

FOUND IN THE ARCHIVES, no. 84 – March 2023

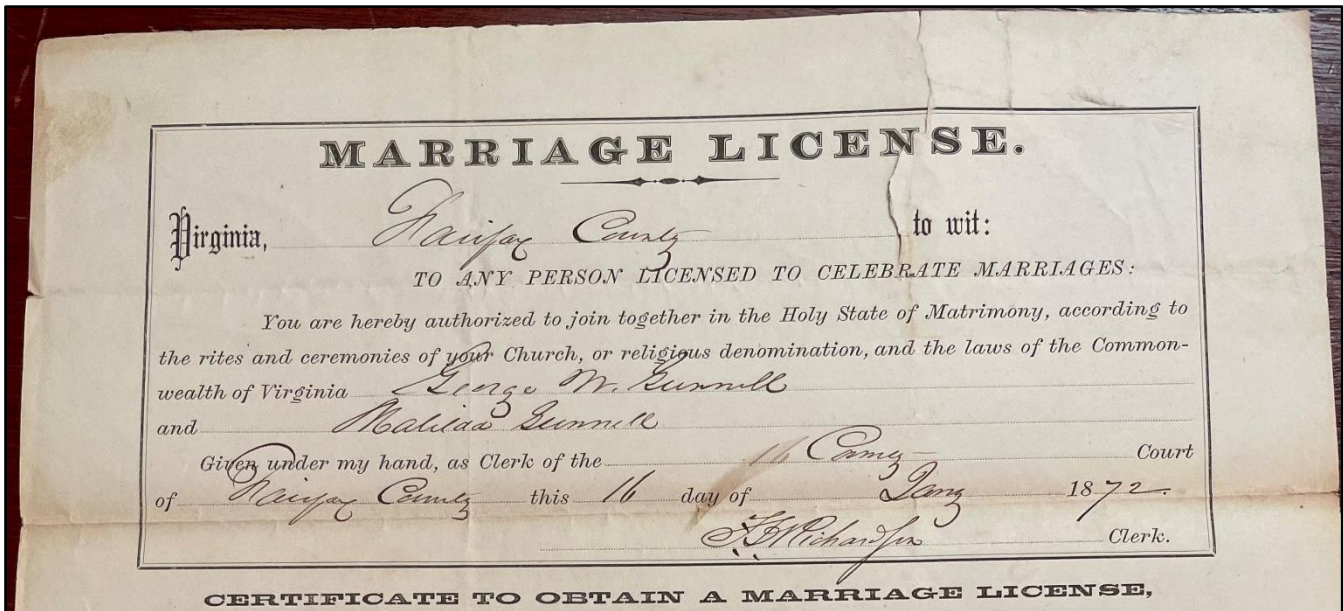
Gunnell vs. Gunnell

Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center



Happy March, and welcome back to Found in the Archives! In this month's edition, we will discuss a chancery case, *George W. Gunnell vs Matilda Gunnell*, by John A. Lanham, her Next Friend. This case from 1879 tells the scandalous story of the unconventional marriage and divorce of George W. Gunnell and Matilda Gunnell, and the original case documents are kept at the Historic Records Center within the chancery case record group.

