

## Corset Building - A General Overview

Corsets have been worn by both men and women for hundreds of years. Shapes and construction techniques have varied and so have the materials used. In order to reproduce the correct shapes you need to have an understanding of the materials available to you on today's market.

This article will focus more on the bones/steels or stays than the fabric. I have written this a general guide, not as an historic text.

The earlier corsets tend to be those with the least amount of shape or curves. The breasts tend to be flattened and their shape diminished. (see illustrations below) To attain this straight silhouette you are having to "fight" the natural curves of most women's bodies. Success depends on two things strength of boning used and tightness of lacing. For the sake of comfort you can only lace so tightly, it is therefore more practical to use the proper quality of "bone". The best product on today's market is "Spring Steel". Corsets/bodices of this time were made of linen.

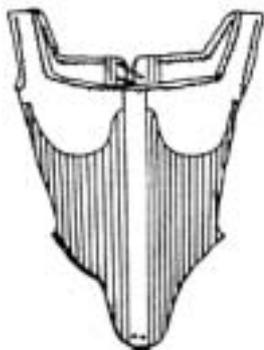
Spring steel boning is nylon-coated steel that is white in colour and comes in different widths, thickness and length. When choosing a spring steel for this type of corset the "thickness" is more important than the width and nothing less than .6mm should be considered unless the woman involved has very little curve. Spring steel of this thickness is somewhat flexible but is quite difficult to bend. See our item 50-8206- sold by the piece in pre finished lengths from 10cm – 42cm and also sold by the metre; item #50-8406-06

By the early 19<sup>th</sup>(1800's) Century women were attempting to enhance their bustline and hips and corsets were less heavily boned and more accommodating to the body. While less boning was used there was still a centre front bone or busk (of the non-opening type) It was wider than previous bones and was important to the corset for pushing the breasts upward. Item #50-8515-30 is useful for this purpose. Opening busks came later.

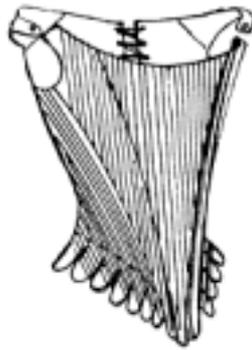
As the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century arrived the corset became more curvaceous. Corsets supposedly became more comfortable and allowed more freedom of movement. Spiral bones and the lighter spring steels (item #50-8308- ) can best recreate these shapes. Spiral bones flex in any direction and are capable of supporting most any curve a corset may have. The lighter spring steels are more flexible than the heavier but can still only flex back and forth not side to side, which limits their use in curved seams. They are however important in centre front and particularly in centre back as support for the lacing. By this time coutil was the fabric of choice. Busks, we touched briefly on the straight busk above. There are also busks which open and are used in the front of corsets to enable you to get into and out of your corset without help. These did not appear until around 1860 and began with the straight busk , the spoon busk appeared shortly afterward in about 1870. Both items can be found in our catalogue.

For more information on the construction of corsets through out time consider reading "**Waisted Efforts**" by Robert Doyle.

*Illustrations below are from the book "Waisted Efforts"*



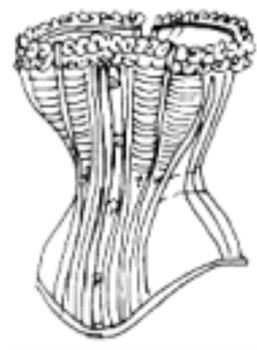
16th Century



17th Century



18th Century



19th Century

## Comparison of Historic and Contemporary Corsets

Thanks to Robert Doyle author of "Waisted Efforts" I have had the opportunity to view and handle a few corsets from his collection of period pieces. Most of them are found in his book and I had the privilege of photographing two to display here. I hope the details will be visible. I chose the two corsets in the photo below because the pattern must have been very similar and both were black with white lining. I made the corset on the left side using the Laughing Moon "**Dore**" style pattern (sold in our **pattern section** of the catalog) and the one on the right is an original from the late 1890's and has almost exactly the same lines. The primary difference is size.



The original corset was made using cotton sateen twill for the outer layer and linen batiste for the inside. The modern one was made using black corset brocade for the exterior and plain cotton coutil on the inside.

