

When researching family histories, the genealogist often discovers a marriage bond. Sometimes there is confusion as to what a marriage bond actually is and how it reveals the existence of a marriage.

Think of a marriage bond as an intention to marry – a reflection of an official “engagement.” A man who had proposed to a woman went to the courthouse with a bondsman (often the father or brother of the prospective bride), and posted a bond indicating his intention to marry the woman. The bond was an amount of money that the prospective groom would have to pay as a penalty if an impediment to the marriage was found. No money literally changed hands at the time of posting the bond. But if the groom was discovered, for instance, already to have a wife whom he had abandoned, the marriage could not go through and the man would have to pay (I’ve often seen bonds in the sum of 50 dollars or pounds, but the amount could be as high as \$1,000).

Here are several facts about marriage bonds.

(1) The date on the bond is not the date of the actual marriage. Most marriages took place within a few days of posting the bond, but theoretically it could have been weeks or months before the actual marriage took place.

(2) The existence of a marriage bond for two people does not conclusively mean that the marriage took place. A high percentage of marriages occurred after the bond was posted, but in a small percentage of cases the marriage was not carried out. Reasons not to go forward with the marriage could be the sudden death of one of the parties, or both parties mutually deciding to cancel their marriage plans. In these instances, the bond penalty would not have to be paid by the prospective groom.

(3) Marriage bonds were most often posted in the county of the prospective bride’s residence or the county in which the wedding was to take place, if different from the bride’s residence.

(4) Marriage bonds were not used in all the states, colonies, or Canadian provinces. They were most common in the South. (Most of my own experience with researching marriage bonds is in Kentucky).

(5) Marriage bonds were supposed to be annotated with the date of the marriage by the minister or civil official after the marriage had taken place. This often was not done, due to poor recordkeeping in the county. (I personally have never found an annotated marriage bond.)

When researching marriage bonds, be sure to pay attention to who signed as the

bondsman because this was often a relative of the bride. If the bond wasn't signed by the prospective bride's father, it may be an indication that her father was dead. A brother of the bride may then have been the bondsman. Also, check to see if the bond was accompanied by a consent note. This would be written by a parent of the bride or groom and was often required if either was under the legal age for marriage.

Marriage bonds seem to be most common in the United States in the 1700s and early 1800s. Sometimes they are the only indication that a couple legally married. For that reason, genealogists often use the date of the marriage bond as the date of the actual marriage, because it is the only record found and the closest estimate of the actual date of a marriage. When using marriage bonds to document a union, just keep in mind the above information and remember that it is not absolute proof of an actual marriage.

[http://www.tribstar.com/news/lifestyles/genealogy-think-of-a-marriage-bond-as-an-intention-to/article\\_0d4c0f38-f3a7-5e83-a556-e75bbaca2bd4.html](http://www.tribstar.com/news/lifestyles/genealogy-think-of-a-marriage-bond-as-an-intention-to/article_0d4c0f38-f3a7-5e83-a556-e75bbaca2bd4.html)

J. Valentine Reece and Christina Harmon's marriage bond from April 6, 1769. This notice served one purpose to make sure folks knew there was a wedding coming. So they had the chance to object. Promise of payment was to insure that the marriage was legal. Some of the names come from the registrar's records.

North Carolina  
Rowan County

Know all men by their presents that we  
Phelty Rease and John Harmon have  
shown all of the County and province of \_ and held and  
formally bound unto \_ Lord the King \_  
in the just and full sum of one hundred  
pounds proclamation money for which amount  
Well and truly to be maid and \_  
Values(?) [Administrate] and of most Gently and formally  
seen by \_ these present \_  
one seaks D... \_

Image 1  
North Carolina,  
Rowan County

Know all men by their presents that we  
Phelty Rease and John Harmon\_\_ by  
showing all of the county and province of \_ and held and  
formally bound unto\_ Lord the King \_  
\_\_\_ in the just and full sum of one hundred  
pounds proclamation money for which amount  
Well and truly to be maid and \_  
Values(?) [Administrate] and of most Gently and formally  
seen by \_ these present \_  
one seaks D... \_

These are our condition of the above obligation is such that  
 When as the above Bound or Felly Reese of both obtained  
 allow to be married to a woman named Christina Harmon  
 of the County of [symbol] Now if it shall afford of any  
 here after that is not any Lawfull cause to contest  
 the said ~~marriage~~ Marriage then the above obligation shall  
 void & of no effect otherwise to remain in full force and  
 virtue  
 Witness my hand & seal this 6th day of April 1769  
 in the presence of  
 Gideon Wright

Felly Reese  
 John Harmon  
 Frederich F. Shouse

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Image 2

These are our condition of the above \_\_\_\_\_ is \_\_\_\_\_ such that  
 When before above bound and Felly Reese \_\_\_\_\_ Reese hath obtained  
 \_\_\_\_\_ be married to a woman named Christina Harmon  
 of the county of (symbol). Now if it shall afford of any \_\_\_\_\_  
 here after that is not any lawful cause to contest  
 the said marriage then the above obligation shall  
 void (money symbol I think) of no effect otherwise to \_\_\_\_\_ in full \_\_\_\_\_ and  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 April 6, 1769

Sealed and delivered  
 In the \_\_\_\_\_

Felty Reese  
 John Harmon (bondsman)  
 Frederich F. Shouse (bondsman)

Gideon Wright (witness)