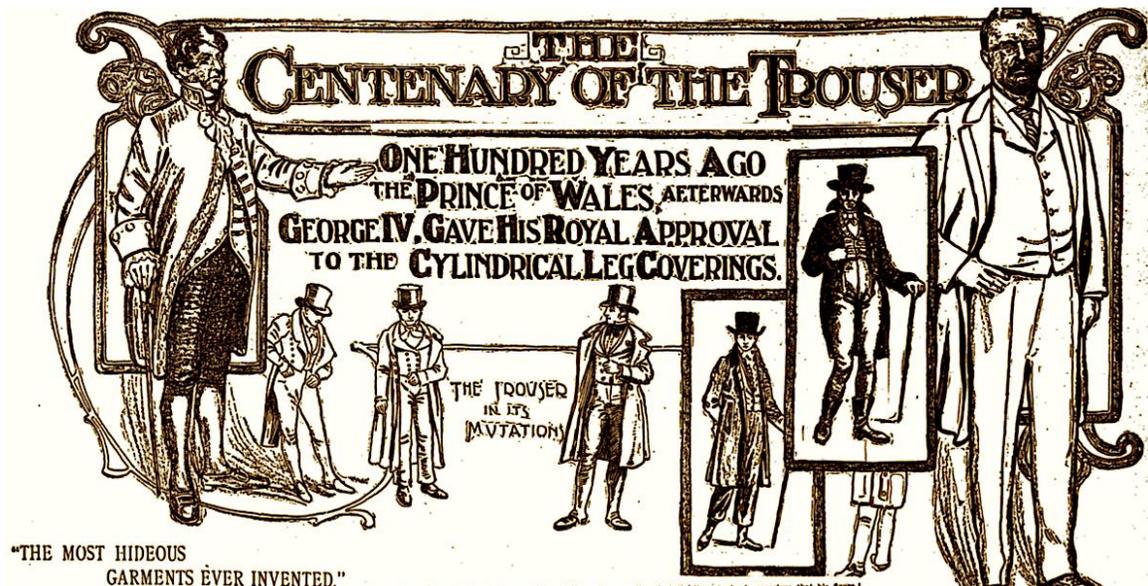


Trousers in New Orleans

Celebrating the Tricentennial of its founding in 2018, the city of New Orleans was without long trousers, for the most part, for nearly a third of its colorful and fascinating history.



In 1902, the *Picayune* celebrated "THE CENTENARY OF THE TROUSER". "In 1802" (only one year before the Louisiana Purchase), reported the *Picayune*, "the pantaloons were without honor. The exquisite laughed at it and the common man despised it." No person dare suggest that the "My Lords of that day ... exchange their knee breeches and silken stockings for this hideous garment."

Breeches and hose, pronounced "Britches and hoes", were worn during the Crescent City's colonial days. Knee-length breeches were also known as "small-clothes". An 1853 article in the *Picayune* described them as "coming down and fastening just below the knee". "John Hancock," before his Hip-Hop Broadway days, could be found on the streets of Boston in 1782 (according to a *Times-Picayune* article dated October 24, 1835) wearing "black satin small-clothes, white silk stockings and red morocco slippers."

"Pantaloons, called by some "the most hideous garments ever invented," were, according to the 1902 *Picayune* article, "originally the badges of Democracy and the French Revolution," so why did the Prince of Wales (later George IV) go in for these "cylindrical leg coverings"? The paper's answer: They "were adopted by gouty aristocrats to conceal their deformed calves" – and let's not forget the

influence of a remarkable style influencer named Beau Brummell.

But, before we get to Beau, one must know that the oldest known trousers were discovered in the Xinjiang Region of Northwestern China dating back to the period between the 13th and the 10th centuries BC. They were woolen with straight legs and wide crotches and were likely used while horseback riding. Entering recorded history in the 6th century BC, trousers were also used for horseback riding, this time by Iranians.



