

#571

Return Day



Sussex County Georgetown, Delaware

Thursday, Nov. 9, 1972

HISTORY OF SUSSEX COUNTY RETURN DAY

By W. Emerson Wilson

"Return Day" has been a custom 'peculiar to the people of Sussex since time immemorial', J. Thomas Scharf wrote in his 'History of Delaware' back in 1888.

But "time immemorial" is a very indefinite term and certainly indicates no specific or even approximate date. When, therefore, did "Return Day" actually originate? In colonial days elections were held at the county seat and this custom was continued under the first state constitution of 1776 but Lewes was a long way from the Delmar area and the citizens of western Sussex objected strongly to traveling such long distances to the polls.

In January, 1791, the General Assembly directed that a commission choose a central site for a new county seat. This was done by May and the new town, named Georgetown after George Mitchell, one of the commissioners, was ready for the election of 1792.

Was the first "Return Day" held that year? One may assume that it was, but if that is true it was much different than the 'Return Days' of the present era. Voters had to drive into Georgetown to cast their ballots and it is unlikely that they would return two days later for the results. Undoubtedly the results of the election were known that night or the next day and the voters would stay over to learn the results.

As early as 1803 complaints about having to go to Georgetown over rough roads in bad weather, leaving their families at home unprotected, were made by large groups of men in the outer districts.

It took a long time in those days for the people to change customs, especially in Sussex County, so it was not until 1828 that the General Assembly adopted new election laws providing that the Presidential electors should be chosen by the people rather than by the Legislature and that the polling places should be in the hundreds rather than at the county seat. This meant that the election officers had to bring the results from each of the hundreds into Georgetown where they were turned over to the sheriff and tabulated and the results announced from the courthouse at noon on Thursday.

Thus the voters did not have to go very far from home to vote, but since there were no county newspapers in those days there was no way of knowing who had won the election. So many of the farmers decided to take a day off, load their whole families into wagons and go to Georgetown on Thursday to get the results.

Sussex County

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Parade Announcer -- Mr. "Country Chuck" Manning

RETURN DAY PROGRAM

11:00 A.M. -- LUNCHEON FOR CANDIDATES
Georgetown Fire House,
South Bedford Street

1:30 P.M. -- PARADE
(Starts promptly at 1:30 P.M. from George-
town 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
(First United States Army Band, Fort
George G. Meade, Maryland, Conductor and
Commanding Officer, Chief Warrant Officer,
Harold M. Emigh)

4:30 P.M. -- OLD FASHION OX ROAST
(Just off Circle on North Bedford St.)

PROGRAM AT THE CIRCLE

National AnthemSussex 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 W. Peterson
Lt. Gov. Eugene Bookhammer
U.S. Senator J. Caleb Boggs
U.S. Senator William V. Roth
U.S. Representative Pierre S. duPont IV
Former Gov. Elbert N. Carvel
Former Sen. J. Allen Frear
Former Sen. John J. Williams
Col. Richard L. Lyman
Senior Army Advisor to the Delaware Army National Guard
Representing the Commander of the 1st United States Army
Lt. Col. J. Caleb Boggs Jr. - U.S.M.C.
(VMF-321, MARTD)
Capt. James P. Adams - Dela. Army Nat'l Guard
(Commanding Officer - 101 P1 DELTA)

Introduction of National Candidates --
... By Mr. Houston Wilson
Address Dr. George M. Worriow
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

It would seem that "Return Day" as we now know it probably started with the election of 1830 or the Presidential election of 1832. Certainly by the 1840s the custom was well established.

Several thousand persons would pour into Georgetown that morning coming on foot, in wagons drawn by mules, horses, or oxen, in carriages of all types and on horseback.

While waiting for the results the crowd listened to band concerts, wagered on cockfights, and engaged in other pastimes. Soon merchants saw an opportunity for gain and stalls and booths selling all kinds of food, clothing, and other articles were set up.

The results were read from the door of the courthouse at noon and were printed on a white sheet hoisted over the courthouse door. The winning candidates were placed on to the shoulders of their adherents and paraded around the Green. A large pole was erected in the Green and the emblem of the winning party was run up it. Generally an ox roast was provided by the winners.

