

Feature



What Lizzie Borden Wore *Lisa A. Ashton*

Known for the events surrounding her acquittal for the 1892 murders of her parents, we now meet her through a costumer's recreation of the clothing that she might have worn on that fateful day in Fall River.

On the morning of August 4, 1892, both the father and the stepmother of Elizabeth Andrew Borden were murdered in their home in Fall River, Massachusetts – essentially the only absolutely known facts surrounding one of the most notorious and well-known crimes in U.S. history. Evidence has never led to the actual killer; we are left with conjecture, circumstantial findings, and inconsistencies. Historians have tried to reconstruct the events of that morning – unsuccessfully.

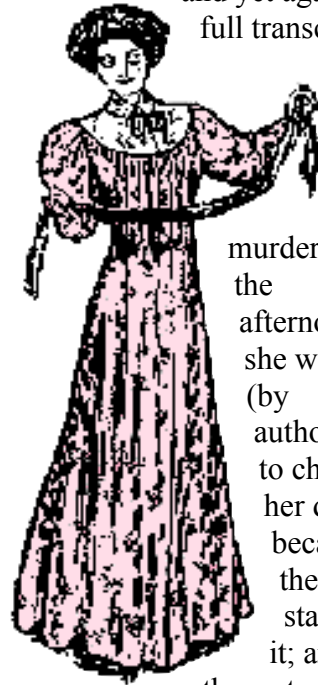
With this project, I try to extrapolate the dress that Lizzie might have worn that day, based on what is actually known from

Editor's Note

Lisa Ashton's recreation of Lizzie Borden's attire was presented in the Historical Masquerade at Costume-Con 24, in May 2006.

evidence at the scene, about Lizzie and her family, their social station, and the cultural framework of standards of dress of that time and place.

Lizzie was questioned quite thoroughly at the “deposition”, again prior to the trial, and yet again at the trial. The full transcripts are available.



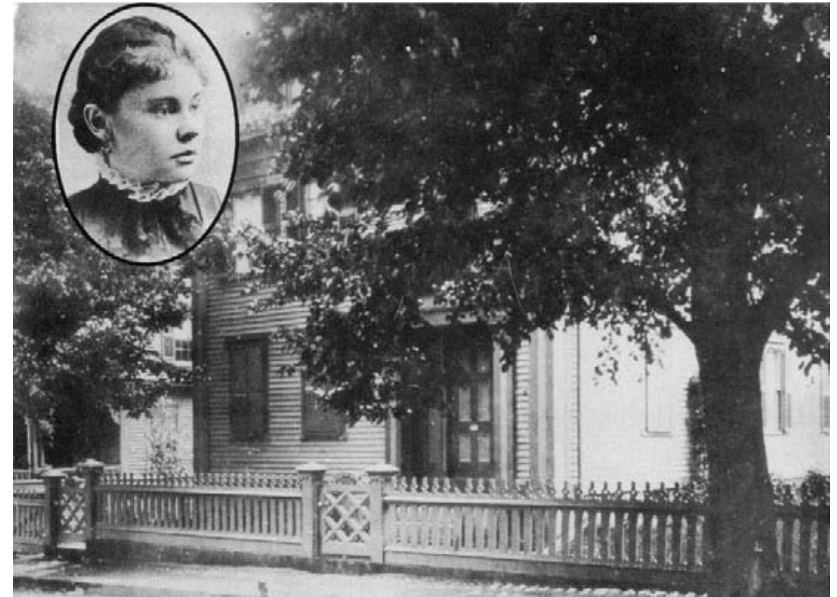
She admits to wearing a “blue bengaline dress” during the morning of the murders, but states that in

the afternoon, she was told (by authorities) to change her dress because of the blood stains on it; and for the rest of the

day wore a “pink wrapper” (1890s fashion drawing, above). Lizzie was a woman far, far ahead of her time; later that evening, she apparently burned the blue day dress in the stove (with the help of one

of her friends – a neighbor who subsequently testified to that effect), and it was never seen again.