Both corsets have twill tape sewn into the waist and both have a draw cord in the upper edge. The draw cord in the modern one is visible as a white cord encased in the bias cut binding of the top edge and the draw cord in the "antique" corset would have been the yellow ribbon just visible threaded through the lace (most of it had deteriorated.). Both corsets have a straight busk, the antique one is raw steel and seems to be encased in a fine bucrum, the modern one is plastic/nylon coated to inhibit rust. The busks were similar in ability to flex. The bones in the modern corset were encased between the two layers of coutil and were made of plastic. The bones in the antique version were encased in strips of casing cut from the same fabric as the exterior and sewn onto the outside, stitching on the inside is visible, these bones are whale bone/baleen and narrower than most bones today. While the antique corset was smaller in circumference by about 5 inches it had a total of 14 more bones! It may be difficult to see in the photo but there is a lot of boning in the antique corset. The modern corset came out slightly heavier (but then it is larger both in length and circumference) and more supportive.

It was difficult to make any judgement on the whalebone as it is old and brittle and as the corset was not mine I was not inclined to try and flex it. It was quite visible where one casing had worn away and the end of the bone was sticking out. It was more three-dimensional than anything on the market today, being much like a tiny, long, thin, rectangular cube that was black in color.

The second set of corsets that I compared, were very different in cut from the others and from each other. The peach coloured corset on the left was made from the Laughing Moon "Silverado" corset pattern (the pattern can be found in the **patterns section** of the catalog). The white corset on the right is an antique one also from Robert Doyle's collection.



The antique corset on the right is a single layer corset made of fabric identical to our coutil #74-1141-01. The Laughing Moon corset was made with two layers of coutil. Both corsets used have steel bones, those in the antique one were spring steels wrapped in paper and those in the modern version are spirals. Both corsets have straight busks and both have draw cords/ribbons in the top edge incorporated with lace. Similar to the above listed corsets both of these have twill tape supports in the waist indicating that although styles changed, certain methods of construction remained the same.

The photo below shows the lining. The corset on the left is the antique, the corset on the right is the Laughing Moon "Silverado" corset.



## Online Corset Class

*Basic construction techniques required for building a boned bodice or corset. Note; italicized words can be found in the [Glossary](#).*

There is no definitive method for building a period corset. The method chosen is based on the use for which the corset is being built and to some extent the materials being used. Corsets were made by a multitude of people and most corset makers developed their own techniques. Consider some important questions before you decide which method to use.

1. Will the corset or bodice, get worn only by one person or will it be used for other productions, on other people or for costume rental?
2. Is the corset for one person who hopes to get a few years of wear out of it?

If you answer "Yes" to each of the above then you need to build a garment that can be altered as easily as possible.

The first method I will describe is for an "alterable" corset or boned bodice using two layers of *coutil*, the second method will be for an "alterable" corset or boned bodice using only one layer of *coutil* and *bone casing*. The third method will explain my favorite technique that creates a corset with a perfectly finished interior but is not alterable. I will conclude by explaining briefly how to make any of the above in a fashion fabric.

Note: Your bone casing stitching will be seen on the outside of all three techniques. Only the 4<sup>th</sup> Technique, which involves fashion fabric, does not have stitches evident on the finished garment.

### TECHNIQUE #1

Building an "alterable" corset using two layers of *coutil*. This results in a much more structured garment and one which will withstand a great deal of wear if built properly. It takes the same amount of time to build a garment of poor fabric as it does to build one from good fabric.

