



# 7 Strategies

for Creating Realistic  
Historical Clothing  
from Chain Fabric Stores

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It's inevitable – those of us who create historical costumes will always find ourselves making a quick trip to the local fabric store across town. It's generic, but SO very handy for that extra spool of white thread or black hook & eyes.

But many times if the budget is small we stop for a closer look at the fabric selections.... Yeah.

Then we wonder: "**How in the *world* are we supposed to make a Victorian gown out of that crap?**" I use that term loosely to cover many items you'll see in chain stores. However, good-quality possibilities blossom if you're willing to look – **AND you know what to look FOR.**

Plus it's not just the materials that make a set of authentic Civil War underpinnings or the perfect bustle silhouette. **All the fundamentals of design play a part.** Make sure to familiarize yourself with the [5 Elements](#) that are necessary for 19<sup>th</sup> Century costuming.

**It doesn't matter** if you pick up the blue floral calico in a semi-period appropriate pattern for \$2/yard. If it's fitted over proper undergarments and has correct seamline placements, **you can pull off a completely believable outfit.**

I'm not talking about an authentic reproduction. No. I'm saying you can make it *believable*, which means it's close but not entirely accurate.

And even though you're shopping "on the cheap" pay particular attention to the finishing touches – accessories.

With ANY historical ensemble **you should be wearing something on your head** – a bonnet, hat, fascinator, feather clip, etc. – absolutely ANYTHING! Along with a semi-reasonable hairstyle (simple buns work for any period), completing your costume with a headpiece will rank you far and above over any other person missing this vital component.

One last tip before we get into the effective strategies, **use those coupons!** Every large hobby & fabric store has a mailing list. Get on it! It may only be an email list but valuable money-saving coupons abound. Take extreme advantage of them!

You never know when you'll discover that perfect red silk hidden in the shelves. Pull out that 40% off coupon and you'll be singing all the way home. 😊

Now for the **7 Strategies for Creating Realistic Historical Clothing from Chain Fabric Stores...**

## 1. Mind Your Fabric Selections

If you are familiar with your local JoAnn Fabrics or Hancock's (stores here in the U.S. at least), they are filled with fabrics that are \*shiny\* - aka man-made. If you want your 19<sup>th</sup> Century costume to look like clothing, stay away from these less-than-desirable fabrics. They don't breathe and look "costume-y."

**Stick with the 100% cottons, linens, wools and silks.** This is what they had in the 1800s so for believability, stick with them.

A well-chosen solid or print fabric can go quite far in pulling off a believable Regency or Victorian costume. To do this, **research the print patterns of the era before going to the store.** When in doubt, go for the solid colors. Victorians loved their aniline dyes, so go bold with deep, rich colors – even in the cottons.

**Snatch up 100% silk when you find it.** Although, be careful of "raw" silks that are completely full of slubs. These are usually shantung or dupioni, which existed in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, but those textiles with many slubs will show off a more "inferior" look. The fewer the slubs (a smoother fabric), the better the quality.

You can find 100% cottons in the Quilting section which are of high quality. Although, be cautious, as not only can they be expensive, these textiles are treated with special finishes specifically for quilting projects. You may want to wash these a couple times before cutting your project to remove the sizing and stiffness of hand.

For a less expensive option, spend time along the general cotton print wall and aisles. Some are obviously not great choices. But others are perfect, like multi-print stripes for 1840s. Delicate prints and those with plenty of background showing are your best bets for Regency. Other florals and pretty prints work for bustle day dresses.

Don't want cotton? Try linen. A poly-blend linen or a linen/rayon mixed textile is beautiful. Use these for summer dresses for the Bustle Era, Late Victorian-1890s and Edwardian periods. Blends are more readily found in chain stores than the 100% stuff.

### **What to avoid:**

- Shiny fabrics – any and all *except* silk, polished cotton, cotton sateen
- Glittery surfaces (add your own sparkles with beads)
- Anything with nylon (even in a blend, although most wools will be blends with poly or nylon)
- Large floral prints, like chintz patterns from the 1980s
- Heavy fabrics like denim or corduroy for dresses
- Artificial colors (like neon)
- Colors that are unflattering to your complexion
- Kitschy prints of your favorite NFL team, tractor company or superhero

## 2. Trims Matter

Nearly every existing antique garment from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century will have some sort of trim, something added beyond the basic fabric. The chain stores vary by their inventory of trims. Some have a great selection while others you have to search just to find a ribbon spool.

**To make your costume believable as a historical representation, you'll want trim.** It takes your outfit from a plain, church play costume to living historian.

