The history of sidesaddle riding attire is not a tale of fashion alone. It is also the story of woman's place in society, of attitudes and prejudices, opportunities and restrictions. Although silhouettes might change every decade, social changes could take centuries.
THE ERA OF FULL SKIRTS
17th century to 1875

1779 Early riding habits frequently borrowed from men’s attire, allowing women to experience, however vicariously, a sense of masculine power. This reproduction habit is based on Sir Joshua Reynolds’ portrait of Lady Worsley, who took status-seeking a step further. Her habit was based on the uniform of her husband’s regiment, the Hants Militia, with plumed hat, ample underpetticoats, and white slippers providing the feminine touch.

1652 An early habit of the Louis XIV period called for a velvet brocade jacket with “buttons, loops, bowknots and braid,” interpreted here with slashed sleeves. A sheer shirt with a “falling band”, cloth skirt, and black hat with plumes would have completed the outfit. This is one of the earliest outfits intended primarily for riding, and the masculine influence is undeniable.
1795-1810 The *Empire* style habit was influenced by French *Directoire* styles. All fabrics in the original would have been light weight: highwaisted underdress and jacket in "pale blue, soft worsted woolen cloth"; habit shirt in sheer white fabric; and petticoats of silk or lawn. The straight-cut skirt was so long that it had to be held up or carried over the arm until on horseback. A system of tapes and tabs inside the skirt allowed it to be "tied up" (shortened) for walking or for use as a traveling costume.

1800-1815 Again borrowing from the gentlemen, this reproduction habit features the military look of fitted jacket, double lapels (*revers*) and brass buttons popular at the time. Underneath—a one-piece "jumper" worn over ruffled habit shirt. The long skirt of the original has been interpreted for modern use as a *train*, buttoned up or carried in the left hand for ease in walking. From a British fashion illustration.
1890's The hour-glass silhouette of the 1890’s was interpreted for riding in this black wool habit by L.P. Hollander & Co. of Boston, MA. The closely fitted jacket buttons high, its shape insured by eleven stays. A complicated double-knee-pocket riding skirt was designed to fit smoothly over the upper pommel of a sidesaddle yet hang with a level hem. The extra length of skirt, or train, is carried in the left hand for mounting or swagged behind and buttoned up on the right hip for walking.
The high mandarin collar, multi-button front, and stylized coat-tail, seen in French fashions as early as the 1870’s, were more typical of American habits in the 1880’s. This habit, in a very light weight bottle green wool, has 11 seams and two stays in the basque, or snugly fitted bodice. Straight legged riding trousers of matching fabric were standard under the double-knee-pocket riding skirt of the period.

The shaped riding skirt was at first considered too complicated to be made at home, but by the late 1800’s fashion magazines included patterns and directions as well as illustrations. While women who rode did so in a sidesaddle, not all needed or could afford a tailored habit. This riding skirt in denim, a sturdy fabric that had been used in work clothes for over 100 years, was a rural woman’s practical alternative.
A heavy melton wool habit by Deggerberg of Philadelphia, PA, features the long, princess style coat popular in the Edwardian era. Its shaped riding skirt, following a movement that began around 1885, has evolved into a single-knee-pocket style known as the half apron skirt. When buttoned up for walking, its “new” safety feature—a cut out area under the right leg intended to prevent the skirt from catching on pommels—is concealed from prying eyes.
1910 - 1915  Washable fabrics were both acceptable and popular for summer wear or tropical climates. A natural linen habit, by Hill and Hill of Boston, MA, features an *apron* instead of a skirt, covering only the part of the rider that shows when she is in the saddle. This early version was made with longer hem and “modesty panels” to insure propriety while off the horse. The slender, unlined coat comes almost to the knees for a long-waisted look; underneath the apron--linen breeches that lace at the calf instead of button.
1920-1930 No label is found in this white linen habit, suggesting it was custom made by a local tailor. The shorter, less fitted jacket indicates a time when corseting had finally passed from fashion--sometime in the early 1920’s. White linen breeches and a standing collar shirt with buttons for detachable stock tie were originally worn with this habit.

1931 This formal habit with doublebreasted shadbelly coat was made by Roberts and Carroll, London, for the MFH of the Warrenton Hunt in VA. As the abbreviated midriff did not offer sufficient coverage for cold or rainy days, it would have been reserved for Opening Meet and Hunt Club classes. Made in “Oxford Grey” cavalry twill, with collar and waistcoat in Warrenton’s colors, it represents the standardization of hunting attire for women.
1959  Sidesaddle riding was once so popular in Saddle Horse classes that habits could be ordered through major riding apparel stores. This informal habit from Millers, NYC, is made of wool gabardine in the tailored "Ivy League" silhouette of the times, and was appropriate attire for morning, afternoon, and certain evening classes. A colored silk stock tie would have been a neckwear option.