the American-Mitchell Fashion Publishers, Inc. (New York).

The other major American publication of the time was *American Gentleman* (1901 to 1929), containing fashion news for the tailoring industry, published by the American Fashion Company. Its associated cutting school was the American Fashion Company Schools of Cutting and Designing, which published the technical periodical *Custom Cutters Exchange* during 1908 and 1909.

Other American trade journals were published by the Croonborg Sartorial Co. – *Advanced Fashions and Custom Cutter*<sup>13</sup> – between 1908 and 1910. A. D. Rude published a journal, *Modern Fashions*, around 1905, and ran the New York Cutting School. Only two numbers of the periodical were located during the study, but mention was made in them of Canadian graduates of the New York Cutting School.<sup>14</sup>

Style books were used as guides for the selection of styles by the salesman/tailor. Garments were made to an individual's measurement and were thus considered custom-made. The styles offered by each firm were limited to several choices. Line drawings or fashion illustrations describe each prototype. Thus the restricted fashion range for men was preserved. Such style books that also include fabric swatches are a boon to costume historians. Often swatches are missing due to

insect infestation or earlier use, but swatches that remain are usually named and the weight of the fabric is often indicated. These resources are useful in preparing a vocabulary of menswear fabrics and specifying fabrics for reproduction costume.

#### **Bills of Prices**

An unusual but useful printed resource for the costume historian is the "bill of prices." Tailors were among the earliest trades to form labour or benevolent protective associations and price lists were among the gains made for the trade by these groups. The lists include the usual garment styles made up at the time for which the prices were negotiated and as such give an indication of the normal extent of the tailor's practice. Early nineteenth-century bills of prices indicate that tailors worked for women and children (making heavy outer-wear and riding costume) as well as for their usual male clients. The practice of tailors of certain regions might include a large proportion of military clients. Some agreements allowed prices to be determined on the weight, and difficulty of handling the fabrics.

#### **Instructional Manuals**

Instructional manuals for the construction of menswear, intended for the trade, are relatively rare. Systems of garment assembly are available for both hand and sectional systems of construction in volumes of instruction for tailors. Most of the systems located in the study were British. A pre-1850 British publication, *The Tailor*<sup>15</sup> was written for young men considering entering the trade, and includes advice for their parents. The book describes the daily routine of the shop and instructs the apprentice how best to fit in. Detailed instruction for the construction and assembly of coat, trousers and vests are included. A repertoire of stitches is described. Such instructions are a unique view into the tailor shop of the past. The researcher may experience difficulty in the interpretation of terms.

J. J. Byrne's *Practical Tailoring: Treatise on Garment Making*, published in 1895, also includes steps of instruction for garment assembly. A vocabulary of hand sewing stitches is included. The more "modern" nature of this publication makes it easier to use. Detailed assembly instructions include

procedures for a fine, hand-tailored lounge coat.

Instructions were also available for the set-up and management of sectional system shops.<sup>16</sup> General sewing and assembly instructions are included. Alterations for fitting the common postural problems are included. Most interesting are the floor plans for shops of different sizes and motivational tips for managing the factory tailor.

*Tailoring: How to Make and Mend Trousers, Vests and Coats*, published in 1909 and edited by P. N. Hasluck as a part of a "handicrafts" series is more representative of the kind of instructional manuals found today. Tailoring manuals of the twentieth century tend to be directed to the home sewer and as such are "shortcut" methods for achieving a tailored "look." It is doubtful whether enough information is contained in this book to train a tailor. However, it does contain detailed alterations and mending instructions, indicative of the kind of handwork jobs available in menswear at the time.

An exception to the inadequate modern manual is *The Modern Tailor Outfitter and Clothier*, edited by A. A. White and published in 1950 by the major British trade journal, *Tailor and Cutter*. The series gives pattern-drafting instruction for the full range of men's outerwear. It also includes basic anatomy and proportion for tailors, chapters on cutting for the wholesale trade, and "outfitting" (retail men's furnishings). These volumes contain styling, fabrics, and business information.

