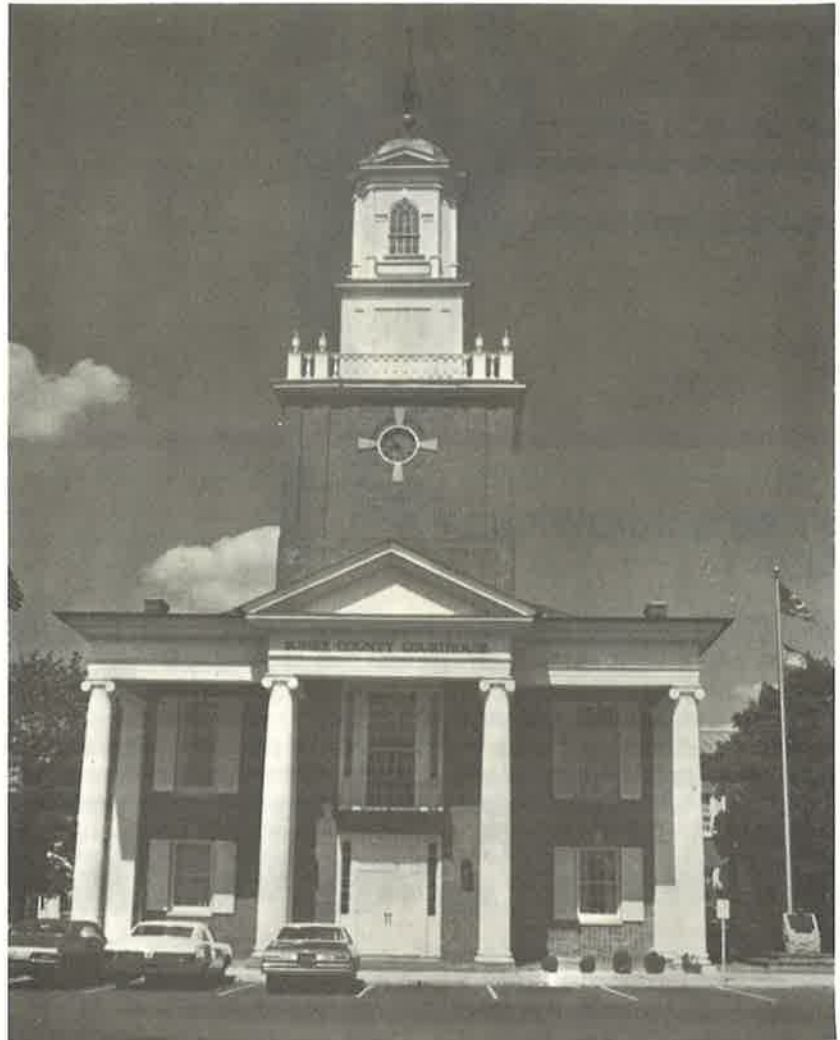


WESTON'S RECORD

Volume 57 No.1



BYRON WESTON COMPANY



A Visit to Sussex County, Delaware

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A Visit to Sussex County, Delaware



Mrs. Mary Ann Hammond, Sussex County Recorder of Deeds, Georgetown, Delaware

Mary Ann Hammond, Recorder of Deeds in the Sussex County courthouse in Georgetown, Delaware, is the first woman in the county's history to occupy that position. She is now in her second term as recorder; in winning the position in the 1974 election she defeated an incumbent who had been in office for eight years.

One of her first projects, after becoming acquainted in detail with recording functions, was the close study of the method of copying the great number and variety of documents which were the responsibility of her office. Mrs. Hammond found that all incoming documents had been recorded on microfilm, which allegedly presented several difficulties.

It was difficult and time-consuming to produce duplicate copies from the microfiche cards. Also, these film records frequently become scratched; being loose cards they were liable to become misfiled; and they had to be viewed, one at a time, through an enlarger.

She found the solution to these problems in the use of hard-copy records, and for



Betty Collins, Deputy Recorder of Deeds, at work in the Recorder's office.

this purpose she called on Bernard Owens, vice president of Hall and McChesney, Inc., of Syracuse, N.Y. With his advice and assistance, she prepared a comprehensive proposal for the change to the new system and submitted it to county authorities, as well as to local lawyers, title searchers, and other interested parties. Approval came quickly. By mid-1975 the hard-copy system, using Byron Weston's Xerographic 100% Linen Record, was in operation.

County recorders from Delaware's other two counties, Kent and New Castle, sent delegations to study the Sussex county operation. Because of the obvious advantages of hard-copy records, they reported back favorably. Today, all recorders in the state of Delaware use the Hall and McChesney system and Byron Weston's 100% Linen Record Paper. In addition, the Sussex County Register of Wills, Mr. Wilson McCabe, has changed over to the new system.

Mrs. Hammond's office receives 80 to 100 documents a day. These consist mostly of deeds, mortgages, court orders, federal

tax liens and releases, and prenuptial agreements. However, she points out that her office records any document which is properly drawn-up and notarized.

("We are asked to record some unusual documents," she said. One such unusual document filed in the office contained a poem entitled "How to Be Happily Married," which was written to the tune of the hymn "Rock of Ages.")



Helen Wilkins placing an Index strip in the Temporary Indices record book.

Immediately on receipt of a document to be recorded, it is time-and-date stamped and given a book, page, and instrument number. It is then indexed on a word-processing keyboard. Because of its computer memory, this system makes correction possible before typing and results in a 50% saving of time. These strips are entered in a Temporary Indices book for immediate reference, and are converted annually to permanent records.

All documents are then photographed, and the film is sent to Hall and McChesney



Compact, permanent deed-record books. Older, large record books in background.

on a daily basis. The documents are held in the Recorder's office until compact copies are prepared and returned by the Syracuse company.

