



The Gilded Age Hair Trade

IN ST. LOUIS

BY DAVID L. STRAIGHT

Top left: The corner card from the late 1870s sports an elegant evening hairstyle. Mrs. E. M. Dumas first appears in the 1870 city directory as a "Hair Dresser and Worker." By 1876 the entry is for A. M. Dumas and continues under "Hair — Human" until 1895. (Image: Collection of the author)

Top right: Saveris DiFranza, a "Dealer in and Manufacturer of Human Hair Goods, Hair Ornaments and Toilets" notes the succession from A. R. Sabini on the 1881 letterhead, which depicts a small wig for covering baldness or thinning hair at the top of the head. The attractive pair of curls on the corner card has a loop for hanging, when they are not being worn. DiFranza was listed as an employee of Florian DeDonato in 1883, but then independently from 1884 through 1888. (Image: Collection of the author)

Right: A. Pozzoni, whose 1869 corner card advertises him as a "Manufacturer and Importer of Human Hair, Gentlemen's and Ladies' Wigs, Bandeaux, Braids, Curls, Puffs, &c., &c." was listed in the 1865 city directory as owning a "Hair Dye Factory," in 1870 as a "Hair Dresser and Worker," and then under "Hair — Human" from 1871 until 1884. In 1885, he was listed as a perfumer. The back of his cover shows a cooperative advertising scheme in which several unrelated businesses share printing costs; his ad is on the top row. (Image: Collection of the author)



WHOLESALE AND RETAIL
EUROPEAN HAIR STORE,

100 SOUTH FIFTH STREET,

Under Southern Hotel.

ST. LOUIS.



Is constantly supplied with the choicest selections of

HUMAN HAIR

DIRECTLY IMPORTED FROM
 RELATIONS IN EUROPE.

We carry the largest and most extensive stock of Human Hair, buy at the lowest possible prices, do the largest and most extensive business, and carry conviction to every mind who compares our prices, that we are decidedly the cheapest on the American Continent, for Wigs, Toupees, Braids, Curls and every description of Hair work.

THE TRADE SUPPLIED ON LIBERAL TERMS.

Importers, Dealers and Manufacturers of every Description of HAIR WORK.

Real Hair Braids, from \$2.00; Curls from \$1.00; Puffs from \$1.00; 25 per cent. cheaper than down town stores. Combing made into Switches, &c., &c., 50 and \$1.00 Hair added if desired. 1, round the head; 2, forehead to neck; 3, E to E; 4, E to E over the crown.

WEST END HAIR STORE

1829 & 1831 FRANKLIN AV.

W. L. LARGÉ & CO.

TRADE MARK

19th & FRANKLIN AVE

SAINT LOUIS MO.

IMPORTERS OF HUMAN HAIR

MANUFACTURERS OF WIGS, TOUPEES, SWITCHES, BRAIDS, CURLS, PUFFS & ALL MANNER OF HAIR WORK

"Will you buy my hair?" asked Della.

"I buy Hair," said Madame. "Take yer hat off and let's have a sight at the looks of it."

Down rippled the brown cascade.

"Twenty dollars," said Madame, lifting the mass with a practiced hand.

"Give it to me quick," said Della.

*— "The Gift of the Magi"
 by O. Henry*

In O. Henry's classic story, after months of scrimping, Della had only managed to save \$1.87 out of her living expenses to buy a Christmas gift—a watch chain—for her husband, Jim. Desperate, she turned to her only remaining resource—Della sold her hair. "The Gift of the Magi" reflects the trade in human hair that underlay the elaborate Victorian hairstyles. While O. Henry had no doubt witnessed such scenes in New York, where he wrote, Madame could have easily been a St. Louis hair dealer. In 1882, the St. Louis city directory listed twenty-five businesses under the heading, "Hair — Human," plus one under "Hair Jewelry."¹ In contrast, the 1865 St. Louis city directory listed just a single "Hair Dealer," Jules Pinaud; a hair dye factory; two companies under the heading "Hair Ornaments and Hair Jewelry"; plus eleven hair dressers. "Hair Workers" became a directory heading, distinct from "Hair Dressers," two years later. The heading "Hair — Human" first appeared in 1871 with fifteen listings. After 1882, the number of listings gradually declined until its last usage in 1899 with a single name, Mary DiFranza. By that time, several who had previously listed themselves under "Hair — Human" now selected the heading "Hair

¹The only large ads for the hair trade to appear in the St. Louis city directory during this period were in 1874 (page 1091).

