

From Panniers to Bustles: French Influence on the Fashion of the Gulf Coast South

John T. Magill

Curator /Historian, The Historic New Orleans Collection

Despite New Orleans's distance from Paris, French fashion was not out of reach for its residents. Indeed, Pierre Clément de Laussat, colonial prefect at the time of the Louisiana Purchase, made note of the modishly dressed women of New Orleans in his *Memoirs*, and period portraits depict Gulf Coast residents in fashionable finery. New Orleans was, of course, a major port, and during the colonial period fabrics were routinely imported from France's many textile manufacturers. Frequently included in their shipments were fashion dolls, engraved designs, and books that showed fashionable ladies and dressmakers the latest ideas from Europe. The importance of ladies' fashion extended beyond the salon—its widening and narrowing skirts, for example, influenced interior architecture and furniture design. As New Orleans grew larger and wealthier during the 19th century, it evolved into one of the United States' more important wholesale and retail centers. By the 1850s some noted French-born dressmakers had set up shop, and the city boasted dry goods stores offering an impressive array of fabrics and ready-made accessories. American fashion periodicals like *Godey's Lady's Book*, as well as mass-market illustrated magazines like *Harper's Weekly*, were also readily available, providing New Orleanians with pictures of the latest fashions. These were often reinterpreted to fit the local climate and tastes—always with overtones of Paris, which had become the chief fashion arbiter by the late 18th century.