

# Directions for Making an 1830s US Navy Sailor's Frock

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## History:

By the middle of the 1830s, the white duck frock, decorated with blue collar, cuffs, and bosom placket, had become ubiquitous among US Navy seamen. Worn alone in warm climates and under a blue woolen jacket in colder seas, the decorated frock had become the service-wide uniform. The Rev. George Jones described the warm weather dress on board USS *Brandywine*: “The Summer uniform is white canvass shoes; white trowsers, frock (a shirt with blue collar, set off with white fancy work), hat covered with white canvass, and blue belt with white stars.”<sup>1</sup>

According to William McNally, “All man-of-war's men must have the collars of their frocks lined with blue nankeen, two rows of tape on the same, and sometimes a star in the corner, according to the fancy of the commanding officer of the ship to which they are attached.”<sup>2</sup> Enoch Cobb Wines, who served on USS *Constellation* between 1829 and 1831 corroborates the prevalence of this dress: “A sailor's summer uniform is a white hat, duck frock with blue-striped and starred bosoms and collars, duck trowsers and blue-striped belt. His winter uniform is a black tarpaulin hat, blue cloth jacket and trowsers, with the same frock and belt as in summer. He is always obliged to appear at muster, dressed in uniform.”<sup>3</sup> The well-known portrait of Quartermaster [Dick Libby](#), painted about 1834 by Charles Cole, depicts the veteran seaman wearing the blue and white frock. We see the same frock in a drawing by Alfred T. Agate, depicting one of USS *Vincennes* crew during the US Exploring Expedition. For more on the history of the frock in the US Navy, see: <http://usscm.blogspot.com/2012/11/the-sailor-frock-and-trousers-of-jt.html>

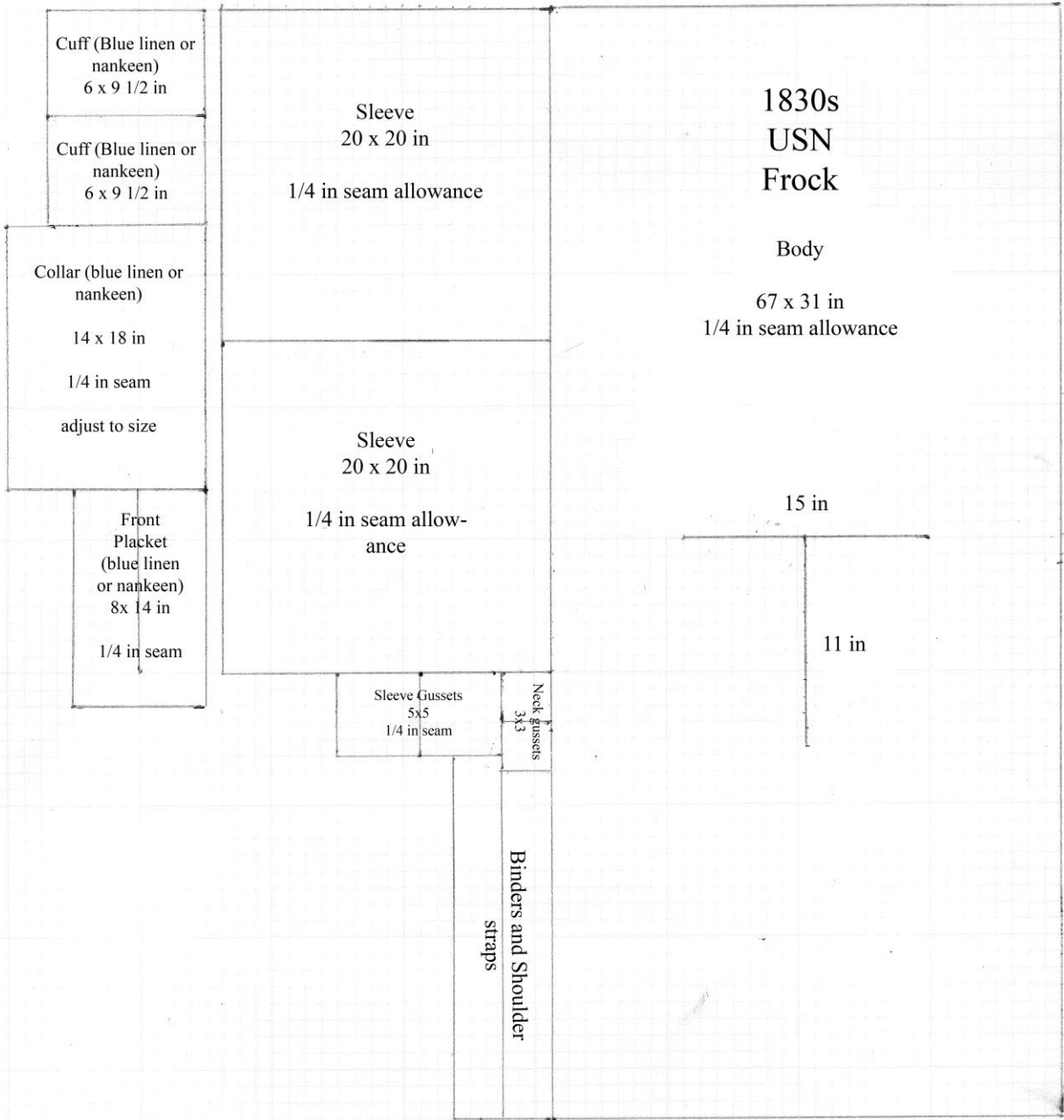
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<sup>1</sup> George Jones, *Sketches of Naval Life: With Notices of Men, Manners, and Scenery on the Shore of the Mediterranean, in A Series of Letter from Brandywine and Constitution Frigates*, vol. 1 (New Haven: Hezekiah Howe, 1829), p. 190.

