

You're Invited: Historical Wedding Dresses from the DM&A

1907

Jean Bertram Pirie

Dundas - February 6, 1907

In February of 1907 two weddings occurred in Dundas which proved to be the biggest social events of the season. They involved three of the most prominent families in Dundas, and both involved the most wealthy family in the Valley, the Bertrams.

The first of these was the wedding of Jean Kirkhope Bertram to Dr. Alexander Fraser Pirie on February 6. Jean was the daughter of Henry Bertram, then owner and operator of the Bertram machine factory which was the biggest business and largest employer in Town. Jean's dress was made in Paris. It is white Duchesse satin and Maltese lace, originally worn with sleeves of pleated chiffon. Her veil had been worn by her mother Jennie Graham 25 years before.

Over a hundred people attended the ceremony, and after a short stay in Dundas the bride and groom left for their new home in Costa Rica, where Dr. Pirie operated a coffee plantation.

1907

Mary Bain Bertram

Dundas - February 20, 1907

The second of the two weddings was the marriage of Mary Bain to James 'Jim' B. Bertram. Mary was one of the two daughters of Canadian parliamentarian and Speaker of the House Thomas Bain, without a doubt the most politically prominent man in Dundas. She was a founding member of the Dundas Travel Club, and lived her whole life in Dundas.

Jim was the youngest son of John Bertram, founder of the Bertram factory, and the brother of Henry Bertram. He had a passion for photography, and took many pictures of Mary and their friends in Dundas throughout the 1900s and 1910s. He later took over operations the factory after his brother Henry retired.

Mary's dress is limerick lace over ivory duchess satin. Her veil was originally adorned with real orange blossoms which were afterward replaced with replicas. Her bridesmaid was her sister Helen, who never married, but later lived with her and Jim in their home 'Bonnington' on 50 Governors Road.

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Dearly beloved...

We are gathered here today to view a remarkable assemblage of wedding dresses from the collection of the Dundas Museum and Archives.

Though they were sometimes worn only for a day, wedding dresses are often amongst the most cherished of heirlooms. The Dundas Museum preserves a vast collection of wedding dresses, donated over the years by local families, which bring to life over two centuries of fashion and social custom. In fact, the dresses displayed here represent only a little over a third of all the wedding dresses in the collection!

Those on display have been chosen both for their stylistic qualities, as well as for their stories. The sentimental reason why they were donated to the Museum after years of preservation as cherished heirlooms.

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Dutch Wedding Chest, 1611.

In European cultures, weddings often generate a family's most cherished heirlooms.

This is a handmade, hand painted wedding chest, in which a bride would store parts of her trousseau as souvenirs. It dates to 1611, the period of the Spanish occupation of the Netherlands, at which time the Dutch struggled for independence from Hapsburg rule.

It was last used to hold the wedding veil and shoes of Mrs. D.S. Forsee of Dundas, after being passed down in her family for 350 years.

The era of Spanish control brought Iberian and Mooresque influence to Dutch art and design, and this is clearly reflected in the colours and ornate designs used to decorate the chest. The top of the curved lid is painted with a portrait of the original wedding couple as well as the date.

1815

Mrs. Sir George Turner

England

This is the oldest wedding dress in the Dundas Museum's collection and dates back to 1815. It is a superb example of regency fashion, made of fine ecru silk and with the distinctive round neckline and high Empire waist popular in the Napoleonic period. However, it unfortunately lacks any Dundas connection. It belonged to the wife of Sir George Turner and was donated in 1961 by her descendants who were then living in Hamilton.

1961.121

1830

Wearer Unknown
Canada

This fascinating wedding dress of grey brown silk taffeta shows the distinctive style of sleeves popular in the early 1830s. These were known as 'gigot' or 'leg-of-mutton' sleeves and were paired with a high, tightly cinched waist, and bell shaped skirt to complete the look.

Unfortunately this dress also lacks a Dundas connection. It was donated in 1973 by a Mrs. J.R. Bain of Islington Ontario, who brought in four generations of wedding dresses from her family spanning from 1830 to 1968. Doubtless the age, beauty, fine condition, and rarity of this piece made it impossible for then Museum Curator Olive Newcombe to refuse. But we now know almost nothing of the lady who wore it.

