

Bonnet on the Brain:
An Object Study of a Nineteenth Century Crochet Bonnet

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Upon first seeing this object, most people question what exactly it is. Is it a bonnet? Is it some sort of wig? One thing is certain, and that is that the object evokes a certain level of curiosity among everyone who views it. The bonnet in question was gifted to Historic Deerfield by Dorothy Dunklee Gavin in 2017. The object file states that the bonnet is from West Dummerston, Vermont, and was made sometime between 1850 and 1870. Mrs. Gavin was born in Brattleboro, Vermont, a neighboring town, in 1921 and attended The University of Massachusetts, or Massachusetts State College as it was known then, graduating in 1943.¹ She is the author/compiler of *Our Family Album: A Pictorial History of the Dunklee/Bailey Families: Produced by the Heirs of Robert E. Dunklee, Senior, who died January 11, 1978 at the age of 96 in Brattleboro, Vermont.*² Given her interest in family history and the proximity of West Dummerston and Brattleboro, it is entirely possible that this piece may have had a personal connection for Mrs. Gavin.

The object is made of brown woolen yarn, brown plain weave wool, and brown grosgrain silk ribbon. It is twelve inches high, eight and a half inches wide, and 9 inches deep.³ There are two ribbons attached on either side that tie underneath the wearer's chin, and there are two ribbons that are woven around the edges of the bonnet. These ribbons tie in bows at the crown of the head and at the nape of the neck, creating a shaping effect that separates the upper "hood" from a lower, skirted edge that would just brush the shoulders. The thread that attaches one of

¹ Gavin, Dorothy Dunklee. "Dorothy D. Gavin: Oral History with Daniel Chard, August 7, 2013".By Daniel Chard. *UMass Amherst Sesquicentennial Oral History Collection*, Aug. 7, 2013. http://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/murg1_207_2013-i067

² "More About Vermont History." Vermont Historical Society. 209.

³ Object File, Accession number HD 2017.31.2 Historic Deerfield.

the ribbon ties to the bonnet is a different color than thread used elsewhere, possibly indicating a repair. The ribbon ties also show smoothed, worn sections that indicate extensive use. The entire outside is covered in small loops that were worked in a chain stitch, giving the appearance of intensely curly hair. The inside features stitches that appear scalloped, except around the bow at the back of the neck. The stitches used in this spot create boxes, offering larger holes for the ribbon to be woven through. The inside has a lining; the material is folded and stitched up at the bottom, ending where the outer layer of the garment begins to flare. There is a stitched seam that runs diagonally perpendicular to the bottom edge of the lining. There is also a short seam running along the center back, rounding the material to fit the outer layer. This lining has come unsewn on one side, and features at least two different colors of thread. This would again indicate extensive use and the need for repairs.

This bonnet does not appear to have been made from one specific pattern, though there are a large number of images and patterns that the design for this bonnet could have drawn inspiration from. To narrow down the time frame in which this bonnet was made, it is likely that it was originally constructed sometime in the late 1850's or early 1860's. The silhouette that this bonnet would have when worn appears similar to that of the highly fashionable silk and straw bonnets of this time period. In the fashion plates of the 1830's and 1840's, bonnets appear to have featured a wide brim to shadow the face and ended abruptly at the nape of the neck. By the 1850's and early 1860's, the brim began to shorten, exposing the face and hairline. A flared cape was attached to the back of these bonnets, extending down to cover part of the neck.⁴ In the late

⁴ JoAnne Olian, ed. *80 Godey's Full-Color Fashion Plates 1838-1880* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1998), Plates 23-29.

1860's and the early 1870's hats and bonnets perched more on the top of the head, meaning that they did not shadow the face or cover the back of the neck.

