

Burying the Hatchet

Return Day in Sussex County, Delaware

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Busy as they are with the political backstabbing that seems to constitute the core of America's current election system, Republicans, Democrats, Independents, and members of various small political parties are gearing up for the final days of the 1992 campaign season. With voters going to the



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■ It happens every two years, two days after the national election. Georgetown, Delaware, swells by many thousands as folks pour in to hear the election results and witness political reconciliation. *Opposite:* Winners and losers riding together in horse-drawn carriages. *Left and below:* Working the crowds to thank supporters.



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polls November 3, politicians and their eager-to-please staffers are hurriedly sending out stories reflecting not what their candidates can do but what the other candidates cannot.

Unfortunately, the political fighting will not stop when the polls close and signal an end to the campaign. The two-sided bickering—or multisided in these days of third and fourth parties—will continue, picking up again on November 4 and run-

ning without hesitation like a popular Broadway play until the next campaign season rolls around. Republicans will criticize Democrats, who in turn will criticize Republicans. All the while, Independents and others will criticize everyone.

Throughout it all, the American public is left in utter confusion, not knowing whom or what to believe.

Such is the condition of this nation and the states it comprises.

BURYING THE HATCHET

■ The parade into town includes more than politicians. *Below:* High school marching band. *Opposite above:* Coaching two rivals. *Opposite below:* High school choral group.



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In Sussex County, Delaware, however, residents and lawmakers break from the traditional system that seemingly dictates on national and state levels which politicians of different parties cannot (or should not) socialize with one another. All the political grudges are discarded in tradition-laden Sussex, where residents of the mostly rural county—which boasts no true urban center where people can gather—celebrate an election-year custom that became firmly entrenched back in the mid-1800s. Called Return Day, the nearly 160-year-old custom brings politicians of all parties—winners and losers—and their supporters to the centrally located county

seat of Georgetown for a day filled with fun and political reconciliation. It is a time to say, “OK, the election is over. Now let’s patch up our differences, have a good time, and move on with running the state to help improve life for the people of Delaware.”

Sussex County is the only place in the United States believed to still celebrate the event, which once was commonplace in colonial America.

A rich history

Return Day has roots dating back to the late 1790s and early 1800s, when Sussex County was enveloped in forests and farms, and travel was hard. State law required residents in all three of Delaware’s counties to travel to their respective county seats to vote. Similar requirements were prevalent in the other states during the early part of America’s history; this served as an opportunity for the citizenry to gather, to talk, and to have a good time with friends they may not have seen for months.

Because of poor road conditions that made travel seem more like work, residents did not head home after voting. Instead, they stayed in the county seat for two days, waiting for the results to be posted and for the town crier to bark out the numbers from the balcony or steps of the courthouse. Those two days would be a festive occasion, with people drinking, eating, and visiting friends.

As early as 1803, however, complaints were made by large groups of men living in the outer districts of Delaware’s county seats. They protested having to travel to Georgetown over the rough roads in bad weather and having to leave their families home unprotected. They wanted to be able to stay closer to home and vote.

But change, as it still is, was hard to come by, and it was not until years later that the request was acted on. In 1828, the Delaware General Assembly passed legislation allowing citizens to vote in the districts—locally called “hundreds”—where they lived. After the polls closed, election officials from the districts would race on horses to Georgetown with the votes. The race was competitive, with officials reveling in the fact they could be first in carrying the tally from their respective voting



COURTESY SUSSEX COUNTY RETURN DAY

districts to the county seat.

Once there, the officials would give the ballots to the Board of Canvassers, presided over by the sheriff. The board would meet two days later, total the votes, and announce the results at noon on the Thursday after Election Day.

Only in Sussex County, however, did residents regularly return that Thursday to hear the outcome. Because citizens could vote closer to home and because travel conditions were poor throughout the new republic, residents in Delaware's two northern counties and in other states restricted their movement. Without other means (such as county newspapers) to learn of the outcome, they waited until election officials returned to hear who had won the election.

In Sussex, though, where traditions are hard to break, many of the farmers decided to take the day off and travel with



ROBERT J. BENNETT

their families to the public square. By the 1840s, Return Day had become a regular event, with county residents looking forward to gathering in Georgetown every two years, two days after the election.

They would arrive in the morning on foot; in wagons drawn by mules, horses,

BURYING THE HATCHET

■ There is plenty of food for all. *Below:* Treats for sale. *Opposite above:* Cutting up ox meat—three oxen are roasted—for sandwiches. *Opposite below:* Snackers along the parade route.

or oxen; in all types of carriages and on horseback. The public square, known today as the Circle, became filled with the spirit of a rustic carnival. Delaware biscuits, hot corn pone, rabbit roasted on the spit, opossum, fried chicken, oysters, clams, and white and sweet potatoes baked in hot ashes fed the hundreds present. Large quantities of beer, fresh cider, and Sussex County applejack were consumed. Participants dressed in outlandish costumes or in old clothes they had pulled out of the attic.

