

# THE NEWS & OBSERVER

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## The bride princess

### Willie Otey Kay was the one-time 'it' designer for wedding and special occasion gowns in Raleigh

**SAMANTHA THOMPSON SMITH, Staff Writer**

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Long before the rage over a must-have Marc Jacobs handbag or a pair of 7 For All Mankind jeans, "it" girls in the Triangle wanted a Willie Otey Kay. To have one of her handcrafted dresses -- for a prom, a debutante ball or a wedding -- was considered a style score.

But getting one at the height of Kay's popularity was harder than landing the latest Jacobs bag. Either you inherited one -- which many women did from their mother or sister -- or you sometimes waited a year or more for Kay to have the time to make one for you.

"She turned out the kind of pretty gown that women wanted to be seen in," says Louise Benner, curator of costume and textiles at the N.C. Museum of History. "The dresses were very flattering, very pretty."

Without ever using a pattern, Kay reigned in the region for nearly 60 years, creating hundreds of wedding gowns, bridesmaid dresses, christening gowns and party frocks often worn by wives and daughters of governors, senators, business leaders and society families -- both black and white.

She was so good at her craft, some stores in Raleigh wouldn't let her in for fear she would take one look at a dress and easily knock it off for one of her customers, says her granddaughter Mildred Campbell Christmas, who lives in Raleigh. One woman flew to Europe to buy a dress so that Kay could copy the style. Then she flew it back to Europe and returned it, Christmas says.

Christmas and one of her brothers, former State Auditor Ralph Campbell Jr., last week spent a lunch hour at the N.C. Museum of History telling stories about their grandmother and sharing her scrapbook full of portraits of brides and debutantes wearing Willie Otey Kay gowns. The museum also displayed several new pieces from its collection of Kay's work, including Campbell's christening gown, and out in the exhibit hall, a red velvet gown worn by Kay's daughter, the late June Kay Campbell, as part of the "What We Wore in North Carolina" clothing exhibit. More are at St. Augustine's College in Raleigh and the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center near Dayton, Ohio.

The bulk, however, are scattered around the state, likely carefully preserved and stored away in homes.

Cathryn Zevenhuizen has one. Kay made the wedding gown she wore in 1957. The dress was originally made for her sister, who wore it to her wedding in 1953. Years later, Zevenhuizen's two daughters wore it. Her daughter-in-law also has worn it, as has a family friend.

Last week, Zevenhuizen had a picture of one of her daughters wearing the satin gown with Venetian lace, long sleeves and a dramatic full train to show Campbell and Christmas.

"She was a dear lady," she said. "She was refined. She just appreciated good things."

Kay was 98 when she died in 1992. Those who knew her said she was patient and kind, creative and hardworking. Hers was the ideal personality for working with demanding brides or overzealous society moms who often turned submissive just to have the honor of Kay making their dresses.

"Her gentle nature put the ladies at ease," Campbell said.

Kay's clothes were never mass produced, and you couldn't buy one at a boutique. She advertised through word of mouth.

Part of Kay's allure was that each dress was one-of-a-kind, and she never shared details about what another woman was having made. In fact, she had a walk-in cedar closet where she kept all the gowns she was working on, safely hidden from other women who came to her home to be fitted, Christmas said.

### **The beginning**

Kay began designing out of necessity. In 1927, she found herself single with five children after her husband, John Walcott Kay, a prominent Wilmington doctor, died. The two had met in Raleigh years before as students at Shaw University. Kay, a Raleigh native, graduated in 1912 with a degree in home economics. Her husband received his medical degree from Shaw.

With no family in Wilmington to help raise her family, she moved back to Raleigh and turned to the only income-producing skill she had: sewing.

Campbell and Christmas say they don't know how she survived financially. She was a prolific dressmaker, but she charged clients only \$200 to \$300 a dress. "My grandmother never really charged the amount of money she should have," Christmas said.

By 1935, she was so well-known, McCall's magazine did a story on her work. Each debutante season for years, 50 to 60 mothers and their daughters made appointments to see Kay, Campbell said. Sometimes mothers would come years before a daughter's deb ball. They all wanted her to make their daughters' gown, but Kay never made more than 30 deb dresses a year -- 15 for the white debs and 15 for the black debs.

Who made the cut and why? Campbell says he never found out her decision-making process.

The girls who were chosen were deeply involved in the design process, Campbell said. After the initial visit, Kay would send each girl and her parents home with a stack of fashion magazines. They were to flip through them to get ideas about what they wanted their gown to look like. Sometimes Kay would make a sketch to help them.

Once the girls figured out what kind of sleeves, neckline or skirt they wanted, often they were sent downtown to Hudson Belk on Fayetteville Street to pick out the fabrics and lace.

"The girls come in here, and usually they don't know exactly what they want," she told a Raleigh Times reporter in 1981. "I pull out pictures and patterns. A lot of times they'll like maybe a bodice from one and a skirt from another, so I'll mix and match the pieces."