Much later, what happened to the dress became a matter of intense speculation, both by the police and by local society. The only photographs of that day were of the bodies and the interior the house; none of family, household, or neighbors. They were not the “crime scene” photos that we have come to expect, and very few are extant, the best known being of the bodies of Andrew Borden, and Abby Durfee Borden, in the respective rooms they were found in.



Photograph from Fall River Historical Society shows the residence of Andrew J. Borden, Lizzie's father, at 92 Second Street, Fall River, Mass., 1892. The inset is Lizzie Andrew Borden, c. 1890, when she was about 30 years old. The house is now a B&B.

For a lady in Lizzie's position, who was not a servant, and whose family was considered well-to-do (Lizzie's father, in fact, was almost the wealthiest man in the town of Fall River, Massachusetts), appropriate dress at home in the early 1890's would have been either a blouse and skirt or a bodice and skirt combination, or a "day dress"; that is, a dress that would be good enough to receive a caller, should there be need, yet certainly not highly decorated or formal.



Late 1880s day dress

A "wrapper" was what we might consider a modern "housecoat"; that is, a full-length dress that opened completely in the front, and therefore differed from a "day dress" (also a one-piece dress), in which the bodice would have button (or hook-and-eye) closures, but the skirt would have only a short placket opening at the waist (usually an extension of the bodice closure), therefore one would either pull it over the head or step into it, and then close the front.

A woman at home might wear an apron if doing messy household or cooking tasks; the apron would be a solid or print color, but probably *not* white; and could possibly have minimal decoration, such as pockets or a

ruffled hem. She would always remove the apron to receive callers or to go out. The Borden family did have a young Irish maid, named Bridget, who probably helped Lizzie and her sister, Emma, dress.

Lizzie was 32 at that time, unmarried and living at home, and so would have been considered a "spinster". She would likely have dressed in a rather sober, subdued fashion. She was quite active at church, and did various small tasks around the house and yard (the heavy cleaning would have fallen to Bridget, and there was also a cook). In token of that I have filled her pockets with artifacts typical of



a lady of the time--an embroidered handkerchief, a key, a pocket-watch. Supposedly she had ironed handkerchiefs earlier that day, by her deposition (she had also gone out to a store the previous day and purchased prussic acid, "for getting rid of vermin", which came out at the deposition and trial).

Her father, although quite wealthy by local standards, was nonetheless known to be "frugal" (as his peers would politely report); Lizzie and her sister Emma apparently both believed him to be "mean" in terms of their allowances, and what they were permitted to buy and do.

For this reason, I believe it entirely possible that Lizzie might have been wearing a slightly out-of-fashion dress, that is, a day dress patterned after the styles of the very late 1880's. It might have been modified a little or "dressed up" in the two or three years or so since it was bought. Changes in embellishment or the addition of additional lace to the collar or yoke, were very acceptable ways of keeping up with fashion and extending the utility of a dress.

Her father being as austere as he was, allowed no expensive clothing for any in his household, nor new clothes every season. Thus, it is unlikely that Lizzie and her sister Emma would have been considered "fashionable." He apparently (according to Lizzie's and other neighbors' recall), thought thrift more imperative than social standing.

The only photo known of his wife, Lizzie's step-mother (Abby Durfee Gray Borden), shows her dressed quite plainly; she was known to be from a family of lesser status than the Borden, and for her it



Lizzie's father Andrew and step-mother Abby Borden.

doubtless had been a welcome marriage. It was also commonly known at the time (and brought out at the trial), that Lizzie never cared for her stepmother, although any open hostility was denied.