<sup>2</sup> William McNally, *Evils and Abuses in the Naval and Merchant Service, Exposed, with Proposals for Their Remedy and Redress* (Boston: Cassady and March, 1839), 29.

<sup>3</sup> Enoch Cobb Wines, *Two Years and a Half in the Navy; or, a Journal of a Cruise in the Mediterranean and Levant on board of the US Frigate Constellation*, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Carey and Lea, 1832), 129.

The pattern:



### **Step 1: Pulling Threads and Cutting patterns pieces**

Carefully study the cutting diagram provided. Nineteenth century shirts were made of a series of squares and rectangles. This simplified construction, but also minimized waste of expensive textiles. These measurements will fit a medium –sized man 5ft 6in to 5 ft 10 in with a 36 to 42 inch chest. Make sure you have someone measure your neck and wrists and adjust the length of those pieces accordingly. For the neck, take your measure and add two inches to the length of the collar.

To make sure that all the pieces are square, pull threads and cut along the line created. [Note: this isn't always possible with low-grade slubby linen. Penciling a line with a straight edge along the grain will work fine.]

Seam allowances have been added to the following measurements: 1/2inch on body and sleeve pieces, 1/4 inch on collar, cuffs, neck gussets, shoulder straps and binders.

- 1 Body 31" wide x 67" long
- 2 Sleeves 20" wide x 20" long
- 2 underarm gussets 5" square
- 2 neck gussets 3" square
- 2 shoulder straps 2" wide x 10-12" long
- 2 sleeve binders 2"wide x 26-27" long
- 2 wristbands 6" wide x 9.5" long (adjust as needed)
- 1 collar 14" wide x 18" long (adjust as needed)

### **Step 2: Prepare collar, cuffs, and bosom**

You will find it much easier to sew on the cotton tape and embroider the stars if you do this before sewing the various pieces to the body of the shirt. Take the collar, bosom and cuff pieces and turn in a 1/4 inch seam allowance all the way around. Pin 1/4 inch white cotton tape in the proper position. The lines are usually about 1/4 inch apart. Pay special attention to the lower corners of the bosom and collar, where the tape forms a semi-circular hollow for the stars. Once you have attached the tape, embroider the stars. For a helpful tutorial on how to do this, follow this link: <http://www.needlenthread.com/2012/11/stitch-play-star-stitch-snowflakes.html>



### Step 3: Sleeve assembly

Take one sleeve piece and one sleeve gusset. Pin the gusset in place at the end of the sleeve and continue pinning the rest of the sleeve. Leave about 2 inches unpinned at the end. This will form the wrist opening.

Sew gusset and sleeve together. Most period shirts were sewn with tiny backstitches, catching no more than 4 or 5 threads per stitch. Drawing a line 1/4 inch from the edge (the seam allowance) with a pencil or tailor's chalk will help you sew a straight seam. All the seams must be flat felled to prevent the raw edges from raveling.

### Step 4: Gather sleeves

Run two rows of small gathering stitches at the cuff end of your sleeve. The first row should start about 1/8 of an inch from the end, while the second should be run about 3/4 of an inch from the edge. Doing this process on a sewing machine greatly facilitates the process. [Note: stiff linen really helps with this process. If the linen you are using is not already stiff with sizing, try starching it in the area you intend to gather]

Find the center of the cuff and the center of the sleeve, and join them with a pin, so that the right side of the sleeve meets the wrong or under side of the cuff. Gently gather the sleeve fabric by drawing your fingers from the wrist opening to the center. Straighten and neaten the gathers by stroking with a needle. This step takes time and patience! Don't fret if your gathers look ungainly- practice makes perfect.

Pin the cuff to the sleeve, making sure that the gathers are evenly spaced along its entire length.

### Step 5: Sewing the cuffs

Sew the cuff to the sleeve using small overcast or whip stitches. The idea is to make your stitches fall into the valley or trough between each individual gather. This locks the gathers in place, making them look neat and even. Once you've finished the stitching on the top, turn the entire length of the cuff so that it falls along the stitch line in the inside. Sew down with small whipstitches, catching each gather as you go.

