

Event Report



Citizen's Forum of the 1860's *Lisa Ashton*

This event provided educational speakers and workshops for Civil War reenactors, and a welcoming environment for sharing knowledge and personal growth as a living historian.

From March 24-26 2017, I attended the Citizens Forum of the 1860's Conference, in Monroe, Michigan, just outside of Detroit. I have been to several of these events in the past that were closer to home. They are primarily geared for those who re-enact aspects of the Civil War period, whether battles, encampments, or perspectives on civilian life during that time. This is a review of the weekend's events.

I am not a re-enactor, but have entered the world of Mid-19th Century dress and accessories via the path of sci-fi and fantasy costuming, then historical costuming. So I am always a little anxious that I will be viewed as "out of place" at

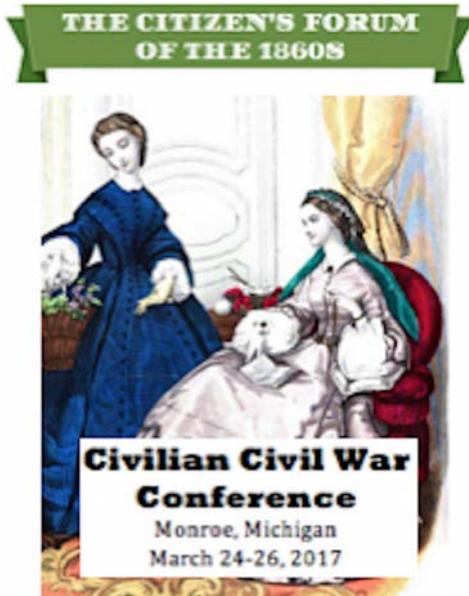
these gatherings, especially when it is a local or regional group who know each other well. I found everyone there very welcoming and interested in my point of view and my other costuming accomplishments.

I flew in on Friday morning, March 24th. I had been in touch with the conference directors, Glenna Jo and Kristen, before hand by email and phone beforehand, and they assured me rides from the airport to the hotel, and from there to the conference venue, a building at the local Community College. I didn't attend the two workshops

on making a Gathering or Knitting Apron, and on making a Pineapple Purse. Both workshops were very popular. A tour of a local historical library was also available.

That evening, there was a Soiree at the historic Sawyer House. Some photos are included. We had an absolutely gorgeous evening, with mild weather and a warm breeze, so we could sit in the gazebo as well. There was a brass band in period uniforms, and dancing in one

room of the house. A photographer took our likeness in another room, and emailed them to us later that evening.



It is always wonderful to see so many people in historical dress. It makes one remember that it wasn't all black and brown! Some wore ball gowns. Others, like me, wore cotton or silk day dresses. Many also wore lovely accessories, including gloves, antique jewelry, parasols, fans, and shawls.



Lisa Ashton at 1860's Conference. Image: Robert Beech.

It was an interesting chance that I knew him from some time ago (early 1990's) via SF and costume conventions in and around Baltimore. Robert Beech was an incredible costumer and makeup/bodypaint artist. I doubt he knew who I was back then (I had only started in SF and Fantasy costuming then), but remember him doing an amazing pair of humanoid zebras at a Balticon, and a Star Trek pair at a Costume Con in Columbia Maryland with only body paint. He now does traditional photography at Civil War events.

On Saturday morning, we were up early, breakfasted, and drove over to Monroe Community College. There were two tracks of talks during the day, one in a large multi-



Two photos outside the Sawyer House

purpose room, set up with small tables. There was also a vendor room, with vendors like Lucy's Hairwork (I've met her and seen her work at Harrisburg at other conferences—she does hair jewelry and hair wreaths using the traditional techniques with human or horse hair—and also teaches), pattern, book and fabric vendors, a Civil War reproduction stationery vendor, notions vendors (corset boning, silk flowers, beaded accessories, small kits for perforated paper projects, historical toy reproductions, almanacs.

At the other end of the vendor area an exhibit space was set up and the conference directors displayed dresses and articles from their collections. Some photos of the exhibits are on this page and the following one.

There were two tracks on Saturday after the Opening remarks, with 15 minute breaks between each talk. Anyone could attend whichever talks they preferred.

The first talk I attended was “An Exhibition of Civil War Wedding Photography” presented by Susan Anthony. This was an interesting collection of photos of couples, and the talk examined wedding dress customs, positioning



A stovepipe hat and a top hat.

of the couple in the photos, and discussed geographic differences. The talk ended with a magnificent laid-out 1864 wedding ensemble of cream silk satin, including shoes, an alternative bodice and Swiss waist.

The second talk was “In a Family Way: Pregnancy and Childbirth in the Mid-19th Century,” which talked about the myths and realities, how clothing was adapted, undergarments, and how pregnancy and motherhood were discussed in the society of that time.

