

## **Centre County Historical Society Teaches Public About Victorian Social Conventions Through Tea**

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By [Michael Martin Garrett](#)

Despite the fact that it was nearly 80 degrees in State College on Sunday, Bonnie Barry was wearing seven layers of clothing: knee high stockings, split drawers, a chemise, two different petticoats, a lacey pink dress and the hoop beneath her skirt.

Barry, a member of the reenactment organization the Ladies of Battery B, was dressed in full Victorian regalia for a Victorian Tea for Families event at the Centre Furnace Mansion in State College on Sunday afternoon.

Arranged by recent Penn State graduate Olivia Perdeu and the Centre County Historical Society, the afternoon event promoted hands on engagement with a period of history of great importance and influence for the Centre region.

Mary Sorensen, the historical society executive director, says that the Victorian era – a period from the mid to late nineteenth century when Queen Victoria was in power – were the decades when Centre County first began to grow and prosper.

The Centre Furnace Mansion, home of the historical society, was the site of a banquet of community and business leaders during this period that lead to the founding of Farmer's High School – which would later evolve into Penn State.

“This mansion and our events help represent the transition into one of Centre County’s major industries: education,” Sorensen says.

This dinner was on Perdeu’s mind when she was planning Sunday’s Victorian tea event. During dinners and other formal events, a strict set of etiquette rules were enforced by social convention.

“There were lists and lists and books full of rules for social interactions for women,” Perdeu told the gathered crowd of families. “Putting your elbows on the table, or taking too big of a bite would lead to being chastised.”

As part of two independent studies for integrative arts and English at Penn State, Perdeu found primary sources documenting these intricate social conventions. She then incorporated this information into Sunday’s event as the final entry into the mansion’s “Veiled Arts of Victorian Women” exhibit.

Some of these social conventions were listed on the back of the event’s menu. The Ladies of Battery B explained the intricacies of the restrictive period clothing, and stations were set up for children to make their own calling cards and Victorian fans.

State College youngster Julian Tapia, himself dressed in an old-fashioned vest and hat, excitedly made his own fan, which Perdeu explained were used as part of a "secretive language" some woman communicated with. The fan-making station was set up as a way to incorporate hands-on history education for children into an organization that often schedules lectures and galleries.

“My goal with this event wasn’t to have kids walking away knowing lists of etiquette rules, but to be aware and appreciative of the past,” Perdeu says.

His mother, Andrea Tapia, was also dressed in an appropriately retro costume. She’s been collecting various costumes since her junior year of high school, and has pieced together a wide variety of outfits from consignment shops and yard sales. She says she always enjoys the chance to indulge in her hobby.

State College resident Leonard Malinowski attended Sunday’s event with his wife Agatha, and says they often come to the historical society’s events.

“It’s a treasure for any place to have this sense of antiquity,” Malinowski says. “It creates a certain pride in the longevity of life and the history of our country.”