Later she would get to see those girls make their debut. Into the 1960s, she was the only black person invited to attend the white debutante balls at Memorial Auditorium -- an invitation that was made at the insistence of her clients, Campbell said.

Once the deb season was over, she moved on to the wedding season, often making the bride's dress, the mother-of-the-bride's dress and bridesmaid gowns. Campbell recalls one wedding where she made 20 bridesmaid dresses, each custom-fitted.

### **The right fit**

Her gowns weren't cutting-edge fashion. Most were client-driven designs, modeled from the

styles of the times. Wedding gowns, for instance, had enormous amounts of satin and silk fabric to cover wide hoop skirts. Some had delicate lace overlays or were embroidered with beads and sequins.

In some designs, however, it's easy to see her creative style. On one rose-colored mother-of-the-groom dress -- donated by Doris Doshier, and on display briefly at the N.C. Museum of History last week -- Kay used a sweeping front swag, a look from the 1880s, to create a soft, feminine contemporary-styled gown for 1959, Benner said.

"She just knew how to fit the dresses," says Minnie Peebles, who asked Kay to make a debutante dress for her daughter Brenda Kay Kearney in 1971. "You didn't have to have a pattern. She just knew what would work and would just make a dress."

The dresses were products of countless hours of manual labor, with Kay and several of her sisters doing elaborate beading work and detailed sewing. For several decades, Kay was known to work through the night on gowns.

When she was 87, she cut back, making gowns only for christenings, weddings and debutante balls. She stopped sewing when she was 90.

By then, her family had carried on the tradition of notoriety -- only as civic leaders rather than dressmakers. Her daughter June Kay Campbell and son-in-law Ralph Campbell Sr. were central figures in Raleigh's civil-rights struggle in the 1950s and 1960s. June Campbell's oldest son, Ralph, was the first black person elected to statewide executive office in North Carolina as the state auditor in 1992. Her other son, Bill Campbell, is a former Atlanta mayor.

Kay's dresses have lived on with the family. The beaded red dress June Campbell wore to Christmas' debutante ball in 1964 was worn again in 1992 by Christmas' daughter for Ralph Campbell's inauguration. The family recently found it while cleaning out June Campbell's house after she died in 2004 and donated it as part of the museum's Kay collection.

"As you can see, these creations go on and on as family traditions," Campbell said. "These were special dresses for special ladies."

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## DETAILS

**WHAT** The "What We Wore in North Carolina" exhibit features a Willie Otey Kay gown and other fashion from N.C. history.

**WHERE** N.C. Museum of History, 5 E. Edenton St., Raleigh.

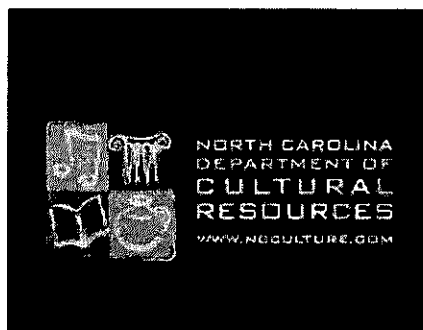
**WHEN** Through Feb. 19. A second exhibit will open March 13 and close Oct. 7, 2007.

**COST** Free

**MORE INFO** 807-7900; [ncmuseumof history.org](http://ncmuseumofhistory.org).

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## News From the Department

**Ralph Campbell, JR. Present Program  
 Raleigh's Premiere Dressmaker, Willie Otey Kay**  
 posted 12/05/2006

**Contact:**

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For more than 60 years, businesswoman, fashion designer and dressmaker **Willie Otey Kay** created lavish gowns for weddings, debutante balls and other special occasions. Hear Kay's grandson, former state auditor **Ralph Campbell Jr.**, relate her stories during the program **History à la Carte: Raleigh's Premier Dressmaker** on

**Wednesday, Dec. 13, at 12:10 p.m.** at the **N.C. Museum of History**. Several of Kay's gowns in the museum collection will be on display during the program.

Kay's custom-designed gowns gained her national attention in 1935, when an article about her beautiful creations appeared in an issue of *McCall's* magazine. Her clients said they could simply draw a picture of the dress they wanted, and she would make it without the help of a pattern.

An inspiration to many, Kay's business thrived during a time when African American women faced many challenges in the business world. Her determination and her luxurious satin, silk and velvet creations supported her young family after her husband died.

A 1964 velvet dress by Kay is on view in the exhibit *What We Wore in North Carolina*. The dress will be on exhibit until Feb. 19. Come see it and hear Ralph Campbell Jr. recall stories about his beloved grandmother on Dec. 13.

The N.C. Museum of History's hours are Tuesday through Saturday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Sunday, noon to 5 p.m. Admission is free. The museum is part of the Division of State History Museums, Office of Archives and History, an agency of the N.C. Department of Cultural Resources. The department's Web site is [www.ncculture.com](http://www.ncculture.com).

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