

THE ORIGINS OF WEDDING TRADITIONS

WEDDING AND ENGAGEMENT RINGS: In ancient Rome, husband showed their commitment to their wives with rings made of iron. Poorer Romans would seal their engagement with the loop of a door key to the new marital home. In 860 A.D., Pope Nicholas I mandated that engagements would be binding. From then on, the ring signified the intention to marry, and were made of a valuable metal, preferably gold. Ancient Egyptians believed that a perfect circle represented eternal love between two people. In the Middle Ages, the engagement ring was also used as the wedding ring. It was not until the 15th century that separate rings were given. Double ring ceremonies became fashioned during World War II, as a tangible link to home for husbands overseas. In Ireland, the Claddagh ring features two hands holding a crowned heart. The famous Tiffany setting was designed in the 1870s.

THIRD FINGER: The custom of wearing a wedding ring on the third finger of the left hand began with the ancient Egyptians. Roman brides wore rings on their thumbs, while in Medieval England women wore rings on their little fingers. One reason why the third finger of the left hand remains in fashion is the mistaken belief that a vein from that finger leads directly to the heart.

BRIDAL SHOWERS: Modern brides are showered with gifts before they wed. Legend has it that 300 years ago the daughter of a wealthy Dutchman fell in love with a miller who was poor from giving flour away to the needy. When the bride's father refused to provide a dowry, her friends and neighbors showered her with enough gifts that she marry her true love. In the 1890s, it became fashionable to place gifts for the new bride in a parasol. Later, the bride-to-be was showered with presents when the umbrella was opened over her head. Another popular Victorian container—which remains common through today—was a crepe-paper wishing well. In Colonial times, neighbors would gather for a quilting bee and present the next bride with a quilt featuring a wedding band or nuptial theme. In Eastern Europe, friends of the bride spend the night before the wedding helping her pack a hope chest. African village women bestow household goods and words of wisdom.

SOMETHING OLD: Superstitions abound in wedding folklore. Wearing something old links a bride to her family roots. Something new looks toward the future. Something borrowed shows good fortune if it is shared by a happily married woman, or it shows the power of friendship. Something blue is a symbol of purity and fidelity according to the Bible. A coin in the shoe means the couple will never be without happiness or money.

THROWING RICE: Rice has multiple origins. Once wedding guests would throw grains and figs at the newlyweds to wish them fertility. Modern wedding-goers throw birdseed, confetti, or flower petals, or blow bubbles over the newlyweds.

BRIDAL VEILS: Wearing a veil will shield a bride from the Evil Eye.

LUCKY HORSESHOE: Irish brides believe a horseshoe strewn with ribbons will bring good luck.

UNFASTEN YOUR SHOE: Swedish brides leave their shoes untied during the wedding in hopes childbirth will be easy.

TYING THE KNOT: This custom got started with the ancient Egyptians and was also practiced by the medieval Celts. In a ceremony called hand-fasting, couples had their hands bound together while they pledged their fidelity. The practice is shared by

COLONIAL DREAMS: Brides in Colonial America carried a small pouch with a coin, piece of bread, wood, and cloth. This assured they would always have money, food, shelter, and clothing.

SUGAR, SUGAR: Greek brides tuck a sugar cube inside their glove to ensure sweetness throughout their marriage.

BRIDESMAIDS: The practice of surrounding the bride with women dressed in a similar fashion began as a defense against bride-stealing Anglo-Saxon and Germanic marauders. The bridesmaids acted as decoys to confuse potential kidnapers. It was also believed that the surrounding bridesmaids were ward off harmful spirits who might curse the young couple. Early Greek brides were escorted by a happily-married, fertile women who protected the bride from evil and allowed their good fortune to rub off on her.

BEST MAN: The bridegroom's best man was generally the right-hand man of a thieving tribesman, ready to assist in kidnapping the bride-elect.

WEDDING TABOOS: Don't look in the aisle before walking down the aisle, lest you leave part of yourself behind. Don't let the bridegroom see you before the wedding. Never wear the ring before your wedding day.

GOOD LUCK: A spider on your wedding gown indicates you will come into money, while snow on your wedding day means you will be wealthy. Spotting a flock of birds before the ceremony means you will be blessed with fertility. The sun shines on a happy bride, as does a waxing moon. Crying on your wedding day prevents tears during your marriage. Kiss a chimney sweep on your wedding day for good luck. Sew a penny into the seam of your wedding dress for luck and prosperity. If you attend a wedding, take a piece of the groom's cake home and put it under your pillow. That night the face of your future husband will appear in your dreams.