There are very few extant photos of Lizzie herself during her life--none from the immediate time of the murders. Newspaper articles printed later (she wasn't taken into custody for at least 4 days) are accompanied by drawings, in which she is usually wearing a relatively high collar and mildly poufy



Lizzie Borden, mid-1890s.

sleeve caps, both typical of the early 1890's (and exactly like today's celebrity suspects, careful to dress in a very conservative, acceptable manner). Her best-known photo dates from several years later, in which she is wearing relatively plain clothing, clearly of the mid 1890's as identified by the enormous sleeve puffs, standing behind a chair (below, left)

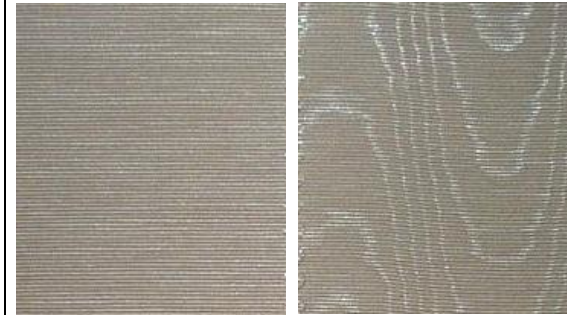
It may be a bit fanciful on my part to imagine that Lizzie, with her yearning for clothes and material goods finer than those allowed by her thrifty father, might have had undergarments that were perhaps a bit luxurious. Her father, after all, would never see them, nor would anyone likely have, except possibly the household help who laundered them. To duplicate the corset she might have worn, I used a lovely satin brocade in light teal, with a sturdy cotton lining and interlining, and edging. Certainly China silk was available to her. For the bust gores I overlined the brocade in embroidered translucent charmeuse. The chemise is cotton batiste, with the extra lace that Lizzie might have yearned for. Hoops were rare at this time, a petticoat would have been enough.

It was well-known then (as it is even now by the matrons of the Fall River Historical Society) that blue was by far Lizzie's favorite color. "Bengaline" is a sort of faille or taffeta, and was frequently used at the time, as it has structure and durability. Both sleeveless and short-sleeve gowns would only have been worn for formal

Sewcabulary

Bengaline – is a grosgrain fabric, with low narrow ribs running across it's width.

Moiré Bengaline – has an effect running lengthwise on the fabric, giving it a shimmering, wavy, 'woodgrain' appearance that changes with the lighting and angle of view.

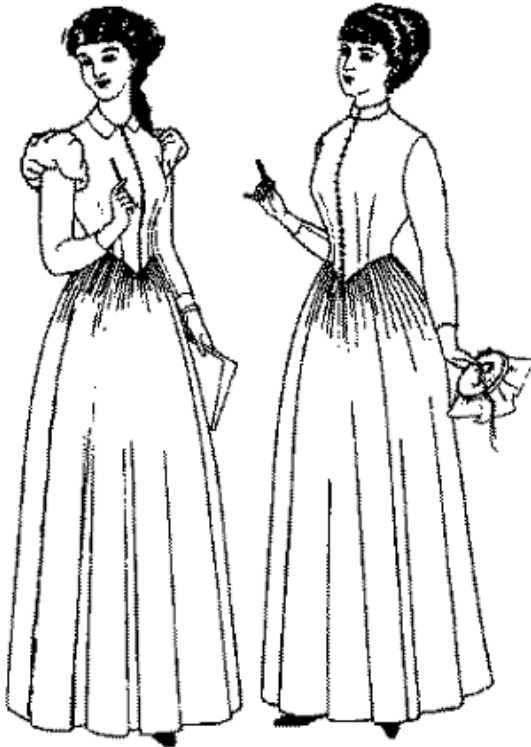


Bengaline (right) and Moiré Bengaline (left).
Source: [Tutu.Com Fabrics](http://Tutu.Com/Fabrics).

occasions, so I have retained the original long sleeves with the typical early 1890's poufy sleeve caps, that would have been all the fashion that Lizzie was allowed.

Although the dress is relatively plain, it is of a rich fabric; the decoration is sedate and understated, the same color as the dress, so it is more a textured decoration using typical Victorian fabric manipulation: a combination of ruching, gathering, pleating, and embroidery. It was quite conventional for dress trim to use the same fabric as the garment itself. The "V" configuration of the embellishment on the bodice back is intended to make the waist appear narrower, which is the goal of all Victorian dresses.