However, the spirit of good feeling and reconciliation which marks the "Return Day" of the present was not always there in the old days. The losers quite often did not take their defeat with good grace and in one fight in 1844 a Dagsboro man was killed.

One of the flags made for the victory of Polk in 1844 for "Return Day" was carried by a group of voters going to the polls in 1862. The Civil War was being fought and feelings were running high. The Republicans had had the Lincoln administration bring in out-of-state soldiers to guard the polls. These soldiers did not recognize the Polk flag, thought it was a Confederate one, so they tore it to pieces and arrested all of the men who had been carrying it.

Generally there was a spirit of jollification with many of the participants appearing in old clothes dug out of attics and others in outlandish costumes they improvised. The news of the good times to be had in Georgetown on "Return Day" spread and many people from the Eastern Shore of Maryland came into the town on that day to join the fun even though they had no interest in the outcome of the election.

One of the best descriptions of "Return Day" was that published in the Wilmington Evening which sent a city slicker down to Georgetown to cover the event in 1872 just one hundred years ago. Excerpts from his story follow:

"Strolling from the Brick Hotel kept by a New Castle man, J. H. Wood, I found in front of the courthouse and on either side of the main street leading to the jail work benches, tables, and temporary stands, numbering 30 or 40 and called stalls and many were the boxes of confections on them."

"By 10 o'clock people of both sexes and all colors dressed in every manner and style, in wagons drawn by one, two and four horses with mule teams as well poured in from all directions. The ladies especially were gotten up well and I doubt not Harpers would have sent one of the best artists of the fashion world had they known of the day."

"By noon at least 2,000 persons had been added to the town's population for every avenue, lane, alley and street were lined with wagons in which old fashioned settees and chairs, some going back to Revolutionary times, had been installed as seats."

"Many dined at the hotels, others fared sumptuously in their wagons and carriages while others enjoyed roast beef, turkey, chicken, fish, coon, rabbits and possum at will, all of which could be had among the stalls cooked to order. Many ladies who had not visited the "Capitol" since the last "Return Day" could be seen in the crowd buying nicknacks for "the little ones"

"A part of the programme 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."

This writer was not interested in the outcome of the election because his paper had already announced that Grant had carried the State and nation. Even Sussex, a Democratic stronghold, had given Grant a majority of 58 since the Democrats could not stand Horace Greeley, their own candidate, whom they considered too radical.

The unidentified writer stressed that "Return Day" was peculiar to Sussex County. In New Castle and Kent the returns were generally known the same night and then the winners would hold their "Jubilation" consisting of a parade and speeches by the winners as long as a week after the election.

In 1882 the feature of the "Return Day" parade was a boat mounted on wheels rigged like a ship and labeled "Old Constitution". Six men on horseback rode in front of it and 120 more in back of it. On the quarter deck was Governor-elect Charles Stockley who was cheered as the craft moved along the streets.

"Return Day" continued through the 1890s and on into the present century. But with the advent of automobiles, which made the visit to Georgetown from any part of Sussex only a matter of minutes, and with the arrival of radio which let the people know the results of elections even before the newspapers arrived, interest in the old custom began to dwindle.

There was a big celebration in 1936 when Franklin D. Roosevelt won in a landslide and the Democrats carried the State for the first time in many years. "Return Day" was canceled altogether in 1942 because of World War II, but it was too good an event to let die in Sussex County where traditions are important. It was not long before a group of interested citizens of both the Republican and Democrat parties joined together to revive it.

The progress made in the development of computers, modern communications, and the use of voting machines soon made it possible to know the results of election returns within minutes after the poles were closed. Not so in 1962 when the official returns for one State office were not determined until after "Return Day" had come and gone.

Throughout the 50s and 60s enthusiasm grew beyond all expectations as was evident with a bill being passed in the State Legislature in 1965 making "Return Day" a legal half holiday for Sussex County. From that time to the present this celebration has attracted more and more candidates from Kent and New Castle Counties who enjoy riding in the parade and joining in all of the activities of the day. The spectators have also increased in numbers, to the point where it is now necessary to roast two oxen to feed the hungry crowds after the speeches have been made on the square in Georgetown.

