

COLUMNS

Worcester County Wonders: Bound by fashion in the City of Corsets

**[Sarah Barnacle](#)**

Worcester Telegram & Gazette

Aug. 24, 2025 | Updated Aug. 26, 2025, 2:45 p.m. ET

WORCESTER — Walking down Main Street, a pedestrian might notice the windows of the former Denholm Building are full of brightly colored fashion. Bursts of hue, in all different shapes, textures and textiles greet visitors, celebrating the former retailer's 103-year history as the largest department store outside of Boston.

Avert your gaze toward the Hanover Theatre and tucked into the scenery of the sidewalk is a tribute to another piece of Worcester's fashion history: The corset.

Designed by Jennifer Rubin Garey, the deep red metal sculpture shows the intricate details and mechanics of the piece of underwear. Standing next to the sculpture is Anne Marie Murphy, who has been working on a book, "[A Proper Fit: Woman working in a City of Corsets](#)," which is due out in October.

"There are so many untold stories here, especially from the women," she said. "I went to the library to see what I could find and there was nothing."

Murphy, who moved to Worcester about eight years ago, began researching the history of the corset during the pandemic, creating a walking tour and even a coloring book depicting the "Amazing Women of Worcester."

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It was 1872 when the unnatural shape made by cinching the wearer's waist and boosting the bust was the ideal fashion statement, and that same year, the Royal Worcester Corset Company was founded by David Hale Fanning.

Worcester's corset history

Fanning had established a hook-skirt factory a decade earlier, but changed production from skirts to corsets, which proved to be a wise business decision.

Four decades later, five other major corset companies and more than 100 corset shops would call Worcester home. Many of these shops are highlighted on Murphy's tour including the Adrian Shop, located at 6 Franklin St., now the home of a Santander Bank.

Royal Worcester led the pack, employing some 2,000 people, about 90% of which were women, and touted itself as "the factory of America." Company advertisements touted "Style, Comfort, Economy," and described their corsets as offering "great flexibility."

"If you got a job at Royal Worcester, it was considered an 'enlightened employer' as Fanning made employee retention a priority. Lots of people who worked for Royal Worcester stayed; you never left," Murphy explained.

The company made three different brands: "Royal Worcester," "Bon Ton" and "Adjusto," for larger women. Prices ranged from \$3 to 15, roughly the equivalent to \$24 to \$366 in today's prices.

Everyone wore corsets, explained Murphy, regardless of class, finances or social standing. At the Museum of Worcester, there is a corset within the collection that is meant for a girl as young as 6.

"It was a badge of wealth and elegance that is totally hidden," Murphy continued with a laugh, adding wealthy women would have 20 to 30 corsets, while a "working girl" may have one or two.

Soon orders were coming in from around the world including South Africa, Sweden, China and Argentina. Traveling salespeople were also at work, selling and advertising the pieces around the country.

Many employees had to purchase their own thread, and despite the workforce being 90% women, they were still paid a fraction of what male employees earned.

Apart from the thread, there were several other things deducted from a woman's paycheck including a fee for the lighting and cleaning of the building, said Murphy.

'No women in management'

"There were no women in management," Vanessa Bumpus, exhibit coordinator of the Museum of Worcester said. "But these women would have lunch on fine china, with classical music being pumped in and waiters would serve their meals."

"It's true," Murphy said with a smile. "There was a huge cafeteria, with porcelain tiles and a live quartet playing in the corner."

At the same time, the success of businesses like Fanning's trickled down to many of the female employees, some of whom were able to leave and start their own enterprises. One of those women was "salesman" Mary Gertrude Heintzelman.

It was Heintzelman's story that first got Murphy interested in the form-fitting history of her adopted hometown.

"I really wanted to know about this woman who owned her own corset factory," Murphy said. "Many of these women had no children, no spouses and she was maybe one of 400 women who held any sort of upper-management role and I'd say half of those women inherited their businesses from their husband or father."

Heintzelman opened her own company, the Corset H Company, in 1904. It later

became the Ivy Corset Factory. One thing Heintzelman had going for her that other businesses did not was her gender. She began promoting a “designed by women” emphasis.

“These Corsets are designed by a woman who knows the requirements of a feminine figure,” a 1908 advertisement for the Ivy Corset Factory read. And if that didn’t attract customers, the company also had a special diamond-studded corset that traveled around the country.

By 1910, the city of Worcester was shipping more corsets worldwide than the U.S. was importing. Worcester-made corsets began popping up in the windows of Parisian shops and Ivy Corset opened a shop on Fifth Avenue in New York City in 1920.

"It was all about bragging rights," Murphy explained, adding none of the corsets were meant to be seen. "Your girlfriends would probably know. You'd tell them 'I got the latest Ivy corset,' and then your lover, but corsets were always covered."

Heintzelman wasn’t just selling her designs but transforming the corset as the industry knew it. She invented and patented the boneless corset, a “corset of the girdle or step-in type” made of elastic and even began selling brassieres, which wouldn’t come until decades later.

"It's just so interesting this massive workforce of women and the friendships, partnerships that were formed," Murphy said.

Just like the modern concept of loyalty to your hairdresser, many women had one specific corset-maker they saw, who kept their specific measurements.

"Just like some people like Coca Cola, some like Pepsi," said Murphy. "Or some people like Burger King while others like McDonald's, it was the same when it came to your corset maker."

With the start of World War I came a supply shortage and a move for more

women to turn away from the traditional corset. Now women gravitated toward two-piece undergarments, opting for comfort over style, as many went to work.

Women around the globe let out a collective sigh of relief as the corset was loosened and the “boyish figure” made headway into the fashion limelight.

"Many of these companys had to retool their businesses," Murphy explained. "They made things like parachutes and backpacks."

By 1950, Royal Worcester, much like the corset, was a thing of the past and on its way out.

That year, the then president of Royal Worcester Corset Co., E.A. Meister [donated his collection](#) of 171 corsets to the Brooklyn Museum in honor of his late father-in-law and former president of the company, Isidor Roth. The collection is now in the hands of the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

Standing next to “Flat Curves,” at one time Denholm’s, Macy’s and Marcus’s department stores could be seen from that very spot on the sidewalk. While the buildings have been repurposed, the corset continues to recycle itself into fashion subgenres every few years.

"Up until recently, corsets were always worn under clothing," Murphy said.

As we trade our summer fashion for autumnal looks, the corset is making a comeback in 2025, according to [Glamour](#). Models like Naomi Campbell and entertainers like [Taylor Swift](#) and Christina Aguilera have all been spotted wearing the tightly-bound fashion statement.

While women may not be running out to get this season's corset, it's clear the undergarment is dropping the "under" and has transformed into a piece of wearable history, a history Worcester is proud of.

The corset will be highlighted at the [175th anniversary of the first National Women's Rights Convention](#), which will take place at Mechanics Hall Oct. 22 and Oct. 23, 2025.

T&G engagement editor Sarah Barnacle is getting to know Central Mass. by exploring some of the best places to go and things to do in Worcester County. If you have an idea or suggestion, please email sbarnacle@gannett.com.