The pattern I started with was [Past Patterns #903](#), 1880's Day Dress. It had many of the style features I was looking for, including the fold-over plain collar, The smaller sleeve puff with a snug-fitting sleeve, the very fitted bodice, and gathered skirt. There was also an option of a tiny watch pocket (these watch pockets were sometimes ingeniously designed and fitted in to either the skirt or the bodice—I have seen crocheted, net-like watch pockets on the outside of the bodice as well). In addition I added regular side pockets to the skirt. The corset was made using [Laughing Moon #100](#), Victorian Ladies underwear. The chemise was made without a pattern.



Past Patterns #903, 1880's Day Dress.



At right is a full view of the finished dress. In keeping with Lizzie's preference for blue, I have gotten as close to the "Blue bengaline" described in the transcripts, as possible—I used a taffeta moiré, very nice and durable, lovely draping qualities. In keeping with authenticity for the time, the bodice and sleeves are lined, and the skirt is not. Note that the center skirt placket becomes invisible.

Front of dress, showing a corset underneath, and also showing the skirt placket, extending from the front closure. Plackets were sometimes off to the side, and



the bodice would be finished at the edge, and then just buttoned in place, sometimes an extra hook-and-eye would hold the bodice in place if needed. (This was *not* the corset made for and worn with the dress).



Here is a detail of the watch pocket, on left side of skirt. The pocket is only as big as the three fingers I have in it! The chain and fob for the watch could be worn around the neck, or could be attached with the clasp to a buttonhole.



The inside of bodice detail (below) shows the waist line binding, where bodice and skirt are sewn together. The self-bias binding is cut and sewn onto the seam combining the skirt and bodice hem, to keep it stable. It is the area of the dress with the most tension.



A detail of the bodice back decoration includes a navy satin with tight gathering—"ruching"—and bordered with trim of the same color. Then ¼ inch velvet ribbon was

added, then machine embroidery in a scallop design of the same color. The overall effect is a very textured "V" shape, making the waist even slimmer. A similar technique was used on the lower skirt.



The lower skirt embellishment—the same as that of the bodice, only wider. The ruched satin had to be sewn together in strips and then gathered in about 12 inch sections, then applied to the fabric, before the skirt itself was gathered or hemmed.



The front bodice decoration shows the two shoulder “points” are carried over from the back “V” trim, and are actually typical of the time. The center front bodice trim is the same width of blue satin ruched strips, but they are sewn down the center vertically to create a “double row” of ruching for visual interest.



A back view of left sleeve, below, shows blood stains with beaded highlights.



The front of the sleeve, below, shows blood stains with beaded highlights; the fabric dye and cellophane paint were actually designed and painted on once the two sleeve pieces were joined, but before the sleeve was sewn together. The beadwork was applied *after* the sleeve was sewn together.



The skirt hem, at right, has bloodstains added. The skirt was finished at that point

Note on the blood stains: I won a special documentation award for this costume. I set it up as an old-fashioned scrapbook with the photos glued in with photo corners, and as the pages progressed, there were bloody fingerprints that started out with just one or two then became rather more bloody toward the end. I was told that one of the judges was “so freaked out” that she could not complete reading it!!

The bloodstains themselves took an entire afternoon of experimenting to get it right. I started out with 4 different silk

paints, two cellophane paints and several varieties of “squeeze” fabric paint, as well as brushes, sponges, cotton balls, etc. The best results involved a more purple-red silk paint as a base to chalked in areas on the skirt and sleeve, with globs of red cellophane (“glass”) paint on top of that, followed by some topaz squeeze paint here and there. I wanted it to look fresh but not immediate—in other words, actual blood will turn quite black on a dark fabric like this. Mine still looks freshly clotted, even after being in the closet for about five years.

The blood-red bead work, with even a few drop shaped beads hanging off the sleeve edge, was just to highlight it, make it more dimensional, and to capture the stage light. I also made a beaded bloody edge to the axe I carried, by beading strands and red



drops onto a piece of burgundy trim that was then glued onto the axe edge. It looked fantastic when I whirled around on stage.