Dresser” for their businesses. The heading “Hair Watch Chains” appeared only in the 1880 edition. While business records are not known to have survived for any St. Louis hair dealers, city directory listings—together with their “corner cards,” the promotional graphics and text that accompany a return address on business envelopes—provide a glimpse of the hair trade in Gilded Age St. Louis.

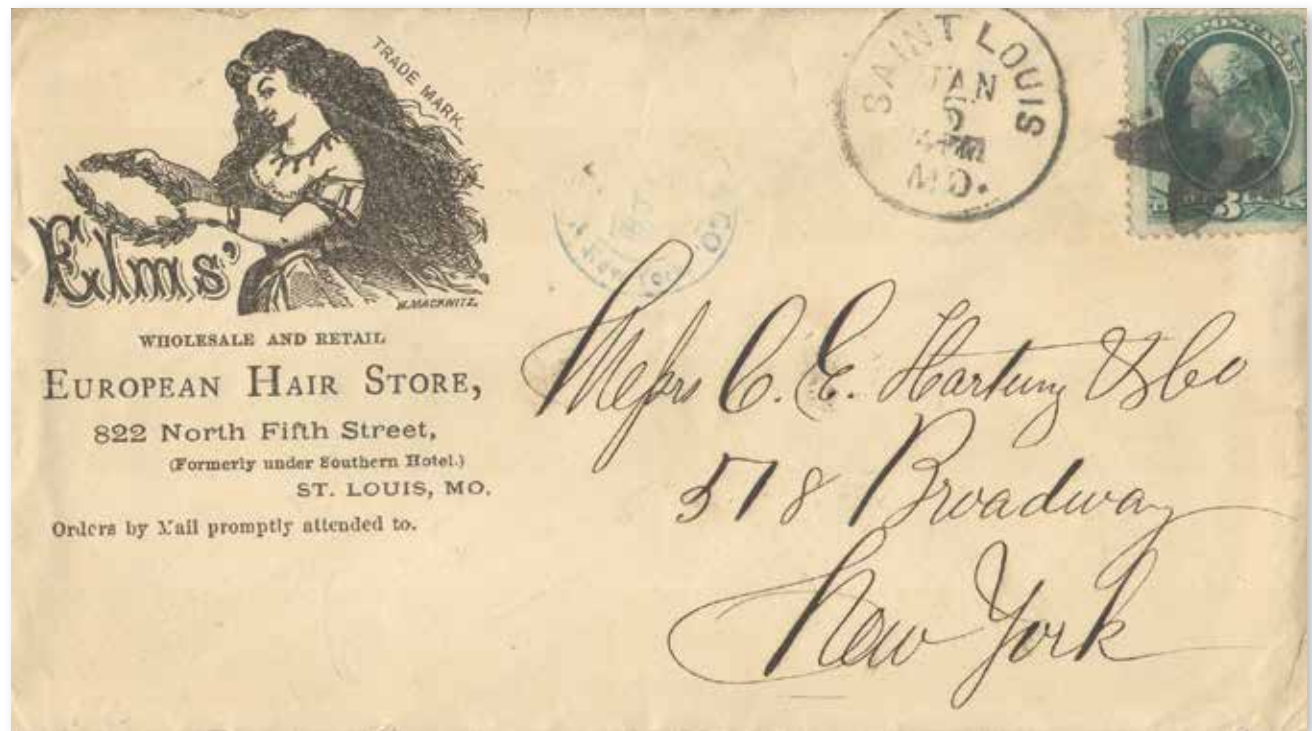
In the story, Jim sold his pocket watch to buy a set of tortoise shell combs, “just the shade to wear in the beautiful vanished hair.” Beyond the particular irony of their sacrifices to purchase Christmas gifts, Della sacrificed one of her most feminine attributes. The Irish dancer, actress, and courtesan Lola Montez advised women of the Victorian era that “Without a fine head of hair no woman can be really beautiful. A combination of perfect features, united in one person, would all go for naught without that *crowning* excellence of beautiful hair.”² More than a century later, the significance of a woman’s hair is no different. Wendy Cooper, in her study, *Hair: Sex, Society, Symbolism*, observed, “Beautiful hair has always been a major item of a woman’s sex appeal. Its color, its texture, its softness, its scent, are potent weapons in her sexual armory.”³ For Victorian women, “hair was almost the only exposed, visible and distinctly feminine body part in a lady’s appearance. Thus the association of hair and the female sex intensified as the rest of woman’s body was covered, and as a result, hair was invested with an over-

