The 1790s were a transitional period for Western women’s fashion. Silhouettes departed from earlier standards of rigid torso support to a relaxed empire waistline inspired by neoclassical artwork. While it is difficult to know exactly what Sarah Manning Vaughan would have worn, letters note that she preferred traditional, non-ostentatious dress. Nonetheless she was a woman of means, and while a working woman might have paired her gown with an apron or a simple cap, Sarah Manning Vaughan might have accessorized it with a fine fichu or gold shoe buckles. Slaves were the precursor to corsets and provided flexible bust support. They would have been worn with a shift and one or more layers of petticoats to provide a fashionable outline and protection from the elements during frigid Maine winters.

The fichu was a key element of 18th century Western fashions. They provided a modest covering to be tucked into or pinned onto a fashionably low bodice. Many surviving examples were made of white linen, silk or cotton, decorated with lace and trim, and so thin as to be nearly translucent. While a working woman would have to do the same, a fashionable woman could exercise a relatively unhindered sense of cultural expression without punishment from white people. In the book, “Black: African American Expressive Culture,” Shane White writes that, “For African American women who lacked the implements and the leisure to create intricate coiffures, the often brilliantly colored bandanna or headkerchief offered an alternative means of self-adornment and aesthetic display.” Black women styled their hair in a variety of ways, including the caps or towering hairstyles distinctive to European fashion, sometimes as a satirical display. The headwrap is an example of an “African retention,” or an element with African roots that persists in the cultures of Afro-diasporic Blacks. Headwraps, still popular today, provided a protective hairstyle that emphasized the bright textiles so valuable to the multi-faceted wardrobe of fashions and styles distinctive to early African Americans.

Indigo was a popular color choice for people of all classes during the 1790s. The legendary “blue coats” of the Continental Army were often achieved using indigo. Enslaved people in the South performed most of the skilled artisanal work required for indigo processing on dye plantations. Indigo featured in the developing fashions specific to African Americans faced as a result of the slave economy on which America is founded. Historian Shane White notes that the fashion of enslaved and formerly enslaved people was notable for its distinctive use of bright, “clashing” colors, the use of fabric patching reminiscent of quilts, and elements of cultural brokage, or the mixing of traditional West African cultural themes with European styles, a practice that both offended and intrigued their contemporaries. In her book, “Lives of Consequence: Blacks in Early, Kittry & Berwick in the Massachusetts Province of Maine,” Patricia Wall writes that while slavery was outlawed in Maine in 1783, it lingered for years, if not decades, and was likely still a part of the make-up of rural Maine at the time of the Homestead’s founding.

Women in the 18th century sometimes wore finely trimmed aprons as a fashion statement, such as the picture on the left. However, the apron’s main importance was to protect a working woman’s gown during cooking, tanning, dyeing, or any number of endless chores that were performed most of the household during the 1790s. The apron on display is made of osnaburg, a coarse, unbleached linen. This fabric is significant because of how frequently it is referenced in historical documents. Osnaburg was commonly mentioned in runaway advertisements from colonial newspapers. White slaveowners relied on these advertisements for the forcible return of escaped slaves, and because they often include a remarkable level of detail, fashion historians look to them today as one of the few sources noting the fashions of enslaved people. Because it was coarse and cheap, whites wanting to deny both the humanity and African-ness of Black people deemed it to be acceptable for African Americans, sometimes referring to it as “negro cloth.” Osnaburg was a part of the multi-faceted wardrobe of fashions and styles distinctive to early African Americans.

The styling of hair was one of the rare areas in which Black women in Federalist-era America could exercise a relatively unhindered sense of cultural expression without punishment from white people. In the book, “Stylin': African American Expressive Culture,” Shane White writes that, “For African American women who lacked the implements and the leisure to create intricate coiffures, the often brilliantly colored bandanna or headkerchief offered an alternative means of self-adornment and aesthetic display.” Black women styled their hair in a variety of ways, including the caps or towering hairstyles native to European fashion, sometimes as a satirical display. The headwrap is an example of an “African retention,” or an element with African roots that persists in the cultures of Afro-diasporic Blacks. Headwraps, still popular today, provided a protective hairstyle that emphasized the bright textiles so valuable to many traditional West African cultures. The headwrap on display is modelled after an example by Cheyney McKnight of Not Your Momma’s History, a historical reenactor and expert on the fashions of enslaved women in America.