COLOR ME WHITE: An old poem shows how the color of your wedding dress will influence your future: *“Married in white, you will have chosen all right. Married in grey, you will go far away. Married in black, you will wish yourself back. Married in red, you’ll wish yourself dead. Married in blue, you will always be true. Married in pearl, you’ll live in a whirl. Married in green, ashamed to be seen, Married in yellow, ashamed of the fellow. Married in brown, you’ll live out of town. Married in pink, your spirits will sink.”*

BRIDAL BOUQUETS: The bride’s bouquet is a symbol of beauty and fertility. In early England, spectators tore away bits of the bride’s clothing and flowers in order to share her good fortune. In self-defense, the bride often tossed her bouquet! Perfumed bouquets helped to ward off sickness, and in days when hygiene left something to be desired, created a sweet aroma around the bride. Flowers bundled with ribbons and knots harken back to times when lovers literally tied the knot to wed.

ORANGE BLOSSOMS: The orange tree is evergreen and blooms in all seasons. In Greek mythology, Jupiter gave orange blossoms to the goddess Juno in their wedding night, while Gaia, goddess of earth and fertility, presented Hera with a garland of orange blossoms to bless her marriage to Zeus. The Spanish began to wear orange blossoms for weddings, a custom that spread to France. Queen Victoria later chose to wear a wreath of orange blossoms in place of a tiara on her wedding day.

JUNE BRIDES: The ancient Romans favored June for weddings, and it is still one of the most popular months for modern brides. Betrothed couples hoped that Juno, goddess of women, would bring special blessings to their marriage. Couples avoided July and August, when it was important to work the fields and harvest. However, it was thought that marrying in September would enhance fertility.

SCATTERED PETALS: When flower girls scatter rose petals down the aisle, it is an old tradition which shows a wish for a future of sweetness and fertility. In times past, wedding guests would throw grains and wheat along the path to bless the couple with a fruitful and bountiful marriage.

UNITY CANDLES: The flame from a candle is a reminder of spiritual light, earthly fire, and good wishes for hearth and home. Ancient Romans lighted the way with torches. Young Greek brides are escorted to the altar by candlelight. Modern couples often light a large unity candle after igniting their matches from separate candles lit by their respective families. This signifies the uniting of the couple and of their two families.

KISS, KISS: In ancient Rome, the kiss was legally binding. The public gesture between two betrothed people meant as much as an exchange of rings.

WEDDING TOAST: No feast is complete without the customary toasts to bless the newly-married couple. This joyful may have started among the wine lovers in France. At banquets, people put a small bit of bread in a goblet to soak up the sediment from the wine. Guests would pass the goblet around for everyone to take a sip. The person who got the “toast” at the end would be rewarded with good luck. By the way, the word *bridal* comes from the term *bride’s ale*, a common English festivity that would take place in a local pub after the ceremony. Guests would pay for their own ale to help keep the wedding costs down.

WEDDING BREAKFAST: Still common in England, especially following royal weddings, it is called *breakfast* because it is the first meal the bride and groom share as husband and wife, no matter when it is actually served!

MARITAL MISCHIEF: Wedding celebrations being the festive occasions they are, guests often play pranks on the newlyweds—all in good humor, of course. In the 16th and 17th centuries, guests regularly chased the bride and groom to their honeymoon chambers and invaded their room, something that would be considered completely out-of-line by today’s standards. In the rural United States, newlyweds can expect a late night “shivaree” from noisy friends and neighbors who serenade the couple with boisterous shouting until the husband humors them with treats. The term comes from the medieval French *charivari*, which means a loud display of rough music. The German custom of stealing bride has its roots in medieval abductions. During the reception, the best man whisks the bride away to a bar, where they drink champagne until the groom finds them and pays their tab. In Wales, the bride and her family ride away on horseback, with members of the groom’s family and his groomsmen in pursuit. Today’s mischief usually involves tying cans and other noisy items on the back of the couple’s car, or soaping or spraying the vehicle. At some weddings, the guests will encircle the bride during the last dance and the groom must break in and claim her.

OVER THE THRESHOLD: The romantic moment when the bride carries his bride over the threshold is an ancient homage to Vespa, the protector of hearth and home. The Roman goddess considered the threshold sacred, so Roman grooms carried out this symbolic gesture to avoid letting their new brides touch the treshold and thereby risk being disrespectful of the goddess. Other cultures feared that evil spirits lurked in the ground near the doorway, waiting to trip the bride as she entered. Some brides would toss grains of salt to ward of evil spirits.