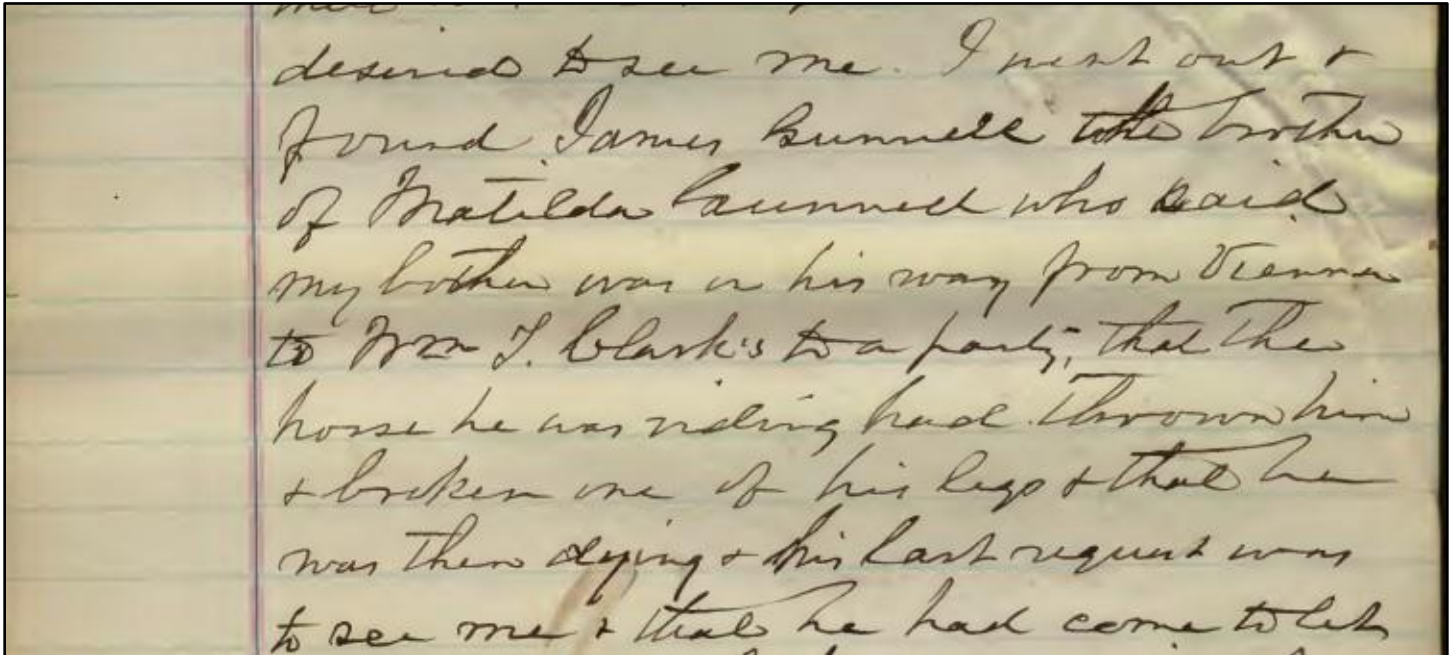
George and Matilda Gunnell, each having the Gunnell name before their marriage, were two distantly related members of the Gunnell Family, a prominent and wealthy Fairfax County family. According to court records, George and Matilda were married in Fairfax County on January 16, 1872.



Fairfax Marriage License, George W. Gunnell and Matilda Gunnell, 1872

Despite legally being husband and wife, George and Matilda never saw each other again after their wedding day. The truth surrounding their marriage, which was apparently already known to those around them, was fully documented during their divorce proceedings seven years after their marriage date. The following is their story of a “shotgun wedding,” as told by depositions taken under oath in Fairfax Circuit Court.

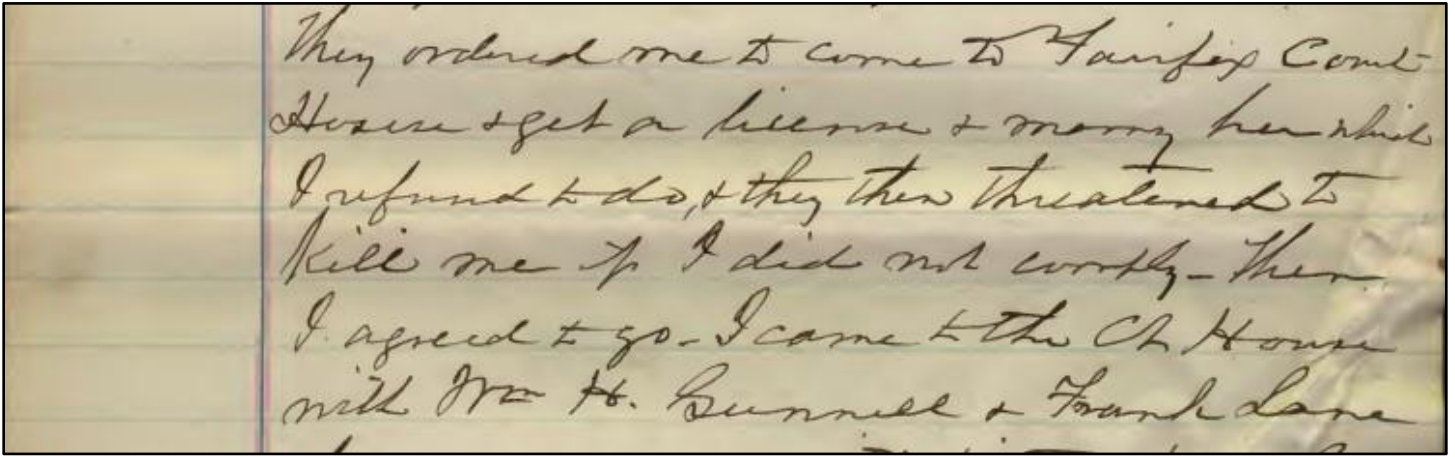
According to his deposition, George Gunnell was at a party at the house of a man named Frank Palmer on January 14, 1872. Around 11 p.m. that evening, George was told that there were visitors at the door, asking to speak with him. When George went to the door, he found James Gunnell waiting outside for him. While speaking, James revealed that George’s brother Hugh had just been thrown off a horse and was dying, and that his last request was to see George.