determination of sexual meaning.”⁴

During the nineteenth century, only young girls were allowed to wear their hair loose and flowing freely; pinning up her hair was a mark of adolescence for a young woman. After the transition to womanhood, a woman let her hair down only in the most intimate circumstances. Victorian women generally wore their hair parted in the center and pulled back smoothly from the face into a wide array of knots, curls, poufs, or buns at the top, sides, or back of the head. As the more elaborate hairstyles worn by middle- and upper-class women often required more hair than they could grow themselves, wig shops and hairdressers did a brisk business supplying women with small hairpieces for incorporation into their natural hair. These included pin curls, bonnet curls, braids, “the marteau, a flat tail of hair for pinning on the back,” “the chignon, a mass of hair coiled and pinned up at the back,” and “the bandeau, a band of carefully dressed hair for the front which could be combed back with the growing hair.”⁵ Stationery and advertisements from St. Louis hair dressers and wig makers illustrate some of these hairpieces.

Servants, as well as women in the working and industrial classes, could not afford hairpieces, nor the time to elaborately dress their hair several times each day. Clearly, hairstyles were also emblems of class distinction. For those who had the time to devote and could afford them, complex hairstyles “became a dominant aspect of the conspicuous leisure, wealth, and waste which Veblen

As their name suggests, the European Hair Store was “constantly supplied with the choicest selections of human hair directly imported from relations in Europe,” according to their advertisement in the 1874 city directory. James C. Elms is listed as a “Hair Worker” in the 1868-1870 city directories. He is listed under “Hair — Human” from 1871 until 1895 and then as a “Hair Dresser.” The elegant woman, with loose hair holding a laurel wreath was their trademark. (Image: Collection of the author)





Florian DeDonato's unusual corner card displays a woman whose unpinned hair flows over the moon. The "Hair Dresser, Perfumer, Ladies & Gents Wig Maker" first appeared in the 1881 city directory under "Hair — Human" and gradually switched to "Hair Dresser" with dual listings in some years. (Image: Collection of the author)

held to be characteristic of an acquisitive society.”⁶ Women from different economic and social classes played opposite roles as the buyers or sellers of human hair. Convents and prisons, which required women to wear their hair short, were among the sources for hair.⁷ However, the largest amount of hair came from poor and working-class women, like Della, who sold their hair to earn money. Rich women, in their preference for wigs and hairpieces made from human hair, rather than horse hair or feathers, adorned themselves with the hair of poor women.

In addition to the hair acquired domestically, the United States imported between 150,000 and 200,000 pounds of human hair in 1859 and 1860, with a value close to \$1 million. By the early 1870s, U.S. imports were estimated to be three times as great. Nineteenth-century Paris was the largest hair market, with other sources being Italy, Russia, Germany, Norway, and Sweden. “Hue, length, and texture” determined the price for human hair. “Hair of the ordinary colors ranges in price from \$15 to \$100 per pound, but that of gray and white from \$100 to \$200

