



# *Brides through the Ages*

*An exhibit of Northborough brides  
from 1805 through 1964*



**the Northborough Historical Society**

52 Main Street  
Northborough, Massachusetts 01532

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Welcome to the Northborough Historical Society's special exhibit, "Brides through the Ages: 160 Years of Wedding Fashions." The museum is proud of its extensive collection of bridal dresses and accessories donated by present and former society members and town residents. The earliest gown in the exhibit dates to 1805 and the most recent to 1964.

Like the wedding customs of their period, the fashions are vastly different in fabric, style and ornament. In the early 1800s, weddings were simple affairs, mostly held in the bride's home with a few guests present. The bride wore either her best dress or a new dress that could be worn for other special occasions, or even just to church on Sunday. While white was not the particular color of choice for many 19th century brides, many did wear gowns of white or off-white linen, dimity or lawn as this was a popular color for a best dress, particularly in the summer months. White grew in popularity after Queen Victoria chose a lavish white satin gown for her 1840 nuptials to Prince Albert, but the average American woman continued to wear colors on her special day. Even dark colors, as you will see in our exhibit, were a favorite choice for a bride. White was still reserved primarily for the more well-to-do bride who could afford such a luxury.

Though a bride might wear her wedding dress over and over in the 19th century, some chose a for-that-day-only wedding bonnet, with lace, ribbons and other delicate trim, that could be packed away as a special memento of the day. You will see a few such bonnets in our exhibit.

As the new century dawned, however, and the American middle class expanded, weddings became more elegant affairs, and white dresses were the dream of many young women. Even during the rationing years of World War II when certain fabrics were hard to come by, some brides managed to wear white by opting for dresses made of white parachute silk.

In the 1950s, the voluminous white dress with fitted bodice, nipped waist and a skirt puffed out to its fullest by hoops was the choice of most American brides. That look diminished in the 60s when bridal fashions took on the slimmer A-line silhouette and was influenced near the end of the decade by the flowing "flower child" look.



**1805** The first dress is a simple cotton chemise worn by Mary Crawford Fairbanks at her 1805 wedding at the Crawford Farm in Northborough. The chemise was a popular style of the day. It was characterized by a short low-cut bodice, short puffed sleeves and straight skirt. Often for daytime wear, long slim sleeves would be attached under the short sleeves. The earliest chemises were one piece with two sets of drawstrings pulled in and tied at the back to shape the garment. One string was around the



neckline and the other below the bustline. Eventually, the dresses became two pieces with the short separate bodice being sewn onto the skirt. Gradually lace and embroidery were added as embellishments. This dress is shown with Mary's original flat-soled pointed-toe kid-leather slippers. The small antique cotton parasol with brass and ivory shaft is from the museum collection. *Donor: M/M Howard Shattuck 70.1.51*

The next dress, shown with an open silk parasol, came to us with no date attached, but the style and construction places it in the chemise era. This cotton dress, enhanced with embroidery, was worn by a member of Northborough's well-known Ball family. Both of these dresses are hand sewn as the sewing machine was not available until the 1850s. *Donor: Sarah Searle 19.6.2 Silk ecru parasol 75.48.1 Blue cotton parasol: Donor: Miss Ethel Fiske 63.48.14 Satin square toe slippers of a later date: Donor: Mrs. Clarence St. Lawrence 64.61.1*

**1851** Next in chronology, but not in the exhibit line, is a blue changeable silk taffeta bodice, part of a two-piece dress worn by Sarah Ann Brigham at her January 29th wedding to George E. Rice. The hand-sewn waist, or bodice, is in the display case in front of the stage along with the wedding vest worn by Mr. Rice. Wedding accessories including bonnets, gloves and men's braces (suspenders) are also displayed. *H.11.5c*



**1865** The jewel-tone blue two-piece silk gown with off-white lace trimming was worn by Rosa Jane Crosby at her marriage to William H. Warren on April 22, 1865. Accompanying the gown is the lacy, beribboned bonnet worn that day by the bride. The dress, as was the custom of the day, was worn many times after the wedding. Typical of the Civil War era style, the tight, boned waist buttons down the front as does the wide, pleated skirt held out by a hoop. Necklines by now were much higher and were often worn with separate lace collars.

