



RETURN DAY
FOR
SUSSEX COUNTY
GEORGETOWN, DELAWARE

THURSDAY, NOV. 7, 1968

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.

1968 OFFICERS

John T. Purnell, Chairman
Mrs. Jean West, Co-Chairman
Vincent Sears, Vice-Chairman
Mrs. Nellie R. Barr, Vice-Chairman
Mrs. Charlotte Campbell, Vice-Chairman
Mrs. Clair Croll, Vice-Chairman
Mrs. Carol W. Collins, Recording Secretary
Mrs. Peggy W. Booth, Corresponding Secretary
W. Layton Johnson, Treasurer

DIRECTORS

John L. Briggs	Anthony Racaniello
Avery H. Ellis	James Sabo
Miles Frederick	Betty Ann Marvel
Peter J. Gaffney	Mary Ann Ewing
M. Martin Isaacs	Eugene Bowne
Edward Marzoo	Thomas Henning
Steven Pepper	William Spencer
James Prettyman	

Master of Ceremonies — Mr. Houston Wilson

Parade Marshal — Linden Rementer

Parade Judges

Mrs. J. Young
Mr. W. Emerson Wilson
Mr. W. Lewis Knowles
Mr. David J. Conly

Parade Announcer — Mr. O. L. Layton

RETURN DAY PROGRAM

11:30 A.M. — LUNCHEON FOR CANDIDATES
(Thomas C. Mulligan Hall, Grace
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 St.)

3:00 P.M. — OFFICIAL RETURNS
Announcement by James F. Walls

PUBLIC SPEAKING
(at the Circle)

AWARDS

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

PROGRAM AT THE CIRCLE

National Anthem Georgetown High School Band
Invocation Rev. Charles E. Covington
Greetings Mr. Houston Wilson
Welcome Mayor W. Layton Johnson
Announcement of National, State & County Returns —
Mr. James F. Walls

Brief Remarks —
Gov. Charles L. Terry, Jr.
or
Lt. Gov. Sherman Tribbitt
Mr. Russell Peterson
Former Gov. Elbert N. Carvel
U. S. Senator J. Caleb Boggs
U. S. Senator John J. Williams
U. S. Representative William V. Roth
Honorable Harris M. McDowell

Introduction of National Candidates —
By Mr. Houston Wilson

Address Congressman William V. Roth

Introduction of County Candidates —
By Mr. Houston Wilson

Presentation of Awards . . . Mrs. N. Eugene Campbell

Appreciation Chairman, Mr. John T. Purnell

Benediction Rev. Charles E. Covington

LETTER OF THANKS

On behalf of the officers and directors of the Sussex County Return Day Committee, I would like to take this opportunity to express our sincere gratitude to each and every person who has helped in so many ways to make Return Day a reality again this year.

To all of the officers and directors, who have spent so many hours and performed so many jobs behind the scenes, I want to give a special word of thanks. Without these dedicated and loyal citizens, an event like this could never take place.

In times such as we live today, with the civil unrest at home and the troubled times around the world, we are indeed fortunate to be able to have the opportunity to celebrate our time honored Sussex County Return Day. There is no other place in the world, where, after an election both the winning and the defeated candidates meet, shake hands and ride in the same vehicle for a parade through the streets.

Let us always continue to celebrate Return Day in Sussex County. 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.

John T. Purnell
Chairman

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.

