THE PUTNAM HOUSE

Scissors and Ghosts

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An Introduction to the Putnam House Clothing

It is not unusual for a family to give a group of related objects to their local historical society, but it is very rare indeed for a family to give—as the Emerson family did in the case of the Israel Putnam House—a dwelling occupied by a single family for over three centuries along with furniture, household items, numerous letters, family papers, textiles and clothing items, all connected with the people who lived there. The clothing and textiles alone number over four hundred items.

Together, the Putnam House, its related objects and documents form a very complex body of material with hundreds, probably thousands of as yet unknown interconnections that must be uncovered before we can really understand the family as a whole or even the importance of any single item. This article reflects only an initial exploration of the costumes and textiles, this writer's area of expertise, but what is already clear is that when surviving objects and documents are properly related, the whole picture is immeasurably enriched. Even objects that are apparently quite insignificant, such as the ripped-out cloak lining discussed in this essay, may acquire interest and meaning when correctly identified and placed in the context of family letters.

The Family Context for the Putnam Textiles

As most readers know, the Putnam family has a long history in Danvers beginning with the original settlement in the 1640s. They were centrally involved in the divisions of the witch hysteria in 1692, and the family name rose to national prominence with General Israel Putnam (of Bunker Hill fame), who was born in the house now owned by the Danvers Historical Society. General Israel lived there only during his childhood, but his brother David spent his entire life in this house, as did many of his descendents. Since most of the clothing preserved by the Putnams dates from the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, the part of the fam-

ily most central to the story of the surviving textiles is the family of David's grandson Daniel.

Daniel was born in 1774. He was primarily a farmer (the Putnam acreage was quite extensive before a large part of it was taken to build the railroad and the state hospital). As a young man he also started a shoemaking business in which he cut out shoes and distributed them to his neighbors to assemble. These heavy "brogans" were shipped south to be worn by slaves. In 1797, Daniel married a distant cousin, Susanna Putnam (whose brother Moses was another Danvers shoe entrepreneur). They had twelve children born between 1798 and 1825, of whom the six most important for this article are:

Emma	born 1800
Allen	born 1802
Daniel Franklin	born 1804
Ahira	born 1807
Susan	born 1813
Julia	born 1818

As Daniel and Susanna's children grew up and began to leave home, they wrote scores of letters to each other. Many were saved by Susan, the unmarried daughter who spent the whole of her long life in the family homestead. I have begun to read this correspondence and it is full of interest, but as a costume historian I am sorry to report that most of Daniel's children didn't have much to say about their clothes. They were deeply concerned about education, religion, politics, and the science of farming, but an interest in fashion was apparently a frivolity that only Julia indulged in. When Ansel wrote to Benjamin from Boston in 1842, he told him to "tell Julia that the latest city fashion is to milk. See if you can get her to follow it." [1]

The Scissors at Work: Julia's Cloak, 1843

If any of the Putnams tried to follow current fashion outside the barn, their methods involved altering old clothes as much as buying new ones. In November 1843, the recently-married Julia rashly started to cut up her old

cloak before consulting with her dressmaker. She removed from the voluminous garment enough fabric to make a large cape-collar which she planned to add to it as part of the renovation. But when the dressmaker arrived to help her fit it, Julia learned that cape collars were no longer in style, so she wrote to her sister Susan to describe her alterations and to warn her not to make the same mistake:

> My cloak I have made over, I ripped off the yoke, sleeves out, took out ½ breadth, new hemmed at the bottom, but did not alter the hooks & eyes. This much I had done when Miss Dudley came. She said she would not have a tight waist but plaited into the yoke as before which she altered a little on the shoulder, those slits under the arm I sewed up about ½ way & then put in a gusset, just like a neck gusset for the arm size, [2] the sleeves are the same inverted,[3] the cape[4] plain round, the same linings answering, & trimmed with a large cord rather larger than we use in dresses covered with the velvet, and one ½ as large round the sleeves & a collar cut the same as the other only larger & trimmed the same as the cape. Do you understand it? If you have not ripped yours I would not take out any, it is the fashion to go without any cape.[5]

Indeed, the fashion plate published in *Godey's Lady's Book* in November, 1843, the same month in which Julia wrote this letter, illustrates several cloaks and none of them have a cape-collar. All are shown in far richer materials than the Putnams could have afforded, but Julia's cloak may have looked something like the example at the far left.