1973.117

1873

Clara Heaton Smith
Yorkshire, England

Something blue for this exhibition is this lovely taffeta wedding gown with decorative ivory net ruching. Along with those beside it, this dress shows how white did not become the obligatory colour for lady's wedding costume until nearer the end of the 19th century. Indeed, although Queen Victoria (married in 1840) often gets the credit for setting the trend of wearing white, it remained common to wear dresses of rich and varied colour well through to the end of the Victorian era.

Yet another interloper, this dress has no Dundas connection, and no business being here. It was worn by Clara Ellen Heaton on April 29, 1873, the day she married James Wilson Smith in Yorkshire. It was donated to the Museum by family in Hamilton in 1972.

1972.005

1888

Elizabeth Campbell Newitt
Dundas - July 2, 1888

Finally a Dundas gown! This brown silk dress was worn by Elizabeth Agnes Campbell on the occasion of her marriage to John William Newitt. It has been positioned to show the distinctive silhouette of the period achieved with the use of a bustle, or padded undergarment, tied round the waist and worn on the behind.

Miss Campbell was born in Alexandria Scotland and came to Canada with her family when only a few months old. She was the daughter of prominent Dundas Butcher William 'Porky' Campbell. Her husband-to-be John Newitt was also a Dundas Butcher, and thus this marriage represented the consolidation of two great Dundas meat dynasties.

Heirlooms Case

The collection of the Dundas Museum is filled with objects that were preserved by families because they were wedding heirlooms.

- Top layer of the wedding cake of Miss Isobel Edmunds and Mr. A.C. Swackhammer, who married in November of 1892. They lived on what is now known as Helen St.
- The top portion of wedding cake from the wedding of Dr. & Mrs. Tidey of Dundas, on August 28, 1943,
- Veil and Bouquet worn by the grandmother of Mrs. John Greathead of Dundas.
- Wedding china used by Gavin Rankin and Lillias Philips, who were married December 4, 1829.
- Wedding ring from the family of Mrs. J. E. Cornett
- This heavy copper kettle was a wedding present to Mr. Joshua Taylor of Dundas in the 1890s.
- Hand painted round fruit dish - floral decorations in pink, cream, green and a little white. This was a wedding gift in 1901 to Mr. & Mrs. Herbert W. Temple,
- Pitcher commemorating the Royal wedding of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, namesakes of Victoria and Albert Streets Dundas.

1908

Etta Secord Ferguson

St. Catherines - September 17, 1908

Notable for its unique colour, this mauve one-piece wedding dress is trimmed with tucks and small buttons and features a tucked net collar and a vestee insert. It also has a now-faded orange and green velvet trim on the collar, bodice, and sleeves.

It was worn by Etta Lyle Secord on the occasion of her marriage to Andrew Clark Ferguson in St. Catherines on Sept 17th 1908. On the throat is a porcelain brooch worn by Etta at her marriage. The brooch was also worn by her mother and her grandmother on their respective wedding days. It was donated in 1973 by her daughter, then living in Hamilton.

1973.118

1909

Loretta Dwyer Enright

Dundas - November 10, 1909

A quintessentially Edwardian wedding gown, this cream duchess satin dress was worn by Miss Loretta Dwyer who married Dundas carriage maker John Enright at St. Augustine's Church on November 10th, 1909.

The dress was made by Loretta's sister Mayme, and is decorated with bits of lace, buttons, bobbles, and trim that may have been purchased at a local store.

1963.131

1912

Grace Adeltha Binkley

West Flamboro - December 18, 1912

This two-piece wedding dress is made of ecru silk and lined with cotton. It was worn by Grace A. Binkley on the occasion of her Marriage to Percy W. Morden on December 18th 1912. The wedding took place at the home of the bride's brother J.W. Binkley on the 3rd Concession. The Mordens and the Binkleys were two of the earliest United Empire Loyalist families to settle in Dundas.

Like those to the left, this dress shows the high collar, broad shoulders, tight waist, and long sleeves which characterized Edwardian fashion and the era of the 'Gibson Girl'.

2022.074.005

1925

Mildred Woods Murray

Dundas - June 24, 1925

This dress clearly demonstrates the radical change in women's fashion which followed the First World War. This is a flapper's wedding dress. It is a French gown of beaded georgette over white satin, originally worn with a veil adorned with a coronet of orange blossoms.

