

Curator's Choice

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Fashionable Foundations

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When people think of the kind of foundations archaeologists uncover, they tend to picture the remnants of an old building, but this *Curator's Choice* is all about the foundations of fashion. Clothing can be hard to identify archaeologically because fabric rarely survives underground. To understand what people were wearing, we rely heavily on durable fasteners (buttons, buckles, hooks and eyes, etc.) and accessories (purse frames, parasol parts, jewelry, etc.). Metal hardware from late 19th- and early 20th-century foundation garments can also offer clues about what people were wearing if one knows what to look for.

Excavations of the Dallam Farm/Fanny's Inheritance site (18HA312) in Harford County, Maryland, recovered evidence of both a corset and a hoop skirt (Figure 1). Both were in a kitchen cellar that was abandoned around 1900. Artifacts from the cellar fill primarily date to the second half of the 19th century.

That date falls after the adoption of slot-and-stud closures for corsets, which were invented in 1848 to allow wearers to leave back laces in place except for tightening (Figure 2: Bloomingdale Brothers 1988 [1886]; Lynn 2010; Takeda and Spilker 2010). These foundations served to mold women's bodies to fit changing trends. Similarly, a variety of inventive foundation garments embraced lightweight metal hardware to support fashionable skirts. Cage crinolines made of flexible wire hoops gave the skirts of the 1850s and 1860s their famously extreme shape. In the 1870s, rear-oriented crinolettes made of wire started to concentrate skirt volume into a bustle at the back. This trend reached its full glory in the 1880s when bustles reached extreme heights (Lynn 2010). This look required a great deal of architecture to achieve, and various contraptions made of wire, springs, and ruffled canvas were available to add body to the behind (Figure 3).

Unlike removable clothing buttons and fasteners that were frequently saved for reuse, the hardware from rusting corsets and crinolines usually ended up in trash middens or burn piles. That is likely how such garments ended up in the 18HA312 kitchen cellar fill. Although the hoop skirt fragments are obscured by corrosion of the iron wires, x-radiography reveals the form of the brackets that held the wire and secured hoops to fabric tapes.

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Figure 1: Four copper alloy hoop skirt brackets with iron corrosion from the wires they encased (left) and slot-and-stud closures for a corset (right) were recovered in Feature 23, kitchen cellar fill, at 18HA312. Courtesy U.S. Army Garrison, Aberdeen Proving Ground.

Based on patents, the brackets found at 18HA312 were first introduced in the mid-1860s (Figure 4).

Between 1855 and 1878, 18HA312 was owned by Edward Boothby Dallam and Henry Clay Dallam, but records indicate they primarily resided in Baltimore City, so the farm was either a secondary residence or rented to tenants. In 1878 they sold the farm to William Benjamin Baker who owned a canning business, spearheaded the formation of local banks, acted as president of the Harford County telephone company, and served in several political offices, including three congressional terms from 1895 to 1901 (Hornum 2011; Wikipedia 2024).

Less is known about the women who lived at the site in the late 19th century. Mary Catherine Baker née Hollis (b. 1847-d. 1922) and her young daughters Jessie (b. 1878) and Nettie (b. 1883) presumably lived there with William Baker (Hornum 2011), so it is tempting to conclude that the corset and hoop skirts helped keep Mary Baker at the height of style as the matriarch of a prominent family. However, foundation garments were not exclusive to the upper classes. Female tenants could have lived at 18HA312 before the Bakers moved in, and any household servants who possibly lived in residence might not have made it into the historical record. Such women would not have appeared on the deeds, but they would have adopted the dominant fashions that called for corsets and skirt supports. Whether Mrs. Baker owned these artifacts or another woman who is invisible in the historical records, it is important for archaeologists to recognize the foundations of fashion that women of all classes left behind.



Figure 3: This page from the 1886 Bloomingdale Brothers catalog shows a variety of foundation garments to help women boost the bust, narrow the waist, and enhance the derriere (Bloomingdale Brothers 1988[1886]:34).