Julia and Susan weren't the only ones thinking about new cloaks in the fall of 1843. From 1828 to 1847, their older sister Emma kept a little leather-covered account book listing all her clothing-related expenses,

and during the period from June 1843 to June 1844 she mentions the following:

10 sheets of batting	.30	[used for warm interlinings in cloaks and quilts]
velvet ribbon	.75	[presumably for new trim]
hooks & eyes	.16	[standard fastenings]
cutting pelisse	.50	[paid to a dressmaker to cut and fit the garment]
11 yds cambric	.92	[a common lining fabric]

The term *pelisse* usually implies a woman's fitted winter coat, suggesting that Emma chose the "tight waist" rather than the loose form Miss Dudley recommended for Julia (see the far right-hand figure in the 1843 fashion plate). Emma's account book does not indicate which entries were intended for the same project, so we cannot be certain that the cambric lining relates to the pelisse. There is no nearby entry likely to be the main "fashion fabric" that formed the visible exterior of the garment, unless the 7 yds Alpaca, 5.45 previously listed, was for the pelisse. Emma, like Julia, may have been remaking from an earlier garment.

When the Putnam sisters' cloaks reached the end of their useful lives after a career punctuated by repeated mending and restyling, the primary fabrics (probably wool worsteds) were almost certainly cut up to make into smaller garments or to braid into rugs. In a thrifty family, even the cambric lining with its warm wool interior batting would be saved for future use. In fact, the lining and attached batting from what was probably one of the Putnam sisters' 1843 cloaks was discovered amid the detritus of the Putnam House attic when the Danvers Historical Society removed the last of the textiles in 1998.

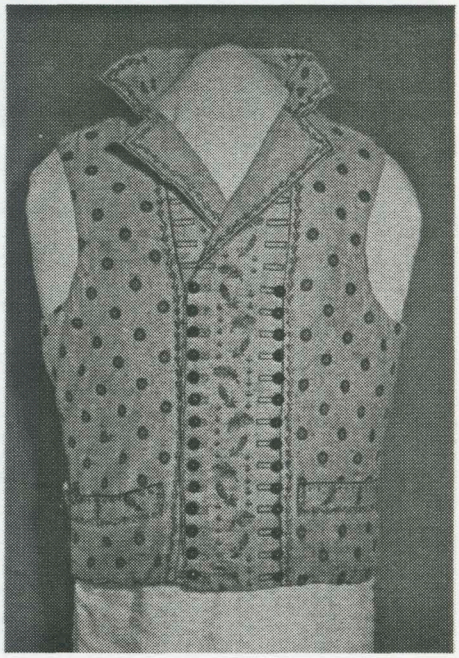
Admittedly this kind of survival is almost accidental. No one *planned* to keep an old cloak lining for 160 years. It was merely laid away for possible future use and forgotten about. Nevertheless, the thrift that caused that lining to be saved in the first place seems almost incomprehensible today. In today's throwaway American society, a hole in a garment is the signal to throw it out, not to mend it. And who in the last thirty years has both-

ered to *alter* a dress to keep it in fashion?

But in the nineteenth century textiles were far more valuable than the labor required to sew them together. Emma's account book makes this painfully clear. The amounts Emma paid others for their work (probably close to the market value for her own work, supposing she ever got paid for it) are pitifully small compared to what she had to pay for the raw materials. For example, 12 yards of cotton cloth—enough for a dress—cost her $1.50, while "for cutting and making [a] gown" she paid only 38 cents, only half a penny more than she spent for ¾ yard of lace.

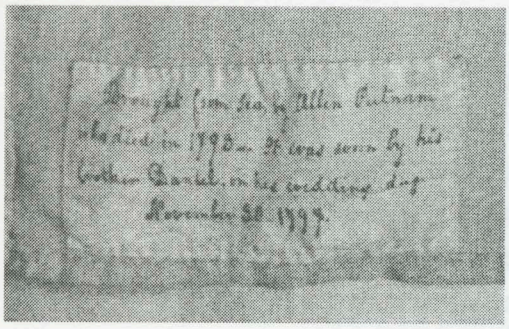
In the context of this hard-working middle-class family, prosperous but not rich, and living in a period when textiles were still very expensive, it comes as a surprise that ANY everyday clothing from the Putnams has come down to us in its original form. And yet a handful of highly evocative unaltered garments has survived, forcing the historian to ask why these pieces in particular escaped the dressmaker's scissors.