While waiting for the results, some citizens listened to band concerts that took place on the square. Others wagered on

cockfights, which took place in barns located just outside of Georgetown. Often, the crowds became rowdy as the liquor and moonshine flowed freely. The town's two hotels did a lively bar business, and it must have been through the influence of their managers that a crackdown on the moonshine vendors eventually took place. Because the town police force was small and often had trouble maintaining order, fights were common, with one man being killed in 1844. The town council would hire additional police officers on the day of the celebration to help control the crowd.

As the tradition grew, so did the number of people who attended. It was not uncommon during the latter part of the 1800s for three thousand people to gather in Georgetown. By this time, vendors saw opportunities to sell their wares, and they set up booths on the town streets.

A visitor to the celebration wrote in the local paper, *Wilmington Every Evening*, in 1872:

Many ladies who had not visited the "Capitol" since the last "Return Day" could be seen in the crowd buying knick-knacks for "the little ones." A part of the program of the day is to see that young girls are treated. A pretty young lady, whether acquainted or not, is licensed to receive a box of candy and be it said for the young gentlemen of Sussex that no pretty damsel goes away empty.

The highlight of all Return Days has been the parade down one of the town's main thoroughfares. Winners and losers ride together in horse-drawn carriages to signify the end of the political campaign and a new beginning. High-stepping bands march down Market Street, and people in colorful costumes ride in carriages and on horseback.



ROBERT J. BENNETT

Perhaps the most colorful parade took place in 1882 when Georgetown's Charles Stockley was elected Delaware's forty-fifth governor. The *Wilmington Sunday Star* of November 12, 1882, described the parade this way:

A procession moved through town while the people cheered and guns boomed. A boat in bright new paint was mounted on wheels rigged like a ship, and labeled the "Old Constitution." The craft was profusely decorated with a blue hen draped in ribbon and a dried coon skin was suspended from the mast. Six men on horseback moved in front and one hundred and twenty mounted men in the rear, all decorated and giving back to the crowd cheer for cheer. Standing on the quarter deck of the mimic ship, bowing to the multitude who enthusiastically applauded and saluted him, was the Governor-Elect Charles Stockley. When the ship was drawn in the Square, the people flocked from all sides to shake hands with the new Governor and at length he was lifted on brawny shoulders and carried into the Court House above the heads of the crowd, which cheered louder and louder.

As the years passed, the advent of automobiles made the trip to Georgetown only a matter of minutes from anywhere in the county. With the arrival of radio, people knew the election results before the newspapers arrived, and interest in the age-old custom of Return Day began to dwindle.

In 1942, the event was canceled altogether because of World War II, though on what should have been Return Day a group of farmers and other people from the outlying areas gathered in Georgetown for business. They could only stand and



ROBERT J. BENNETT



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remember the celebrations of years past.

Return Day remained canceled until 1952, when a group of residents, some Democrats and others Republicans, reinstituted the official celebration as enthusiasm for the event returned. In the 1960s, that excitement continued, and in 1965, the General Assembly made Return Day a legal half holiday in Sussex County.

Today, it is common for twenty to twenty-five thousand people to descend upon Georgetown, coming from Delaware's other two counties and from the neighboring states of Maryland, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. Dozens of par-

BURYING THE HATCHET



ROBERT J. BENNETT

■ Following a tradition once commonplace in America, the town crier announces the election results from the courthouse balcony.

ties take place in residences throughout town, with legislators gathering among their constituents for a good time.

It is during these parties that much political positioning for future elections takes place. Politicos try to mend fences and to gather support for the future. Georgetown Mayor Joseph Booth said potential lawmakers throw out position statements to see how they will be received.

"They shed the political labels for a day. It gives them a chance to celebrate and discuss issues," Booth said. "They say the most politics takes place after the elec-

tion on Return Day, and I believe it. The ideas discussed that day seem to carry through until the next election. People position themselves for that next run."

Thus, not much has changed over the years. People still flock to the county seat for an abundance of food, a colorful parade, the official announcement of election results, speeches, band concerts, and socializing. Although the opossum and rabbit have been replaced by roast oxen, crafters and vendors still line the streets and alleys of Georgetown to hawk their goods.

A model for others

Residents of Sussex County are traditionalists, and Return Day serves as a reminder of the past. It helps people to remember a time when their ancestors gathered to renew acquaintances. A 1912 newspaper account stated,

Hard is that man or woman to find who can beat Sussex Countians when it comes to standing about the old courthouse or around the public square on a cold "Return Day" afternoon, with no particular purpose in view—just merely "standing round looking" to see who they can see.

Traditions and customs are difficult to hold on to in this electronic age, when children seem more interested in watching television and attempting to beat the latest video games than they do learning about their past. Delaware, particularly Sussex County, is attempting to hold on to that past, attempting to use the past to give the future some meaning. Return Day is an effort to keep alive the memories of

people who made Sussex County, Delaware, and the United States what they are—places that are rich in democracy, places filled with people who understand the process but sometimes get too caught up in it.

