

# Marriages Here, There, and Nowhere: Finding Gretna Greens and Borders

J. Mark Lowe, FUGA  
marklowe@kytnresearch.com  
All rights reserved ©2022

Many couples choose to marry in a location away from their home. Sometimes, this decision is based on a romantic location or a place that allows them to marry now without a three-day waiting period. These locations are often referred to as a Gretna Green, the historic town in Scotland where thousands of English ran because of Scotland's sympathetic marriage laws.

As researchers, we first realize a couple chose a different location because we can't find their extant marriage record. Let's determine an appropriate strategy to find those records.

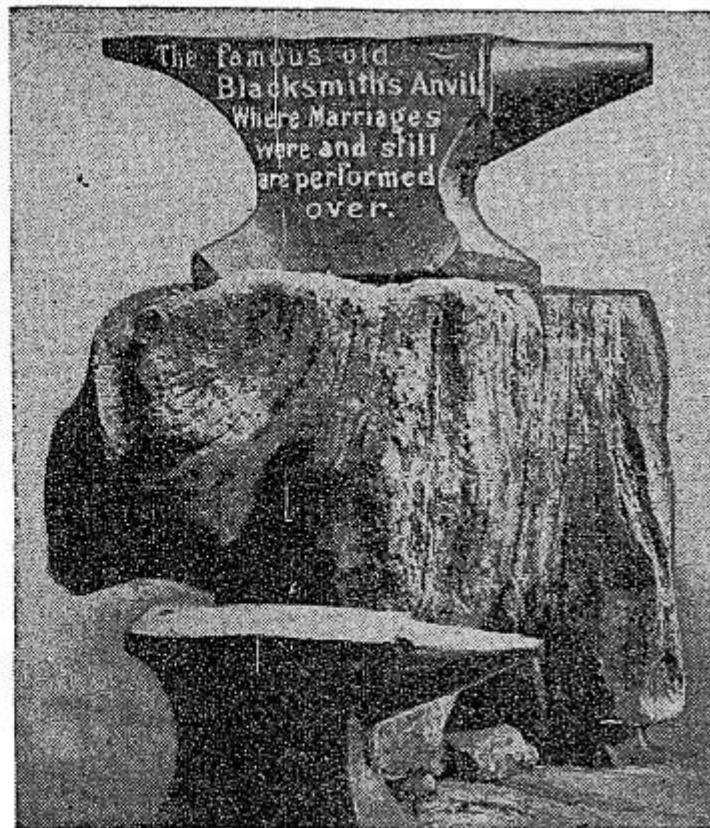
**Reasons for Gretna Green:** Waiting Periods, Medical Tests, Costs, Restrictive Clauses, Alcohol/Parties, Popular Choice, Going on the Train, Romance

**GRETNA GREEN, Scotland,** Sept. 16 (Reuters)—Gretna Green's smithy, the most famous runaway-marriage place in the world, is up for sale.

The eighteenth century smithy, where more than 5,000 sweethearts by-passed parental objections and were married in a matter of minutes by the blacksmith "priest," is part of a parcel that will be turned over to the highest bidder for the Gretna Green Estate.

Scotland's sympathetic marriage laws first made the little village just across the English border a haven for eloping couples. The practical Scots said that, as far as they were concerned, a marriage was a marriage if a man and woman declared before witnesses that they were man and wife.

Then one canny Scot looked at the droves of couples crossing the border and saw in them his fortune. He was a farmer named Mackie who ran a smithy on the side. In 1900 he turned the shop into a marriage room and there began the "over the anvil" marriages with himself as witness.



The "altar" for the brief ceremonies was this historic anvil

Reasons to Find a Gretna Green or a Marriage not local to couple: No marriage record in area, Records for family in adjacent areas, newspaper searches, alcohol sales on state line, rumor or family stories  
Research Strategies That Work

Choose a focus area where the couple resides. Follow basic research to look in local area, and surrounding counties.

Add towns, roads and rivers to focus area. Find contemporary maps to assist and encourage questions.  
Look for Clues and methods of transportation.

Review County Boundaries for the appropriate timeline [Atlas of Historical County Boundaries]

Consider reasonable locations where marriage might have occurred.

Use state-wide indices for assistance. [Remember there might be missing individuals or misindexed records.

When marriage is found, research all the parties for a clearer understanding.

Document each step.

As I was researching references to town like Gretna Green I found the following: (newspaper date is included if a specific timeframe was mentioned)

CA – Santa Ana (1891)

CT – Greenwich

GA – Georgetown (Judge J.E. Dozier – 1913), Ringgold

IL – E. St. Louis, Belleville (1900)

IN – Jeffersonville, Valparaiso (1917), Anderson (1903), Crown Point (1937), Hammond, New Albany (1907)

KY – Covington, Newport, Maysville,

LA – American Legion Convention, New Orleans (1922)

MD – Elkton, Rockville (1901), Ellicott City (1932)

MI – Menominee (1910), St. Joseph, Benton Harbor (1914), Detroit (1909)

MO – Maryville (1905)

NC – Squire W.O. Bailes (1901) [York County SC]

NJ – Camden (1891)

NY – Harrison (1930), NY City (1912)

NV – Reno (1920)

OH – Aberdeen (1884), Squire Beasely (1887)

PA – West Alexander

RI – Providence

SC (See NC)

TN – Bristol (1890-1911), Lavergne (1873), Clarksville (1894), Nashville (1897),  
Springfield (1950)

VA – Alexandria (1938), Winchester (1940)

VT – Bellows Falls (1917)

WV – Wellsburg (1917)

WI – Hudson (1893)

Mexico - Tijuana (1948) Mixed Marriages

## Selected Resources

Carroll, John D., preparer. *The Kentucky Statutes ...*, Vol 1. Fifth Edition. Louisville: The Baldwin Law Book Company Inc., 1915.