It was worn by Mildred Woods who married James W. Murray at a ceremony at 113 Victoria Street Dundas on June 24, 1925. The wedding announcement mentions that Miss Jesse Petterson played the Wedding March from Lohengrin and that 55 guests partook of a 'sumptuous repast'.

2022.13.006

1925

Mary Bunting Byrne

Ancaster - October 1925

Boop-Boop-A-Doop! And Hotcha! This is a real flapper wedding dress. Worn by Mary Louise Bunting on the occasion of her marriage to Norman W. Byrne, in Ancaster in October of 1925.

The dress is notably short, and made of cream satin, with no sleeves and plain round neck. It has a train from the shoulders, of cream satin with a peach chiffon lining and a border of small pearls, as well as a gold and silver ribbon sash with a matching rose. A veil with a headband of pearls and orange blossoms has also survived intact.

1983.307

1938

Jessie ROUNG Smith

Dundas - November 10, 1938

Yet another evolution in style, this plum velvet wedding dress was worn by Jessie L. ROUNG on the occasion of her marriage to Lindo Smith of Dundas, November 10th 1938.

The Great Depression and the general hard-times of the 1930s meant that it was difficult for many to afford a special wedding dress that would only be worn once. Consequently it became more common to choose less-obvious evening gowns as wedding dresses in order that they might be worn over again.

1994.213

1943

Wilma Dixon Southhall

Dundas - January 16, 1943

The war years brought a return to the sentimentality of the white wedding dress but coupled this with the austerity of rationing on the Home Front. The result was often simpler home-made gowns such as this cream and sand floor length dress of embossed taffeta made for Wilma Manning Dixon by her mother for her marriage to John Southhall in Dundas in 1943.

Wilma Southhall was a major figure in Dundas life and politics. Her marriage marked the beginning of a Dundas power-couple, as her husband served on council from 1959 to 1980 and was known as "Mr. Dundas" and she served from 1988 to 1997, topping polls for most of her career and helming major initiatives for the community.

2023.020.001

1943

Audrey Beattie Sneath

Dundas - November 13, 1943

This gown was worn by Audrey Beattie who married Mr. Frank Wood Sneath at St. Paul's United Church Dundas on November 13, 1943. After honeymooning in Ottawa and other points east, they returned to reside on Napier Street, Dundas.

The dress is made of Chantilly lace and net, trimmed with white velvet and was originally worn with a finger-tip length veil held in place with a sweetheart headdress.

LOAN

1946

Jim Eden

Dundas - June 15, 1946

Sometimes a man can be an important part of a wedding. This suit was worn by Jim Eden on the occasion of his marriage to Helen Budgen on June 15, 1946. He had the suit made at Grafton's Clothing Manufacturers in Dundas, as he was then living in Dundas after serving in WWII. Jim and Helen moved into a house at 33 Woodward Avenue. They were market gardeners, growing vegetables on their property that they sold at the Hamilton Market and later at the Toronto Food Terminal.

Grafton's was the largest and longest lived clothing manufacturer in Dundas, and one of the biggest businesses in the town. Starting in the 1850s they had pioneered the idea of 'ready-made' clothing, and built a reputation based on their 'High Quality' slogan. The Grafton Store once stood on the south side of King Street between Main and Ogilvie.

1947

Louise Grightmire Dubois

Dundas - June 2, 1947

St. Augustine's Church, Dundas was the scene of a pretty wedding on Saturday June 21st 1947 when Louise Ann Grightmire was married to Mr. Raymond Ross Dubois. Their reception was at the Royal Connaught Hotel in Hamilton, and their Honeymoon was a trip through New York State.

Her dress is a 'portrait gown' of white satin and French lace, with the bodice embroidered with seed pearls and crystal beads. The gathered skirt sweeps into a particularly long train, typical of the post-war years. The long tulle veil is attached to a lace coronet which is embroidered to match the bodice.

2022.022.001

1950

Ruth Worthington Cliff

Dundas - October 21, 1950

This dress was worn by Ruth Worthington on her marriage to William A. Cliff at St. James Anglican Church Dundas on October 21, 1950. The dress is velvet with a yoke of Chantilly lace. The full skirt is draped at the back and sweeps into a train. Her tulle veil is held by a 'halo' of white velvet.