The Scissors Escaped: A Sailor Brother's Waistcoat, c. 1790



Anyone who works in a museum costume collection knows that garments associated with weddings are among those most likely to be preserved intentionally. Beyond the wedding dresses themselves (and no, they weren't always white—many brides preferred more useful colored day dresses), one also finds wedding shoes, bonnets, trousseau underwear and bedding, and on the men's side, waistcoats and sometimes suits. Daniel and Susannah Putnam's 1797 wedding is represented by Susannah's wedding quilt (solid dark green wool on one side, rose color on the other) and by Daniel's waistcoat. It is also possible that Susannah's wedding dress survives in a dress remade about 1806, but family history is silent on the subject.

The most revealing of the Putnam wedding garments is Daniel's waistcoat. It is made of cream-colored wool embel-



lished with extremely crude block-printing designed to imitate the elaborate embroidery produced in France in the late eighteenth century. Wearing cheap imitations of expensive fashions was always considered vulgar, and this printed waistcoat is the most obvious of imitations. It is far less sophisticated than the contemporary sheer white embroidered cotton fabric that Susannah probably wore on the same occasion (or at least owned about the same time). I would have expected a person of Daniel's status to wear a silk/wool mixture with perhaps a restrained woven sprig, not this. So why did he choose it? The answer is sewn right on the back of the waistcoat:

Brought from sea, by Allen Putnam who died in 1793. It was worn by his brother Daniel on his wedding day November 30, 1797.

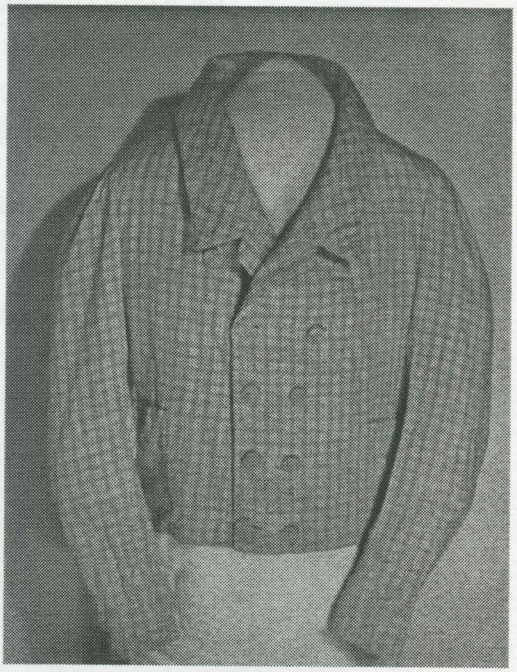
Allen Putnam was two years older than Daniel, and he may have been no more than 15 or 16 when he left home. We don't know what ship he was in or the circumstances of his death when he was only 21, but it is hard not to imagine him buying this waistcoat in some place catering to rough sailors in a far-off port. It was probably the finest thing he could afford out of his limited sailor's pay, and Daniel clearly treasured it as a link to his adored older brother. We know Allen was adored, because Daniel not only wore his brother's waistcoat at his own wedding, but he also named his firstborn son after him.

Clothing as Keepsake

When I began reading the Putnam family letters, archivist Richard Trask commented that New Englanders seem to have written far fewer letters before 1840 than they did afterwards. Eighteenth and early nineteenth century records tend to consist of account books, wills, deeds and other legal documents instead. That pattern is reflected in the Putnam family papers as well. So far I have noted no letters from Daniel and only one from Susannah. That one shows a less than firm grasp of spelling and grammar, suggesting that the older generation was less at ease with the pen. In a world where people rarely expressed themselves on paper, where

photographs hadn't been invented and most people didn't have the money to commission a portrait, how would you remember the people you loved? To preserve a garment you remember that person wearing seems as good a way as any. Allen's waistcoat may have been one of the few personal items closely associated with him and each new generation of Putnams dutifully saved it as something they had been taught to treasure.

Thus when a pre-1840 everyday garment survives unaltered in a frugal American family, it does not strain logic to think that it escaped the scissors because it belonged to someone who died young and was much grieved for. When we know the family who owned it and can date the garment, one can sometimes use this hypothesis to suggest a plausible owner for a previously undocumented object.