The Sussex County Recorder's office is an historical archive, containing handwritten deeds and plats dating back to the late 1600's. Today most of these irreplaceable records have been duplicated in smaller, bound books, easily accessible for reference purposes. All of these old records describe the location of property as being not only in Sussex County, but also in a particular "hundred." This is an old English description of a judicial district within a county, which has been maintained in Delaware, although discarded in England over 100 years ago. The original five hundreds of Sussex County were established about 1680 as assessment districts by the Duke of York. Today there are thirteen hundreds in the county, and these are still used in deed descriptions and other legal documents.



Front office area. In the background documents are being presented for recording.

Today's beautiful Sussex County Courthouse has been remodeled and enlarged twice—once in 1914 and again in 1969—since it was originally built in 1840. At that time it was paid for, in part, by funds raised through a lottery.

The history of both the county seat of Georgetown and its original courthouse is an interesting one. The first Sussex County seat was Lewiston, in the extreme eastern part of the county. It was a full day's journey from the opposite side of the county, and when a planter or farmer had any amount of legal business to conduct in Lewiston, it would take him at least three days to make the round trip.

The state legislature bowed to popular pressure in 1791 and established a commission to purchase a proper site near the center of the county. The area chosen was described as "James Pettyjohn's old field or within two miles of the house where

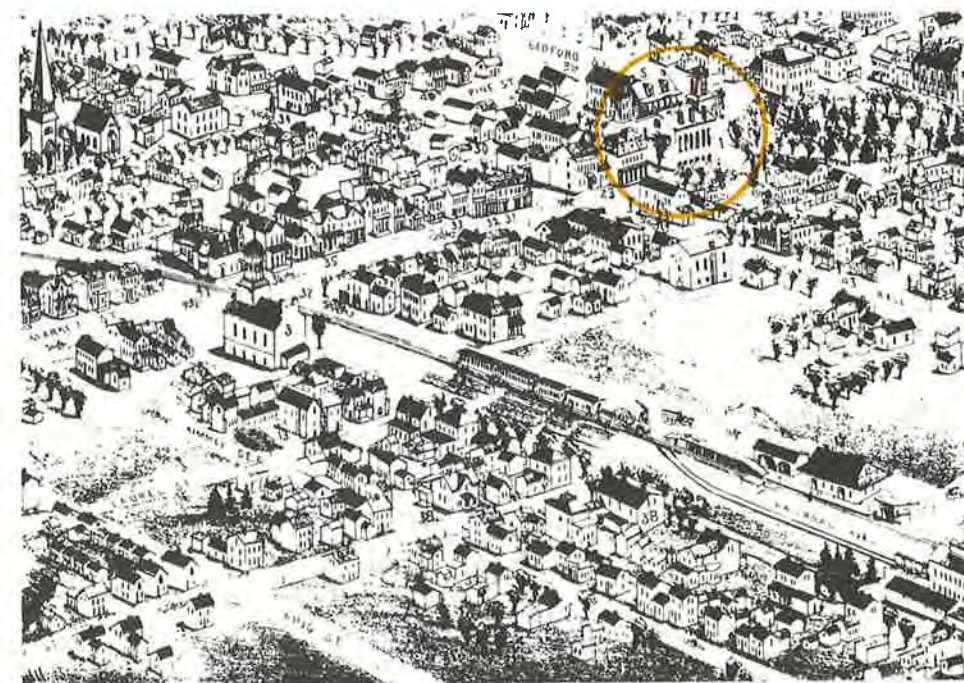
Ebenezer Pettyjohn resided, situate in the Broadkill Hundred." In due course 76 acres of land were purchased, and the new town of Georgetown was laid out with provision for a central square 100 yards in each direction. The location of the polls and county courts were moved to the new county seat—as were the pillory and whipping post.



General work area of County Recorder's office where documents are processed for recording.

In 1793 a frame and cypress-shingled courthouse was built from funds raised through popular subscription. It contained county offices and one courtroom. As the area grew and prospered over the next forty years, the one-courtroom facility became totally inadequate. A lottery was used to raise \$25,000 in 1837 for the construction of a larger brick courthouse, which, with enlargement and remodeling, eventually became the Sussex County courthouse of today.

The old frame courthouse was moved before construction of the new one began; it later became, among other things, a



An 1885 aerial view of Georgetown. With enlargement and remodeling, the building with three chimneys to the left of the circle of trees is today's courthouse.

private house, a printing shop, and a shoe-repair shop before falling into complete disrepair in the 1960's. At present, this historic building is being restored to its original appearance by the Delaware Division of Historical and Cultural Affairs.

The post of County Recorder, now occupied by Mary Ann Hammond, goes back nearly 300 years. It is an elective position with a term of four years. She had not held any political position prior to running for recorder, but was knowledgeable and active in county politics through her father, R. Allen Cannon, a former state senator and representative. Mrs. Hammond is a native of Sussex County, having been born in nearby Seaford, and now resides in Georgetown with her husband Jack, her

daughters Jennie Lynn and Tracey Ann, and stepchildren Amy Lynn, Jay, and Clarke. In summertime she commutes about 20 miles from Dewey Beach where the Hammonds have a home.

Mrs. Hammond and her cheerful, competent deputy, Betty Collins, supervise the activities of the 6-person recorder's office. There is a constant flow of lawyers, title searchers, and others with interest in the county records. A library-like atmosphere provides a research area with comfortable chairs and spacious tables for their work.

We wish to thank Mrs. Mary Ann Hammond for the warm welcome given on our visit to Sussex County and for the time taken to explain the many interesting functions of her office.