



PAST TIMES: STORIES FROM THE SHELDON'S PAST

Ruth Freeman's Perfect Wedding Gown

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The bride in the photo radiates the intelligence and good sense of a young Emma Thompson. The groom is in tails, as handsome as Jimmy

Stewart. Ruth Hayden met Stephen Freeman at a church youth group in Cambridge, Massachusetts when they were 16, and both of them soon knew that this was it. The courtship was not without drama. She caught typhoid and missed her junior year of high school. He was a postman's son, working his way through Harvard. When she recovered and graduated, she went to secretarial college and then toiled in an office while he did a Ph.D. in French. They waited for each other for seven years. On the afternoon of June 5, 1923, the newly-minted professor and the painting contractor's daughter were finally married in the Old Cambridge Baptist Church.

No photo of the time can do justice to the flapper-era perfection of her dress. In a recent talk at the Sheldon Museum, costume designer Angela Brande showed us the finer points of a number of the lovely wedding dresses in our collection; but it was the sheer elegance of Ruth Freeman's that wowed the crowd.

The bride came to her big day with a great advantage. Her mother, Mina Hayden, was a skilled dressmaker who had come to Boston as a young woman to create lovely frocks in the homes of the wealthy. Now she sewed her daughter's wedding dress by hand, taking little stitches of softly glowing champagne silk satin. An underlayer controls the bodice, which is given a little shape by a sash at the back. The scooped neck is edged in a row of

pearly beads, and they also line the armholes, the rims of the sleeves and a single discreet slit low on the left leg. The front of the gown carries more pearls in a subtle floral spray. The sleeves are graced with perfect flaps of fabric that hung down from the arms in elegant little trains.

Ruth was a modern woman, as shown in the length of her dress. Angela tells us that in the 1920s fashionable brides wanted them only ankle length, but still preferred long veils and trains. Ruth's train was 'chapel length,' trailing the gown by less than a yard. It came to the floor at a square end and was decorated by a beaded bow. The whole thing could be detached for ease of movement after the ceremony. Her headdress was a gathered cap of silk tulle, its satin headband adorned with delicate wax orange blossoms. This cloud floated down her back to the length of the train. She wore a string of pearls around her neck and seems to have carried a bouquet of orange blossoms. The shoes, which are also in our collection, are charming low-heeled satin, with pointed toes and a single strap with a simple button. The gold lettering inside says, "Thayer, McNeill Company, Boston."

The rest of the trousseau, as made by Mother Hayden, is nearly as luxurious as the dress. Beneath the bodice the bride wore what we would think of as a 'teddy' of sleeveless silk with a scooped neck, rimmed in pale lace, and anchored with rows of delicate pin tucks. It fastens at the bottom of the torso with perfect little buttons set in a lace ruffle. A silk half-slip hung from the waist, with horizontal pin tucks and rows of lace swishing subtly beneath the skirt.

The final component of this perfect package was a matching nightgown in the same champagne satin, with a lace inset across the upper chest. The armholes are slightly ruffled. A ribbon rings the neckline and little vertical pin tucks give a touch of shape to the bodice. The clean, simple lines provide the whole ensemble with a look of quiet sophistication.

The wedding seems to have lived up to the years of fantasy that had preceded it. One of their daughters, now Hope Schultz of Shelburne, tells us that the ceremony was followed by a lovely reception at the bride's home. Ruth was a wonderful pianist who had taken classes at the New England Conservatory, so for their wedding present her parents presented the newlyweds with a baby grand piano.

Stephen and Ruth went off to Providence, where he held his first teaching appointment at Brown for two years. Then the call to a permanent job came from a college in the wilds of Vermont. The dashing young French professor and his quiet wife headed to Middlebury, where they would make an indelible mark on the community. Stephen Freeman took the lead in putting foreign languages on the map at the College, spearheading the building of the Chateau, the nation's first college French house. He held many prominent positions in town and gown, including a stint as Acting President

of the College. His services to the French language in America earned him the recognition of the French government, who awarded him the Legion of Honor in 1949.

Men of this era were often able to shine because they had solid women behind them, and the Freemans were no exception. Ruth took care of their three children in the house on South Street, enjoying the needlework she had learned from her accomplished mother. Her favorite times were when she and Stephen could get away and travel. They went around the world twice, as well as making many trips to Europe. Despite a constitution that remained delicate as the result of her teenaged typhoid, she was always game to walk in Mongolia or set off across the Sahara.

The union ended when Ruth died of heart failure shortly after their 60th anniversary in 1983. The charismatic man she'd fallen for when she was sixteen had given her with life that had proved to be pretty glamorous for a professor's wife from Vermont. But on that long ago June day in Cambridge, in her beautiful, floating dress, Ruth was the brightest star.