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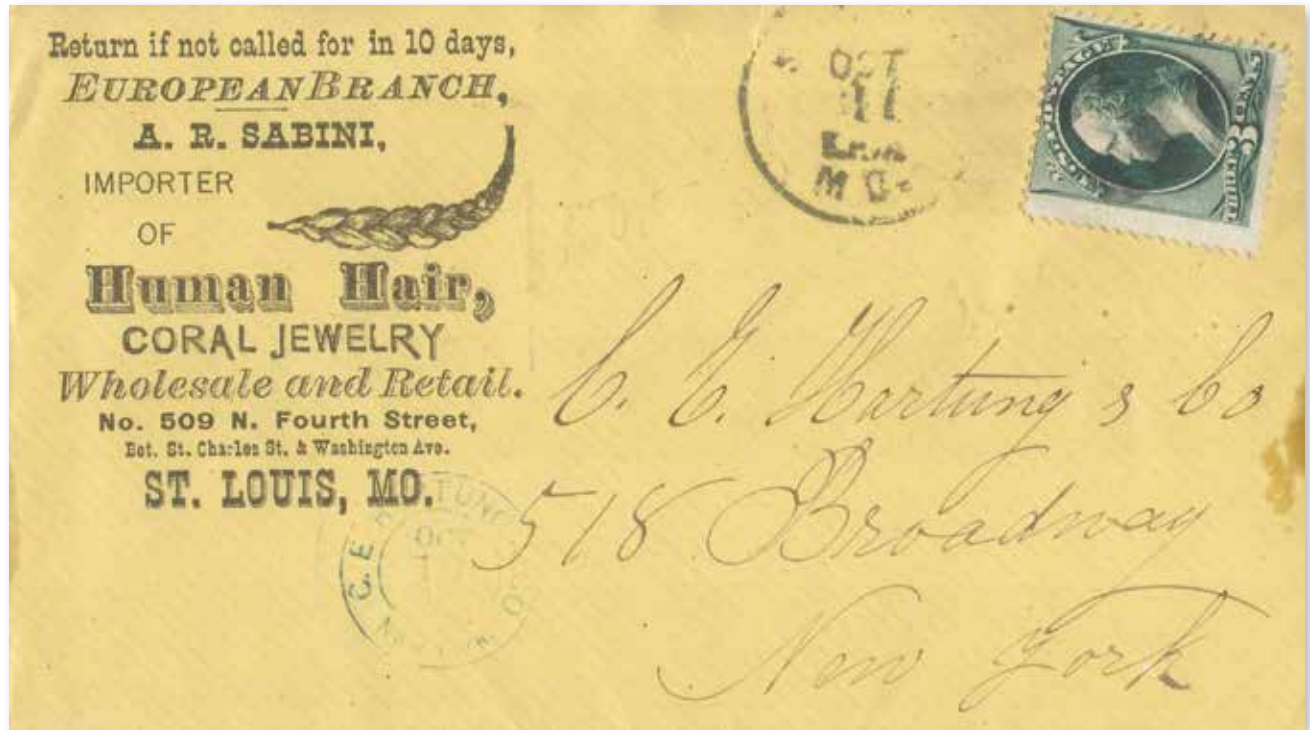


per pound, and even then is not considered exorbitant.”⁸ All the covers accompanying this article, except one, are addressed to C. E. Hartung, a hair importer and wholesaler at 518 Broadway in New York. The local side of this mail exchange shows that there was not sufficient hair offered for sale in St. Louis to meet local demand. The letters are mainly orders for hair and supplies along with haggling over prices and excuses for late payments. In a typical exchange, on April 20, 1878, Mme. A. R. Sabini ordered, “send me ½ lb of real natural curly hair 8 and 10 inch strand.” Seven days later, she wrote to complain, “I received your invoice today and found that your prices are entirely too high. . . . I won’t pay more than \$16.00 for curly hair longer than what you sent to me.” Stripped

of its intimacy and personal connections, Della’s hair was reduced to a mere commodity.

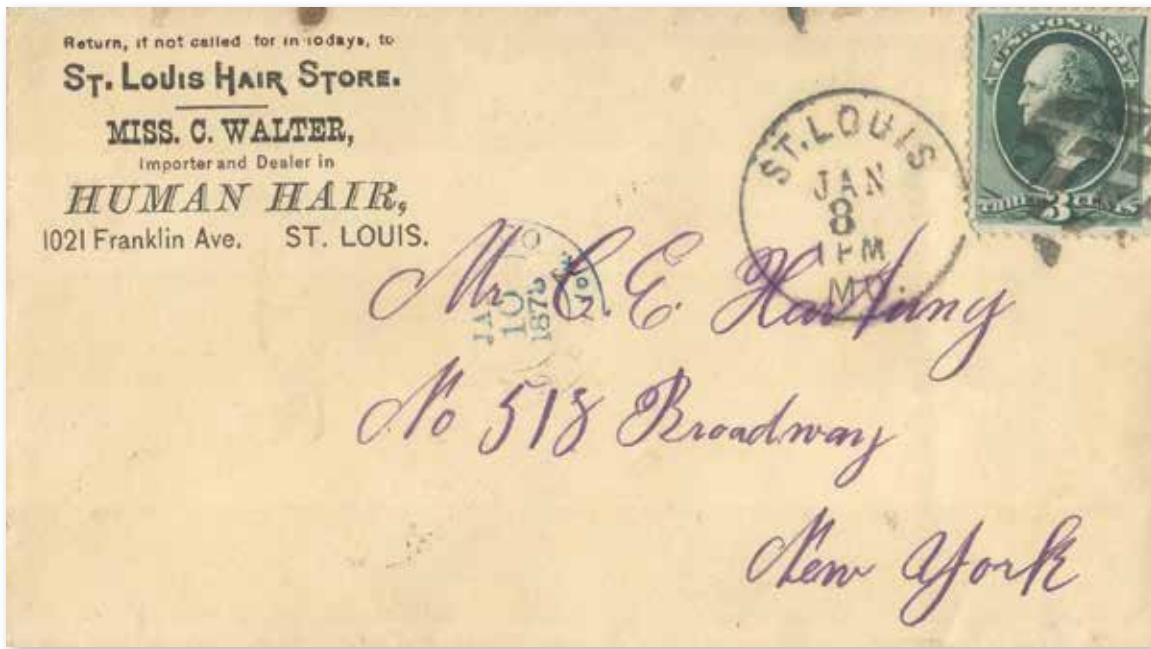
A sideline of the hair trade was its use for jewelry. The practice of exchanging hair as tokens of love or friendship dates to at least the sixteenth century. Victorian lovers exchanged hair at the time of engagement or marriage; hair was considered too personal to exchange before engagement. Such hair might be displayed behind glass in a locket or pendent, or woven into personal items such as rings, bracelets, watch chains, brooches, or cuff links. However, following the death of Victoria’s husband, Prince Albert, and the Civil War in the United States, hair jewelry became increasingly popular as a sign of mourning.