At all times avoid those cheap, large cardboard spools of 29 cent nasty nylon laces. They usually come pre-gathered and are just awful! I think more than anything, these cheapen the look of whatever you are making – dress, hat or blouse. And the sad thing is I see them used on EVERYTHING that some retailers sell as "Victorian." UGH! No, no, no!

You want the softest lace possible and often if the price is higher, then the quality is better. So on the same note, some of these nylon laces can be quite usable for undergarments like a chemise, drawers and petticoats. It's when they start showing up row upon row on a skirt that's deemed "Victorian" that it cheapens the look to "costume-y."

You want to scour the aisle with the long, white oval spools for the nicer laces. Of course the higher price is usually the higher quality, but you'll still need a discerning eye.

I've used many cotton and even cotton/poly or 100% poly trims that pull a period look quite well. And the best thing with the cotton ones is that they dye well. Victorians loved their matching or contrast trims!

**Rayon fringes and trims work really well for a silk substitute.** You can't go wrong with these most of the time.

Embroidered ribbons are perfect. However, stay clear of the ones with a great deal of metallic thread. These are popular for Renaissance costumes but are not appropriate for Regency and Victorian eras.

If you're making pleated ribbon trims, use wired-edge spools and simply remove the wires. I've found Michael's has a nice selection of ribbon that has found its way onto lots of costumes.

Also, explore the special Christmas holiday section for workable ribbons. Red plaid is PERFECT for 1850s & 60s dress trim.

And if you can't find trim you like, simply purchase two or three basic ribbons and stack them. Get the single face ones that are less expensive and usually have a wider availability at big box stores.

### 3. Try The Home Dec Section

You want to always utilize the home dec department of any chain store. Treasures await you there. Looking for a thin material for a sheer dress or lovely Regency gown? Check the home dec sheers.

Beware though! You must look for content labels as most of them are 100% polyester or nylon or a blend. Home dec fabrics are also manufactured differently than apparel ones. They'll usually have sizing and finishes specifically for covering pillows and chairs – not to dress one in a gown from 1815. Pre-treat before using.

Although it IS possible to find workable home dec fabrics, you'll have to dig for them. The velveteens, although very lovely, become a disaster when you start sewing. Too heavy and/or too thick fabrics make your project look like a theater assignment rather than period clothing.

**The best part of the home dec department? The polished cottons.** Use them for period underlinings, bodice & sleeve linings and foundation skirts. Remember to pre-treat!



Have you scanned the home dec trim section lately? The fringes, if not too involved or heavy, are perfect for bustle gown trims. The tassel selection is great for skirt trim as well as on reticules. Sometimes you can even find tiny cording for bodice lacing and even piping.

Then there are the utility items. Cotton filler and basic white cording are perfect for corded petticoats, piping and rouleaux trim on 18-Teens and 20s dresses. Some crinoline tapes for drapes make for excellent hem facing stiffeners for a variety of Victorian skirts.

#### 4. Work On Fitting Techniques

Nothing (except maybe fabric choice) can make or break a historical look more than sloppy fit. Truly. It is what a great silhouette is based on. Utilize those 40% and 50% off coupons to pick up a bolt of muslin and a couple of fitting books.

If you're really into historical costuming (which you probably are if you're reading this), then always have several yards of muslin on hand. Use it to **make a test run (a mockup) of your pattern to fine tune the fit.** Tweak the darts. Re-align the seams. Move the pocket placement.

The Big 4 pattern companies (Simplicity, McCall's, Butterick & Vogue), offer a fitting pattern that you make up in a gingham to test the general fit of their patterns to your figure. You then transfer your marks to the fashion pattern you're using.

Although this is not a perfect way to fit, it can give you a big boost in the right direction. Wait for a pattern sale to get them. You can find the pattern info usually toward the very back of the pattern books.

To help you in your fittings you'll need good tools. Again, use those coupons and watch for sales on the following items.

- 18" clear ruler – find in the regular notions aisle or the quilting department
- Hip curve & French curve rulers – same place as above
- Paper for Patterns – use large pads from chain office stores or from the art department at Michael's. At the fabric store you can sometimes find "Pattern Ease" which is essentially a heavy interfacing that you can sew with and mark on which is great for a mockup.
- Inexpensive craft scissors (NOT the fabric shears!)

Here are my favorite fitting books I've used for years. Sometimes you can find them at the local fabric store and the coupon sale applies.

