

Feature



European-American Bathing Suit Timeline: 1650-1950 Kathe Gust*

From Baywatch to celebrity bikini body photos, bathing suits are prominent in today's news. When did they first appear and how have they evolved? Here is a timeline of the past 300 years.

European and American fashion in bathing suits for both men and women has seen many changes over the past 300 years. For those who are interested in their history and recreation, here is a timeline of clothing and customs, based on my historical research, illustrated with contemporary drawings and photos of the time. I have organized the material by century, starting in the mid- 1600s.

1650 - 1750

1687 - Celia Fiennes' description of garments worn in Bath, England: "The Ladies go into the bath with Garments made of a fine yellow canvas, which is stiff and made large with great sleeves like a parson's gown; the water fills it up so that it is borne off that your shape is not seen, it does not cling close as other linning, which Looks sadly in the poorer sort that go in their own

linning. The Gentlemen have drawers and wastcoates of the same sort of canvas...."

1736 – Oldest known depiction of a "bathing machine" is in a Scarborough beach scene by John Settingington.

1737 – Bath, England outlaws nude bathing for men. Modest swimwear is now required for both genders.

1750 – 1850

1771 - "The Expedition of Humphry Clinker" by Tobias Smollett, gives a description of female swimwear: "The ladies wear jackets and petticoats of brown linen..."

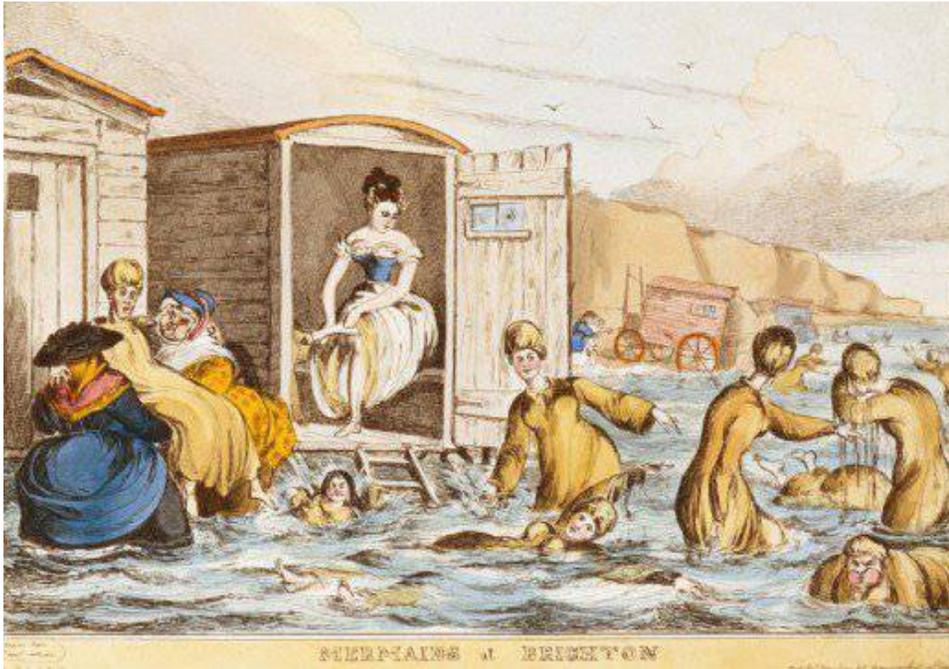
1847 - Nancy Edberg of Sweden becomes the first female swimming instructor in Europe.



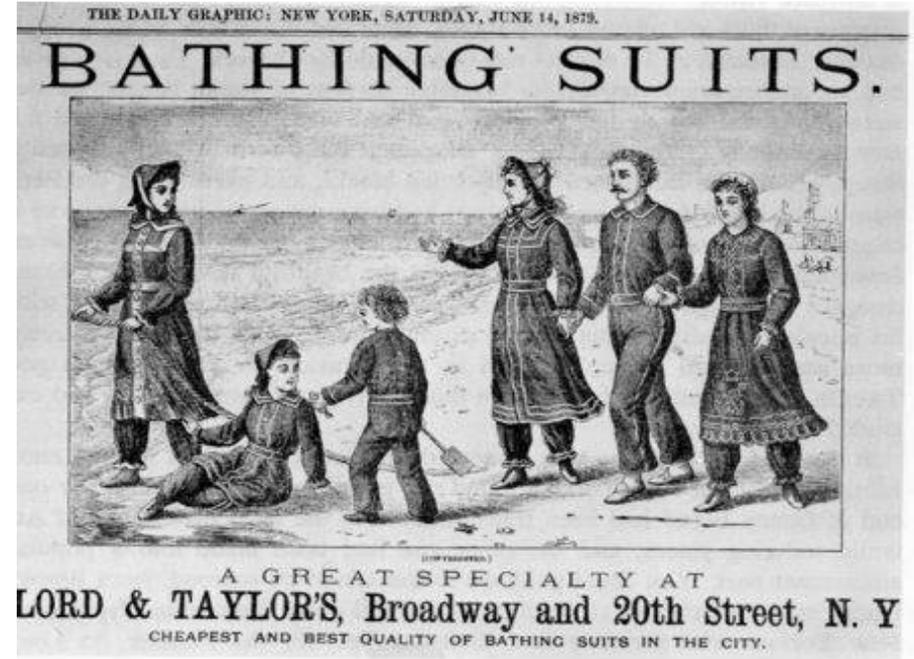
Scarborough (cropped section) by John Settingington 1735 shows bathing carriages and bathers at the seaside.