**Sewing on gathers** (fig. 21).—To distribute the fulness equally, divide the gathered portion of material, and the band, or plain piece, on to which it is to be sewn, into equal parts, and pin the two together at corresponding distances, the gathered portion under the plain, and hem each gather to the band or plain piece, sloping the needle to make the thread slant, and slipping it through the upper threads only of the gathers.

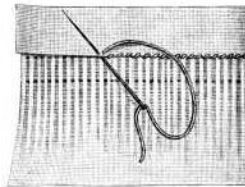


FIG. 21. SEWING ON GATHERS.

Repeat steps 3 through 5 for the other sleeve.

### **Step 6: Preparing the body**

Find center of the body by folding the piece in half. Pull a thread across to mark the centerline [or pencil a line]. Find the center of the width (about 15.5" from each side if using the measurements above) Make a slit that follows the grain of the fabric and looks like a "T" (with the intersecting point of the T at the center you just found). The horizontal part of the "T" slit (the neck hole) should measure 14" to 16" and the vertical part (the chest opening) about 11".

Carefully, narrowly press each side of the vertical part of the "T" you just cut to the front of the shirt to form the chest opening. Place the already prepared bosom placket over this opening, aligning the top edge of the bosom with the top of the "T". You should have already cut a slit down the center of the bosom to correspond in length with the leg of the "T". Narrowly sew the bosom to the shirt using small backstitches, all the way around. To finish the bottom of the slit add a bar tack or a decorative patch to keep the slit from tearing out.

### **Step 7: Sewing neck gussets and shoulder straps**

Take the small collar gussets and fold in half to form two triangles. Cut each gusset in half along the fold line so that you have four small triangles. Fold in a 1/4" seam allowance with your fingers on two sides and press with an iron. These pieces will now be sewn into the corners of the horizontal part of your "T" slit (the neck opening). The point of the triangle will fit into the end of the cut slit. Start with the top gusset first and sew with small, even backstitches. Turn the shirt inside out and whipstitch the other triangle so that it covers the other one and encases the raw edges. Repeat for the other side.

Take a shoulder strap and fold in 1/4 inch seam allowance. Center the strap on the pulled thread line from the inside edge of the neck gusset to the outside edge of the shirt and pin in place. Topstitch the strap into place with small, even back stitches like you did with the neck gussets. Repeat for the other side.

### **Step 8: Gathering the neck and sewing collar**

Mark the center back of your shirt using a pin. Run two rows of small gathering stitches around the neck hole, starting at the center front and ending on the other side. The first row should start about 1/8 of an inch from the edge, while the second should be run about 3/4 of an inch from the edge.

Take the collar and sew both ends, wrong sides together, with 1/4" seam allowances. Find the center of the collar and the center back of the body piece. Match the two pieces and pin in place. Gather the neck to the length of the collar piece by gently pulling on the gathering stitches. Pin the collar to the gathered making sure to evenly space the gathers along the length of the collar. Note: Many period shirts have minimal gathering over the gussets and at the center front- this provides a flat area that sits on the shoulders.

Sew on the collar using small backstitches, in the same manner as you attached the cuffs to the sleeves. Use your fingers to fold the 1/4" seam allowance of the other long side of the collar and match to the stitch line just created. Pin in place and whipstitch down.

The gathers are now fully encased inside of the collar and the hardest part of making a frock is done!

### **Step 9: Attaching the Sleeves**

Run two rows of gathering stitches from the middle of one side of the sleeve to the middle of the other. Turn under a 1/2 seam allowance on the edge of the body. Find the mid-point of the shoulder and the top of the sleeve and pin the two pieces together. Gently pull the gathers and pin. The armpit or sleeve opening in the body should be about 11" or 12" long from the top of the sleeve to the bottom of the gusset. Attach the sleeve using the same technique you practiced on the cuff and collar- that is, working from the right side and setting the sleeve and gathers with whipstitches. Repeat for the other sleeve.

### **Step 10: Closing the body and hemming**

Pin the side seams closed to within about 6" of the bottom (this leaves a vent so that the frock does not constrict leg movement). Sew the seams with small backstitches. Press the seams open, trim, and fell all raw edges.

### **Step 11: Attaching binders**

Because of the gathers at the sleeve head (where the sleeve attaches to the body) it is difficult to fell the arm scye. A binder, a long narrow strip of linen, is used to encase all the raw edges. Make sure your binders are long enough to stretch from the bottom of the sleeve gusset, up over the shoulder, and back down to the sleeve gusset on the other side. Press the binder's raw edges under 1/4" and carefully pin in place. Sew down with small whipstitches all around.

### **Step 12: Cutting and sewing buttonholes**

Mark and cut the buttonholes. Most frocks have two buttons and holes on the cuff, but none on the collar (the collar is held closed with the handkerchief) Open holes with a chisel to get a clean cut. Note: it is best to cut and finish one buttonhole at a time to prevent unnecessary raveling.

Finally, sew on your buttons opposite the holes. You may use small thread, mother of pearl, or milk glass buttons. You've now completed your first handmade 1830s frock! Congratulations!