

# RHODE ISLAND LORE & LAUGHTER

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Washington and  
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## Those Shift-y Marriages

**D**ELVERS into colonial lore have made much of the shift marriage, a custom which enabled the new husband of a widow to escape payment of his predecessor's debts. Comment has varied from indignation at this means of cheating a creditor, to mawkish attempts at showing the wearing of a shift to be immodest.

What was a shift marriage? Better than descriptions in the published works is an old manuscript in the Westerly Public Library, by Nelson B. Vars. It says:

"Of this seemingly very strange ceremony I have learned of four, one in South Kingstown, two in Westerly, one in Hopkinton. The records of one I found in Westerly I copied and sent to the *Newport Historical Magazine*, where it was published. But I have never seen published any explanation of the strange ceremony.

"Therefore, I will give such information as I have received, believing it to be correct. The law was in substance this—if a married man died, leaving a widow and unpaid debts, the man who should marry her became responsible for the first husband's indebtedness. But a way of escape was provided if they would comply with the requirements, as follows: That the bride-to-be (widow) should be married in the public highway with no other clothing on but her shift (*that is, chemise or undershirt*) thereby representing 'in the figure' that she was a poor wanderer without any home or friends, utterly destitute.

"It was also required that the ceremony should be performed where at least three roads meet, that is, at the corners of the roads, showing still further, figuratively, that she had come thus far and was now at a loss which road to take. She is there met by a man who, seeing her destitute and friendless condition, offers to marry her and take her to himself and his home.

"If it were not convenient to find a place where three roads met, then the bride-to-be should walk across the road back and forth at least four times, thereby representing the four corners of the road."

This is the marriage noted by Mr. Vars in South Kingstown:

"Thomas Cullenwall was joyned in Marriage to Abigail his wife the 22nd day of February, 1719-20. He took her in Marriage after she had gone four times across the highway in only her Shift and hairlace and no other clothing. Joyned together in Marriage per me, George Hazard, Justice."

This is a Westerly record:

"To all people to whome it may concern—this may certify you that Nathaniell Bundy of Westerly Took ye Widow Mary Palmeter of sd town in ye highway with no other clothing but shifting or Smock on ye evening after the 26th day of April 1724—and was joyned together in that honorable estate of matrimony in ye presence of John Coley, Peter Crandall, James Coury, Moses Downing, George Stillman, May Crandall, Mary Hill, and was so joyned together as above sd ye day and year above mentioned per me, John Saunders, Justice."

A particularly interesting ceremony of this kind is described by Mr. Vars in colorful detail:

"Whilst in Westerly in November 1881 I was told of another of those odd marriages by Miss Frances Macomber who was then 72 years of age. She said it was witnessed by her step-grandmother, who was Rebecca Vars before her marriage, who told her of it.

"The marriage took place at the forks of



the road about one and a half miles south-east of Niantic—the place is known as Grinnell's Rocks. It had become known to some of the neighbors, accordingly several of the young people were desirous of seeing the marriage performed. There as the time drew near, they went quietly into the woods nearby and awaited the arrival of the party who met at the house of Mr. and Mrs. Pooler. . . .

"Presently they saw Elder Clarke come riding on his horse and stop at Pooler's. Soon after, several persons came out and walked to the corners of the road, then those in the woods came out and witnessed the marriage.

"The shift the bride wore was a nice garment, finely pleated, tucked and stitched. The bride was a widow Tift, and the time of this marriage was about 1755 to 1760.

It seems apparent that during a part of the time when the shift marriages were used, there was some feeling of immodesty about them. They were, in most cases, performed at twilight. One, at least, was solemnized in the middle of the night, obviously to escape prying eyes:

"David Lewis married widow Jemima Hill where four roads meet, at midnight."

This wedding occurred in 1780, at Hopkinton. At the crossroads where the towns of Exeter, South Kingstown and North Kingstown met, there was another shift marriage, perhaps by daylight:

"On March 11th, 1717, did Philip Shearman Take the Widow Hannah Clarke in her Shift, without any other Apparel, and led her across the Highway, as the Law directs in such cases and was then married according to the law by me, William Hall, Justice."

The inevitable pruriency which accompanied the shift marriage for a while, and in some regions, was soon banished by the adaptation of the shift itself. It was, in most of the ceremonies, far from a true symbol of dire poverty. It was long, thick, and at best an awkward garment; but it was often beautifully hand-worked, and at times, perhaps, colorful and becoming.

In practically all the shift marriages on record in Rhode Island, the bride came to the appointed corners already wearing her shift. Only once was there, apparently, something of modern burlesque involved. That was in East Greenwich, where:

"Rebeckah Andrews, widow, did personally appear in the highway in sd Towne and the said Rebeckah did strip herself unto her shift and declar yt she left all to take ye sd John Nichols to be her husband and yt said Nichols did take her to be his wife and they were lawfully married the 18th day of June 1721 before me, Tho. Fry, Just."

## Test Your Horse Sense

Score one point for a correct solution of each of the first five problems. The last problem counts five points. Score as follows: 0-2, poor; 3-6, average; 7-8, superior; 9-10, very superior.

1. In a cool room, which one of the following would feel warmest to your bare feet?

Wood Floor Rag Rug  
 Tile Axminster Rug

2. Electricity will flow most easily through which type of water?

Ocean Lake  
 River Rainwater

3. A magnet will attract the metal whose chemical symbol is which one of the following?

Ag Sn  
 Cu Fe

4. Bastille Day is a holiday comparable to our 4th of July, in which nation?

Russia Italy  
 France Norway

5. The Panama Canal is approximately how long?

10 miles 108 miles  
 50 miles 164 miles

6. Match the five men who serve in a general way to adjudicate or decide special issues with the items with which they are usually associated. One point for each correct matching.

(a) Referee (v) Church

(b) Moderator (w) Boxing ring

(c) Mediator (x) Baseball

(d) Judge (y) Labor strike

(e) Umpire (z) Divorce court

### ANSWERS

1. Axminster (Wool rug); 2. Ocean. (Salt); 3. Fe (Iron); 4. France; 5. 50 miles; 6. (a) Referee-Boxing ring (w); (b) Moderator-Church (v); (c) Mediator-Judge (y); (d) Judge-Referee (z); (e) Umpire-Baseball (x).

## How to Make Any Skin Appear Softer, Smoother, Younger-Looking Overnight



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