

In South Carolina, Marriage Wasn't Always A Vital Statistic

By LOUISE PETTUS

It was not until July 1, 1911, that the State of South Carolina required the recording of marriages.

In some counties the probate judge's office was to issue the license and in other counties the clerk of court issued the license.

In 1911 the York County probate judge was L.R. Williams, and he issued the first York County



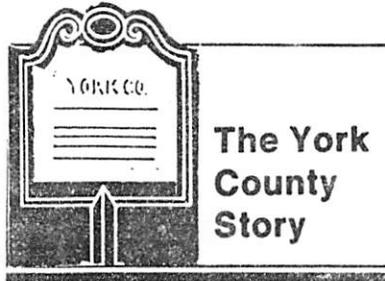
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marriage license to Lathern Brown McFadden and Mollie Albright, both of Rock Hill.

County residency was never a requirement for receiving a license. However, until July 1, 1950, the record of the marriage was preserved only in the county in which the marriage was performed, not by the state.

After July 1, 1950, the State of South Carolina centralized all of marriage records by placing them in the Bureau of Vital Statistics, a division of the State Board of Health. The Bureau of Vital Statistics was not created until 1915 and then kept only a record of births and deaths.

Of all S.C. counties, York was to become the county with the greatest number of recorded marriages — so many that the town of York became known as the "Gretna Green" of America. (In Scotland, Gretna Green was the place where eloping couples wed.) In the 1950s, York averaged above 7,000 marriages a year.



People flocked to York to be married, not only from North Carolina but from all over the Eastern United States. In 1963, Judge Charles Nunn estimated that three-fourths of all York County marriage licenses were issued to out-of-state couples. The usual reasons given for coming to York was that the fee was much cheaper than surrounding states and the process was much quicker.

For many years the fee for a license was \$2, but by 1945 the license was \$6 and by 1963 the application was \$1 and the license was \$14.

After July 1, 1945, the state stipulated a 24-hour waiting period, but Judge E. Gettys Nunn, the most famed of the marrying judges, would waive the 24-hour waiting period if the couple wrote a letter or phoned ahead. No blood tests or health examinations were required.

Nunn took office in 1930. In 1963, he married his 50,000th couple. By that time, the office was open 24 hours a day. Besides Nunn, the marriages were performed by two office helpers, his daughter, his two sons and a daughter-in-law.

The rise of E. Gettys Nunn to probate judge sounds like a Horatio Alger story. Nunn went to work in a cotton mill when he was 9 years old and worked a 12-hour

day. For 30 years he worked all day, and at night practiced to be a barber. Then he quit to become a full-time barber. A few years later he was elected to the S.C. House. When York County Probate Judge G.F. Smith died, Nunn filled the unexpired term. After that, election and reelection was easy for the affable Nunn who never lost his "common touch."

In 1933, in his first year as

probate judge, Nunn wrote a bill that was introduced in the S.C. legislature. It allowed counties to officially record marriages that existed before July 1, 1911.

When the bill passed, Nunn said, "This act will help remedy the situation resulting from the lack of marriage licenses before July 1, 1911. I am constantly receiving inquiries about marriage records that do not exist, these inquiries coming from all parts of the United States."

Nunn said there was no record of his own marriage and he intended to put it on the first page of the register of marriages that existed before 1911.

What about divorces? South Carolina was the last state in the union to permit divorce. It was not until 1950 that divorces were allowed and not until July 1, 1962, that the Bureau of Vital Statistics kept a record of divorces.

The largest collection of Marriage and Death Notices is at the South Caroliniana Library on the University of South Carolina campus in Columbia. But it is far from being inclusive.

It is unfortunate that South Carolina did not follow the example of North Carolina and keep vital statistics from the beginning of statehood.