

The Case of the Missing Dress

By Archives Intern *Sophia Malikyar*

Recently a longstanding mystery of our museum was solved through a happy bit of coincidence. A historic wedding gown that was “lost” somewhere in the stored collections of the DeKalb History Center was finally located last year. Why all the fuss about a dress? Considering who wore the dress, and whom she married, you might understand our excitement.

In 1847 when Elizabeth Grisham married Joseph Emerson Brown in South Carolina, she wore a lovely linen gown, a fine example of 19th-century textiles and the subject of a 21st-century mystery. In 1857 the Browns became the Governor and First Lady of Georgia. Brown held the gubernatorial seat from 1857 to 1865, including the Civil War. He was a secessionist and a firm believer in the institution of slavery. After leaving the Governor’s mansion, Brown served as the chief justice of the Supreme Court of Georgia during Reconstruction. He left politics to practice law and to operate the Dade Coal Company, where he earned high profits by using the convict lease system, putting African American prisoners to work through lease to private individuals. When Joe died in 1894, he and Elizabeth had been married for 47 years; she died just two years later. Given the history surrounding its owner and her husband, the History Center was eager to locate the Grisham/Brown wedding dress.

Thanks to a 1983 photograph in an *Atlanta Constitution*,

DeKalb Extra article, we knew what the dress looked like and what it was made of. There had been some debate between Elizabeth’s aunt and father about who would purchase a satin wedding dress for her. The discussion was settled when Elizabeth decided that since she was getting married in midsummer, she wanted a linen wedding dress instead of a satin one. The handkerchief linen dress is covered in intricate hand-crocheted patterns and lace inserts. Elisabeth Grisham Brown is said to have worn *thirteen* petticoats under the dress. So much for summer comfort!

The wedding gown was donated to the DeKalb History Center in 1966 by an anonymous donor. The dress was put on display in 1983, but we do not know when it was put into storage. 51 years after the dress was donated, it could not be found. Photographs to document the dress, now a routine part of receiving or updating objects in a collection, could also not be found. The only helpful bits of information were the grainy photo in the 1983 article and the fact that the dress was known to be made of linen.

So after such a long period of fruitless searching, how did we finally manage to find it? It was a moment of real serendipity.

Because the History Center is creating textile exhibit, we are unpacking and reviewing boxes full of incredible textiles. One box, filled with four dresses, was opened only an hour after discussion of the missing wedding dress. The story had

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Elizabeth Grisham Brown’s 1847 wedding dress.

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Missing Dress

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been shared in answer to a question from the author about all the Post-it Notes on boxes which read, "Searched through for Grisham/Brown dress." It was an interesting anecdote, but with the dress unlabeled and missing for at least ten years, I thought it highly unlikely that I would stumble upon it, especially in a box that had already been searched. I was to be proven wrong.

Within the box of four dresses, only three were listed and described on condition reports. The fourth simply had a tag that read, "1900s," along with an accession number. The dress is interesting for its detailing, making it a potential candidate for display in the exhibit. At the time, it simply seemed unfortunate that there was no additional information on the dress—that is, until our archivist walked past, did a double take, and rushed to pull up the 1983 article with its grainy image. The dress showed some similarities, but it wasn't until the dress was turned over that the distinct detailing on the front came up as a perfect match. The photograph was fuzzy, but there was the confirmation we needed. The linen wedding dress, hidden for so long and mysterious to those of us who had neither seen it in person nor viewed a good photograph of it, had been found at last!

The real kicker is that upon looking up the accession number listed on the tag, a *recent* photo of the dress popped up immediately. The description read, "Woman's day dress of white lawn [a fine linen or cotton fabric] with crocheted trim, high collar and three quarter length sleeves. Dress fastens up the back and has machine stitching. No marks." It was given a date range of 1900 - 1915.

In 2006 someone had come across this dress, had described it to the best of their abilities, and had assigned it a likely time period. This misinformation was entered into our collections database, and there the incorrect description remained for a decade. At some point, this dress was separated from any identifying information about its owner, date, or history. Because it was simply titled "Dress" and assigned to the wrong time period, no one had been able to find it in the database and thus locate it in our collections. The fact that the dress was linen probably added to the fact that it was so easily overlooked; it simply is not as sumptuous and satiny as other wedding dresses in the collection. It is somewhat ironic that the linen is what caught our eyes that day, perhaps *because* it was such a contrast to the satin dresses that filled the rest of the box.

Ultimately, the find was incredibly thrilling. We carefully placed it on a mannequin in order to document it and assess its current condition, beaming delightedly the entire time. The case of the missing wedding dress had been resolved at last, *and* the dress was beautifully intact. While there are no direct ties to DeKalb County on the part of Elizabeth or her husband, the dress is still a significant piece of Georgia's history. We are fortunate that it was donated to us and even more fortunate that it has been well maintained (though admittedly lost in the database) for the past ten years. It just goes to show that you sometimes find the best things when you aren't looking for them.

Needless to say, we will certainly be keeping a close and careful eye on this 171-year-old dress from now on! ✦



Presented by the DeKalb History Center

THE 11TH ANNUAL **BLACK HISTORY MONTH CELEBRATION**

The History of African American Politics in DeKalb, from Struggle to Transformation



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11:00 am - 1:15 pm
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Deep Roots in DeKalb: The Flat Rock Story of Resilience

Join us for our opening reception as we unveil our newest exhibit, *Deep Roots in DeKalb: The Flat Rock Story of Resilience*. This exhibit explores the story of Flat Rock as well as the people who called it home. By examining objects collected over time from the residents of Flat Rock, we have been able to better narrate the lives and experiences of the families within the community. This exhibit would not have been possible if not for the generosity of **Flat Rock Archives**, who graciously lent part of their collection and all of their expertise to allow us to tell the inspiring story of the community who stood strong for over one hundred years. Free and open to the public. **Thursday, February 28 from 6:00—8:00 p.m.**

Annual Meeting & Silent Auction

Join us for our Annual Meeting and Silent Auction on **Friday, March 22, from 6:00 - 8:30 p.m.** at the Historic DeKalb Courthouse. Enjoy an evening of wine, beer, hors d'oeuvres and music while bidding on fantastic items donated by generous local businesses. We are currently seeking Silent Auction donations; contact Melissa at forgey@dekalbhistory.org or 404-373-1088, ext. 22, if you would like to donate.

Hops at the History Center

This recurring author event will feature Susan Hunter and her book *Southern Homes and Plan Books: The Architectural Legacy of Leila Ross Wilburn*. **Wednesday, March 6, 6:00—8:00 p.m.** Doors open at 5:30. Ticket includes book signing & drink ticket. Book available for purchase. \$5 members, \$10 non members. Contact Marissa at howard@dekalbhistory.org or 404-373-1088, ext. 20 for more information.

All of these events will be held at the DeKalb History Center, 101 E. Court Sq, Decatur GA 30030 ✦

Thanks to all who have joined or renewed. Membership donations are extremely important to our mission. If there is a correction to your listing, or you have questions about your membership, please call Marissa at 404-373-1088, extension 20.

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All funds received through memberships directly support the preservation of DeKalb County history and are tax-deductible as allowed by law. Your generous contribution to the DeKalb History Center will provide you with a year-long membership that includes our quarterly newsletter to keep you informed on all our activities. We hope that you will join our team by either renewing your membership or joining as a first-time supporter.

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