

A blacksmith's anvil, the traditional symbol of Gretna Green

Historically marriage was tightly controlled by the family, the community, and the church. Couples who disagreed with the prescribed plan for their lives had to find someone who would marry them without parental consent, which often meant leaving their community for a brief period so the knot could be tied.

Gretna Green was a Scottish town in Dumfriesshire, just across the border from England, where couples went to "ring the bell" before returning home to face the wrath or tears of their families. Gretna Green, as a destination for weddings, was a result of Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act of 1753. Lord Hardwicke's Act required parental/guardian consent for the marriage of a minor by license. Other requirements affected banns and Anglican ceremonies, except for Jews and Quakers. Scotland had very different laws, allowing couples to marry by declaration before witnesses, and the legal age was 15.

North America had, and still has, its own Gretna Greens. Unlike Las Vegas, however, what happened there rarely stayed there. Successfully locating these marriages may require identifying the Gretna Greens that were convenient for your ancestors, including locations in Canada. In America, "Gretna Green" came to describe a place couples traveled to because its marriage laws or practices were less restrictive than those at home.

RECORDS DO EXIST, BUT THEY MAY BE WHERE YOU LEAST EXPECT THEM!

Location

The most important consideration was location. A couple hoping to marry without consent or knowledge of their family must find a place that:

- Had laws that allowed them to marry legally, including rules about:
  - Age requirements
  - Parental consent
  - Privacy of the ceremony
  - Waiting periods
- Had people who were willing to officiate their marriage, such as:
  - Justice of the peace
  - Religious official
  - Other official
- They could reach before their plans were discovered.

Secrecy

A couple may, or may not, have been underage. Reasons for "running off" to get married are as varied as the couples.

Consider the differences in these factors:

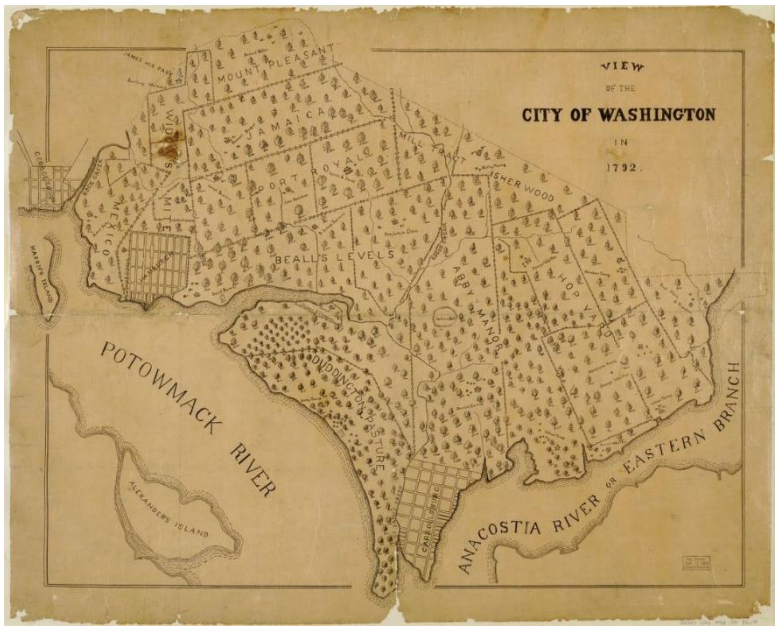
- Cultural
- Economic
- Racial
- Religious
- Societal

Transportation

Traveling was significantly more difficult even a century ago, and, knowing where to marry did not always mean a couple could easily get there.

Factors to consider:

- Where was each person from?
- Where were they residing just before marrying?
- What types of transportation were available to them?
    - Automobile
    - Carriage/Wagon
    - Foot
    - Horseback
    - Train
    - Waterway



"View of the City of Washington in 1792"

Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division.

https://www.loc.gov/resource/g3851g.ct001791/?r=-0.03,0.249,0.291,0.11,0

Confidants and Helpers

Most couples had someone in whom they could confide. It could be a sympathetic relative, friend, or clergy. Not everyone who helped the couple necessarily knew their intentions.. The broader the network of the couple, the more opportunities they had to arrange a secret wedding.

Did either person:

- Go to school outside their town?
- Travel between two or more homes regularly during a typical year?
- Have responsibilities that took them away from home?
- Have extended family that lived elsewhere?

Possible Records and Clues

What clues might help you discover the marriage records you seek?

- **Account Books** – expenses related to the marriage
- **Church records** – may include dates and places of marriages, births, and deaths
- **Court records** – attempt to annul the marriage, disinherit, etc.
- **Diaries** – if you are lucky
- **Family Bibles** – marriage date or changes to a marriage date
- **Letters** (before or after the event)
- **Military records**, including pension records
- **Newspapers** – marriage, birth, anniversary, or death notices may provide clues
- **Photographs** – clothing can help date the image; names and locations may be written on the back
- **Wills** – clues to married names or a diminished inheritance resulting from family disapproval



Proximity of Gretna Green to the English border

Other possibilities

Could you have the wrong marriage date?

- If you are estimating from the oldest known child, earlier children may have died young.
- If you are estimating based on the age of the bride or groom – they may have needed permission because they were underage

Are there two couples with similar names that are being confused?

Don't search only where the couple lived. Search where they could get to.

Resources

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