

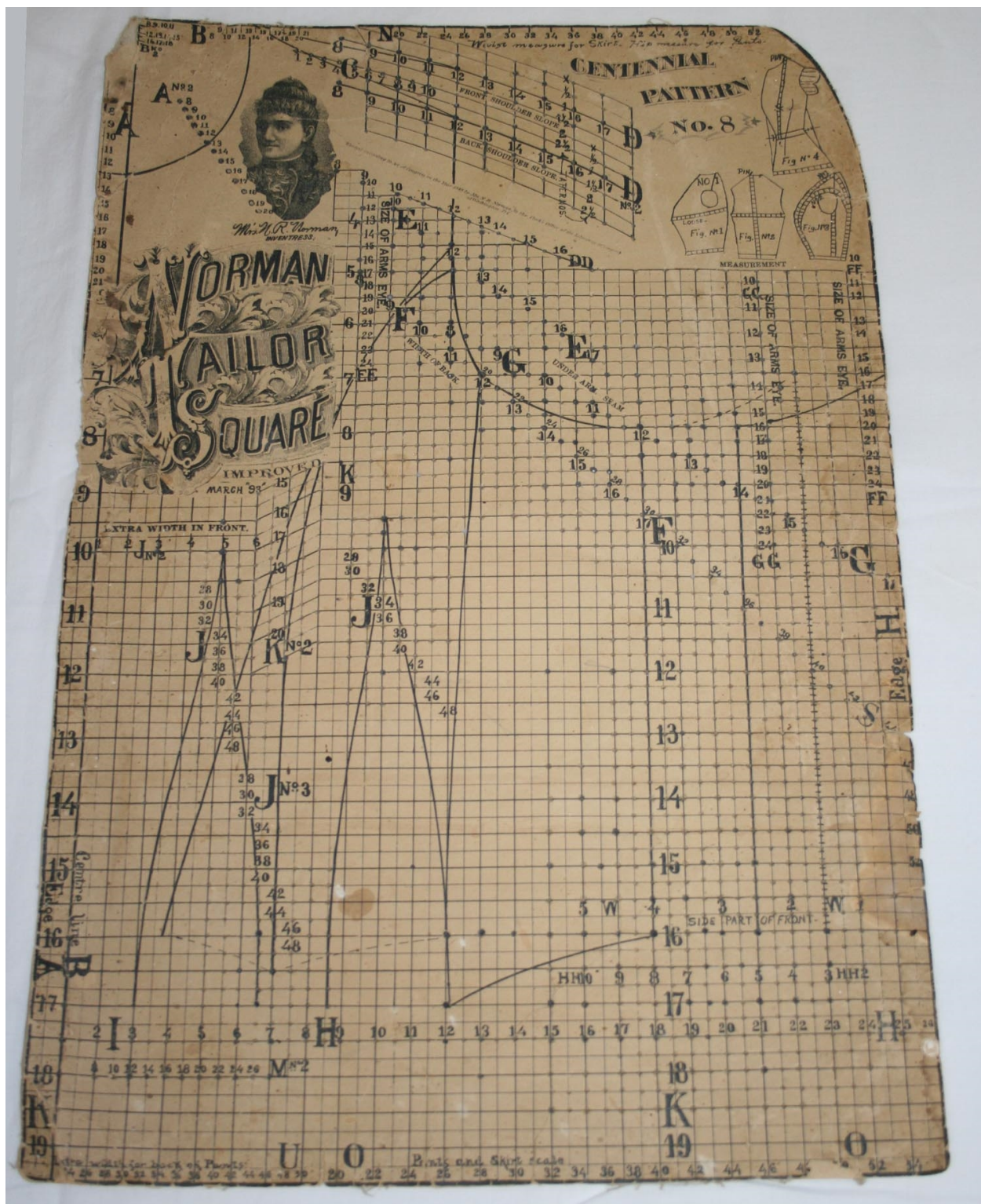
Donation of the Month

Norman Tailor System dress pattern

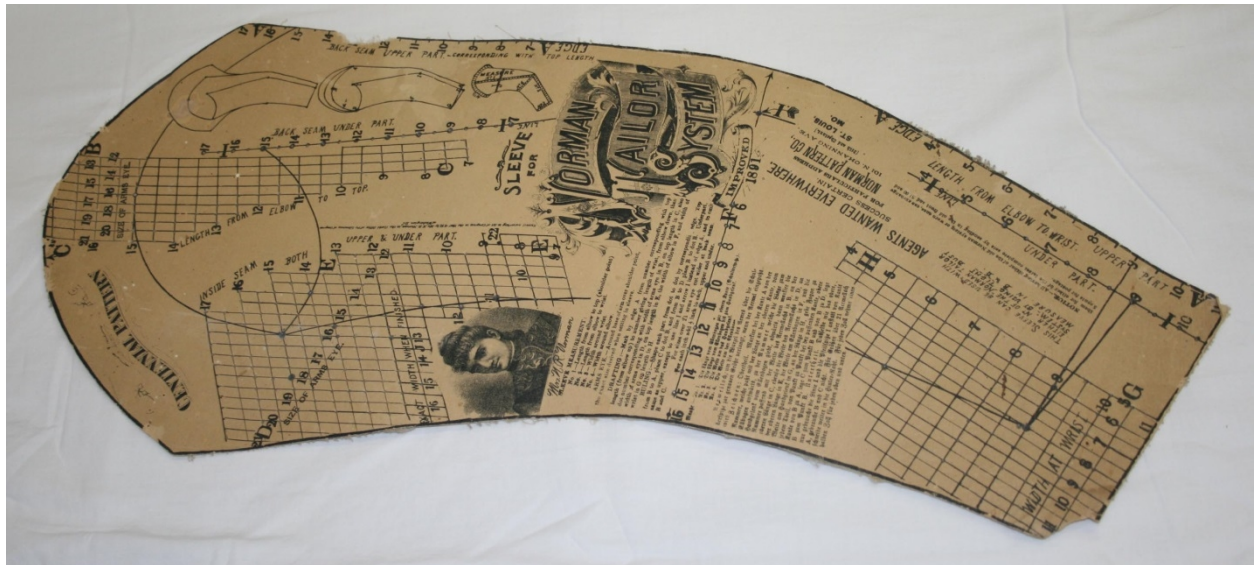
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Instructions for bodice



Instructions for sleeve



Instructions for skirt waist

Sewing a garment is like putting together a puzzle. The fabric must be cut in the correct shapes and in just the right size to be sewn into a well-fitting, attractive garment. This can be easily accomplished today by using a purchased tissue paper pattern. Many companies offer patterns in a multitude of styles and sizes at reasonable prices. However, this was not always the case.

In the 19th century, many dressmakers' drafting systems were introduced to the marketplace. These systems, like the Norman Tailor System seen here, were marketed as a boon to the women attempting to create fashionable clothing at home. Before the introduction of these systems, women wishing to make dresses usually relied upon an old garment as a pattern or attempted to draft a pattern based on an illustration. By the mid-1800s, Godey's Lady's Book did publish pattern diagrams, but these required the sewist to enlarge the pattern pieces which proved difficult for many.

The introduction of drafting systems allowed the home sewist the opportunity to use her own measurements to draw pattern pieces that would closely match her body for a good fit. Of course, as fashions changed rapidly, drafting systems that only allowed for one style quickly became obsolete. As the century wore on, many different systems were introduced using a variety of methods to draw the pattern pieces. The Norman Tailor System used small holes or perforations where the person drafting the pattern would draw a series of dots and then connect them to create the shape of the pattern piece which would then be transferred to the chosen fabric.

This particular drafting system dates to about 1890. The Norman Tailor System was created by a woman, Mrs. Nancy R. Norman of St. Louis. The copyright was held by Nancy Norman and her husband George Norman as early as 1878. By the time Centennial Pattern No. 8 was published, the Norman Company had been in business for over a decade.