The creator and owner of this bonnet, however, was not only concerned with how fashionable it was; she probably cared more about utility. Patterns for bonnets or hoods similar to this one appeared in several issues of *Peterson's Magazine* during the winter months of the late 1850's and early 1860's. Many of these patterns created garments with the same silhouette. In October of 1863, *Peterson's Magazine* printed a color plate of a "Spanish Opera Hood" that appears to have been worked from yarns rather than fabric.⁵ This hood covered the head and shoulders, perhaps providing a bit more coverage than this bonnet but maintaining the same style. In September of 1861, another pattern was printed for a knit hood with long ties that were constructed as part of the garment. This hood featured a flared cape to cover part of the neck, similar to this bonnet, and would have offered warmth during cold winter months. These styles of hoods mixed the practical with the fashionable. The presence of patterns for these hoods indicates their relative popularity and the probability that they would be produced at home.

There were several other patterns that were featured in *Peterson's* that the creator of this object could have drawn more direct inspiration from. Interestingly, these patterns are all for garments that were meant for children. In addition, most of the patterns mentioned earlier were for knitting, but some of these patterns are for crochet. The body of this bonnet may have drawn inspiration from a March 1861 pattern for an "Infant's Hood in Crochet". This particular pattern instructs the woman to "make a chain three-eighths of a yard in length. On it work 27 shells, 4 dc

⁵ "Spanish Opera Hood", *Peterson's Magazine*, October 1863, Historic Deerfield.

stitches to each shell”.⁶ The “dc” stands for double crochet, one of the foundational stitches used in the craft. By consulting a modern needlework book for visual confirmation, it becomes clear that there are many different styles of shell stitch. The *Peterson’s* pattern for the infant’s hood did not specify one particular shell stitch to use, but this bonnet may have been worked in a simple shell stitch.⁷ The center back section near the bow may have been crocheted in a brick stitch, which form squares of asymmetrical shells with spaces between them. The infant’s hood features bows at the crown and nape, just as the bonnet in question does, but this particular pattern does not specify a change in the type of stitch used around the hood’s border.

The three dimensional loops on the outer surface of the bonnet are what help to make it such an interesting piece. Loops similar to these can be found in several garment patterns from the time period. The *Peterson’s* edition for February of 1863 ran a crochet pattern for a tippet made of chinchilla wool. This scarf-like garment was completely covered in loops, which the pattern shows to have been created by wrapping the yarn around a finger on the hand not holding the crochet hook.⁸ This is called a bouclé loop and can be done in both knitting and crocheting. Patterns for hoods with this bouclé loop were run in *Peterson’s* in April of 1859 and February of 1864. The pattern “To Knit a Child’s Hood” in 1859 only featured the bouclé loops along the border, but the pattern “Baby’s Knitted Hood” from 1864 featured rows of the bouclé loops

⁶ Shep, *Civil War Ladies*, 48.

⁷ *Reader’s Digest Complete Guide to Needlework* (Pleasantville, NY: The Reader’s Digest Association, Inc., 1986) 374.

⁸Jane Weaver, “Tippet of Chinchilla Wool”, *Peterson’s Magazine*, February 1863, Historic Deerfield, 313.

framing the face and bordering the cape.⁹ This cape features knitted shell stitches, but does not have any of the loops. The 1864 hood also features ribbon bows at the top and back, as well as ties made of the same ribbon, similar to the bonnet in the Historic Deerfield collection. The Deerfield bonnet, however, does not feature the simple bouclé loop that was used in these patterns, but instead uses a crocheted chain loop stitch.¹⁰ This variation helps to give Deerfield's bonnet the distinct, curly-haired look.

While this bonnet may ultimately have been adapted from patterns in a fashion magazine, it served a very real purpose. The owner may have been of modest or moderate means, as evidenced by the extensive repairs and wear on the ribbons and lining. The ability to produce this bonnet in the home would also have been crucial to someone of modest means. The bonnet was likely worn as outdoor winter wear, so the lining could have been added for extra warmth. The patterns for similar hoods usually appeared in *Peterson's Magazine* in the fall and winter issues. The perpendicular seam in the lining may indicate that it was cut from another garment that was no longer wearable. This repurposing of goods may again indicate that the owner was of modest means and that nothing would go to waste. This bonnet/hood may have been fashionable when it was first made, but it probably would still have been used long after this style went out of fashion. The topic of fashion was contentious in magazines such as *Godey's Lady's Book* until sometime in the 1850's. Editors such as Sarah Josepha Hale felt that the middle class obsession with fashion was hypocritical and pretentious.¹¹ The ability to afford fashionable clothes

⁹ Jane Weaver, "To Knit a Child's Hood", *Peterson's Magazine*, April 1859, Historic Deerfield, 316; Shep, *Civil War Ladies*, 259.