- [Vogue Sewing, revised and updated](#)
- [Pattern Fitting with Confidence](#) (previously Fitting Finesse) by Nancy Zieman
- [Fast Fit](#) by Sandra Betzina

In addition, take a look at our own very popular fitting handbooks: [Regency Era Fitting Tips & Tricks](#) and [Civil War Era Fitting Tips & Tricks](#).

## 5. Don't Ignore The Craft Department

Universities have "costume craft" courses for a reason... costumes just wouldn't be complete without accessories. The goodies found in the craft aisles go beyond the apparel trims. **Here's where you find the bling!**

**Beading.** Need I say more? Adding a bit of beading can really make your evening wear POP! But don't overdo it. Less is still more, or at least make sure your beading pattern on that 1830s sheer overskirt is uniform and based on existing garments in a museum.

And along with beads you'll find **jewelry making supplies** for anything your imagination can come up with. Explore museum websites and Google images for period designs. Do this first so when you go to the store you'll have an idea of what you're looking at.

- Choose plastic beads if they pull off a realistic glass look.
- Metal findings are good to go. But stick with nickel/silver or gold plate. "Antique Gold or Silver" is cool but use it sparingly.
- Use only wire hooks for earrings. Stud earrings weren't worn until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.
- Sequins have been around for centuries. Chain store supplies are usually made from a plastic material rather than metal but they still will add sparkle to a 19<sup>th</sup> C. evening dress.

What else can you find in the craft aisles? **Feathers!** Since when have feathers NOT been in historical fashion? Use them.

Some of the larger Michael's, Jo-Ann's and Hobby Lobby stores will carry larger selections than the run-of-the-mill package of marabou feather ends. Look for the unique quills, cock feathers, and ostrich plumes for that period item. Feathers can decorate most bonnets and hats, and the occasional elegant evening gown from the 1880s and 90s.

And along with feathers, stroll **the floral section**. HUGE opportunities here! The key here is to use flowers that look real, meaning they don't look plastic (even though most chain store goods are made from nylon or poly fabric).

When using "silk" flowers, you'll want to basically reconstruct them to make them more believable on that bustle dress.

Take apart each flower then pull off the plastic bulb at the bottom. Reposition the petals and hand sew back together. If you just pop the flower off the wire stem and tack down, that plastic bulb will make the flower stand off your garment at a weird angle. Taking it apart will make them adjustable and easier to sew onto an overskirt, bodice neckline or a bonnet crown.

Also take a gander down the bridal aisle. You'll find pre-made ribbon flowers (albeit tiny ones), stamen that will work for your own handmade ribbon flowers, and crystal headpieces that work wonderfully for a Regency or a late Victorian ball gown.

If you find yourself with a gorgeous piece of fabric in the wrong color, dye it! Rit and other inexpensive dyes are found in the craft section and can transform your fabric or trim. This technique is both period AND easy on the pocketbook.

More craft goodies that can be used for historical costumes:

- Polymer clay to design a new heel on a custom shoe (think French Louie heels). Yes, you CAN bake your shoe to harden it!
- Leather lacing for shoes, bags or other trim.
- Floral wire as a substitute for millinery wire. Sure, you may have to overlap the ends more but the price and availability are a score.
- Plain brown hat boxes to hold that large 1830s bonnet.

If you haven't looked in the craft department lately, do so. Spend a few moments on each aisle. You'll never know what you might find. Even craft areas in Wal-Mart or Target may have little bits to spice up your costume. Keep a ready eye out for accessories when shopping at any chain store.

## 6. Select Notions Well

Notions are those little gadgets that finish and support your garments. Odds and Ends. Things like thread, buttons, hook & eyes, fastenings, boning and dress shields.

**As insignificant as they seem, they are *vital* to a believable costume.**

A severely plastic looking set of buttons may break an otherwise incredible design. (Avoid those when you can.) However, a search for buttons made from plastic but with the perfect Victorian painted or etched design can win you plenty of ooh's and ahh's.

Particular buttons do a really good job at imitating glass too. These are a score if you find some and will blend well on a Bustle or Late Victorian era gown.

Glass, shell and metal are period correct - as long as they don't pull a too modern or whimsical look). And you can't go wrong with mother-of-pearl or faux pearl buttons, proper for all the 1800s. You can definitely find those in chain stores.

When in doubt, go with fabric covered buttons. Use your dress material or a complementary one. Choose the buttons with a full back piece with shank. The make-your-own-buttons with just the prong back are terrible to make and keep together. I've found the rounded surface buttons-to-cover are the best to work with and use.