See the Warrens photos of a later date to the left.  
*Donor: Miss Olive Warren 57.11.10*



**1870** Next in line is the pearl-gray gown worn by Mrs. Marietta Sinclair when she married Professor John E. Sinclair in 1870. Mr. Sinclair taught at Worcester Polytechnic Institute. This gown features



a tablier, or apron skirt, a fashion trend of the day. The dress, with pleated hemlines, is made in three pieces and comes to a full bustle at the back. The wide sleeves, called bell or pagoda, often had under sleeves of batiste or other gauzy fabric attached. The shoes and gloves displayed with the dress are the original accessories worn by the bride. *Donor: Mrs. Helen Dodge Vinton 73.70.2a*



**1887** As you approach the stage, you will see the teal satin gown said to have been worn by Julia Nault when she married Joseph Marsolais, on July 3, 1887 in West Boylston. Trimmed with black lace and jet beads, it features a gathered bib-like panel on the bodice, giving it the “pigeon front” look of a later period. The dress has a slimmed down, pleated skirt bordered with velvet. The tight sleeves have a slight puff at the shoulder and taper to the wrist, which is embellished with a lace flounce. The dress was donated to the Society as Mrs. Marsolais’s wedding outfit, but it does not match the dress she is wearing in the photograph that is marked as her wedding picture. This gown has the style of a dress from the late 1890s.

*Donor: Mrs. Irene Spears, 74.53.1*

**c.1903** This playful lad sports a three-piece velvet knickerbocker suit in the “Little Lord Fauntleroy” style. It was worn by Ezra Cutting, grandson of Ellen and Ezra Chapin. Mrs. Chapin’s sage green gown can be seen on the stage to the right. The suit style was popularized by a book of the same name written by Frances Hodgson-Burnett. The suits were typically of blue or black velvet with white lace trim and were obviously special occasion outfits. Hats worn with the suits varied. This wool beret is on loan for the exhibit by Cindy Atwood. The shoes are from the collection. *Donated by Mrs. Ezra Cutting 73.90.1* Black slippers, *by Mrs. Clarence St. Lawrence 64.61.3*



**1895** *On the stage:* Jeannette Wells wore this elegant off-white dotted silk gown for her marriage to Rev. Charles Stanley Pease, minister of the Baptist Church that was the original occupant of this museum building. By this date, white had become increasingly popular for weddings, as well as for





general summer wear. The boned bodice fastens in the back and is trimmed with lace and ribbons in keeping with the fashion trend of the day. The yoke of the bodice is filled with softly gathered organza. The billowy elbow-length sleeves are banded with the same beige satin ribbon that trims the “choker” neckline, waist and shoulders. The flared skirt is flatter than earlier styles at the front and hips but wraps to large box pleats at the back. The bride did not wear a veil.

*Donor: Elizabeth Pease Felt 67.8.16*

**1884** In 1885, Godey’s Lady’s Book noted that navy and brown were popular choices for wedding dresses. Proof of that claim is seen in this rich maroon-brown silk faille dress with velvet inserts worn by Delia F. Brigham of Northborough when she married Edwin Sawtell Corey on Dec. 13, 1884. The brooch at the neckline was also worn by Miss Brigham at her wedding. The tightly fitted jacket-like bodice is heavily boned and features long, tapered sleeves and glittery buttons down the front. These both were popular style elements of the day along with the draped overskirt seen on the front of the dress. The high bustle at the back is accented by a short peplum on the bodice back, a fashionable detail of the era. See their wedding invitation and also their daughter’s in the showcase. *Donor: Mrs. Marjorie Buckley 61.8.1ab*



**1880** This ivory brocade gem was the choice of Annie W. Jones for her wedding to Dr. John Coffin on Nov. 8, 1880. Though remodeled somewhat for later use, it is still quite true to the original styling, as witnessed by Mrs. Coffin’s wedding portrait on display case. Also on view are her satin wedding boots, kid gloves and beaded purse. tight-fitting bodice has a low-cut neckline filled with lace. Tiny decorative buttons fasten the dress front. The shirring on the satin sleeves, a popular design enhancement of the time, is repeated on the front of the underskirt. The over-skirt is gathered amply in the back and has a sweeping train with scalloped hem trimmed in lace. A portrait of Dr. Coffin is on the back wall.

*Donor: M/M Holland Coffin 65.18.1*

*Hoop slip donated by Claire Swan*



**1888** The debonair groom has on the black wool serge trousers worn by Thornton E. Mentzer at his wedding to Mary Eunice Mack on May 23, 1888. The back-vented frock coat and matching vest belonged to Henry G. Colburn and are believed to date from an earlier time. He is wearing a beaver top hat, a staple of male fashion during the era. 66.51.1 Donor: Elizabeth Hilliard 66.50.1ab



**c.1880** Mrs. Minnie Brown Hinkley married Frank J. Russell of Northborough on March 4, 1897. Judging from the style, this gown may be from her first marriage. It is made of mocha silk faille has a high collar and boned cuirass bodice. The main element of the cuirass bodice was its tight fit that ended in a deep, pointed V at the waistline. The pleated skirt has a very full back with shelf-like bustle formed by a sewn-in wire frame. Donors: Dorothy Margerum and Ruth Newton 62.35.1



