



RETURN DAY
FOR
SUSSEX COUNTY
GEORGETOWN, DELAWARE

THURSDAY, NOV. 5, 1970

1791-1968: A Time To Remember

By William P. Frank

History books and historical records do not tell us when Return Day was started in Sussex County.

Back in 1791, the General Assembly granted a petition of Sussex Countians that the "seat of justice" be moved from Lewes to a more central and convenient part of the county. The General Assembly authorized a board of 10 commissioners to buy not more than 100 acres "near the center of the county at the place called 'James Pettijohn's Old Field' or within two miles of the house where Ebenezer Pettijohn now resides."

The same board of commissioners had orders from the General Assembly to build a court house, a jail, a pillory and a whipping post.

Later in 1791, the General Assembly decreed that James Pettijohn's Old Field shall be known as George-town, in honor of George Mitchell who was the chairman of the acquisition commission.

For years, Sussex Countians seemed to have the idea that Return Day was peculiar to and characteristic only of their county and its county seat. The historical fact is much more interesting and certainly more to the credit of Sussex County. The truth is that Sussex County and Georgetown have been more faithful to Delaware customs than two upper counties of New Castle and Kent. For in the early days, according to the law, all election inspectors were required to deliver their tally sheets to the court house of their respective counties on the Thursday after Election Day.

That made it an occasion for the people from far and wide to gather in their county seats to hear and learn the results. Only Sussex Countians seemed to have taken such a personal interest in their elections; and so down through the years, in good season and bad, they flocked by the thousands to the hub of Sussex and settled in and near the court house. Of course, it wasn't always that the people were able to learn the results of the elections, particularly in the tight ones, but they all had a good time.

Sussex County

Return Day Committee, Inc.

1970 OFFICERS

Mrs. Jean West, President
Vincent J. Sears, Vice President
Mrs. Carol W. Collins, Secretary
Mayor W. Layton Johnson, Treasurer

DIRECTORS

Mrs. Nell Barr	Thomas Henning
Eugene Bowne	Edward Marzosa
John Briggs	Gordon McFadden
Mrs. Charlotte Campbell	John Purnell
Mrs. Claire Croll	Anthony Racaniello
Miles Frederick	James Sabo

Master of Ceremonies -- Mr. Houston Wilson

Parade Marshal -- Mr. Louis "Bud" Collins

Guest Marshal -- Mr. Alan Glover

Old Timers Judges

Mrs. David Conly
Mrs. Lewis Knowles
Mrs. Mabel Lambden

Antique Car Judges

Mr. John S. Cordrey
Mr. Andrew Rice
Mr. William Jones

Parade Judges

Mr. David J. Conly
Mr. H. W. Hoad Froehlich
Mr. Lewis Knowles
Mr. Glenn Smoot
Mrs. William L. Steele
Mr. George W. Wilkins

Parade Announcer -- Mr. "Country Chuck" Manning

RETURN DAY PROGRAM

11:30 A. M. -- LUNCHEON FOR CANDIDATES

(Thomas C. Mulligan Hall, Grace United Methodist Church, South King Street, Georgetown)

1:30 P. M. -- PARADE

(Starts promptly at 1:30 from Georgetown High School. Will travel East on Market Street)

3:00 P. M. -- OFFICIAL RETURNS

Announcement by Ronald Dodd

PUBLIC SPEAKING

(At the Circle)

AWARDS

4:00 P. M. -- BAND CONCERT

(U. S. Marine Band of Cherry Point, North Carolina)

4:30 P. M. -- OLD-FASHION OX ROAST

(Just off Circle on North Bedford Street)

PROGRAM AT THE CIRCLE

National Anthem Sussex Central High School Band

Invocation..... The Reverend Charles E. Covington

Greetings Mr. Houston Wilson

Welcome Mayor W. Layton Johnson

Announcement of National, State and County Returns.....