The corner card from 1877 shows a braid used to augment some hairstyles. Mme. A. R. Sabini, an “Importer of Human Hair, Coral Jewelry — Wholesale and Retail” first appears in the 1872 city directory. In 1880, Sabini is listed in partnership with Saveris DiFranza and the following year DiFranza had taken over the business. (Image: Collection of the author)



General Notes:

All the covers except Pozzoni (1869 — 3¢ rose Washington) and DeDonato (1891 — 2¢ carmine Washington) are franked with the 3¢ green George Washington stamp widely used in the 1870s and early 1880s. The St. Louis duplex cancels consist of a circular date stamp and a killer of lines, grids, or geometric shapes to deface the stamp. Many have the blue double-circle receiving stamp of C. E. Hartung & Co. in New York. All are owned by a private collector who wishes to remain anonymous.



The St. Louis Hair Store, owned by Miss Catherine Walter, first appeared in the 1874 city directory under “Hair Work and Wigs” although covers are known from the previous year. Apparently, she married in 1879 when her listing changed to Catherine Sporleder, formerly C. Walter. She last appeared in the city directory in 1885. (Image: Collection of the author)

Rather than paying a commission to professional hair workers to weave the desired pieces, many preferred to make their own keepsakes. This insured that the hair used would indeed be that of the deceased loved one. Women’s magazines such as *Godey’s Lady’s Book* or *Peterson’s*

Magazine, along with several editions of Mark Campbell’s book, *Self-Instructor in the Art of Hair Work*, contained patterns and instructions for this Gilded Age craft. Some families constructed elaborate wreathes, with hair contributed by each of the members.

NOTES

- ¹ The principle city directories in St. Louis were *Edwards’ Annual Directory to the Inhabitants, Institutions, Incorporated Companies, Manufacturing Establishments, Business Firms, etc., etc., in the City of St. Louis* published from 1864 until 1872 and *Gould’s St. Louis City Directory*, which began publication in 1872.
- ² Lola Montez, *The arts of beauty: or, Secrets of a lady’s toilet: with hints to gentlemen on the art of fascinatin.* (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, 1858), 80.
- ³ Wendy Cooper, *Hair: Sex, Society, Symbolism* (New York: Stein and Day, 1971), 65.
- ⁴ Galia Ofek, *Representations of Hair in Victorian Literature and Culture* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2009), 3.

- ⁵ John Woodforde, *The Strange Story of False Hair* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), 83-86.
- ⁶ Ofek, *Representations of Hair*, 2.
- ⁷ Victoria Sherrow, *Encyclopedia of Hair: A Cultural History* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2006), 387.
- ⁸ Mark Campbell, *Self-Instructor in the Art of Hair Work* (New York: [s.n.], 1875), 11-12, reproduced in Mary Brett, *Fashionable Mourning Jewelry, Clothing & Customs* (Atglen, Pennsylvania: Schiffer, 2006).