Stronger than Mere Flesh: A Yellow Gingham Jacket, c. 1835 - 1840

One such item in the Putnam family collection is a dark yellow and white checked gingham man's jacket dating from about 1840. Informal summer coats like this one were probably a common sight in New England towns in the 1830s and 1840s, but only a small handful survive and I know of only two other examples made of gingham.[6] Why was this one not either worn out or remade? Was it, like Allen's waistcoat, saved because it belonged to someone who died young?

It is not difficult to find a tragic death among the Putnams at this period to account for the jacket's survival. In fact there were two. Daniel Franklin Putnam, aged 35, and his younger brother Ahira, aged 32, died within weeks of each other during the typhus epidemic that raged through Danvers in 1839. The jacket may have belonged to either of them. Daniel Franklin ran the family shoe business, now called D. F. Putnam and Co., and Ahira worked with him. They were both married and both had three children. Ahira planted the first dahlias in Danvers and worked in the lo-

cal church. Daniel Franklin was active in community affairs and helped found the Village Bank, the first bank established in Danvers. Thanks to a letter written by Israel Proctor to Charles Preston, we know something of how people reacted to Daniel Franklin's death on October 7, 1839:

> Doubt, despondency and gloom rests on every countenance, and dismay seems imprinted on every forehead; day before yesterday the earthly remains of Daniel F. Putnam were committed to the tomb; thus is lost to the community one of our most active and useful citizens; as such they deplore him; to his family, his friends and connections, his loss will be more severely felt; to him they looked for guidance, on him they leaned for succor; his wife is bowed down with affliction, and fears are expressed that she will not long survive him; others in the neighborhood are complaining. Butler who was to be married this evening, has postponed it on account of ill health and Mr. Putnam's death; he died with the typhus fever of the most malignant kind, approximating as near the yellow fever as our climate will admit of.[7]

Ahira's second child died in the typhus epidemic. Daniel Franklin's wife survived. ~~but~~ Of these two promising young men, all that remains are a few scattered references ~~to promising young men~~ and—perhaps—a yellow gingham jacket that someone could not bear to cut up.

The Graceful Ghost: A Blue Glazed Wool Dress, c. 1831

The most intriguing example of an unexpected survival among the Putnam clothing is a glazed blue wool dress from the 1830s with huge leg o' mutton sleeves that are held out by down-filled puffs. This is an extremely rare dress. In its day, the dark glazed wool would have been a common choice for winter, suitable for a middle-class girl to wear to church when it was new, and for lighter indoor work when it had lost its first gloss. But unlike silks that were treasured and preserved (though often made over in new styles), wool was a fabric that was used to the point of extinction. This dress should have ended up, like the cloaks, braided into a rug. Yet it sur-

vives without significant alteration. Can it be connected to any event in the Putnam family history that would account for its survival?

The dress clearly dates from the period 1830 -1833. Dresses made during those years are characterized by (among other things) sleeves that are very full on the upper arm. It is important to the story of this dress that large leg o' mutton sleeves, after having been the height of fashion since 1828, abruptly went out of style in Paris late in 1836. The instant American women went into town and saw the new Parisian tight sleeve in the winter of 1836/1837, the huge sleeves they had been happy to wear when they left home began to feel as ridiculous as a pair of pumpkins tied to their shoulders. So they went home and changed them.

The alteration was so easy and the outmoded style suddenly so ludicrous that there was no reason to delay. In most cases you could fix the problem without even removing the sleeves from the dress. You just smoothed down the fullness from the shoulder toward the elbow and stitched it down into neat flat pleats before letting the fullness bloom a little at the elbow. In fact, updating the sleeves was so easy that very few early 1830s dresses escaped the change, and the survival of this blue dress still with its full sleeves—including even the down pillows worn inside them to keep them puffed out—is nothing short of amazing. Someone clearly wanted this dress kept exactly as it looked in 1830--1833. Why? Which of the Putnam women wore it?

The dress is slender and reasonably stylish—a young woman's dress. Who in the Putnam family in 1830 would have been of an age to wear it? The matriarch, Susannah, was 55 by this time and had gone through at least twelve pregnancies. She is not a candidate. The Putnam girls living in 1830 included Emma (age 30), Susan (age 17), Maria (age 14) and Julia (age 12). Julia is a little young, but in any case, Emma, Susan, and Julia all lived into old age. Maria died at age 25 in 1841, but if the dress had been hers, she, like any of the others, would have updated the sleeves by 1837. No, we are looking for someone who died before that critical fashion change occurred.