Delaware appears to be the essence of what this country's forefathers must have been thinking when they drafted the Declaration of Independence and declared that democracy would rule. It is no coincidence that the state was the first to sign the U.S. Constitution in 1787.

In a state that is only ninety-six miles long and thirty-five miles wide—the sec-



COURTESY SUSSEX COUNTY RETURN DAY



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■ On the steps below, the hatchet is buried, symbolizing goodwill and reconciliation between the rival parties.

ond smallest state in the Union—statewide problems are easily solved, because everyone seems to know most everyone else on a first-name basis. It is not unusual, for example, for a northern lawmaker to call a southern counterpart about a statewide issue and suggest the two meet later that afternoon in Dover, the state capital, an equal distance for

both. In larger states, debates take months and years before solutions are reached; in Delaware, it is a matter of hours or, at the most, days. Residents simply get on the telephone and call their representative, no matter whether he be serving on the state or the national level.

That open communication serves to emphasize how the people of Delaware

BURYING THE HATCHET



ROBERT J. BENNETT

■ In this American town, people remember the cooperative spirit of republican government that serves the people and not itself.

view their elected officials. Titles are not impressive—governors, U.S. senators, and representatives are all referred to by first name. Both citizens and legislatures share the good times and the bad.

Former two-term governor Pierre S. du Pont IV recalled in 1985 the story of a woman who telephoned his office just six days after his inauguration. It was a Saturday, and everyone was unpacking boxes when the phone rang. He answered, and the woman on the other end was complaining that a heavy rain had left her basement flooded. She could not be convinced, he said, that the matter was a local problem that should be handled by the town or county in which she lived—she wanted to talk with the governor.

"She called the man in Delaware she just saw sworn in and who is the leader of

the state and he better be able to do something," he said. "That's the kind of state it is. Where else in America would you find people who think that when their basement is full of water the thing to do is to call the governor?"

That type of informality strikes at what Return Day means to Sussex County and Delaware. There are no political grudges carried over, no hard feelings lingering. If there are, those involved keep the feelings to themselves and do not let them interfere with the festivities. Winners and losers join together, wave to supporters, and put behind the charged campaigns that sometimes, though not often, result in unnecessary accusations being tossed around. Literally, in a special ceremony, the hatchet is buried by political leaders, signifying the end of the political

season and providing a gesture of reconciliation.

"It's a healing process that sets the election aside and says we're now going to get on with the business of government," said du Pont. "It's a very personal thing. It brings government right down to your backyard, and I think that's why it works."

It worked when people began gathering in Georgetown in the mid-nineteenth century, and it continues to work today as Delaware prepares to enter the twenty-first century. Residents are as close-knit now as they were when Caesar Rodney led the fight for independence in the 1770s.

W. Layton Johnson, who for twenty-six years served as mayor of Georgetown, has been helping organize Return Day celebrations for about four decades. Johnson has hosted Return Day parties for upward of seven hundred people, including governors and other state lawmakers. This year will mark his first stint as town crier.

"Return Day heals a lot of political wounds," he said. "Nobody likes to lose, whether it's a town election or a state election. It's nice to get together and shake hands with a winner. It takes a good person to ride in the vehicle with his opponent."

Sen. William V. Roth, Jr., who first represented Delaware in Congress in 1966 as a member of the House of Representatives and who has been a member of the U.S. Senate since 1970, has seen his share of negative politics. He said that the current system of political campaigning emphasizes the need for something similar to Return Day on a national level.

"The divisiveness of the presidential campaign needs to be put aside after the election so the process of political healing and bipartisan cooperation can begin," said Roth.

"Return Day reminds both the win-

ners and losers that their aim is not to persist in partisan squabbling but rather to work together for the benefit of the state and of the country."

J. Everett Moore, Jr., who as chairman of the Sussex County Republican Party has helped bury the hatchet several times, said Return Day would work well in small towns or counties throughout America where residents and officials know or know of each other. Large cities or states that do little to embrace a community feeling would be hard pressed to have a Return Day-type celebration, he said.

"This is a small rural area where people know each other, where they know their candidates. We have a tendency to be not as vicious. In those cases where we do get testy, it's important to join together and say, 'That was our job during the political process, now let's move on.'"

Jean West, who served as president of the Sussex County Return Day Committee for about twenty-five years before stepping down several years ago, said she hopes the people of Delaware always honor the tradition.

"I know of no better way to show future generations that there can be good sportsmanship among candidates after a hard and vigorous political campaign," she said.

It is a lesson much of America could learn from, whether the political game is being played in the marbled halls of Washington, D.C., or in small towns nestled in the cornfields of the Middle West, or among the great redwoods of the Pacific Northwest. After all, it is hoped that everyone—citizens and politicians alike—wants the same thing: a better government for the people, by the people, of the people. ■

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