**1864-1889** Pictured below, this sage green silk gown was worn by Ellen Frances Cooper when she married Ezra Wood Chapin on June 23, 1864. The gown was remodeled in 1889 when Mrs. Chapin wore it for her 25th wedding anniversary. We have no photos of the original style of the dress. The redesign features leg-of-mutton sleeves, which may be of weighted silk and are unfortunately quite deteriorated. Weighted silk contained arsenic and lead, a dangerous compound which is no longer used in fabrics. Also displayed are a copy of the Chapin's wedding certificate and her original wedding slippers. Donor: Mrs. Willis Lovell 73.89.1



**1905** On the next page, the ecru embroidered Alencon lace gown at the foot of the stage adorned three brides. First to wear it was Mary Laracy McMahan in 1905, then came Katherine McMahan Crawford in 1940 and Marie Griswold Smith in 1946. The original matching lace head-piece and gloves are shown with it. The gown is two-piece and features a flared skirt that is shaped by tiny tucks at the hips. The skirt is not as full as



those of the previous century. Bodice fronts also changed markedly in the early 1900s, becoming less constricting and often made with the “pouched” gathering shown here. This top ends in a wide satin waistband with lace appliques. Lace became a popular fabric of the period and dresses were enhanced with many fussy details. Note the ribbon-banded sleeves, tucks and ruffled lace. *Donor: Nancy Reinschild 81.33.1a*



**1920s** This sleeveless chemise-style wedding dress is of tan silk net with cotton and metal embroidery. The appliqued ribbon flowers are handmade. The tubular chemise, which slipped on over the head, was most popular from 1920-21. Some had side fastening hooks and others had no fasteners at all. Our records do not list the name of the bride, but the dress was donated by Vesta Vetter, sister of past Northborough resident Vera Green. *74.43.7 White kid heels, satin bow D.18.45*



**1939** Pictured below, Agnes Bergeron chose this dress for her July 27, 1939, wedding to Walter Carey. The chantilly lace bodice has a Queen Anne neckline with stand-up collar and is scalloped at the natural waistline. The modified leg-of-mutton sleeves taper to a point at the wrist. The draped ivory organza skirt is cut on the bias, a widely popular fashion trend of the 1930s. The bride’s long lace-edged veil fell train-like from her lace cap that is trimmed with artificial orange blossoms. The flowers have long been a favorite trimming for brides and are a symbol of fertility. The ensemble and accompanying wedding photo were donated by her daughter, Doris Densmore. *2007.16.1 Kid leather heels, satin bow of Mrs Florence Bemis 63.62.a*



Displayed with Mrs. Carey’s gown are four vintage dresses. The pink cotton dress dates to 1909 and was worn by Florrie Corey who served as a bride’s maid at the wedding of Ellen Brigham Proctor. Next to it is a gray satin party dress dating to the 1940s. The cap sleeves, matching gauntlets and sweetheart neckline are indicative of the styles popular in the late 30s and early 40s. The pink brocade dress, which appears to have been home-sewn, features a sweetheart neckline, peplum at



the waist, elbow - length sleeves and long circular skirt. These details likely date the garment to 1950s. Last in the group is the printed yellow frock with green cotton trim and tucked bodice, accented with pearl buttons. The square neckline and slightly raised waist place it in the period from 1909 to 1919.



*1959* The next bridal gown, worn by Ann Murray Stokes DiBuono for her April 5th wedding, is a classic late 1950s design with its wide full skirt and tulle flounces. The fitted lace bodice is ornamented with sequins and tiny covered buttons on the back and sleeves. These dresses were worn with hooped petticoats to set off the fullness of the skirts.

*Donor: Mrs. Janice Parmenter 70.48.4*

Behind the gown are three more vintage formal dresses. The magenta lace gown with belted waistline is typical of the 1930s styles. The dress has side snaps and would be donned over the head. The sweetheart neckline was fashionable on evening wear during the decade. In the center is a 1945 blue satin bridesmaid gown donated by Mr. and Mrs. Walter Carlson. The lime green lace gown with capelet is typical of the 1920s. Fashion favorites in that day were bright colors with dropped or no waistline.

*1964* This princess-style silk gown was designed and made by Northborough resident Marie Nieber for her wedding on August 15, 1964. The simple yet elegant style is enhanced by covered buttons down the back and at the wrists and by handmade appliques dotted with pearls. Very typical of the 1960s is her original pillbox-style headpiece with short veil. The pillbox was popularized by First Lady Jackie Kennedy whose fashion tastes influenced day as well as evening wear. Also displayed is the bride's sleeveless sunshine-yellow silk "going away" dress, sewn by Marie and her white flowered hat. *2002.33.37* Displayed next to the 1964 gown is the mauve mother-of-the-bride jacket dress worn in 1984 by Mary Kennerly when her daughter Carol married Charles Sardonini.



*Many hours were spent by the bridal committee of Cindy Atwood, Kathy Pierce, Evelyn Croteau and curator, Ellen Racine. This exhibit would not have been possible without their sewing ability and creative talents. A special thanks to Kathy Pierce for writing and researching this brochure and thanks also to Lynne Derosier for her loan of a dressmaker's model.*