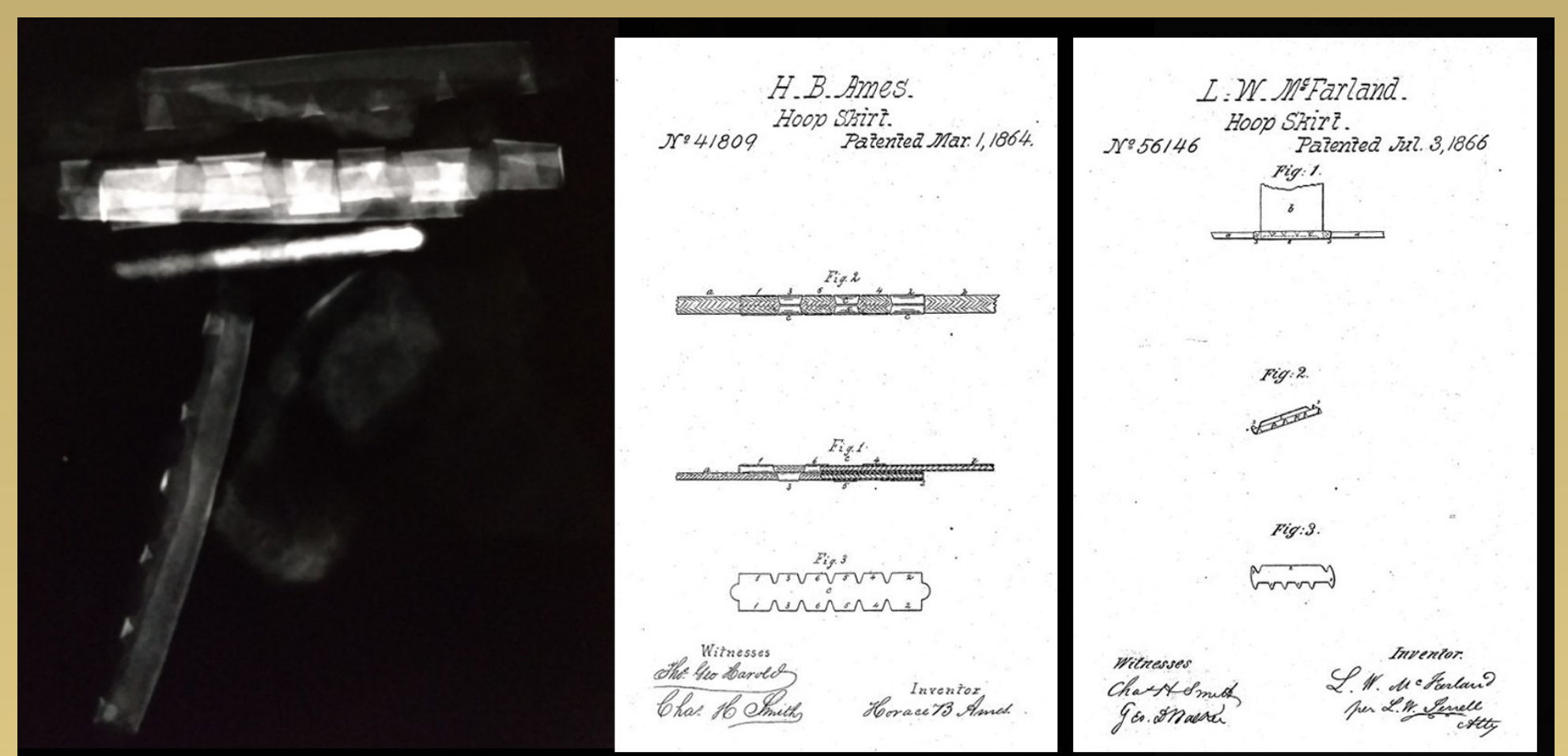


Figure 4: Xrays of the corroded hoop skirt fragments (left) show the structure of the brackets that held iron wires and hung them from fabric tapes (see Figure 3, bottom left). Patents from the 1860s (center and right) show when the different bracket types were introduced (Ames 1864; McFarland 1866).



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