



# Hoop- was hopeless

**In Civil War era, skirts became exaggerated**

By Angie George, Erie County Civil War Sesquicentennial Committee

*First lady Mary Todd Lincoln in a hoop skirt.*



Nothing typifies Civil War ladies' fashion more than the shape of an exceptionally full-skirted dress.

Women desired the look of a small waist without the discomfort of a tightly-laced corset. As a result, skirts became extremely exaggerated.

By the mid-1850s, fashionable women, especially those from larger cities, were wearing up to six petticoats to achieve a full, round silhouette.

Petticoats are essentially skirts worn under a dress or skirt and constructed from a variety of fabrics, including cotton, cambric or muslin. Layering on several petticoats at a time meant a woman wore extra pounds of clothing under her dress. The unwelcome additional weight that accompanied a new

silhouette style led to a desire to seek out a more user-friendly method of adding volume to a skirt.

The answer to that quandary: the cage-crinoline, or hoop skirt, which held the exaggerated shape without requiring multiple heavy and cumbersome petticoats.

The hoop skirt, or cage crinoline, first appeared in Europe during the 1850s. The word "crinoline" derives from the French term for a "stiff skirt"

The first cage-crinolines were constructed from whale bone or cane. The materials were useful in holding out the skirts, although they did nothing to alleviate the weight. Cane and whale bone were both very heavy. Fragility of these materials was another concern, as cane and whale bone easily broke when sitting or passing through small spaces such as doorways.

Availability was another issue with using whale bone.

Whales were being hunted to near extinction, not only for undergarment construction, but also for lamp oil. These reasons were motivation to seek alternative materials.

During this time, the Industrial Revolution was beginning to accelerate and items such as steel were being developed. Flattened spring steel wire was flexible and lightweight, and it proved ideal for use in women's undergarments.

These newer spring steel hoop skirts were eagerly welcomed by women struggling with the weight and bulk of carrying around extra, unneeded petticoats. The steel wire was also durable and could withstand bending from sitting and moving through doorways.

Amid a national crisis such as a Civil War, one might imagine fashion to be on the back burner. But with normal, everyday life interrupted, fashion appeared to be the one thing women had control over, and it was evident they were not willing to give it up. Fashion was a tool used by women to show the world everything was "normal"

Monthly fashion magazines flourished during the war years. At 150,000 strong, Godey's Lady's Book had more subscribers during the Civil War than at any other point in the fashion magazine's 48-year existence. This fact is interesting considering that during the war, when cotton was more expensive and difficult to obtain, women's dresses used more fabric than at ever before.

In a society where portraying an image of success was of the utmost importance, giving off the illusion of wealth was imperative.

The wearing of cage-crinolines had become so widespread by the mid-1860s that any woman seen in public without one was subjected to unwanted attention. A March 1863 issue of Godey's states, "We see some hoopless individuals perambulating our streets; and queer oddities they are"

After the Civil War, American women longed for ways to shed the existence they had during such difficult times and start anew.

Again, fashion trends offered a way to accomplish that and the embellished hoop skirt gradually began to be phased out. During the mid-1860s, the shape of the crinoline began to shift. Rather than being dome-shaped, the front and sides began to dwindle, leaving volume only at the back.

By 1871, cage-crinolines were deemed unfashionable altogether and replaced with the bustle.