¹⁰ *Reader's Digest*, 388-389.

¹¹ Lewis, Mary Jane. "'Godey's Lady's Book': Contributions to the Promotion and Development of the American Fashion Magazine in Nineteenth-Century America" (PhD. diss., New York University, 1996) 193.

segregated the classes, yet also acted as a marker of upward mobility. By the 1850's, however, fashion as a key aspect of society was becoming more acceptable to the editors of these magazines, and this is the time period that this bonnet likely dates from. This garment would not only have served a very practical purpose for a woman living in rural Vermont, but it would also have been unpretentiously in fashion at the time that it was made. A woman of modest means could wear a fashionable garment without sacrificing utility.

Possible Exhibit Ideas

The first possible exhibit that this object could be included in is an exploration of women's headwear through time, perhaps from 1700 to 1900. A potential title for this exhibit is "Bonnet and Caps and Hats, Oh My!" The shapes that headwear takes has changed drastically over time, from the materials used and the positioning on the head to the decorations and embellishments. This bonnet offers an interesting counterpart to the silk and straw bonnets and hats that were highly fashionable in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. This bonnet, along with another "knotted" bonnet that is held in the Philadelphia Museum of Art's collection, could help to present a very practical alternative to silk and straw.¹²

The second possible exhibition is one about winter clothing, focusing on changes regionally and/or chronologically. Winter wear might not necessarily look the same in Deerfield, Massachusetts, Atlanta, Georgia, or on the western frontier at any given time. As technology, fashion, and resources changed, winter wear would have changed. This bonnet would likely have been worn in the winter months while a woman was working outside, protecting her from the

¹² "Woman's Bonnet" Accession number 1971-122-5. Philadelphia Museum of Art.
<https://philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/208880.html?mulR=718579229/4#>.

cold and the rain or snow. An exhibit like this would certainly look more at the practicality of the bonnet rather than at the fashionableness of the bonnet.

A third possible exhibit idea could simply be titled, “What IS that?” This would be an exhibit that showcases objects that are unusual looking or that perhaps do not have very much background information. Textile pieces, pottery, metal work, and pieces of furniture could all work well in this exhibit. It would be interactive, involving the patron in creating the narrative for each object. Some basic information could be given on each object, and patrons would be asked to guess what the object is or to guess what the object’s story is. These responses would be displayed for other visitors to see. The goal of this exhibit would be to get visitors thinking and using their imagination. Have each visitor form a creative bond with the objects, give them the opportunity to use their well-informed imagination. Many people have looked at this bonnet and asked exactly this question of, “What is that thing? It’s so weird looking”. Different people bring different perspectives to history, and this exhibit could help to demonstrate how two people can tell two very different stories about the same thing, even when they are given the same information. It could also help to bring forward anyone who has more information about these objects.

The final exhibit idea that this bonnet could fit into would be an exhibit on the role of ladies magazines and fashion periodicals in the nineteenth century. This exhibit could be called, “For Ladies Eyes Only”. Fashion plates and these magazines themselves could be displayed, as well as clothing made following the featured patterns, books that were reviewed, and goods from the advertisements. A brief exhibit summary could be, “With the dawn of the nineteenth century came the rise of magazines dedicated to female readers. Fashion, one of the primary topics, was condemned by editors such as Sarah Josepha Hale, who edited *Godey’s Lady’s Book* from 1837

through the 1870's, as being a hypocritical obsession for middle class women. This view had changed by the 1850's, embracing fashion as a powerful force in society and disregarding the possible moral evils. Fashion acted as a barrier to upward mobility, but also as a marker of having attained middle class status. But what did this fashion look like and what larger role did it play? What did these magazines offer to women across the United States?"