Howard, George Elliott, Ph.D. *A History of Matrimonial Institutions Chiefly in England and the United States With An Introductory Analysis of the Literature and the Theories of Primitive Marriage and the Family*. 3 vols. Chicago : University of Chicago Press, Callaghan & Co. ; 1904.

[Hathitrust: <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000977228>]

Hutchinson, Peter Orlando. *Chronicles of Gretna Green*. 2 vols. London, Richard Bentley, 1844. [Electric Scotland: <https://www.electricscotland.com/history/gretna/index.htm>]

Knott, E.E., comp., *Ready Reference Manual of the Statute Laws of the States and Territories in The United States...*, Burlington, VT: International Publishing Co., 1889.

“Border Jumping: Researching Across State & County Borders,” [2013] article by J. Mark Lowe, <https://www.archives.com/experts/lowe-j-mark/border-jumping-researching-across-state-county-borders.html>

“Have you searched and searched for the marriage without finding it?” Blog post by Arlene Eakle [2007], <http://www.arleneeakle.com/wordpress/2007/02/19/have-you-searched-and-searched-for-the-marriage-without-finding-it/>

“Marriage, Kentucky style,” Blog post by Judy G. Russell [Feb 2017], *The Legal Genealogist*. A discussion of finding a specific statute law for marriage in a particular year. <https://www.legalgenealogist.com/2017/02/13/marriage-kentucky-style/>

Atlas of Historical County Boundaries, Newberry Library  
<https://publications.newberry.org/ahcbp/>

“Marriage Laws of the Fifty States,” Cornell University Law School, Legal Information Institute  
[http://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/table\\_marriage](http://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/table_marriage)

## Locate Contemporary Maps

David Rumsey <http://www.davidrumsey.com>

Library of Congress Map Collection <https://www.loc.gov/maps/>

LOC Railroad Maps <https://www.loc.gov/collections/railroad-maps-1828-to-1900/>

Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection-Univ of Texas, Austin [www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/](http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/)

Landmark and Ordnance Survey, Britain's national mapping agency. [www.old-maps.co.uk/](http://www.old-maps.co.uk/)

Yale Map Collection <https://web.library.yale.edu/maps>

Ancient World Mapping Center, Univ. of North Carolina, Chapel Hill  
<http://awmc.unc.edu/wordpress/free-maps/>

Osher Map Library, Univ. of Southern Maine [www.usm.maine.edu/maps/home.html](http://www.usm.maine.edu/maps/home.html)

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)  
Office of Coast Surveys <https://historicalcharts.noaa.gov/about.php>

Federal Township Plats of Illinois, Ill. Secretary of State  
<http://idaillinois.org/digital/collection/IllinoisPlats/search/>

Maps of Missouri, Kansas City Public Library  
<https://www.kclibrary.org/research-resources/maps>

Missouri County Plat Books  
[www.sos.mo.gov/archives/mdh\\_splash/default.asp?coll=mocountyppltbks](http://www.sos.mo.gov/archives/mdh_splash/default.asp?coll=mocountyppltbks)

UNC Chapel Hill, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library  
<https://web.lib.unc.edu/nc-maps/>

University of Alabama <http://alabamamaps.ua.edu/>

General Land Office / Bureau of Land Management Original plats of US surveys, field notes  
<https://glorerecords.blm.gov/default.aspx>

Georgia Dept of Archives and History <https://vault.georgiaarchives.org/>

Historic New Orleans Collection [www.hnoc.org](http://www.hnoc.org)

University of Mississippi maps from 1900 [www.olemiss.edu/](http://www.olemiss.edu/)

Mississippi Department of Archives [www.mdah.state.ms.us/](http://www.mdah.state.ms.us/)

Univ of Wisconsin Digital History <https://search.library.wisc.edu/search/digital/browse>

Villanova Digital Library [www.villanova.edu/library/digital/](http://www.villanova.edu/library/digital/)

Documenting the American South, UNC <https://docsouth.unc.edu/>

Gilmer Civil War Map Collection <https://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/gilmer/>

HistoryGeo.com – Arphax Publishing [www.Historygeo.com](http://www.Historygeo.com)

Ancestry.com - U.S., Indexed County Land Ownership Maps, 1860-1918  
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1127/>

Ancestry.com - U.S., Indexed Early Land Ownership and Township Plats, 1785-1898  
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2179/>

Arkansas Maps - <http://uark.libguides.com/c.php?g=79066&p=506548>

Indiana Plat Books - <http://ulib.iupuidigital.org/cdm/ref/collection/IndianaPlat/id/2147>

Texas Historic County Maps - <https://texashistory.unt.edu/explore/collections/GLOHCM/>

Harvard Map Collection, Digital Maps –  
<https://library.harvard.edu/libraries/harvard-map-collection>

Old Maps Online - <https://www.oldmapsonline.org/>

Norman Leventhal Map & Educ Center, Boston Public Library - <https://www.leventhalmap.org/>