

# RETURN DAY



Georgetown, Delaware

NOVEMBER 8, 1984



## HISTORY OF RETURN DAY

Historians have generally noted that Return Day has been celebrated in Georgetown since "time immemorial," although it is not known precisely when the first Return Day celebration was held. It may well have been as early as 1791. When the Delaware General Assembly passed the act which made Georgetown the county seat of Sussex County, they decreed that "every annual election . . . to be held in said county of Sussex, shall hereafter be holden and kept at the Court House herein directed to be built." In these early days residents from the surrounding county would come to the county seat to cast their ballots. Having made the arduous journey over bad roads in order to vote, it seems quite likely that these early Sussex Countians would have remained in Georgetown to hear the results of the election and enjoy the camaraderie of fellow citizens, they, in all likelihood, would have raised a toast or two to the victorious candidates, perhaps in this way beginning the tradition of Return Day.

A more regularized form of Return Day probably began in 1828 and was definitely established by the 1840's. Despite the fact that Georgetown was more centrally located than the old county seat at Lewes, poor weather and even worse roads still made traveling to the county seat to vote quite a burden on citizens. The General Assembly moved to improve the situation in 1828, when an act was passed permitting citizens to vote in the "hundreds" in which they resided. Election officials would then bring the results of the voting in the various hundreds to Georgetown, racing their speedy horses to reach Georgetown before their rivals and arriving in the Square with an air of importance to turn over the election results to the Board of Canvassers. On the Thursday after Election Day, the official Board of Canvassers, with the sheriff presiding, would meet to inspect and tabulate the tally sheets from each hundred. The results of the election would then be officially announced to the waiting crowd from the Georgetown Court House.

This form of announcing the results of elections was not peculiar to Georgetown or Sussex County and, in fact, was required by law in all three of Delaware's counties. It also seems probable that similar means of collecting and disseminating election results were followed by other states in this nation's early years. What makes Georgetown unique is that it is the only county seat in the nation that continues the tradition of holding a return day celebration.

Return Day, of course, is much more than the announcing of the election results. The celebration that has grown up around the occasion has elements to please everyone. The main aspect of the celebration is still political, and in this regard Return Day offers those who come to Georgetown an opportunity to meet the candidates. The politicians themselves also made use of the occasion to mend fences and to garner support. As one member of the 1974 Return Day Committee noted, "More politicking goes on on Return Day than any other day of the year . . . I guess they figure it's as good a time as any to get started for the next election."

(continued)

## THE SUSSEX COUNTY RETURN DAY COMMITTEE, INC.

### OFFICERS

JEAN WEST, President

CAROL W. COLLINS, Secretary

JOHN T. PURNELL, Vice-President

WILLIAM LAMBDEN, Treasurer

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County Council

WILLIAM D. STEVENSON, SR.,  
County Council

W. HOWARD WORKMAN,  
County Council

CHARLES W. COLE,  
County Council



## PROGRAM OF EVENTS

11:00 A.M. LUNCHEON FOR CANDIDATES AND HONORED GUESTS  
Sussex Central High School  
Prepared by the Culinary Occupations Department  
of the Sussex County Vocational Technical Center  
under the direction of Joseph Heacock

11:00 A.M. CONCERT AT THE CIRCLE

1:30 P.M. PARADE  
From Sussex Central High School eastward on Market Street

GRAND MARSHALL  
Honorable Fredrick P. Witney

PARADE ANNOUNCERS  
Kevin Short James H. Baxter

PARADE JUDGES	
Douglas Wilburne	Virgil P. Ellwanger
Bernice Lambert	Richard M. Stoops
Helen G. Buchanan	Charlotte M. Samans

FIRE EQUIPMENT ANNOUNCER  
John L. Smith

FIRE EQUIPMENT JUDGES  
Jay Reynolds Jamie Turner

3:30 P.M. CEREMONIES AT THE CIRCLE

4:30 P.M. OX ROAST

## CEREMONIES AT THE CIRCLE

National Anthem .....Sussex Central High School Band  
H. Eugene Bowne, Director

Soloist .....Ms. Janine Grillo

Invocation .....Rev. Charles E. Covington

Greetings .....Joseph T. Conaway  
Master of Ceremonies

Welcome .....W. Layton Johnson  
Mayor of Georgetown

Presentation of Honors .....Ronald F. Dodd

Reading of Returns .....Ronald F. Dodd

Burial of the Tomahawk

End of Campaign of 1984

State Chairman, American Party .....Richard Thompson

State Chairman, Democratic Party .....Samuel L. Shipley

State Chairman, Republican Party .....Jerome O. Herlihy

Introduction of Distinguished Guests, State,  
National and Sussex County Candidates and  
Incumbents .....Joseph T. Conaway

Appreciation .....Mrs. Jean West, President  
Sussex County Return Day Committee, Inc.