Both lunch and dinner were provided by the conference on Saturday as buffets. While not exciting, it was good solid food,

and it was really lovely to be able to stay at the site, sit with people and get to know each other instead of a hurried search for a meal in an area I didn't know. Many people brought knitting or needlework to do and it was fun to look at what others are making. As always, I brought beadwork.



Back close up of a men's morning jacket (we would consider it a "bathrobe"), I ADORE the bright colors and paisley patterns.

My first afternoon talk on Saturday was "Joseph Holt and the Trial of the Lincoln Conspirators." Joseph Holt was the Judge Advocate General at the time, and the trial was held as a military tribunal. Although this sounds like a dry topic, the speaker was a young man who was a descendant of Holt had done a great deal of research, and is writing a book on the topic. It was fascinating. The other option was about Civil War era dolls. The second afternoon talk I attended was on the History of Mourning Practices and Dress. The interesting part for me was that the speaker concentrated on the actual types of fabrics commonly used in mourning and had real examples of them for us to pass around!

The final talk of the day was "19th Century Entertainments," and the speaker, Michael Mescher, is certainly an expert. He made it really fun by having volunteers play some of the sillier party and parlor games. His talk covered everything from toys to games to sports, puzzles, riddle games, parlor theatricals, and everything in between. It was a good talk to finish up the day.

On Sunday, there was plenty of time for the vendor room and re-examining the exhibits. The final presentation was one I thought would be a throw-away, but turned out to be very inspiring. It was called "Making Young People Welcome at your Event" and was giving by Kristen Mrozek, the co-director of the conference. She has some very practical ideas for promoting and

engaging young people that I believe would be completely applicable to the International Costumers' Guild (ICG) and Costume-Con.

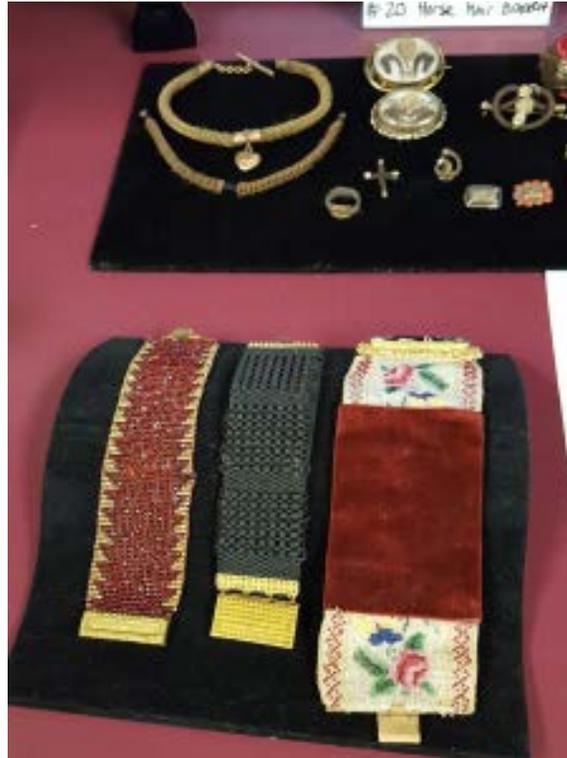
Kristen talked about planning events, updating tech and keeping websites and Facebook pages up to date as things that can



Black and brown plaid silk taffeta dress



Plaid fine wool dress pulled up to show hem facing.



Beaded and horsehair bracelet in front; hair and sentimental jewelry items in back

be managed creatively by younger people, about why young people are needed and wanted, about establishing relationships, educating, empowering, avoiding political drama, and how to retain young people in the group. I was very inspired.

Overall I would say this was a most enjoyable educational event. I was very happy to meet many new friends in a low-key environment and think it likely I will return next year. I may be asked to teach a hand-needlework class on Victorian techniques such as ruching and making flowers.

Lisa Ashton is a Fantasy/SF and Historical costumer since 1989. Almost 30 years on, she is still designing and building costumes to make people laugh, cry, and gasp in wonder. She is the founder and curator of Miss Lizzy's Traveling Historical Fashion Show, an ICG Special Interest Group, which collects and preserves Victorian-era garments and artifacts for study, and brings exhibits to conventions . A Physician Assistant for over 30 years, she is now semi-retired. Lisa has been Program Director for several Costume Cons, and on con panels on a variety of topics for many years. She loves to teach beadwork and vintage sewing techniques, and talk about where ideas originate. Visit Miss Lizzy's on [Facebook](#).

About The Citizen's Forum of the 1860s for 2018

The 2018 edition of The Citizen's Forum of the 1860s will take place March 23-25, 2018 at the Monroe Community College in Monroe, Michigan. See the schedule of workshops, seminars, speakers, and vendors on their [website](#).



Watch an introductory video on [YouTube](#).