Commedia dell'arte's Pantalone



Beau Brummell

Pantaloon takes their name from a principal stage character in the *commedia dell'arte* named *Pantalone*, who, because of his skinny legs, is often portrayed wearing trousers rather than knee-breeches. His leg coverings were the prototype for a type of trouser called "pantaloon", which was subsequently shortened to "pants". "Pants" in England, however, refers only to underwear.

In France, *culottes* were the fashionable silk knee-breeches worn by the aristocracy and bourgeoisie, while the working class *sans-culottes* (literally "without breeches") wore pantaloons, or trousers, instead. This was the attire of the common people of the lower classes in late 18th century France, a great many of whom were the radicalized and militant partisans of the French Revolution. They also rebelled against the silk breeches – too upper-class! The word *sans-culotte* came in vogue in the year 1792.



Sans-culottes

A Regency gentleman, 1806

Thomas Jefferson brought pantaloons back from France after his terms as minister there and wore them "in strict keeping with his notions of democratic simplicity. Naturally they had some vogue in the United

States after that. But the majority of those who wore pantaloons in both America and England wore them not as articles of fashion, but rather as protests against the arbitraments of fashion." Prince George and Beau changed all that.

George and many of his courtiers suffered from gout, which "caused unseemly swellings and protuberances on the noble legs," reported the *Picayune*, "making them unpleasant objects when increased in tight and thin silk stockings." This was the perfect time and place for George Bryan "Beau" Brummell (1778-1840) to enter the scene.



Bienville in knee-breeches, founded New Orleans in 1718.



Habit à Collet de Velours et boutons de soie. Pantalons de Nankin

Nankeen trousers, circa 1818

Unwilling to strictly adhere to the guidelines of civilized behavior in his

day, Beau Brummell instead inspired the future King of England and his followers through his unique sense of style. Due to the patronage of the Prince, Brummell had his entrée into the "bon ton," or elite 1% of British society. He argued against the use of embellished garments and sparkling jewels as part of a gentleman's wardrobe and saw the advantage of better fitting clothing over ornate apparel. Brummell introduced exceptionally well-fitting and hand-tailored bespoke suits, and, rejecting the use of breeches and stockings, looked to full-length formal trousers with both matching and contrasting jackets.

Trousers were made in all shapes during the Regency, from extremely loose fitting ones to well-tailored pantaloons that hugged the legs like a second skin. And breeches were still very common, existing side-by-side with this upstart clothing trend.



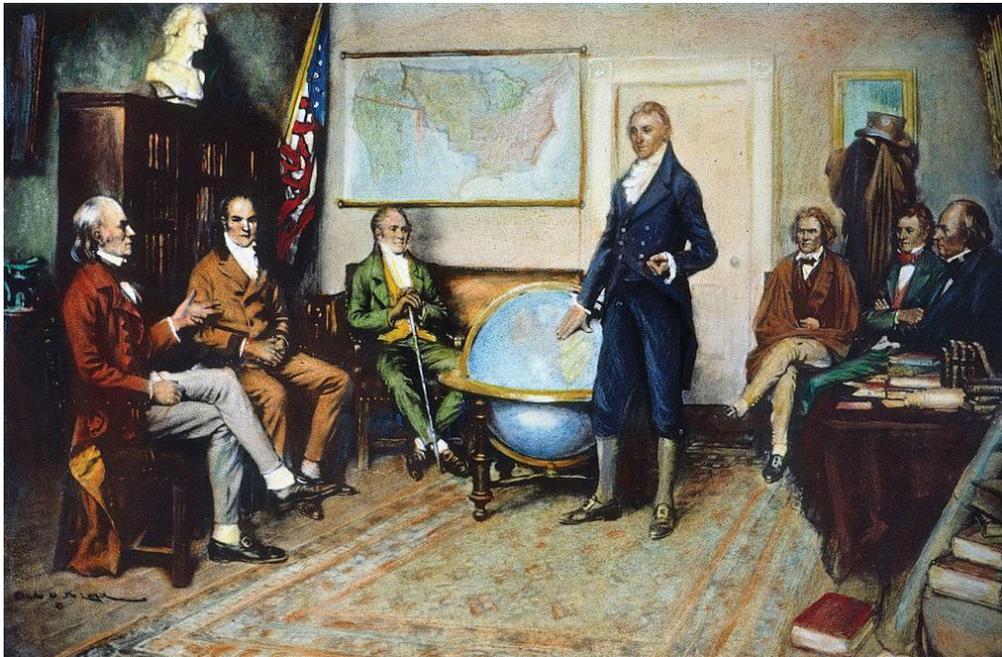
Early linen pantaloons on display at the Metropolitan Museum