Presentation of Awards .....George Couch  
Parade Chairman

Benediction .....Rev. Samuel H. McWilliams



## HISTORY (Continued)

Today the "politicking" generally gets started at a luncheon held for the candidates, where winners and losers circulate amidst supporters, accepting congratulations or condolences as the case may be. In earlier days, however, candidates, townspeople and all others assembled in Georgetown shared a repast in the streets of the town. In the town's public square, booths, stalls and stands were erected, complete with cooking stoves. From these booths "all kinds of edibles were for sale, such as Delaware biscuit, hot corn pone, with black molasses to pour over it, sweet potato biscuit, oppossum, rabbit roasted upon a spit, white and sweet potatoes baked in hot ashes, fish, oysters, maninose (clams), fried chicken and hominy made in mortars chopped from a sturdy gum . . . Always a large steer would be roasted in the open air and eaten. Hogsheads of beer, fresh cider, and vast quantities of Sussex County apple jack were consumed." *Peach Brandy*

The well-fed crowds are also treated to various forms of entertainment. The highlight of the day is the parade down Market Street. This tradition probably began at one of the early Return Days, growing out of the practice of some celebrants who would arrive at Georgetown "in carts drawn by oxen, or in wagons drawn by six and eight horses gaily decorated with flags, ribbons and sleigh bells." No doubt these revelers would have used their decorated wagons to parade the winning candidates through the streets of Georgetown to receive the congratulations of the crowd.

While the parade has been the highlight of Return Day, the celebrants have often added gaiety and entertainment to the fete by attiring themselves in ludicrous costumes and riding or roaming through the streets of town. In the evening, by torch or by moonlight, there would be folk dancing on the green, where "fiddlers scraped the Virginia Reel and the Schottische and joy ran unconfined."

Georgetown's own Senator Willard Saulsbury ably demonstrated that politics and liquor can be mixed and the spirit of Return Day celebrations was often enlivened by this potent brew. Partisan political feelings, when mixed with alcohol, would occasionally lead to brawls when members of one party would rejoice too much over their defeated and crestfallen opponents. In general the high spirits of Return Day were not conducive to good order in the earlier days and, as William P. Frank noted in the 1970 Return Day Program, "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.' " Perhaps the crowd was "remarkably orderly" because it was not learned that Grover Cleveland was really elected until several days later.

In other years the crowds were not so good-natured and the town police often had a hard time maintaining order among the celebrants. "Scuffles and

arrests were common then, and one unfortunate man was killed in a fight in 1844." The small town police force did not have sufficient manpower to handle the crowds that came to Georgetown for Return Day and often the Town Council would come to their aid by hiring additional police officers on the day of the celebration.

In earlier times, before improved road conditions and rail travel, Return Day celebrants from all over Delaware, and some from Maryland, would begin arriving in Georgetown early on Return Day morning. "In buckboard, horseback, on foot, in wagons drawn by oxen they came, bringing food and camping implements for a stay." If the weather was pleasant, the revelers would often remain in Georgetown, continuing their celebration over Friday and Saturday before heading home on Sunday. Even over these extended celebrations there was no dearth of entertainment. The town's bars did a lively business and less discriminating thirsts were quenched by the wares of itinerant moonshine vendors, or at least until the managers of the town's two hotels engineered a crackdown on these vendors. Those with an ear for music could enjoy band concerts in the public square, while those with more active pursuits in mind could take in the cock fights, which were held behind barns on the outskirts of town and quite well attended by members of all of the town's social classes.

Although some of the more exotic elements of Return Days past are no longer a part of the scene, the celebration continues today much as it has always been, with abundant food, a colorful parade, the official announcement of election returns, speeches, band concerts and a great deal of socializing. People still flock to the village to join in the festivities, their joy greatly increased by the fact that since 1965 Return Day has been a legal half-holiday in Sussex County.

World War II caused Return Day to be cancelled in 1942. Although the official celebration was not held, farmers and other persons from outlying areas made it a point to have business in Georgetown on what should have been Return Day. Once in town, the frustrated celebrants could only stand and reminisce about Return Days past. By 1952 the official celebration was reinstituted and it appears that this unique social and political celebration will remain a part of Georgetown tradition.



# 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.

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.

Jean West  
Chairman