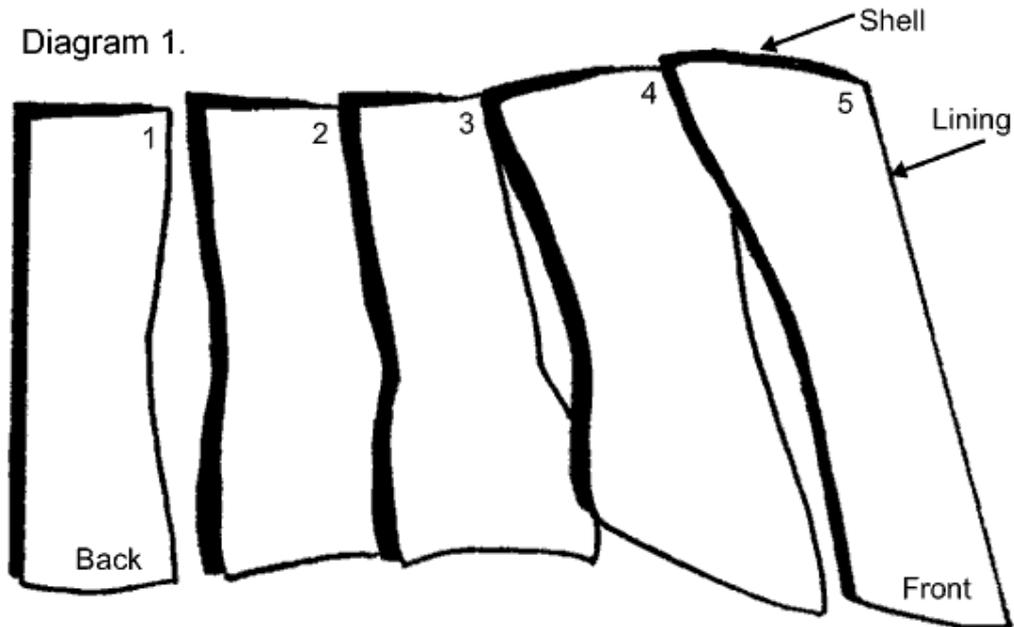
1. Cut four of each pattern piece, 1-left outer layer, 1- right outer layer, 1- left inside layer and 1 – right inside layer of *coutil*.

Note: you may choose to use a basic herringbone *coutil* for the inside layer and a more attractive satin or brocade *coutil* for the outer layer, if so just cut 2 of each pattern piece in each fabric.

Inside layer is the "lining" and outside layer is the "shell".

2. Layout the pieces in order, on a table. Lay them out so that you have each pattern piece side by side as they would be sewn together. Each "pattern piece" should consist of two layers; the inside layer and the outside layer and these should be wrong side to wrong side. **See diagram1 below.**

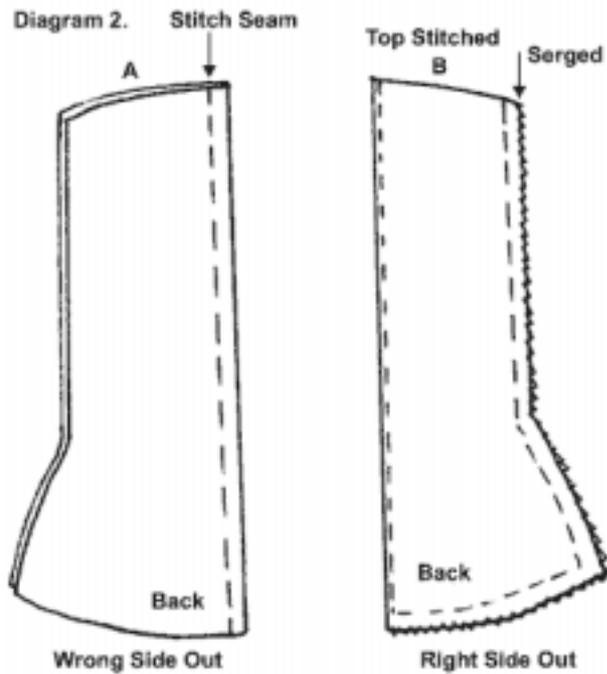
Diagram 1.