Since none of the Putnam daughters quite fit the requirements, we must look to the wives of the Putnam sons, preferably one whose personal belongings might logically have been preserved in the Putnam house. There are four wives in the right generation:

Abigail Pierce, who married Allen on December 1, 1831
Susan H. Putnam, who married Daniel Franklin in June, 1832
Sarah Bradstreet, who married Ahira in October, 1834
Mary Phelps, who married William in 1839

The husbands of Susan and Sarah were the brothers who died in the typhus epidemic. The two widows maintained close ties with the family in the homestead, but they made their homes elsewhere, and Sarah at least, was far too poor not to continue to wear a useful dress like this one. Mary did live in the house, but not until 1845. And besides, every one of these women lived through the great fashion change of 1836/1837. They would have altered the sleeves.

The only woman who fits all the necessary criteria is Abigail Pierce, the wife of Allen Putnam. Allen was Daniel's oldest son (the one named after Daniel's sailor brother). He attended Harvard and was ordained as a Unitarian minister in November 1831. A week later he married Abigail Pierce, a girl from Northampton, MA, and the young couple immediately went to housekeeping in Augusta, Maine, where Allen had his first church. The blue wool dress may have been part of her trousseau or even her wedding dress. The rich dark blue wool seems appropriate for a December wedding for a minister's wife, and for life in Maine in the winter of 1831/32. She probably wore it unaltered the next winter as well, since dress fashions did not change significantly. But in 1833, she became pregnant and her daughter, Abby Hinckley Putnam, was born in December. This means that the dress would have been laid aside during the winter of 1833-34 when she was pregnant and then nursing. Abigail died on July 2, 1834, before the change came in the sleeves.

I have found no letters describing the circumstances of her death, but tuberculosis was widespread during this period, as many other heartbreaking Putnam letters attest. The biographical sketch of Allen Putnam in

the Putnam family genealogy says that his health broke after his wife died and that he came home to Danvers to recover. He never returned to the ministry, and it is hard not to conclude that Abigail's death provoked a spiritual crisis as well as a physical illness. She died leaving a baby girl who would never know her mother. We have no portrait of her, and no letters from her have been found. What could be more natural than for Allen to bring this dress home with him to Danvers so that his little daughter could form some idea of what her mother had looked like? What better memento of a beloved wife than this lovely, dignified blue wool dress? While we can never be 100% certain that the dress was Abigail's, this hypothesis does answer the critical question why the dress was never cut up and made over.

But the story does not quite end in 1834. After his wife's death, Allen worked on the family farm in Danvers, where his widowed sister Emma brought up baby Abby. Ambrotypes taken in the 1850s show that Abby grew up to be a beautiful young woman, but she never married. Later,she lived with her aunt Julia across the street from the old homestead.[8]

Gradually, Allen Putnam must have rebounded, since we find him taking a larger role in public life. In 1840/1841, he represented Danvers in the Massachusetts General Court and was editing a periodical called the *New England Farmer*. By 1843, he had established himself in the coal business in Roxbury (where his younger sister Julia was also living with her new husband). In June of that year he married for the second time, but his new wife, Hannah Williams, died of tuberculosis only five months later. He married again in 1846, and his third wife, Sarah Bartlett, appears to have lived into the 1870s. After her death, he married yet a fourth time, in 1881, when he was 79.

Allen Putnam entered a new phase in his life in 1852 when he attended a séance in Boston. Spiritualism had appeared in America in the late 1840s and it continued to attract followers well into the 1870s. It appealed not merely to the gullible and ignorant, but to intelligent, educated people. One historian of the movement writes: [9]

> While the spiritualist movement comforted the recently bereaved, it also made spiritual matters the subject of empirical investigation. Spiritualism's rationalist, perfectionist and individualistic assumptions linked people in the movement with the liberal, progressive, even radical reform movements of the time—abolition, woman's rights, health reform, labor reform and communal experiments. Spiritualism inspired the activism of many leaders of these movements
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An account of Allen's first experience with spiritualism is given by Robert Hare in his 1855 book *Experimental Investigation of the Spirit Manifestations:*

> As affording support to the testimony which I have given, I deem it expedient to cite that of the Rev. Allen Putnam, formerly a Unitarian clergyman and preacher in Augusta, Maine, having been in the legislature of that State, and for some time editor of the New England Farmer. Mr. Putnam had the advantage of a theological and collegiate education at Harvard. I heard an able and erudite lecture from this worthy spiritualist, at Boston last October. Mr. Putnam entered upon the investigation of the manifestations in July, 1852, nearly eighteen months before my investigation commenced. Like me, he began as an unbeliever, and was converted by communications received from the spirits of his wife and relatives, who had left this life. In a company ignorant of the fact that he had married twice, his first wife had made herself known to him, so as to create a conviction of her identity [pages 56 -57].