By the time the Normans were publishing their system, drafting systems had been used by tailors and dressmakers for some time. The earliest systems consisted of instructions sometimes accompanied by modified rulers and intended mostly for menswear. Some systems were also used for women's clothing, but the earliest patent for a perforated system for cutting dresses was issued in 1841 to one Aaron A. Tentler of Philadelphia. Tentler, however, described his system as an improvement, so this was evidently not the first such system.

By 1890, you could purchase many different paper patterns. Godey's Lady's Book had offered full size patterns since 1854. However, the cost prevented many from purchasing them. Other companies also had begun to offer paper patterns. William Jennings Demorest and Ellen Louise Demorest held fashion shows in their home and sold sewing patterns beginning in 1860. They published a magazine known as Mirror of Fashion, from which many patterns could be ordered. Butterick Pattern Company was founded in 1863 by Ebenezer Butterick, a tailor from Sterling, Massachusetts. Their first paper patterns were for men's and boy's clothing only, with women's patterns becoming available in 1866. McCall Pattern Company was founded in 1870 by James McCall, a Scottish tailor living in New York City. Many other pattern companies started business and as paper patterns became widely available and more affordable, the dressmaker's systems fell out of favor.

Today, some of the earliest pattern companies are still in business. Butterick patterns are still available, as are McCall's patterns. Some of the innovations that started with the dressmaker's systems are still in use by home sewists and designers alike, like the French curve ruler.

Pattern collecting has become more prevalent in the last few years, as home sewing has had somewhat of a resurgence. Many resources are now available to learn about home sewing and patterns. Public libraries are good sources for sewing books, while the internet is home to many great sites for pattern enthusiasts.

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