... Mr. Ronald Dodd

Brief Remarks --

Gov. Russell Peterson

Lt. Gov. Eugene Bookhammer

U. S. Senator J. Caleb Boggs

U. S. Representative William V. Roth

Former Gov. Elbert N. Carvel

Former Sen. J. Allen Frear

Brig. Gen. Lawrence F. Snoddy, USMC

Introduction of National Candidates --

... By Mr. Houston Wilson

Address..... Senator John J. Williams

Introduction of County Candidates --

... By Mr. Houston Wilson

Presentation of Awards Parade Chairman,

... Mrs. Charlotte Campbell

Appreciation..... Chairman, Mrs. Jean West

Benediction..... The Reverend Charles E. Covington

RETURN DAY

November 5, 1970

This year The Sussex County Return Day Committee has unanimously agreed to break all precedents and traditions by extending a special honor to one of its most beloved and respected citizens.

We are proud to proclaim him as our outstanding citizen -- one of us who has served all of us well. He has brought honor and acclaim to himself, his community, Sussex County, The State of Delaware and The Nation. This man has all of the qualities of a gentleman, and is recognized as one of the foremost Statesmen of the United States. He has served us untiringly and faithfully. We and the Nation will miss his keen mind in Washington looking out for our interests, but it is certain that there are many warm hearts in Sussex County because he is coming back home -- hopefully to spend many healthy and happy years in retirement from public office.

Senator John J. Williams, thanks for a job well done. We all appreciate the many hours of labor in Washington over the past years. We are proud of you and the record you have made.

All of us now welcome you and Mrs. Williams back as our neighbors and our friends.

1970 Sussex County Return Day, Inc.

Return Day was usually an occasion for rivalry among the election officers—to see who could make it by horseback first to the court house. In the meantime, the air of festivity and the spirit of rustic carnivals prevailed in the vicinity of the court house square. All kinds of food—and bad liquors—were sold from booths and stalls—Delaware biscuits and hot corn pone, rabbit roasted on spits and of course fried chicken, oysters and clams, white and sweet potatoes baked in hot ashes.

The people made for Georgetown by horse and buggy, farm wagons, on horse or mule back—and later of course, by excursion trains.

The town's two hotels did a lively bar business and it must have been through the influence of their managers that eventually, a crackdown was made on the itinerant vendors of moonshine.

On most Return Days, large strips of muslin were extended from one side of the court house to the other in the years of presidential elections. The names of the states that had gone one way or another were painted on the muslin with the approximate majorities.

The festivities of Return Day, of course, varied according to the excitement of the elections. For example in 1882 when Charles Stockley was elected governor, people cheered and guns boomed out as a victory procession moved through Georgetown. The "center piece" of the parade was a boat, named "The Constitution," decorated with a large blue hen and a coonskin cap suspended from the mast.

And there standing on the quarterdeck of the boat on wheels was the victorious governor-elect. When the ship arrived in front of the court house, the new governor was lifted on the shoulders of brawny men who carried him triumphantly into the court house and up to the balcony to speak to the cheering throng.

It can not be said that all Return Days were orderly. The newspapers of the past century always commented on whether there was any trouble. For example, the Morning News in 1884 noted: "Everything considered, the crowd was remarkably orderly and seemed jubilant over the county victory and the

prospect for the inauguration of a Democratic president on the 4th of March next."

As it happened, the Return Day crowd in Georgetown that year didn't learn that Grover Cleveland was really elected president until several days later.

If the weather was pleasant, Return Day festivities would extend over Friday and Saturday, marked by plenty of entertaining, old fashion eating and drinking, and even cock fights behind the barns on the outskirts of the town.

In the early days, a Sussex farmer would never think of missing Return Day in Georgetown, although as the years passed and so-called sophistication seeped into Sussex County, Return Day dwindled to a somewhat perfunctory occasion. In 1942, because of the war, it was cancelled but was later revived as people began to realize that Return Day was one of the few genuine folk customs in this part of the country, different in many ways from the more synthetic fiestas.