Also, use lots of buttons. For some reason 19<sup>th</sup> C. people loved their buttons. Generally bodices closed with several, so don't skimp here. (You can see why covering your own would be smart because the store may not have 7 cards of the buttons you like.) My favorite sizes are 5/8" and 1/2" and I keep a nice stash on hand.

Hook & eye sets are worth every penny. Stock up on both silver and black. Metal hooks were used before the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. They hooked into metal bars, thread loops and handmade eyelets, and later in the century into the looped metal eyes we are familiar with today.

While snaps, whopper poppers (huge snaps) & zippers are widely used in theaters today, they are not period correct. Stick with hooks, frog closures or lacing for proper historical wear.

Speaking of lacing, grommets and eyelets are both available in fabric stores. Grommets are two pieces with a male part (the eyelet) and a washer to fit on the back. The one-piece metal eyelet was used in the mid-century but a handmade eyelet hole was most popular.

For hand eyelets I recommend strong buttonhole twist thread. Don't use your plain sewing thread, even with two strands. Keep the basic threads for general sewing. I like the cotton-wrapped poly core thread or the 100% poly. If you want to spend the extra money, you can find silk threads in some chain stores, but your costume will still look period if you use a "regular" thread.

Don't use rayon thread to construct your costume. In fact, I rarely use it for my 19<sup>th</sup> C. garments because of its lack of strength. Although, a matching rayon thread works lovely for tacking on a rayon fringe trim on a 1850s or 60s dress.



If you're making 19<sup>th</sup> Century costumes, you'll use boning. Now, chain stores pretty much only carry that horrible plastic stuff (poly boning with cotton cover or Rigilene). You can find them with the belting boxes and purchase by the yard or in a small pre-cut package.

This is my first aside (see #7 below for the second) from making believable historical costumes from chain store supplies. You just can't get the look you want with flimsy plastic supporting it. The plastic will conform to your body shape with heat of wearing. This in turn gives you the wrong (i.e. modern) silhouette.

You want metal boning, either flat white spring steel or spiral steel. Metal won't reshape itself thereby supporting your bodice or corset which in turn keeps your figure in the fashionable Victorian or Regency silhouette. So off to mail order you will go.

One last note on notions, avoid elastic if you can. Especially if it is somewhere that can be seen. Use ribbon or permanent gathers set into place. However, the top of your mid-Victorian undersleeves is a perfect place for its use.

## 7. Purchase Patterns Wisely

Among the plethora of sewing patterns available, you'll find dozens that work really well for your 19<sup>th</sup> Century clothing. But most of those worth having (i.e. collecting) are produced by independent designers. You won't find them at your neighborhood big box store.

So if all you have to shop from is your local Hancock's or JoAnn's, you're left with picking something from one of the Big 4: Simplicity, Butterick, McCall's and Vogue.

If you're new to historical costuming you may not know the difference. However, a Halloween costume pattern is not the same as one that is designed for living history. If the model on the front is swimming in her dress or the fabric seems off to you, then it's probably not the best pattern to use.

First, know the time period silhouette you want to make. Study the seamline placements on original garments seen in online museums. Then take a look at several patterns and pattern company books. A sleeve from one pattern may be perfect and go with a bodice pattern from another. Simply moving the shoulder seam from the top around to the back is all you need to make it look like the period.

And don't go crazy buying patterns just because (unless you are a collector). Many times a great Civil War dress pattern from Simplicity can work over and over for many years from the 1850s through the late 1860s. A few seam tweaks on a 1890s skirt pattern from Butterick can take you from a late bustle underskirt clear through the early 1900s.

## Keep an Open Eye

All the strategies you've read here were intended to be used when shopping at chain fabric stores. However, there's nothing that says you can't take it even further by **exploring options at other big box stores**.

An even bigger costume supply trove will appear when you examine the possibilities at discount stores like Wal-Mart, Target and Kmart (think of using drapes and sheets for dresses and petticoats). Also charity centers like Goodwill, Salvation Army and the Red Cross are not to be missed.

Hardware stores can help you out with notions and accessories. Zip ties for boning or wire for hats anyone?

You may be limited to big box stores. But don't let that hold you back. Some of the best costumers started with general chain store supplies. Until your budget and online shopping confidence increases, utilize what you have nearby.

Remember...

Combine [the elements](#) of fit and good sewing techniques and even the cheap, run-Of-the-mill materials will turn into something worth showing off.

I'd love to hear your adventures in making historical costumes from chain store supplies!

What turned out when you didn't think it would. Supplies you used that were a disaster and would never use again.

Click here to [share the best costume you've made](#) with big box store supplies. 😊

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