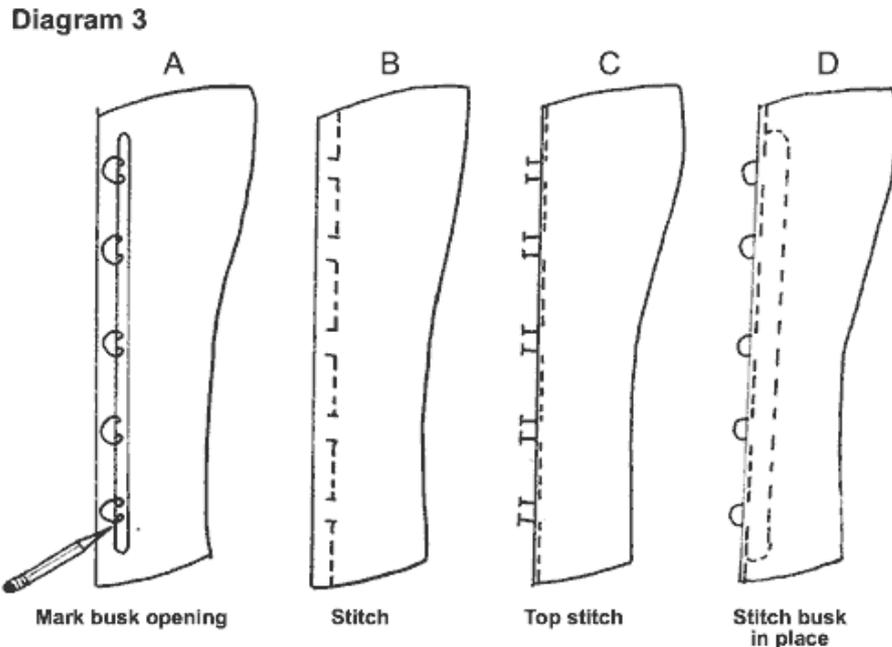
3. Mark the top piece of each "set" in the seam allowance so that you know which piece is which. I tend to lay the shell side facing the table and the lining side facing up. I start with the back piece on the left and call it number 1, then I number each piece consecutively after that. Each number goes in the top seam allowance as shown in the **diagram above**.

Note: I always start with the piece on the far left and work to the right, just to stay organized because it is so easy to get the pieces of a Victorian corset mixed up and even upside down. Other time periods are not as confusing but I tend to like methods which don't require me to think as much and lend them selves to the least opportunity for error.

4. Pick up the piece "set" on the far left, it should be a back panel. The back pieces get treated slightly differently as do the front pieces if you are using an opening *busk*. If you have followed the above directions then the two pieces you have just picked up are the back panel shell and lining and they are on top of one another with wrong sides together. Change this so that the back pieces are right sides together and stitch along the centre back seam line twice. Press the seam open. Now, close the two pieces together so that the wrong sides are face to face and press the centre back seam flat. Stitch 1/8<sup>th</sup> inch from the pressed edge. Stitch along the side seam line to hold the two layers in place, you can also stitch along the bottom but leave the top edge open. Serge both the side seam and bottom. **See diagram 2** below.



5. The front panels are handled much the same way but the *busk* must be inserted. Pick up one front set, place the lining and shell right sides together, matching any notches. Lay your busk with the "loops" in place along the centre front seam line. **See diagram 3** below. Softly trace the outline of the busk and mark where the "loops" need to protrude through the centre seam line. (A) Stitch the centre front seam line, leaving open spots at each "loop" marking. Back stitch before and after each opening. It is important that this seam is well stitched. (B)



Press the seam open, fold the layers back so that the wrong sides are face to face and press the seam closed. Top stitch  $\frac{1}{8}^{\text{th}}$  inch from the edge, but avoid stitching through the gaps where the loops will have to come through. (C) Slide the busk loops through the gaps and push the busk firmly into place. Using a zipper foot stitch around the busk. (D) You may wish to pin the fabrics together. Stitch and serge the side edge and bottom and leave the top edge open. **See diagram 3** above.

Return the back and front panels to their place on the table.

