

Marriage by Blacksmith: Gretna Green Marriages

Genealogical Society of Washtenaw County, Michigan

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1) Definitions:

- a) Elopement – Originally it was a married woman who ran away with a lover. The term evolved to describe two single people who ran away to get married.
- b) “Gretna Green” - A place known for its minimal legal requirements, making it appealing to couples seeking to get married with ease. Its name stems from the Scottish town of Gretna Green, which historically drew numerous English couples looking for a quick wedding.
- c) Irregular marriage – a marriage that is missing a requirement that made it legal
- d) Clandestine marriages - Marriages with no prior public notification of intent that took place outside the residence of the bride and groom.

2) History of Marriages in England in the 1700s:

- a) Marriage Requirements in England pre-1753
 - i) The couple had to be free to marry.
 - ii) The minimum age requirement was 21 years old. 16 years with parental permission.
 - iii) Banns read 3 consecutive Sundays before the wedding or the couple could get a marriage license from the ecclesiastical court
 - iv) Two witnesses had to be present at the ceremony.
 - v) Had to be performed by any ordained Church of England minister, preferably in a Church of England house of worship.
- b) Irregular or Clandestine Marriages:
 - i) Fleet Street Marriages – performed at Fleet Street Prison and neighborhood by ministers who were imprisoned because of debt and subsequently not allowed to perform marriages. They performed “irregular” marriages with no questions asked.
 - ii) In addition to Fleet Prison, other locations in London where “irregular” marriages were conducted, were Mayfair Chapel, Bow Church in Cheapside, and St. James Chapel at Duke's Place.
 - iii) By 1740, over half of London marriages were “irregular or clandestine.”

3) The Clandestine Marriages Act of 1753, also referred to as the Marriage Act of 1753, and commonly known as Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act, is officially titled "An Act for the Better Preventing of Clandestine Marriage."

- a) New Regulations:
 - i) The age requirement for marriage was tightened in England and Wales to 21.
 - ii) If one party was under 21, their parent or guardian could veto the marriage.

- iii) **ALL** marriages had to be performed by a licensed Anglican priest or minister, in good standing, in an Anglican church.
 - iv) Banns must be posted on three (3) consecutive Sundays before the marriage.
 - v) The bride and groom had to sign a marriage register. No secret marriages.
 - vi) Exceptions were made for Jews and Quakers.
 - b) To avoid the regulations – A couple could get a special license from the Archbishop of Canterbury OR elope to Gretna Green.
- 4) Marriage laws in Scotland were more lenient:
- a) Handfasting – marriage by declaration.
 - b) Regulations for marriages
 - i) Males must be 14 and females be 12 to marry without parental consent.
 - ii) Both parties had to be free to marry.
 - iii) Declare themselves as husband and wife in front of 2 witnesses.
 - c) Any children born before a couple married were now considered legitimate regarding inheritance laws.
 - d) Scottish laws recognized “irregular marriages” which allowed couples to marry without a formal ceremony or a clergyman.
- 5) Why Gretna Green?
- a) It was the first Scottish village on the post road from England to the Scottish border.
 - b) It was located just two miles into Scotland from the border with England.
 - c) Other Scottish towns that had irregular marriages included Lamberton and Coldstream but Gretna Green was the most famous.
- 6) Why the blacksmith?
- a) Blacksmiths were conveniently open for business most days, eliminating the need to go to a church or other location. The smithy was central to the town or village.
 - b) “Anvil Marriages” – The couple places their hands on an anvil and the blacksmith strikes it with a hammer to seal the marriage.
 - c) The marriage needed 2 witnesses; the blacksmith was one of the witnesses and could attest to the marriage.
 - d) The blacksmith’s role in these marriages was essentially one of a witness and a facilitator.
 - e) The blacksmith was not the only “priest” who could marry a couple. Innkeepers did too.
- 7) Gretna Green and literature
- a) Gretna Green became synonymous with romance and runaway lovers. The village of Gretna Green became popular with English couples wanting to marry and it soon became famous as the destination for eloping couples.
 - b) Forbidden romance and runaway marriages were popularized in the fiction of the time, in no less than three Jane Austen novels including ‘Pride and Prejudice’.