Back in New Orleans, these fashion influences were working their way into everyday life. An advertisement in the *Orleans Gazette and Commercial Advertiser*, dated October 5, 1807, offered "Worsted satinets, different colors, for pantaloons." A year later, a 10 dollar reward appeared in the same publication for a sailor, "a Scotchman by birth," who deserted wearing "a pair of blue nankeen trousers." Nankeen is a kind of pale yellowish cloth, originally made at Nanjing, China, that was often dyed afterward. Sailors were wearing looser fitting work trousers since the 1580s since they allowed them to roll up the legs for wading ashore or climbing the ship's rigging.

Twice as much (\$20) was offered in the *Louisiana State Gazette* for a runaway slave in "nakeen trowsers" in 1810. As you can see, trousers were often spelled "trowsers" in the early nineteenth century. In Scotland, trousers are sometimes called *trews*, one possible origin of the modern word. Another source may be the Gaelic *triubhas*, meaning "close-fitting shorts". Breeches come from the Old English *bréc*, plural of *bróc*, a garment covering the loins and thighs.

By 1820 most men were wearing "pantaloons", but not all. President Jefferson was a great barometer of the transition from small-clothes to pantaloons, or trousers. Numerous people who met with him wrote down and described what he was wearing on various dates. In 1814, he had donned "corduroy small clothes", while in 1824 "his pantaloons are very long, loose, & of the same colour as his coat." Yet again in 1826, the year he died, a writer mentioned "Mr. Jefferson's taste in dress, and especially his supposed predilection for red breeches."

President James Monroe continued to wear his knee-breeches and silk stockings, long after his fellow cabinet members, senators and congressman had switched to long trousers (as shown in the image below). By the 1840s, trousers finally replaced pantaloons.



Across the Atlantic in Great Britain, the Duke of Wellington was quite the trendsetter of his day and one of the first British pantaloons wearers, but not all of his contemporaries adjusted as quickly to this

new fashion statement. In 1814, the year before defeating Napoleon at Waterloo, the Iron Duke "was turned away from Almack's because he insisted on appearing in pantaloons." It was not long, however before the "Lady Patronesses" of Almack's came up with a new set of rules:

"Gentlemen are expected to wear small clothes and silk stockings, but any gentleman who is conscious that his figure is not adapted to that costume may wear pantaloons." For that particular reception, all wore small clothes except "Wellington and two other daring beaus".

Almack's was a tony London social club of its day, where gentlemen and ladies came to see and be seen and to assert their claim to being of the highest social rank.

Literary giant Oscar Wilde, who visited New Orleans in 1882, tried to reintroduce breeches in 1890, but the gentlemen of his day wisely rejected the idea.



Oscar Wilde in knee-breeches

SLACKS
are in
for a great season

GRAY OR TAN slacks will be very much in evidence this season. Spalding has played an important part in getting this style going. Spalding slacks are made of fine wool flannel. They're comfortably roomy. And they cost only \$7.50. Blue Flannel Coat, recommended for wear with Slacks, \$15.

A. G. Spalding & Bros
130 CARONDLET STREET

Slacks ad, Times-Picayune, 1931

Trousers during the 1800s were made of a variety of fabrics that lent their names to particular varieties of long pants. In the mid-nineteenth century, units of the British Indian Army applied the Hindi word *khāki*, meaning "dust-colored" as the name and color of their uniform cloth. Worn everywhere today as casual wear, khakis were first used by British armies during the 1850s. The term khakis is often used interchangeably with Chinos, which were military issue trousers originally made in China. Ralph Lauren today offers both Chino and Khaki slacks for men.