Rare example of a bathing gown worn by Martha Washington. Made of blue and white linen with lead weights sown into hem for modesty. Probably worn on a 1769 trip to mineral waters in Berkeley Springs, Virginia Image: [Mount Vernon Ladies Association](#).



"Mermaids at Brighton" by William Heath, c. 1829.



1879 - New York bathing suit ad – note the covered arms and legs for all styles.



1862 - Godey's "Bathing Dresses" fashion plate.

1850-1905

1896 – Swimming becomes an official Olympic sport in 1896 for men, 1912 for women.

1901 – Shared gender public beaches finally legal in the UK.

1907 – Australian swimming star Annette Kellerman arrested in Massachusetts for indecent exposure (arms, legs and neck). *"I can't swim wearing more stuff than you hang on a clothesline."* - Annette Kellerman. *"It (her suit) made the question of how ladies were put together no longer a matter of speculation."* – Paul Gallico, sportswriter.



1890's – men's suits now have short sleeves and no stockings.

1915 – Jantzen Knitting Mills (Portland Knitting Company) offers wool rib-knit suits for better fit.

1920s – Suits began to appear made of knit jersey silk, and rayon (advertised as “artificial silk”) rather than wool. Rayon quickly went out of favor since it is not very durable when wet.

1921 - Jantzen Knitting Mills debuts the one-piece “Elastic” knit suit, which becomes the favored style for the Atlantic City Bathing Beauty Pageant.

1927 – Speedo company debuts a swimwear line and develops the men’s and women’s “racer-back” style.

1929 – Champion swimmer Johnny Weissmuller’s portrayal of ‘Tarzan,’ made it acceptable for men to swim bare chested, though it was still illegal in most public venues.

1932 – Olympian Clare Dennis narrowly escapes disqualification when a protest was lodged against her “inappropriate” Speedo silk suit on the grounds that it exposed too much of her shoulder blade.



1906 - New York promotional card – women have bare arms and knees!



Left: 1907 - Annette Kellerman’s “scandalous” suit. **Right:** the 1952 Hollywood spandex copy.



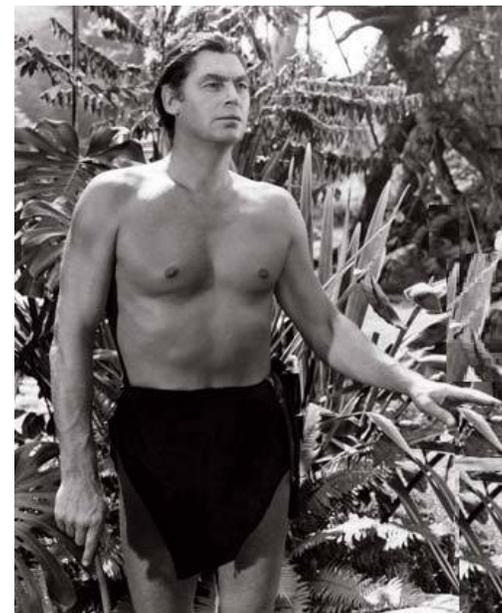
1919 styles for both genders finally about the same.



1920s - A variety of women's styles in Washington DC. You can still see the older Edwardian influence on a couple of them.



1927 – Speedo “racer-back” style suit on champion Arne Borg.



1929 – Johnny ‘Tarzan’ Weissmuller makes bare-chested swimming (in private) okay for guys.

1935 – Mabs of Hollywood uses Lastex, a satin-finished rubberized yarn, in suits. That spelled the end of the commercial knitted wool suit. Lastex worked with cotton, silk and rayon yarns to make a better fitting suit that didn't stretch and sag when wet.

1937 – American men can legally go “topless” in public.

1938 – Speedo introduces men's bare-chested bathing trunks.

1941 – MGM signs Esther Williams as a female sports star, competing swimming against Fox's skating star Sonja Henie.

1943 – US government institutes mandatory reduction in the material used for women's bathing suits by 10% to



1930 – Josephine Baker and Russian dancer Serge on beach. You could wear these in 2017.



1934 – The daring Jantzen “Cutaway” suit.



1937 – The Jantzen men's “Topper” zip-off top style.



1938 – Speedo Swim Trunks.



1945 – Wartime styles “save on fabric.”

conserve material for the war effort, giving rise to the two piece suit and the removal of “modesty skirts.”

1944 – MGM releases “*Bathing Beauty*”, the first of many swimming extravaganzas.

1946 - On July 5th Louis Reard, a former automotive engineer, introduced the “Bikini.” A similar swimsuit called the "Atome," was introduced by designer Jacques Heim. Professional models said it was immodest and refused to wear it, so Reard hired exotic dancer Micheline Bernardini instead.



1947 – Satin Lastex suits

Kathe Gust enjoys creating clothing for many historical periods, and for various sci-fi and fantasy genres. Visit her [website](#) to read articles and see photos for some of her costuming projects.



1946 – Original (and shocking) French Bikini wouldn't catch on until the 1960's. The model, exotic dancer Micheline Bernardini, is holding the storage box for the suit.