

Maine History

Volume 40
Number 3 *Challenge and Change in Maine's
Communities*

Article 5

9-1-2001

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Recommended Citation

Field, Jacqueline. "Mabel Haskell's Wedding Gown." *Maine History* 40, 3 (2001): 245-248.
<https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistoryjournal/vol40/iss3/5>

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FROM THE COLLECTIONS

BY JACQUELINE FIELD

Mabel Haskell's Wedding Gown
Costume Collection, A86-50



MAINE Historical Society's costume collection contains a rich assortment of garments dating from the late eighteenth to mid-twentieth centuries. Many items in the collection have well-documented histories. Some are significant in their own right as examples of the art and craft of fashion, others because they are linked to individuals or events. There are also gems waiting to have their stories told. Such a gem is Mabel Haskell's wedding dress. Recent research on the gown has shed light on one of Maine's lost industries and invited further investigation.

Mabel was born into a prominent southern Maine family. Her grandfather, James Haskell owned a cotton mill, the Westbrook Manufacturing Company and founded the successful Haskell Silk Company (1874-1930). Mabel's father, Edwin, was one of the silk mill's principal shareholders and its general manager. During Mabel's girlhood, at the turn of the century, Westbrook was a prosperous, attractive city, with a shaded, elm-lined Main Street and frequent trolley service to Portland. Mabel likely used this conveyance after graduating from Westbrook High School, when she traveled to join the offspring of other well-to-do families at Waynflete, Portland's prestigious private school.

Evidently a young lady of modern outlook, Mabel continued her education beyond high school. She did not opt for the nearby Normal School in Gorham, nor did she follow her father's footsteps to the University of Maine. Edwin Haskell had been one of six in Orono's first graduating class in 1872 and served as a trustee from 1901 to 1920. Mabel chose Mount Holyoke College, in South Hadley, Massachusetts. This decision was, perhaps, not wholly unexpected, since the Haskell family probably had business associations and friendships in this part of New England. Skinner's Silk Company was located in neighboring Holyoke and nearby Northampton, Florence, and Leeds were all silk manufacturing towns.

When Mabel graduated from college in 1908 she returned to Westbrook. On June 19, 1912 she married Dr. Ernest Woodbury Files, a graduate of Bowdoin College and Maine Medical School class of 1902. To judge from the wedding arrangements and wedding dress, Mabel had a wide circle of friends and a certain amount of flair. For her gown she chose an *au courant* style: high-waisted, with elbow length sleeves, slim skirt, and trained overskirt. The dress is made from luxurious white silk duchesse satin, probably a Haskell Silk Company fabric. Pearl bead and diamonté trimmed lace on the asymmetric bodice and on the sleeves, speak of the bride's individual taste and attention to detail. Unseen on



the inside, the work of an expensive, highly skilled dressmaker is revealed through the construction and superior finish, with all raw edges bound with silk tape.

The wedding was lavish. Compared with other local “society” weddings the arrangements also seem somewhat unconventional. The marriage took place at the family home on Pierce Street in Westbrook. Escorted by her father she passed through an archway formed by long wands with suspended bunches of laurel, held by twelve friends acting as her flower girls.

Only immediate family members attended the ceremony in the front parlor, where one wall was completely covered with greenery and mountain laurel (Mount Holyoke’s flower). Afterwards there was a large reception. Later, with Mabel dressed in a gray suit and matching hat, the newlyweds motored to the Poland Spring House in Poland, Maine for their wedding trip. Upon their return they took up residence at 522 Deering Avenue, Portland.

The duchesse satin and messaline worn by the bride and her maid of honor were types of silk made by the Haskell Silk Company. The Haskell line included other silk staples such as taffeta, surah, and gros-grain, which were sold in stores throughout the country from J.R. Libby in Portland to Macy’s in New York, Rike’s in Dayton, Ohio and the Minneapolis Dry Goods Company. Unlike many silks that split, cracked and disintegrated soon after purchase, Haskell fabrics were renowned for their superior, lasting quality. These silks were sold by the well-known Haskell name but, as was the custom, the company did not use a distinguishing selvage mark, so of the millions of yards manufactured it is almost impossible to identify extant examples.

Mabel’s wedding story is interesting in itself, but the provenance of her wedding dress is especially significant. Because Mabel’s father manufactured high grade duchesse satin and the eighty-nine-year-old dress is still in excellent condition—as would be expected if it was made of Haskell fabric—the gown is probably made from Haskell silk. Thus Mabel’s wedding dress is perhaps the single known example of a garment constructed of material made by the Haskell Silk Company—Maine’s sole silk manufacturer, and one of the most respected in the country during the days when a silk industry flourished in America.

Jacqueline Field is an independent researcher working on the American silk industry and the Haskell Silk Company.