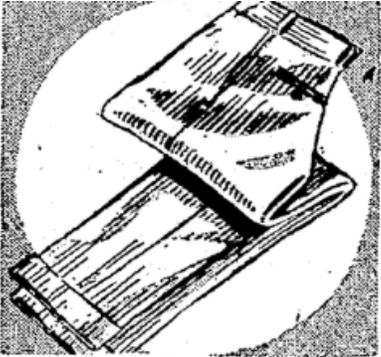
Jeans, or denims, are a whole other lengthy story. Denim comes from "*serge de Nimes*", a canvas cloth first produced in Nimes, France; and the word "jeans" is derived from Genoese sailors who first wore canvas pants. Sailors are said to have played a major role in the worldwide spread of trousers as a fashion. The earliest known type of jeans is the Indian export of a thick cotton cloth, in the 16th century, known as *dungaree*. Dyed in indigo, it was sold in the vicinity of the dockside city of Dongri near Mumbai (Bombay), India. Levi Strauss made jeans ubiquitous in the American West by strengthening gold miners' trousers with rivets at the key stress points. As American as apple pie, American jeans are worn in nations around the entire globe.

In the 1860s knee-breeches were back in style for such activities as hunting and golf. Most were loose "plus twos" or "plus fours," indicating that they came two or four inches below the knee. We still see them sometimes on the golf course. In the movies, Goldfinger wore them in his golf game with James Bond. They continued in popularity through the 1920s and 30s when they became known as knickerbockers after Washington Irving's fictional character in his *History of New York*, who wore traditional knee pants long after the fashion had changed to trousers. Today, baseball players and football players also wear a type of knee-breeches.

Slacks, informal trousers for both men and women, have a twentieth century origin. The Haggard Clothing Company claims to have coined the term in 1938, "a take on the term 'leisure time' or 'slack time' ... to be worn during the 'slack time' away from work." But the term was in use much earlier than that. An ad run by A.G. Spalding & Co., 130 Carondelet Street, in the *Times-Picayune* (previous page), announced that "Gray or Tan Slacks" were to be "very much in evidence this season."

Bloomers for women had surfaced in the 1850s and, for the most part, failed to gain acceptance. The New Orleans *Daily Delta*, among other

newspapers, complained about that look for women. Pants for ladies came back into high fashion in earnest in 1911 with French designer Paul Poiret, known in America as "The King of Fashion". His harem pants made the cover of *Vogue* in 1913. Eventually, comfortable, billowy slacks were worn throughout the 1930s, and actresses like Marlene Dietrich and Katharine Hepburn made them popular, wearing them on and off screen.

		<p>SANFORIZED Seersucker Pants Cord Sports Slacks</p>
<p>Men's Hockmeyer Corduroy Slacks 2.84</p>		<p>\$1 Pr.</p>
<p>Genuine Hockmeyer corduroy slacks; collegiate style, with pleated or plain fronts. Sizes 29 to 40 waist. To be worn with jackets or sweaters.</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Wide stripe seer-sucker pants to match your coat...sanforized shrunk so they'll stay the size you buy them! Sizes 28W to 50W. ● Cord sports slacks for men and students ...all sanforized, too!
<p>—Maison Blanche Street Floor</p>		

Maison Blanche ads for men's slacks, Times-Picayune, 1935 and 1939

In the 1960s, Pierre Cardin popularized sailors' bell bottoms as a reaction to the new narrow shoulder suits. Hip-huggers, first designed in 1957 in Los Angeles by Irene Kasmer, fitted tightly around the hips and thighs, while usually having flared lower legs. Before long, trousers weren't even hanging on the hips at all.

In May 2004, Louisiana Democrat and state legislator Derrick Shepherd proposed a bill that would make it illegal to appear in public wearing trousers below the waist and thereby exposing one's skin or "intimate clothing". The bill did not pass.

Whatever fashion changes come to the world of trousers, you can be sure that New Orleanians will be there on the cutting edge of cultural

evolution, both witnessing and being a part of history in the making.
While there's often a wrinkle or two, we always manage to look smart.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"Trousers in New Orleans"
Ned Hémard
Copyright 2019