The object label for this bonnet in the exhibit could read:

This crocheted bonnet or hood, made of wool yarn, silk grosgrain ribbon, and wool fabric for a lining, was made in the Connecticut River Valley region of southern Vermont between 1850 and 1870. No pattern for this garment seems to appear in any of the ladies magazines, yet patterns and fashion plates for similar hoods could be found scattered throughout these publications. The distinctive chain stitched loops, the shell stitched body, and the ribbon accents are all elements that can be found in the hood patterns of these magazines. The creator of this garment may have been inspired by these patterns, making a fashionable piece of headwear that retained the practical usage of keeping the wearer warm.

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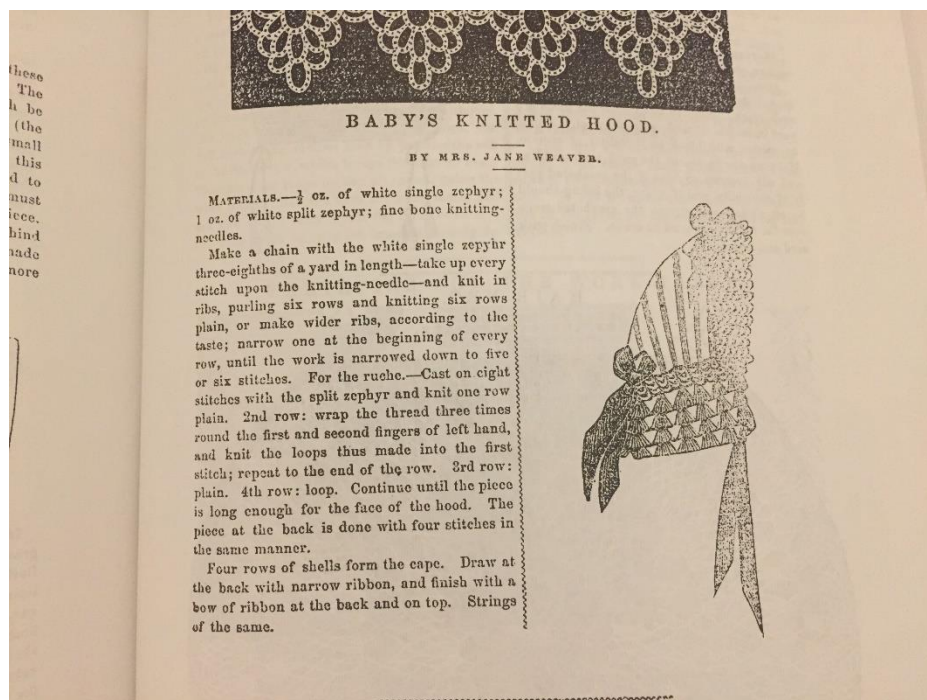
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Appendices

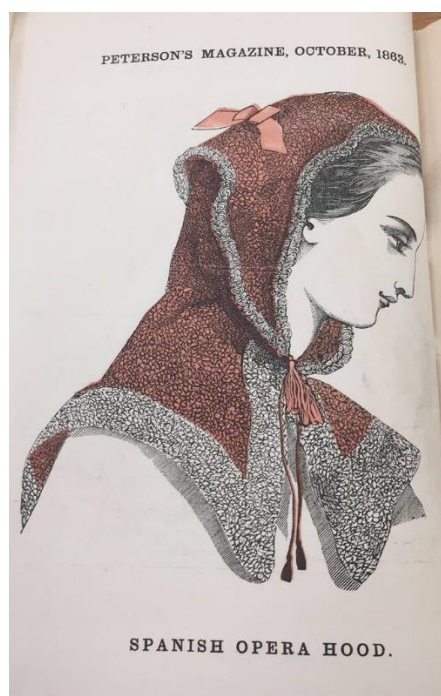
Images of the bonnet and some of the patterns mentioned above have been provided for visual reference.



- 1) Image taken by Penny Leveritt, Historic Deerfield Visual Resources Manager. HD 2017.31.2



- 2) Baby's Knitted Hood pattern from *Peterson's Magazine* in February 1864. Image from R.L. Shep's *Civil War Ladies: Fashions and Needle-Arts of the Early 1860's*



- 3) "Spanish Opera Hood", colored fashion plate from *Peterson's Magazine*, October 1863. From the Historic Deerfield Library collection.