By 1852, Allen Putnam had in fact been married three times, not twice, but it seems likely that the first wife this story refers really was his first wife Abigail. His second wife came from Boston and that marriage was more likely to be known in that city. But Abigail had been from western Massachusetts, their marriage had taken place twenty-two years earlier, they had lived not in Boston but in Augusta, Maine, and she had been dead for eighteen years. Allen might well have believed that no one around the table that day knew of his long-ago marriage to a girl in a blue dress.

Hearing Abigail speak from beyond the grave must have been an almost overpowering experience, especially if it is true that Allen's faith had been

badly shaken by her death in 1834. It clearly changed his life. By 1853 he was giving public lectures on spiritualism and he wrote several books on the subject.

As for the lovely blue dress with its great old-fashioned sleeves, it remained safe from the frugal scissors in the attic of the old homestead until no one could remember why it had been saved. Once the embodiment of great sorrow, it became no more than an amusement for children playing dress-up in the attic on a rainy day.

Afterword

In the early nineteenth century good, strong fabric was too valuable for people like the Putnams to waste. To refuse to recycle an old waistcoat or an out-of-fashion dress into a warm new quilt or a cheerful rug would have struck those Yankee farmers as laziness or extravagance. After all, waste not, want not! Given this mindset, it took a powerful reason to stay their hand, to make them lay down the scissors and give up the habit of getting the last bit of wear out of an old garment. Only the strongest of sentimental associations had this kind of power—the association with a wedding or the desire to remember a loved one who was lost.

But after 1840 a number of cultural changes made the desire to remember the dead a smaller factor in the survival of old clothes. Portrait photography became widely available in the 1840s and letter-writing was easier for people who had spent more time in school as children. In the case of the Putnams, the children who came of age in the 1830s and later were better educated than their parents and they tended to write long, lively letters that give us a clear sense of their personalities. Emma and Julia Emma Putnam still live in their letters. We don't need a dress to get a sense of them (nor do we apparently have one). We know what Allen's little girl looked like from a series of ambrotypes, but without the blue wool dress, her mother would have no reality for us at all.

[1] Ansel to Benjamin, April 26, 1842. Ansel and Benjamin were Julia's younger brothers, both interested in agriculture.

[2] Size is a misspelling for "scyes," the technical term for the arm holes. The underarm slit that Julia got rid of by adding a gusset is a detail found occasionally in sleeved mantles of the early 1840s. It was presumably designed to keep the garment from binding under the arms, but apparently it didn't work very well.

[3] Julia probably means that she turned each sleeve (often straight and tube like at this period), upside down to move the wear marks that tend to develop at the wrists from the bottom of the sleeve to the top. This would have positioned fresher-looking fabric at the highly visible sleeve-ends. If the upper sleeves had to be pieced to accomplish this, the piecing would not show under the cape collar.

[4] In this context, "cape" means not the garment as a whole, but the large cape-collar Julia was adding. Cape-collars had been fashionable since the late 1820s but were now going out of style.

[5] Julia Putnam Philbrick to her sister Susan Putnam, November 6, 1843.

[6] One is a blue and white checked cotton frock coat dated 1845 and preserved at Historic Northampton, MA. The other is a Harvard student's informal summer gown (called a "toga") worn in 1834-1835. It is made of green and white checked gingham trimmed with white fringe and is preserved in the Harvard University Archives.

[7] *Danvers Historical Collections*, vol. 9, p. 104-105.

[8] A letter to Julia gives a tiny glimpse of Abby's life when she was about ten:
My Dear Aunt.
I think that you are a little homesick from your letters . . . You may tell uncle John [Julia's husband] that I wear woolen pantalets to school, and that I wore a pair of dark ones to meeting last Sunday, and that I shall probably [make?] to or 3 more, so that he may not trubble himself about b[u]ying me any red flannel, at present.
From your affectionate neice Abby H Putnam

[9] John Buescher. "Spiritualism." *Dictionary of Unitarian & Universalist Biography*, an online reference available on the Unitarian Universalist website (www.uua.org).