- c) References to Gretna Green have also appeared in other literary works such as Agatha Christie, and Georgette Heyer, and in television shows like Downton Abbey.
 - d) Gretna Green frequently features in British soap operas including Waterloo Road, Coronation Street, and EastEnders.
 - e) It also appeared as the setting for a 1915 silent romantic comedy film based on a popular novel by Grace Livingston Furniss.
- 8) Were Gretna Green marriages considered legal?
- a) Yes – They were legal in Scotland under Scottish law.
 - b) No - In the beginning, they were not considered legal under English law. However, if a marriage was consummated, it was a *fait accompli*. As time went on English law became synchronized with Scottish law.
- 9) Other “Gretna Greens” in Europe
- a) Auldhouse Chapel, East Kilbride, Scotland: Known for clandestine marriages. The chapel operated as a “priest’s house” where couples could marry without public notice.
 - b) Gibraltar: In the 18th century, English couples sometimes eloped to Gibraltar due to their easy marriage laws allowing marriages without parental consent.
 - c) Aix-en-Provence, France: Aix-en-Provence, located in the south of France, was known for its relaxed marriage laws in the 18th and 19th centuries. It was a destination for couples from other parts of France and Europe who wanted to marry without the requirements of their home regions.
 - d) Heligoland, Germany – officials looked the other way if you did not have all your papers. Only one published Sunday wedding bann was needed.
- 10) Gretna Greens in the United States:
- a) Anywhere that has looser regulations than your town or state:
 - i) Could be a small rural county or a large city like Chicago or New York.
 - ii) Places can become popular or faded depending upon the date. Check the period.
 - iii) Military posts on the frontier, like Fort Crown Point NY, or Fort Southwest Point TN.
 - iv) River Towns along the Ohio River like Portsmouth (OH), the Mississippi like Hernando (MS), the Missouri River, like St. Joseph (MO), and towns along the Connecticut River and the Hudson.
 - v) Keokuk, Lee County, IA was a Gretna Green along the Mississippi; it was also a favorite place for marriage of Irish ancestors coming from the Eastern states and up the Mississippi River.
 - b) Reasons to go to Gretna Green:
 - i) Lower age requirements.
 - ii) Want a shorter waiting period after obtaining a license?
 - iii) Avoid medical procedures like a blood test.
 - iv) Avoid paying a marriage bond.

- v) Keep the marriage a secret.
 - vi) Want a less expensive wedding?
 - vii) Marry a cousin closer than the law will allow.
- c) Why certain locations?
- i) May be close to home— across the river or border. The county seat of another county may be closer than your county seat.
 - ii) There might not be a waiting period for marriage.
 - iii) No blood tests or medical testing is required.
 - iv) May be far from hometown = less family interference.
 - v) Near a train route. Couples could travel to another jurisdiction easily.
 - vi) It might be possible to marry at an earlier age without parental permission.
- d) “Marriage Mill” – An area having businesses that provide or contribute to quick and easy marriages:
- i) Popular in the United States in the early 20th century, particularly in states with lax marriage laws such as Indiana. Couples would travel to these states to get married quickly, often without waiting periods or other legal requirements.
 - ii) The term describes businesses because they were often run like factories, with couples being processed quickly and efficiently. Taxis would pick couples up from the train station and deliver them to a certain minister, then take them back to the train station. Inns would have a deal with the minister who would direct the couple there for lodging or food. Local florists, jewelers, and dress shops contributed to the wedding.
- e) “Gin Marriage Laws”
- i) State laws passed in the late 1920s-1930s as a result of Prohibition. The laws required a waiting period of several days between getting a license and marrying. The thought was that the waiting period would prevent divorces as a result of marrying while intoxicated. It was considered a “cooling off” period.
 - ii) These marriage laws helped fuel the exodus to marry in other states where there was no waiting period. Ex: Gin Marriage Laws in California created an exodus to Las Vegas and Reno, Nevada, and Yuma, Arizona for quick marriages.
 - iii) Gin marriage law states included California, Idaho, Kentucky, Michigan, Montana, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Washington, and Wyoming.
- 11) Famous “Gretna Greens” in the U.S.
- a) Reno and Las Vegas, NV – California and Arizona couples.
 - b) Niagara Falls, Ontario, and Niagara County, NY – Canadians and New Yorkers.
 - c) Elkhorn, MD – Eastern Seaboard.
 - d) Crown Point, IN – Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio couples.
 - e) Yuma, AZ – Arizona, Southern California, New Mexico couples.

- 12) Where to find information on "Gretna Green Marriages"
 - a) Start with family stories. Check records at home.
 - b) Look for county or town vital records.
 - c) Newspaper articles or announcements in the home state.
 - d) Can find information on counties with high marriage records in statistical books kept by the Bureau of the Census. (Found on Google Books and HathiTrust).
 - e) Ancestry.com "Gretna Green Marriages, 1754-1895" for Scotland.
 - f) Family Search Wiki, "Gretna Greens in the United States" **MAJOR LISTING OF G.G.**
 - g) Cyndi's List – "Marriages & Divorce - Eloping to "Gretna Greens" (www.cyndislist.com)
 - h) Newspapers: GenealogyBank.com, Newspapers.com, Chronicling America (Library of Congress) (<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>).
 - i) Check Scotland's People database or the National Archives of Scotland **FREE SEARCH BUT A FEE CHARGED FOR OBTAINING A RECORD ON SCOTLAND'S PEOPLE.**
 - j) Check the UK National Archives for English clandestine marriages.
- 13) Tips to Remember
 - a) Search for the nearest Gretna Green location to your ancestor's residence. Use maps.
 - b) Learn about the customs, laws, and times of the area your ancestors lived in.
 - c) Check marriage records in that location for that period.
 - d) Check newspapers in the hometown for announcements. People would elope in secret and then publicize it in the paper after the fact.
 - e) Determine if the location is close to a state line. People just went over the state line.
 - f) Determine if the location is close to an international border. – Ontario, Canada, or Tijuana, Mexico.
 - g) Specific J.P.s were known to marry couples. You can find them in local newspaper stories or county histories.