I made a hat, out of a small shallow basket and a large round of foam core, covered with the same taffeta moiré, pleated and ruched, with decorative silk flowers and a large bow—all airbrushed to same dark blue. There was also beadwork added as fringe to a “Lizzie” refrigerator magnet I bought up in Fall River.

Interestingly, Lizzie was also a redhead, like me; but I suspect she wore her hair up in a more proper style for the times. She was quite an interesting character to research.

Bibliography

Brown, Arnold R.: *Lizzie Borden: the legend, the truth, the final chapter*; Rutledge Hill Press, TN: 1991. Includes a great deal of information about the history of Fall River and its wealthy families; also includes most of the trial transcripts. This book, alone among the many others I read preparing for this costume, sets the scene well, explains the actual known evidence, and realistically imagines the sequence of events. There is a surprise ending, in that, with first person interviews and primary source documents ignored by other historians, Mr. Brown postulates who the real murderer was, in a



CC-26 photo by [Richard Man](#).

very convincing final chapter. Well worth reading, even though it is not a primary costume source.

Dalrymple, Priscilla Harris: *American Victorian Costume in Early Photographs*, Dover Publ., Mineola, NY: 1991.

Gernsheim, Alison: *Victorian and Edwardian Fashion*, Dover Publ., Inc. Mineola, NY: 1963,1981.

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Society; Branden Publ. Co., Boston,MA: 1992. Includes the inquest testimony, transcripts from both the preliminary hearing and the trial, reproductions of articles from over 40 newspapers of the time, including many drawings.

Setnik,Linda: *Victorian Costume for Ladies*; Schiffer Publ. Ltd., Atglen, PA:2000. Very useful reference of photos; divided by decade with sections on general trends, sleeves, hairstyles, necklines, jewelry, and a section on identifying vintage photographs. One of my most useful Victorian references.

End Notes

I visited Fall River, Mass., not with the intention of discovering any startling new evidence, but to be immersed in the world that Lizzie Borden would have lived in. The Fall River Historical Society has a fine museum, with an entire room devoted to Lizzie Borden artifacts and documents. The rest of the house is a fabulously maintained Victorian mansion, with all the typical accoutrements that have been donated, including dresses, furniture, dishes, and ornament, a grand piano, and many room furnishings. One of the finest pieces was a shadowbox wreath of Victorian hair work.

The ladies there, however, are still absolutely convinced that Lizzie was the murderer, and consider her ostracized from proper society forever, no matter how much money she inherited.

Lisa A. Ashton is a Science Fiction & Fantasy and historical costumer who started costuming after attending Noreascon in 1989. Over 20 years later, she is still trying to design and build that perfect costume that will make people gasp in wonder. Other passions include beading, hunting, stamp collecting, gardening and canning, and collecting authentic Victorian photographs to study fashion history. As a Physician Assistant in Emergency Medicine for the last 25 years, she has had many opportunities to hone her sewing skills on her patients. Lisa was Program Director for Costume-Cons 29. Visit her [web site](#).



Top of bodice shows use of *ruching*, a typical Victorian fabric technique, used on Lizzie's skirt. Phillipsburg, mid-1890s.



Asymmetric front closure, mirrored buttons, Lead City SD, 1890s.



Radial pleating at top was sensible way to fit bodice to wearer. Sodus, NY, 1880s.



Popular hairstyle with front and bangs frizzed out. Note pointed, fold-over collar and pleats in front. Quakertown, PA.

The Fashions of Lizzie Borden's Time

Lisa Ashton's extensive collection of vintage photos offers a glimpse into clothing, accessories, and hair styles of Lizzie Borden's time.



Simple, undecorated dress. Narrow sleeves without upper arm fullness, simple center button closure of bodice; plain skirt. Late 1880s or early 1890s..



Middle-class lady in dress, possibly re-made to fit. Note gathering at lower bodice edge, typical square bodice trim, and decorated collar.



Blouse and skirt combination. Printed fabrics, especially cottons, became popular for blouses. Buckled belts were common. Fredrick, MD, mid-1890s.



Typical day dress profile of late 1880s to early 1890s; Lizzie's is more subdued than this striped pattern. Altoona, PA..