

Bathing Suits

Swimwear has evolved a great deal since swimming became a recreational activity in the mid-1800s. American bathing suit designs during the Victorian era were influenced by ideals of modesty.

When women first started going into the water they wore full dresses with black stockings and bloomers, sometimes even sewing weights into the bottom of their dresses so their skirts would not accidentally fly up and expose too much. Bathing suits gradually became more revealing as they adjusted to allow women to swim without being weighed down with a cumbersome wool suit.

Children were allowed more freedom and were able to take off their shoes and stockings, and roll up their pantaloons.

At Sutro Baths all swimming guests, both male and female, were issued wool suits with a short skirt that covered short trunks. It was not until the late 1930s that men began to wear swim trunks. Women's swimwear became gradually more revealing throughout the 1920s and 1930s, culminating in the introduction of the bikini in the 1940s.



Left to right: Late 19th-century bathing outfits; mens and women's swimsuits worn at Sutro Baths.