RESOURCES

- 1) Gretna Green, Scotland
 - a. "Gretna Green, Scotland, Marriage Registers, 1794-1895" – *Ancestry.com* (<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1636/>) **ONLINE DATABASE.**
 - b. National Records of Scotland (<https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/research/guides/birth-death-and-marriage-records/irregular-border-marriage-registers>) **THIS IS THE OFFICIAL REPOSITORY FOR SCOTLAND THAT CONTAIN THE RECORDS. NO ONLINE DATABASES WERE FOUND HOWEVER THEY HAVE A COMPREHENSIVE COLLECTION OF G.G. MARRIAGES TO VIEW IN PERSON.**
 - c. "Scotland's People" – Source for genealogical data in Scotland (<https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/>).

- d. "England, Clandestine Marriages, *FindMyPast*
(<https://search.findmypast.com/search-world-records/england-clandestine-marriages>).
- 2) Fleet marriages
- a. "Fleet Marriages", (www.familyhistory.co.uk/parish-records/fleet-marriages/).
 - b. General Register Office: Registers of Clandestine Marriages and of Baptisms in the Fleet Prison, King's Bench Prison, the Mint and the May Fair Chapel", (<https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C13332>).
- 3) U.S. Gretna Greens
- a. General Resources
 - i. "Atlas of Historical County Boundaries" at the Newberry Library in Chicago - (<https://digital.newberry.org/ahcb/index.html>).
 - ii. Marriage and Statistics, Bureau of the Census – HathiTrust.org and Google Books **MANY YEARS IN THE 1920S BUT NOT ALL.**
 - iii. David Rumsey Map Collection – (<https://library.stanford.edu/libraries/david-rumsey-map-center>).
 - iv. Perry Castaneda Map Collection – (<https://www.lib.utexas.edu/about/collections/perry-castaneda-library-pcl-map-collection>).
 - b. Databases
 - i. Family Search – (www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United_States_Marriage_Records/).
 - ii. Family Search – (www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Gretna_Greens_in_the_United_States/).
 - iii. Cyndi's List, "Gretna Green & Scottish Border Marriages" (<https://www.cyndislist.com/uk/sct/bmd/gretna-green/>).
- 4) Webinars
- a. J. Mark Lowe. "Gretna Green and Marriage Records" on Lisa Louise Cooke's Genealogy Gems, March 21, 2022 (<https://lialouisecooke.com/2022/03/21/gretna-green/>).
 - b. J. Mark Lowe. "Genealogy Case Study: Where did my ancestor get married?" on Lisa Louise Cooke's Genealogy Gems, March 28, 2022 (<https://lialouisecooke.com/2022/03/28/genealogy-case-study-marriage-records/>).
 - c. J. Mark Lowe. "Marriages Here, There, and Nowhere: Finding Gretna Greens and Borders" on Legacy Webinars, Dec 17, 2019, (<https://familytreewebinars.com/webinar/marriages-here-there-and-nowhere-finding-gretna-greens-and-borders/>).

5) Online Articles

- a. Eakle, Arlene. "Have you searched and searched for the marriage without finding it?", (<http://www.arleneeakle.com/wordpress/2007/02/19/have-you-search-and-searched-for-the-marriage-without-finding-it/>).
- b. Eames, Wesley. "Gretna Greens" of Indiana, *Without A Trace*, Issue 74, August 30, 2022, (<https://news.trace.com/p/-gretna-greens-of-indiana>).
- c. Mastrangelo, Sherri. "Runaway Brides: Finding Historical "Gretna Greens" in the U.S.", January 2, 2023, *Start Researching Genealogy*, (<https://www.startresearching.com/blog/runaway-brides-historical-gretna-greens-in-the-us>) (<https://www.startresearching.com/blog/runaway-brides-historical-gretna-greens-in-the-us>).
- d. New York Genealogical and Biographical Society. "A List of New York Gretna Green Marriage Locations", *New York Genealogical and Biographical Society*, (<https://www.newyorkfamilyhistory.org/subject-guide/list-new-york-gretna-green-marriage-locations>).
- e. Philibert-Ortega, Gena. "Gin Marriages, Gretna Greens & Your Ancestor's Marriage Records", September 19, 2012, *GenealogyBank.com*, (<https://blog.genealogybank.com/gin-marriages-gretna-greens-your-ancestors-marriage-records.html>).