6. Now continue with the other piece "sets". Pick up the next set on the left. It should be a shell layer and a lining layer with wrong sides together. You may wish to pin the two layers together. Be sure the pieces match and are wrong side to wrong side. Take them to your sewing machine and stitch down both sides and across the bottom, just outside the seam line (within the seam allowance). Leave the top edge open as you will need to access the soon to be created *bone casings*. Repeat this step with each "set" of pieces, returning each to its place on the table.
7. Serge the same edges of each piece, still leaving the top edge open.
8. Mark the bone casings onto the lining pieces, "right side" as the wrong side is against the shell fabric. Trace them from the pattern pieces using a tracing wheel and subtly contrasting dress makers carbon. Or use *tailors tacks*.
9. Once you have marked all the bone casings take each piece to the sewing machine and make the casings by stitching along each marked line. Note: If any of the marked lines is along the seam line then you need not stitch it as it will get stitched when you sew the pieces together.
10. All pieces are now "*flatted*" together and the bone casings are complete. Now pin each piece to the next piece in the correct order! Be sure that notches match. Stitch each seam twice using two different stitch lengths, example: 8 and 12 stitches to the inch. The different lengths assure that the stitches will not be directly on top of each other, which increases strength. Do not use stitches much smaller than 12 as it makes it very difficult to rip out when alterations are required. Note: If you wish to test the fit of the garment then stitch the seams only once and with a longer stitch length. Fit the garment, make the adjustments and then double stitch all seams as described above.
11. Once all the pieces are sewn together, check that everything looks right and that you do not have one piece upside down, press all seams open. If you wish you can cross tack the seam allowance down.

Time for the *bones*. Regardless of the type of *boneing* you are using the next steps remain the same

12. Measure the length of the bone channels/casing. Subtract at least ½ an inch from this measurement and cut the bone to this length. It is imperative that the bone be at least ½ an inch shorter than the casing and even ¾" shorter is good, in fact it may be better. If the bone is not shorter, holes will result at either end of the casing where the bone ends rub. I tend to measure one length and cut one length rather than measure all and cut all, it saves my hands and it saves confusion as each piece gets slid into its casing as soon as it is cut.

The bones can be slid into their casings from the top edge.

Depending on the type of bone you choose, you may have to *tip* the cut ends. Tipping instructions can be found under "Tips & Techniques"

13. Finish the top and bottom edges. You can do this however you like. I like to bind the edges with bias and encase a draw cord of fine cable cord in the top edge. This allows the top edge to be drawn in and inhibits "fallout" when the wearer leans forward. Lace trim can also be used to finish the edges. To encase a draw cord, strongly tack the cord ends near the centre back within the top seam allowance, after stitching the bias strip to the top edge, right sides together. Now, finish the bias binding as usual making sure you do not catch the cable cord as you stitch. Ribbon can also be used which is more attractive but not as strong or long wearing.

## TECHNIQUE #2

Building an "alterable" corset or boned bodice using only one layer of *coutil* and *bone casing tape*. Only later period corsets used this technique.

Note: front and back pieces would need to have four of each cut if you are using a *busk* and setting eyelets or grommets for lacing. However if you are using a zipper and there is no front opening then four fronts and four backs would not be necessary.

1. Cut two of each pattern piece. 1 – left and 1- right as stated by the pattern.
2. Mark the casing lines on the wrong side of the fabric, unless you want them on the outside. Use a tracing wheel and subtly contrasting dress maker's carbon.
3. Place the bone casing tape along the lines and pin into place.

If the bone casing is to follow a seam then stitch the seam before applying the bone casing tape as you may be able to use the "seam allowance" which will eliminate the bulk of having seam allowance and bone casing tape together.

4. Stitch the bone casing tape into place using an average stitch length of about 12 stitches per inch.
5. Serge the sides and bottom of each piece.
6. Now pin each piece to the next piece in the correct order! Be sure that notches match. Stitch each seam twice using two different stitch lengths, example: 8 and 12 stitches to the inch. The different lengths assure that the stitches will not be directly on top of each other, which increases strength. Do not use stitches much smaller than 12 as it makes it very difficult to rip out when alterations are required. If you need to fit the garment first then only stitch the seams once with a longer stitch length. Fit the garment, make the alterations and double stitch the seams as directed.
7. Once all the pieces are sewn together, check that everything looks right and that you do not have one piece upside down, press all seams open. If you wish you can cross tack the seam allowance down.

Note: If you are using a seam allowance for a bone casing it will have to be stitched into place either by hand or by machine, I stitch by machine right along the inside edge of the serging.

8. Measure the length of the bone channels/casing. Subtract at least ½ an inch from this measurement and cut the bone to this length. It is imperative that the bone be at least ½ an inch shorter than the casing and even ¾" shorter is good. If the bone is not shorter, holes will result at either end of the casing where the bone ends rub. I tend to measure one length and cut one length rather than measure all and cut all, it saves my hands and it saves confusion as each piece gets slid into its casing as soon as it is cut.

