

Transcript of “Eliza S. Bowne’s Notes on Fashion”

Emily Hello everyone and welcome to the Bowne House Historical Society’s series on the letters of Eliza Bowne. My name is Emily and I am joined by David. We will be chatting about the world according to Eliza Bowne for all of March, in honor of Women’s History month. Since this is our first chat we should give some background about Eliza. David, could you do that?

David Of course! Eliza was born into the Southgate family in 1783. Her family was quite well off and well respected since her father was a judge in Scarborough, Maine. Eliza was sent to a boarding school outside of Boston when she was just fourteen and it's in that time period that we have the first letters by her. We are going to learn more about her later and I will save some context for our future chats, but I hope we make clear the liveliness of Eliza’s writing. She obviously took great pleasure in writing about her life and I hope that you take great pleasure in hearing about it.

Emily I agree. For our first topic, we are discussing Eliza’s relationship with fashion, both as a tool of self-expression & a sign of social status. It is an interesting time for fashion in the late 18 and early 19th centuries. What does Eliza write about it?

David Well, most of her writing about clothing describes what she is making or what she would like her family to make for her. Many of the letters reference patterns that she’s created or that she would like to be sent to her. She also requests fabric to be sent to her, like in this passage, in which she says:

“I wish you would send some linen and some more shirts to make as I shall soon finish these, and can as well finish making up the piece here as at home.”

-Eliza S. Bowne, July 3, 1800 (pp.26)

That quote is from 1800, so we see that many of her garments were made by her or her family.

Emily It is interesting that even while the family was wealthy, it appears that they made the vast majority of their clothes by themselves.

David Yes and that would not have been unusual for the time, but it was certainly beginning to change. I want to point out now that fashion was an essential part of how society would have treated Eliza and how Eliza would have prepared for society herself. It was a way for upper class communities to compare themselves. It was a way to make sure that everything they did - how they were perceived and seen - was appropriate for the times and clearly a part of the upper class. So, her concern about clothing always rose dramatically when she was headed to a place where she would encounter many strangers. Before one short trip she writes:

“So long a visit in Wiscasset will oblige me to muster all my muslins, for I am informed they are so monstrous smart as to take no notice of any lady that can condescend to wear a calico gown, therefore, dear mother, to ensure me a favorable reception, pray send my spotted muslin by the next mail after you receive this.”

-Eliza S. Bowne, July 17, 1800 (pp. 28-29)

Emily So she was concerned about keeping up with the fashions?

David Absolutely. In a later letter she writes of the changing fashion in 1803:

“The fashions are remarkably plain, sleeves much longer than ours, and half handkerchiefs are universally worn. At Mrs. Henderson’s party there was but one lady except myself without a handkerchief, — dressed as plain as possible, the most fashionable women the plainest.”

-Eliza S. Bowne, 1803 (pp.

All of this is in line with the quite informal fashion of the time that stood in marked contrast to the fashion that preceded and the fashion that followed it. But fashion is not constricted to clothing alone. Here is one of my favorite letters that she writes in 1800:

“Now Mamma, what do you think I am going to ask for? — a wig. Eleanor has got a new one just like my hair and only 5 dollars, Mrs. Mayo one just like it. I must either cut my hair or have one, I cannot dress it at all stylish. Mrs. Coffin bought Eleanor’s and says that she will write to Mrs. Sumner to get me one just like it; how much time it will save — in one year we could save it in pins and paper, besides the trouble. At the assembly I was quite ashamed of my

head, for nobody has long hair. If you will consent to my having one do send me over a 5 dollar bill by the post immediately after you receive this, for I am in hopes to have it for the next Assembly.”

-Eliza S. Bowne, 1800 (pp. 23)

Emily It is such a great insight into her character and we can empathize in how familiar and timeless this is; a young woman with anxiety about public opinion and so she is trying to convince her mother to buy her the latest fashion accessory - in this case, a wig.

David Exactly, but these letters are in reference to times when she would be seen by people that she was trying to impress or by strangers. But there is another letter that shows how relaxed she could be when she was around people she knew. This letter from March 1st 1802 describes the great trouble a snow storm caused her on the way to a gathering of friends. She goes into great detail about that trek, but it culminates with this passage. Bear with me because it's a long passage but it's worth it!

“At length we arrived at Sister Boyd's door, and the drift before it was the greatest we had met with; the horse was so exhausted that he sunk down, and we really thought him dead. 'Twas some distance from the gate and no path. The gentleman took me up in his arms and carried me till my weight pressed him so far into the snow that he had no power to move his feet. I rolled out of his arms and wallowed till I reached the gate; then rising to shake off the snow, I turned and beheld my beau fixed and immovable; he could not get his feet out to take another step. At length, making a great exertion to spring his whole length forward, he made out to reach the poor horse, who lay in a worse condition than his master. By this time all the family had gathered to the window, indeed they saw the whole frolic; but 'twas not yet ended, for, unluckily, in pulling off Miss Weeks' [my] bonnet to send to the sleigh to be carried back, I pulled off my wig and left my head bare. I was perfectly convulsed with laughter. Think what a ludicrous figure I must have been, still standing at the gate, my bonnet halfway to the sleigh and my wig in my hand.”

-Eliza S. Bowne, March 1, 1802 (pp. 96)

Emily Oh what a wonderful story! It has elements of romance and adventure, and also she has self-awareness to be able to see the humor in it as well. And she still has the wig!

David It's amazing that she was able to capture all of that. What I love most about her writing is that it creates a sense of humanity that is often lost when learning about history in other ways. She has great talent for describing these scenes.

Emily Yes and I look forward to continuing to explore her thoughts with you next week. Thank you David and thank you everyone! We will be back next week to discuss Eliza's thoughts on feminism, so we look forward to that!

Cited Text

Eliza Southgate Bowne (1783-1809). *A girl's life eighty years ago; selections from the letters of Eliza Southgate Bowne*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons (1887).

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