A photograph of a handwritten document on lined paper. The text is written in cursive and reads: "desires to see me. I went out & found James Gunnell the brother of Matilda Gunnell who said my brother was on his way from Vienna to Mr J. Clark's to a party; that the horse he was riding had thrown him & broken one of his legs & that he was then dying & his last request was to see me & that he had come to let".

Excerpt from Fairfax Chancery Case 1879-013, page 26, Deposition of George W. Gunnell

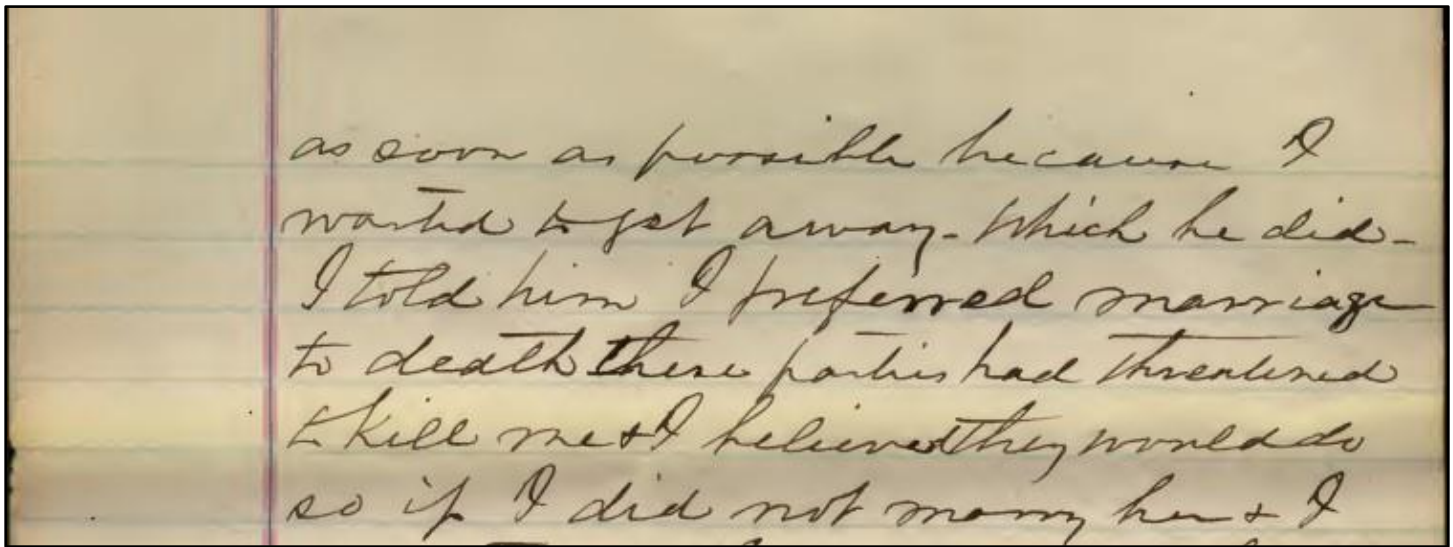
Immediately concerned, George took off with James. Shortly after, George was pushed into a field and saw two men riding on horseback towards him: William Gunnell, James’ brother, and Francis Lane, William and James’ cousin. The three men brought George Gunnell to the family’s home, where the men were joined by William and James’ mother. At the home, the family questioned George about Matilda Gunnell, their sister.

In his deposition, George stated, “They accused me of seducing Matilda Gunnell, and I told them I was not certain whether the child with which she was then pregnant was mine or not.” George then said he spent the night at their house, and the next morning was expecting to return to his home, when William told him, “I [George] could not leave there until I had married her [Matilda] and threatened my life in case I refused to do so.” William and James then forced George to the Fairfax County Courthouse where he obtained a marriage license. George also stated that “they then threatened to kill me if I did not comply.”



