

THE SILENT BRIDES

As this treatise begins, let me categorically declare that what I plan to write about was a good idea.

Anne Southworth is Curator at Historic Lyme Village. I am a volunteer, and we have spent many hours adding location information to the on-line inventory of holdings and items here at the museum. And, when we struggled up the back staircase to the second floor on our searching ventures, we were silently greeted by two very ill-presented mannequins-of-sort wearing wedding dresses. We both agreed that this was just not right; they both deserved better representation. Were they the only silent brides in the museum? Wedding dresses became the topic of our many conversations.

Why not find all the wedding dresses and have a display of them? That was the “good idea.” How hard could it be?

For months we talked about how to do: first, locate the dresses; second, how to display them, and, third, where to display them. Lots of talking because neither of us had ever done anything like this. Many starting points, but where to start?

We managed to locate most of the dresses. The dilemma was to find mannequins. We took the bull by the horns, so-to-speak, this spring of 2022. We scoured catalogues from the Gift Shop collection and found mannequins.

We visited the Vintage Wedding Display at the Wood County Historical Museum in Bowling Green. It was fun and fascinating and left us with many ideas. First thing I did, Anne thought it was a bit suggestive, was to peek under the Do Not Touch dresses to see how the mannequins were secured. Mannequins, it turns out, do not come with adjustable stands, so they must perch on some kind of support. More than 20 dresses were included in the display that took well over a year to plan and execute, and required two rooms.

We didn't have 20 dresses. We have seven or eight dresses, so...how hard could it be?

It is amazing the number of items listed in catalogues for gift shops and libraries. Daunting! Two or three pages of mannequins: tall ones, ones with arms, no arms, attachable arms and hands, heads, no heads. Some were white and shiny and others were tanned. All the mannequins had feminine figures.

Eight wedding dresses meant eight mannequins, and, they were ordered. Huge boxes arrived on Anne's front porch that were then moved to a room in the Wright Mansion. Box cutters were

useful inventions. My bag of tools included a Phillips screwdriver used to attach the bases to the poles that attached to the bases of the mannequins. They were short with no means to make them taller. First question: “what do we do now?” That's why I peeked under the dresses at the Wood County Museum. The answer was boxes of some sort for the “brides” to stand on.

The two lonely brides still stood on the landing of the back stairs of the mansion.

Their dresses were in questionable condition, different than most dresses that were wrapped in tissue paper and better preserved. I took one forgotten bride, dusty and discolored, and removed her dress. The poor dear had been stuck for years on an awkward seamstresses' dress form. We removed the dress, and carefully placed it on a new mannequin, and, hooray, it fit her like a glove!!! It was so exciting I couldn't stop laughing with joy.

The back closures on the dress were those horrible, tiny hook-and-eyes that you need a magnifying glass to see them. I closed all the hooks. This dress had been relegated to a spot in front of a window that did real damage to the dress. The hem of the dress was torn in several places. Not just torn, but disintegrating from age and exposure to sunlight and dust. The dress was way too long, so, we realized that the stands had to be at least 20 inches high to keep the dresses off the floor.

But, it fit! We giggled like school girls. We saved her dress, and the pronouns for the silent brides became “she.”

Remaining mannequins were set up, and Anne and I brought two very carefully wrapped and protected dresses from storage. This time we used the larger white and more attractive mannequins. The first dress, a lovely, well-made two-piece dress with, sewn-in stays and with lots of lace (circa 1870) awaited its fitting. The top fit fine in front, but couldn't be snapped in the back. Took it off, disappointed, and tried it on the smaller “lady.”

The joy of all this was that these two dresses, both two pieces, beautifully made by professional dressmakers, were worn by brides who had 18-20 inch waists and our ladies had 21-inch waists.

One dress, a cobalt blue satin, with a million hook-and-eye snaps (didn't these seamstresses have other closures?) was an 1865 creation. The color was unusual and the dress was tailor-made and fully lined that must have been walking difficult. Beautiful dress and incredibly fragile. Touching the fabric could easily rip it because it was time-worn. We attached the skirt and it needs some mending and new snaps, but, it's on the form. The mannequins' arms were long and rigid