The bones can be slid into their casings from the top edge.

9. Finish the top and bottom edges with bias as described for the two layer *coutil* corset, make facings for the top and bottom edges or "bag it out" using an identically shaped "shell" layer. By doing this no bone stitching will be seen on the out side.

## TECHNIQUE #3

The technique which results in a corset with a beautifully finished interior, but one that is not alterable.

1. Cut four of each pattern piece, 1-left outer layer, 1- right outer layer, 1- left inside layer and 1 – right inside layer of *coutil*.

Note: you may choose to use a basic herringbone *coutil* for the inside layer and a more attractive satin or brocade *coutil* for the outer layer, if so just cut 2 of each pattern piece in each fabric.

Inside layer is the "lining" and outside layer is the "shell". Mark the bone casing channels on the right side of the lining using disappearing ink pens or a tracing wheel with chalk carbon paper in a similar colour to lining fabric. Or, use tailors tacks (best method).

2. Layout the pieces in order, on a table. Lay them out so that you have each pattern piece side by side as they would be sewn together. Each "pattern piece" should consist of two layers; the inside layer and the outside layer and these should be wrong side to wrong side. See diagram 1 above.
3. Pick up the top piece on the far left and pin it to the next top piece, right sides together, notches matching. Continue along the line of pieces, pinning and double stitching each top layer piece into place. Be careful that all pieces are in the correct order and are not stitched into place upside down! Go through the same process with the second layer, stitching all pieces, right sides together and matching all notches. You now have a complete shell and a complete lining. If you are using a front opening and a back opening you will have four pieces. Press all seams open and clip seams at waist to allow the curve. All seams should be double stitched using two different stitch lengths. Top stitch twill tape along the waistline of the lining, stitching along top and bottom of twill tape from front to back.
4. Lay the lining on top of the shell and with right sides together, pin into place on the front and back pieces. Stitch the centre front and centre back seams as described in Technique #1 or #2 for busk and grommet applications step #'s 4 & 5.
5. Turn the pieces right sides out. Pin the pieces lining to shell and hand baste in the seam "ditches", being sure all seams line up.
6. With lining side up, machine stitch all bone casing lines through both layers of fabric. Where bone casing is to follow a seam stitch in the ditch and along the casing line. Remove basting stitches.
7. Handle bones and finishing of top and bottom edges as in Technique #1.

The inside of this corset will have the same finished look as the outside with no visible seam allowances.

# The Corset Glossary

## *Bones*

Also known as "stays" or "steels". Bones are used for support within a corset or bodice. For more specific information look under the following:

- [German Plastic Bones](#)
- [Plastic Whale Bone](#)
- [Spiral Steel Bones](#)
- [Spring Steel Bones](#)
- [Bone Casing](#)

Bone casings are the spaces where bones are placed within a garment and held in place. Bone casings can be made, by stitching two parallel lines through two layers of fabric. Bone casing can also be purchased in various widths and in two styles. One style is a tightly woven cotton ribbon that forms a casing when stitched to fabric. The other style is a "self contained" casing in that it is a flattened tube into which the bones can be slid with out the casing being sewn to anything. This is the more durable of the two styles.

## *Busk*

A busk is the stiff strip that is found in the centre front of corsets and some bodices. The busk can be made of wood or steel and some busks have nobbs and loops which enables them to function as a clasp. These were found only after about 1860.

For more information on busks see the following:

- [Busks](#)
- [Wide Busks](#)
- [Spoon Busks](#)
- [Non-opening busks](#)

## *Coutil*

Coutil is the name used for corseting fabrics. Only fabrics designed specifically for use in corset building should be called "coutil". Coutil is a tightly woven fabric that is not inclined to stretch. It can be made of cotton or any cotton blend and is woven in herringbone, brocade or satin finishes.

As a rule it has a factory applied finish, and can have a crisp or soft hand. Most corsets will not get washed and you do not need to wash the coutil before using. Dry cleaning is recommended.

## *Flatted*

Stitch together a lining and a shell piece. Wrong sides together, stitching around the perimeter. The pieces will lay flat, looking to be just one piece.