#### **Pattern-Drafting Systems**

Pattern-drafting systems are the blueprints from which the tailor cuts the required garment style. Drafting systems allow for either the use of a client's personal measurements or measurements taken from a table of standard sizes to produce individual patterns. Pattern-drafting systems are an excellent source of styling information, but pre-1850 drafting systems are often difficult to use. Instructions may be inadequate for the example represented by the author in the accompanying drawings. The instructions may rely on a great deal of tacit knowledge that is lost to the twentieth-century technician. However, all drafting systems offer the costume historian the same kind of information: line drawings of the pattern pieces and styling

details of the garment under consideration. Later nineteenth-century pattern-drafting systems have little difference from their modern counterparts. By 1880, most systems utilized a grid system for developing the pattern pieces.

Advantages of using period pattern-drafting systems include: authenticity of cut, patterns which can be made to fit the modern interpreter, and many systems which include some assembly instructions or fabric suggestions. Drafting systems are also an untapped potential resource for dating and identifying costume. Many drafting systems are available for the period 1840 to 1940. Close examination reveals the subtle changes in detail such as pocket position or sleeve width that can be used to help date extant garments. Measurement-taking instructions are a part of most drafting systems and usually include a diagram of the ideal figure of the period. A comparison of such drawings for a particular span of dates could give valuable information on postural norms for that era. Lengthy pattern-drafting systems (especially British<sup>17</sup>) include many styles of diplomatic, formal, business, leisure, and military garb. They offer a source of information about dress etiquette as well as terminology for and illustrations of a tremendous range of mens-wear. Since little detailed material has been published about menswear fashion history, pattern-drafting systems remain as a rich source of data.

#### **Proceedings of the Annual Conventions of the International Custom Cutters' of America**

Nine volumes of this resource are held by the Library of Congress. They comprise the minutes of the annual meetings of an association of cutters. Canadians played an important role in the administration of this group. The transcripts of technical papers presented are a valuable resource to historians interested in the progress of the science of garment fitting. The group also held an internal competition of garment-making at each convention. Participants brought an example of their finest work. Photographs and descriptions of these garments are reported upon in trade journals for cutters. As these garments represent the early twentieth century, they bear close examination. They offer the costume historian insight into the subtle, tasteful variety within the menswear field. They

document the sculptural nature of the tailor's art.

The question must be posed: how much technical skill is required to read materials published by tailors? As this researcher was trained as a tailor/cutter and practiced for a decade, the question is difficult to answer objectively. The materials were exciting to read and interpret. Some problems of vocabulary and training arose. Early pattern-drafting systems relied on the expertise of the user to make use of the scanty instructions. With practice, some of the expected tacit knowledge – standard measurements and fashionable styling requirements – was assimilated. Puzzling terms were occasionally defined in other journals of the period. Most pattern-drafting systems will likely only be used by technical people. However, they do contain the obvious styling information as well as some buried asides about the trade (e.g., assembly tips that refer to the common practices of the period; instruction to the novice cutter). Bills of prices require a good knowledge of the contemporary styling vocabulary since they list materials and style variations to which their scale of prices pertain. By far, trade journals are the easiest to use. The reader is at once transported to the world of competing quality men's tailoring shops, the best sources of fabrics, the latest styles and equipment.

#### **Conclusions**

A great deal of work needs to be done in the area of men's costume history. A detailed chronology of fashion remains to be produced. Techniques of the production of tailored menswear need to be understood by costume historians and reproduction costumers. Fortunately, the printed materials required for these tasks are available. Materials are available, not only for men's outerwear, but also for the hat finishing trade.<sup>18</sup>

The social history and business history of the producers of men's fine clothing also bears examination. The narrative of the working tailor runs through the union newspaper. The tale of the changing custom tailoring trade is told in the trade journals published. This dimension of costume history reveal the human hands and minds that created every garment we study. It adds to our ability to interpret human history through clothing.