They ordered me to come to Fairfax Court House & get a license & marry her which I refused to do, & they then threatened to kill me if I did not comply - then I agreed to go - I came to the Ch House with Mr H. Gunnell & Frank Lane

George also said that after they left the Courthouse and went back to the Gunnell's residence, his cousins guarded him until the next day, when an officiant came out to perform the marriage. According to George, he told the officiant that he was being threatened, and he requested the ceremony be performed because he truly believed if he did not marry Matilda, he would be killed, saying that he "preferred marriage to death."



as soon as possible because I wanted to get away - which he did - I told him I preferred marriage to death these parties had threatened to kill me & I believed they would do so if I did not marry her & I

Excerpt from Fairfax Chancery Case 1879-013, page 30, Deposition of George W. Gunnell

James Gunnell also gave a deposition in this case. When asked what his intentions were when he first met with George Gunnell on January 14, James answered, "to find out whether he was the person who had committed the offence [sic] against my sister."

A photograph of a handwritten document on lined paper. The text is written in cursive and reads: "I did go with Mr. H. Gunnell & Mr. Lane to Mr. Palmer, in January 1872. I went there after being, to find out whether he was the person who had committed the offence against".

Excerpt from Fairfax Chancery Case 1879-013, page 19, Deposition of James Gunnell

James then admitted to making up the story of George's brother Hugh falling off a horse and being gravely injured to lure George out of the house to speak with him. Further into the deposition, James was asked what their object was after speaking with George, to which he replied, "Our object was to make him marry her or suffer."

A photograph of a handwritten document on lined paper. The text is written in cursive and reads: "Answer I heard him say his ^{only} object was to make him marry her or suffer & And further this deponent saith not - James Gunnell".

Excerpt from Fairfax Chancery Case 1879-013, page 23, Deposition of James Gunnell

George W. Gunnell first petitioned for a divorce in 1877, and it concluded with George W. Gunnell being granted a divorce from Matilda in 1879. George went on to marry again in 1881 and listed "Widower" as his status on his second marriage license. Divorce was very uncommon in the 19th century, but one could argue that the Gunnells' divorce was even more unusual considering the unique circumstances surrounding the marriage ceremony!

MARRIAGE LICENSE



Virginia, *Fairfax County* to wit:

To any Person Licensed to Celebrate Marriages:

You are hereby authorized to join together in the Holy State of Matrimony, according to the rites and ceremonies of your Church, or religious denomination, and the laws of the Commonwealth of Virginia,

Geo. W. Gunnell
and *Fannie Baltzer*

Given under my hand, as Clerk of the *County* Court of *Fairfax* Co. this *8* day of *Aug* 188*1*
W. Richardson Clerk.

CERTIFICATE TO OBTAIN A MARRIAGE LICENSE.

To be annexed to the License, required by Acts passed 15th March, 1861, and February 27th, 1866.

Time of Marriage, <i>9th. inst.</i>	Place of Husband's Birth, <i>Fairfax Co. Va.</i>
Place of Marriage, <i>Verona</i>	Place of Wife's Birth, <i>Illowa</i>
Full Names of Parties Married, <i>Geo. W. Gunnell</i> <i>Fannie Baltzer</i>	Place of Husband's Residence, <i>Fairfax Co.</i>
Color, <i>white</i>	Place of Wife's Residence, _____
Age of Husband, <i>35</i>	Names of Husband's Parents, <i>Hugh W. + Elizabeth Gunnell</i>
Age of Wife, <i>30</i>	Names of Wife's Parents, <i>John + Maria Baltzer</i>
Condition of Husband, (widowed or single) <i>Widower</i>	Occupation of Husband, <i>Farmer</i>
Condition of Wife, (widowed or single) <i>Single</i>	

Given under my hand this *8* day of *Aug* 188*1*
W. Richardson Clerk.

MINISTER'S RETURN OF MARRIAGE.

I Certify, That on the *10th* day of *August* 188*1*, at *Verona, Fairfax Co* I united in Marriage the above-named and described parties, under authority of the annexed License.

J. A. Delany

The Minister celebrating a marriage, is required, within TEN days thereafter, to return the license to the Office of the Clerk who issued the same, with an endorsement thereon of the FACT of such marriage, and of the TIME and PLACE of celebrating the same.

Fairfax Marriage License George W. Gunnell and Fannie Baltzer, 1881

For those interested in reading more of this 65-page case, the documents can be found online free of charge through the Library Of Virginia's Chancery Records Index, and can be located by searching Index Number 1879-013 in Fairfax County.

For more information on these and other records held at the Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center, please call 703-246-4168 or email CCRHistoricRecords@fairfaxcounty.gov.

The Historic Records Center is open to both walk-ins and appointments. You can make a research appointment by calling 703-246-4168.

Tours of the 1799 Historic Fairfax Courthouse are given every Friday at 3 pm. Please meet Historic Records Center staff at the green doors of the 1799 Courthouse for the start of the tour.

Sign up for *Found in the Archives*, the monthly newsletter of the HRC:

<https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/circuit/historic-records-center>