Ruth Cliff was a lifelong member of the Dundas Lioness Club and a longtime volunteer at the Dundas Museum.

2019.013.006

1950

Rae Hendershot

Hamilton - October 1950

Also in October 1950 was the wedding of Hamilton artists Rae Hendershot and Thomas Reid MacDonald, first Director of the Hamilton Art Gallery. Rae was at the heart of the mid-century Hamilton art scene, and her dress reflects a somewhat more casual, yet still on-trend, style of wedding attire.

This is truly a cocktail dress. Made of net lace in rust brown with polka dot and leaf design, it has spaghetti straps and a full skirt with an underskirt of grosgrain taffeta. It is worn with a jacket of matching lace, but was worn under a fur coat at the wedding.

2018.039.012

1954

Nadine Anderson Campbell

Freelton - August 14, 1954

This strapless gown is paired with a matching bodice jacket all made from white satin with net overlay in floral design.

It was worn by Nadine Anderson on the occasion of her marriage to George Campbell at the Freelton United Church on August 14th, 1954. Though she lived her whole life on her family's farm property in Freelton, Hazel attended high school at Dundas District and worked at the local can factory during the Second World War.

2007.156

1957

Joann MacLachlan

Dundas - September 27, 1957

Moving into the late fifties some elements of earlier fashion styles reappear. This gown features a hoop skirt, which hadn't been present since the 1800s, and yet appears distinctively modern. It was worn by Joann MacLachlan on her wedding to Donald Bean at the Dundas Baptist Church on September 27, 1957.

The dress was worn again by Joann's daughter Meredith at her wedding in 1983, but the hoop skirt was removed and the dress shortened. It is shown here with the original hoop, but is now somewhat shorter than its original proportion.

1968

Wearer Unknown

Canada

By the late sixties the fashions of the counter-culture had begun to show themselves in wedding attire, and what we have here is a remarkable parallel to the style of the very earliest dress in this exhibition across the room. This off-white wedding gown has a lace bodice and full organza skirt with lace flower appliques.

It was given to the Museum by the mysterious Mrs. J. R. Bain who donated the second dress in this exhibition (1830) and as this one is listed as being worn by the donor's daughter, there are three generations which separate them.

1973.114

1969

Donna Discepolo

Dundas - July 19, 1969

When Donna Marie Virginia Discepolo married Michael Wayne Gardiner at St. Augustine's Church, Dundas on July 19th, 1969, she wore this simple long-sleeved white gown with lace trim. Though it doesn't make an appearance in her wedding photos, this gown also came with a matching cape and detachable hood that makes a striking statement.

Shortly before her wedding day, Donna Discepolo was injured in a car accident when her car collided with a truck at the intersection of Highway 6 and Plains Road. Luckily, the lacerations had healed in time for her to walk down the aisle in this striking gown!

2022.020.001

Case 1, Bertram Weddings:

- Wedding certificate of Jean Bertram and Dr. A.F. Pirie.
- Original sleeves for Jean Bertram Pirie's dress, later detached.
- Original copper printing plate for the invitation to Jean Bertram's Wedding.
- Letter from February 1907 from Mrs J. J. Steele of Dundas to her daughter Bertha Keagey describing the wedding presents received by Jean Bertram Pirie.
- Shoes worn by Mary Bain Bertram on her Wedding Day.
- Gloves and stocking worn by Mary Bain Bertram on her Wedding Day.
- Photos of Mary Bain in her wedding dress.
- Original Museum label for the dress when it was first displayed in 1966.
- Letter from February 1907 from Mrs J. J. Steele of Dundas to her daughter Bertha Keagey describing the wedding of Mary Bain Bertram and her dress.

Case 2, Wedding Mementos:

- Scrapbook of Wedding invitations kept by Hazel Nadine Campbell, 1954.
- Gloves worn by Joann Maclachlan at her wedding at the Dundas Baptist Church in 1957.
- Wedding photos of Rae Hendershot and T. R. MacDonald, 1950
- Ribbon for a bridesmaid's dress and a container of keepsakes from the wedding of Hazel Nadine Campbell, 1954.
- Album of wedding photos of Mary Archambeault, 1951