## NOTES

1. C. M. Depew, ed., *1795-1895: One Hundred Years of American Commerce*, vol. 1 (reprint, New York: Greenwood Press 1968), 174-7.
2. Edward Giles, *The History of the Art of Cutting* (London: F. T. Prewett, 1887).
3. *SPSSx User's Guide* (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1986).
4. Ursula Franklin makes the distinction between holistic and prescriptive technologies, a concept which well describes the change in the tailoring trade. Holistic tradespeople proudly practice all aspects of their craft. The prescriptive process requires neatly defined steps towards a reliable outcome - cf. the garment-making industry. U. Franklin, *The Real World of Technology* (Toronto: CBC Enterprises, 1989), 11-32.
5. The sectional system is based on the division of labour principle. It divides the work of construction of a particular garment into its steps of production. Each section of the production line is responsible for a given number of the steps of construction. The sectional system was the forerunner of the modern garment factory.
6. J. A. Schmiechen, *Sweated Industries and Sweated Labor: The London Clothing Trades 1860-1914* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984). S. Wilentz, *Chants Democratic, New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).
7. It must be noted that custom clothing was being made in the factory setting and that the factory sewing of menswear does not necessarily imply that the garments were made for the ready-to-wear market. Custom factory salesman travelled the countryside in North America, setting up shop in hotel rooms. They measured clients, showed samples of fabric, and took orders for suits and separates. The resulting orders were individually cut at the factory, then assembled by the sectional or "efficiency" system. *American Gentleman* 9, no. 7 (1909): 22.
8. W. D. F. Vincent, *The Trimmers' Practical Guide to the Cutting Board* (London: The John Williamson Company, n.d.). A photocopy is held at the Canadian Parks Service costume library, Ottawa.
9. C. Roy, "The Tailoring Trade 1800-1920" (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Alberta, Edmonton, 1990), 62.
10. P. A. Trautman, *Clothing America* (The Costume Society of America, Region II, 1987) is a bibliography and location index of nineteenth-century American pattern-drafting systems. K. Seligman, "Bibliography of Flat Pattern Sources," *Theatre Design and Technology* 8, no. 3: 23-8, and no. 4: 20-5 and 9, no. 1: 32-6, includes periodicals, drafting and instructional manuals, both nineteenth and twentieth century. E. Rink, *Technical Americana* (Millwood, New York: Kraus International Publications, 1981) is a checklist of pre-1831 technical publications. See "Clothing and Shoemaking," 221-3.
11. H. Simons, *Drafting Pants and Overalls* (New York: Clothing Designer Company, 1916), 2. (Available from the John Crerar Library, University of Chicago.)
12. Period photographs of tailor shops often show these fashion plates as wall decor or in window displays, evidently in use to help clients decide upon a suitable style.
13. Frederick T. Croonborg also published *The Blue Book of Men's Tailoring*, popular late in the twentieth century as a reprint. (1907; reprint, New York: Van Nostrand and Reinhold Company, 1977).
14. *Modern Fashions* (July 1904 and January 1905) are held by the Smithsonian Library. Rude also published his pattern-drafting system, *The Great Modern System* in 1900, 1909, and 1911. They are available at the Library of Congress.
15. *The Tailor* (London: Houlston and Stoneman, n.d., pre-1850). Available at the library of the University of California, Berkeley.
16. Only one reference was found by this researcher. F. A. Deiner, *A Complete Handbook of Tailoring and Shop Management on the Sectional or Group System* (New York: F. F. Deiner and Company, 1920). A photocopy is held by the Clothing and Textiles Collection, University of Alberta.
17. For example J. P. Thornton, *The Sectional System of Gentlemen's Garment Cutting, Comprising Coats, Vests, Breeches, Trousers, etc.* (London: Minister & Co., 1894).
18. See D. Bensman, *The Practice of Solidarity: American Hat Finishers in the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985) for sources of trade materials in the hat finishing industry.