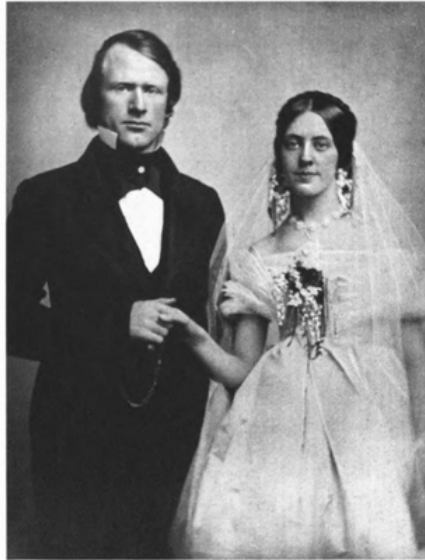


Malvina Shanklin (1839-1916) and John Marshall Harlan (1833-1911) married 1856.



John Harlan and Malvina Shanklin, 1856

John Marshall Harlan was a Supreme Court Justice (1877-1911). He is known as “The Great Dissenter” for his notable dissents, in opposition to segregation and in favor of civil rights for Blacks, in the notorious “Civil Rights” cases of 1883 and *Plessy vs. Ferguson* in 1896, in which the court decided in favor of discriminatory laws.

As described below, Harlan met Malvina Shanklin in 1854, when he was 21 and she was 15, and proposed after a week’s courtship. They were married three years later. Shanklin was the only daughter of a prosperous, strongly abolitionist, family in Indiana. Harlan was the fifth son of James Harlan, a prominent politician in Kentucky, a close friend of Henry Clay, and a slaveholder. At the time, John Harlan was a lawyer and a rising star in the Know-Nothing party, known as a public speaker.

Malvina Harlan wrote her memoirs *Some Memories of a Long Life, 1854-1911*, in 1915, after her husband’s death. They remained unpublished, among Harlan’s papers at the Library of Congress. In 2011, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and her clerk Laura Brill were collecting material about women associated with the Court and found the memoirs. Recognizing their literary quality and historical importance, Ginsburg arrange for its publication, first as a special issue of *Historical Society Journal*, and then, when that got favorable attention in the press, as a book.

From Malvina Shanklin Harlan, *Some Memories of a Long Life, 1854-1911*.

One day during the late summer of 1853 in Evansville, Indiana, a small but growing town in the Southwestern part of the State — a young girl of fifteen, suffering from affection of the eyes, had been confined by the physician's order to a darkened room.

Happening at the moment to peep through a narrow crack of the almost close window-shutters she saw a young man passing by. As she had lived all her life in that town and was familiar with almost every face in it, she knew at once that he was a stranger.

That was sixty-one years ago; but, as clearly as if it were yesterday, she can still see him as he looked that day — his magnificent figure, his head erect, his broad shoulders well thrown back — walking as if the whole world belonged to him.

On the sixth of the following February, 1854, she was invited to take supper with the family of Dr. J.G. Hatchitt, a young physician living in the block beyond her father's residence. To her surprise, as she sat talking to her hostess, a young man — with a rope to each arm, as he "played horsey" for the little nephew that was the delightful and uproarious Jehu — suddenly pranced into the room. The young girl at once recognized him as the interesting stranger who had caught her eye six months before, as she peeped through the narrow crack of her window-shutters and whom, after the romantic style of that period, she had (to herself) called "A Prince of the Blood".

Very much amused and yet covered with manly confusion, at thus being caught by a strange young girl in the act of "playing the boy," the young man who proved to be John Marshall Harlan, of Frankfort, Kentucky, and a brother of the hostess (Elizabeth Harlan) — was duly presented to "Miss Malvina Shanklin".

His conversation during that evening greatly interested the young girl, showing unusual thought and intelligence, for a youth of only twenty-one, and that night he escorted her home.

...

During the next week, a daily call from this new friend gave me a new interest in life; and at the end of the week, before he left for his Kentucky home to my great surprise, he asked me to be his wife.

"Does the course of true love ever run smoothly?" Considering the strain put upon it in this case, where disenchantment might so easily have followed, I can say that for me it did.

In those days early marriages were quite common and in my case the young man urged an immediate consummation of his wishes. But the wiser counsels of parents prevailed and for two years — during which I was at school and he at the practice of

law in his father's office in Frankfurt, we corresponded, an occasional visit from him making the time seem shorter.

The young man's letter to my father asking for my name in marriage was somewhat different, I fancy, from similar letters written at the present time. He said nothing whatever of the worldly or material aspects of the matter. After expressing the hope that he could make me happy, he referred my father for information as to his character, to prominent men with whom my father was acquainted in Henderson, a neighboring town on the Kentucky side of the Ohio River.

I never heard any question from either parents as to what he had in worldly goods or prospects — his character and habits being their one and only thoughts. Perhaps if they had known what the young wife afterwards learned, namely that my "Young Lochinvar from out of the" South had to borrow \$500 from his father for the expenses of our wedding and for our start in life, my parents might have looked on their decision as a trifle unwise and hasty.

...

In those days, in the community in which I was brought up, the announcement of an "engagement" would have seemed somewhat indelicate; and in my case it was *not until* the receipt of an invitation from my parents, announcing simply that they would be "At Home" on December 23, 1856, and enclosing two cards tied together at the top with a tiny tell-tale bow of white ribbon — one bearing the name of "John Marshall Harlan" and the other the name of "Malvina French Shanklin — *that any of the friends on either side had any idea that a marriage was in prospect.* The only exceptions were the six bridesmaids, who were pledged to secrecy. A dressmaker from New York had been smuggled into the house and was carefully hidden from view for two whole months, during the preparation of my simple trousseau. Thus bidden in the quaintly reserved fashion of those early days, a large company of our friends gather promptly at nine o'clock in the evening of December 23, 1856, in the large front parlor of my father's house, to witness what was called a "Tableau Wedding" — which at that time was quite an innovation.

In the smaller back parlor, which was shut off by folding doors from the front room, until the great moment arrived, the bridal party of fourteen were grouped in a semi-circle facing the wedding guests — six bridesmaids alternating with six groomsmen, the Bride and Groom standing in the centre. At weddings in those early days (as I recall it) there was no "best man" — at all events, at *my* wedding, the Groom (to one person, at least) was the only "best man"; so that in the semi-circle that formed our "Tableau", a bridesmaid instead of a groomsman stood at the Groom's right hand, while a groomsman stood at my left.

Two of the bridesmaids were dressed in pink, two in blue, and two in buff, the Bride, of course being in white.

The Groom wore the traditional black dress-coat ...

The immediate members of the two families and the officiating clergyman were the only other persons in the back parlor.

When all things were ready, the folding doors were then thrown open, thus revealing the "Tableau", and the ceremony was performed in the presence of the large company of friends who were gathered in the front parlor.

At every entertainment in those days, amateur music, both vocal and instrumental, made part of the pleasure of the occasion. And in marked contrast to the formality and conventionality of social life at the present time, I may recall the fact that the Bride on the December night, fifty-nine years ago, was escorted to the piano by the young husband, that she might contribute to the pleasure of the evening. I had had advantages in the way of musical education that were rather unusual in those days in my part of the country, and it was not until I had sung three or four of the popular ballads of the day that I was allowed to leave the piano.