

Diplomatic Uniform of John Y. Mason, 1854 - 1859

Gift of Nancy R. Schaefer (Great-great granddaughter of Minister John Y. Mason)



What do you put in a diplomacy museum—dusty old uniforms? No, just those with a good story tucked in the pocket.



John Y. Mason
Library of Congress

When John Y. Mason, a former Attorney General and Secretary of the Navy, took up his posting as Minister Plenipotentiary (Ambassador) to the court of Napoleon III and Empress Eugenie 1853-1859, he devised this uniform. He knew that a uniform would ease his way into the French court, but did not realize how the uniform would also touch on sensitive nerves back home.

As Mason set off for France, the United States was a young country, striving for respect from foreign states, yet determined to retain its individuality and ideals. To Americans, the shiny braid, gilt embroidery and gold buttons of foreign diplomats' attire represented the elitism and, to their minds, the foolishness of European courts. One way Americans could stand apart in the diplomatic world was to reject ornate uniforms and instead appear clothed as plain citizens. So plain, in fact, that Queen Victoria remarked that American diplomats resembled undertakers, ready to bury the dead rather than conduct diplomacy.



Empress Eugénie
Library of Congress



Napoleon III
Library of Congress



Map of France



Persian (Kashan) envoys at
court of Napoleon III

When he arrived in France, Mason discovered that a plain dark suit did not convey the importance his government placed on this diplomatic assignment, nor did a plain suit demonstrate proper respect for the French court. He had an unpretentious uniform tailored to follow French dress protocol to wear while conducting his nation's affairs. Based on his prior post as Secretary of the Navy, he designed a simplified naval officer's uniform with a blue woolen jacket, modest gold embroidery at the collar and cuffs, and a line of eagle-adorned gold buttons to close the jacket. The white woolen trousers bore a simple dark stripe along each outer leg. White gloves and a three-cornered hat called "*port bras*" ("carried by arm") completed the dress uniform.

Caught in a "damned if you do, damned if you don't" position, this unassuming uniform sparked trouble for Mason. Journalists from the U.S. chastised him for submitting to the French royal code of behavior. Still other writers approved his resourcefulness, and a heated debate ensued.