

# All The Rage In 1812

by Lynne Belluscio

The turban was all the fashion in 1812. Dolley Madison, the president's wife, wore a velvet and satin turban, trimmed with two "towering" feathers for her husband's inaugural. Jacob LeRoy's mother-in-law, Charlotte Downes Otis, had her portrait painted with a rather large turban on her head. (We do not own the original portrait, but in 1944, Edward A. LeRoy donated a sketch of the portrait to the Historical Society.)

From the cut of the dress, I suspect that the portrait was done in the late 1700s or early 1800s. The turban was very popular from the 1790s through the 1820s. In England this was known as the "Regency" period – the time of Jane Austen. The term Regency refers to the period when King George III had become unfit to rule and his son, who would later become George IV, ruled as "Regent." Meanwhile in France, Napoleon had come to power after the French Revolution and it was known as the "Empire" period. And dresses had raised "empire" waistlines.

The turban was often more like a hat, rather than wrapped around the head, although I did find an interesting video on utube that shows how to wrap a turban in

the manner of the 19th Century, complete with the addition of a large feather. Some turbans were tight to the head, shaped like a bee-hive. Others were more like a sack or a "liberty cap" worn during the French Revolution. These turbans were similar to the hats worn by the ancient Greeks.

Other turbans, like Charlotte Otis' were large and wide, similar to those worn by men in the Middle East. Some of the fashion illustrations show turbans with matching shawls. Both had become much more popular and important fashion accessories after Napoleon conquered Egypt in 1804. The turban and the long shawl became so popular, that even English women wore them and it wasn't long before the turban and shawl were all the rage in America.

While I was searching the history of the turban, I discovered that Napoleon and his Empress preferred the fashion of Louis-Hippolyte Leroy. I wonder if Louis Leroy was any relation to the LeRoy family that emigrated to America in the 1750s ... The other interesting French connection, is that Mrs. Otis, whose daughter would marry Jacob LeRoy in 1821, was living in France in 1820 when she



Charlotte Downes Otis,  
Jacob LeRoy's mother-in-law.

died. It is not clear how long she lived in France, or whether her two daughters and husband were living with her. One source states that Jacob's wife had been "educated abroad" so perhaps this is a reference to France. Two objects in our collection, that we know belonged to Jacob LeRoy and his wife - - a pair of brass candlesticks and a desk - - both are in the French fashion.

So one has to ask, if the turban was so fashionable in 1812, did any women in LeRoy wear a turban? Jacob and his wife didn't come to town until 1822. (She was only twelve in 1812.)

Would it be possible for women, in the middle of the frontier, most of them still living in log cabins, to have any interest in the latest fashion? Did they wear the fashionable dresses with the empire waist? Surprisingly, we do have in the collection one white muslin dress, heavily embroidered with a short train that would have been worn in 1812. We don't know where it came from or who it belonged to, but it's a good guess it came from an early family. It would have been fashionable to wear a turban with it, but we will never really know.

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