



Dewey Day, a Triumphant Return

*The October 1899 Dewey Day celebration was
an epic event in Montpelier.*

WITNESSES TO “DEWEY DAY” IN MONTPELIER on October 12, 1899 were convinced that it was perhaps the grandest occasion Vermont had ever seen. On that day, Vermonters staged a historic welcome home for native son Admiral George Dewey, whose

success in destroying the Spanish fleet at Manila Bay during the Spanish-American War made him the nation’s number one naval hero. Dewey’s exploit in the Philippines seemed to bring glory to Vermont and it became one the highlights of standard histories of the state.

George Dewey was born in Montpelier in a house across from the state capitol on December 26, 1837. He was the son of Dr. Julius Y. Dewey, a well-known physician and founder and first president of the National Life Insurance Company. After graduating from Montpelier schools, George attended Norwich University (in Northfield, Vermont) and in 1854 entered the Naval Academy at Annapolis, from which he graduated. As a career naval officer, he saw service during the Civil War on the steam frigate *Mississippi*. In January 1898, by now a commodore, George took command of the Asiatic squadron in Nagasaki, Japan. In the next few months the United States fought and won the war against Spain in Cuba, during which time he led the conquest at Manila Bay without the loss of a single American life. The Philippines victory was the most spectacular event of the Spanish-American War. It made the United States an important power in the Pacific Ocean, and it made George Dewey an immediate national hero.

When George returned to the U.S. in September 1899, the national reaction bordered on the hysterical. Congress first made him a rear admiral, then created the rank of Admiral of the Navy especially for him. Private funds were contributed to buy him a home in Washington, DC. Songs and poems were written about him. The journalist R.L. Duffus recalled in his memoir, *The Waterbury Record*, that in Vermont “children...were named Dewey. So were dogs, streets, and schools, even though few knew where Manila was.” George made a triumphal tour of major American cities, from New



Admiral Dewey became the darling of the excitable U.S. and foreign press upon his decisive victory at Manila Bay and his triumphant return to his hometown, Montpelier, Vermont.



George Dewey arrives in Montpelier and settles into a \$10,000 landau loaned for the occasion by Dr. William Seward Webb.



George Dewey's boyhood home, moved west from its original location on State Street by Dewey's brother ten years before the parade, was decked out in bunting like most buildings in downtown Montpelier. A souvenir stand was set up on the front lawn.



Tens of thousands of people arrived in Montpelier aboard trains that stopped at 13 special sidings erected by the Central Vermont Railroad to accommodate the crowds. This colorful cover (at left) is from *Judge's Quarterly*, a magazine of wit and humor from the turn of the century.



One feature of Dewey Day was that the State House was illuminated with electric lights, an impressive site for those unaccustomed to artificially lit buildings.

Vermont's Reception to Her Hero

ADMIRAL DEWEY

AT
MONTPELIER!

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 12, 1899.

The Largest and Most Complete Celebration Ever Held in the State.

.....CONSISTING OF.....

A Grand Military and Civic Parade

---REVIEWED BY---

ADMIRAL DEWEY, GOVERNOR SMITH and Staff, and Other State Officers

Thousands of Men in Line!

25 BANDS of MUSIC

Great Display of Fireworks in the Evg. Everyone should join in honoring the Admiral

THE RUTLAND R.R.

Will sell Round Trip Tickets to Montpelier and return, at the following greatly reduced rates:

From stations Rutland to Bellows Falls, **ONLY \$3.00** inclusive, CHILDREN UNDER 17 YEARS, HALF RATE

SPECIAL TRAINS

Will be run on Thursday, October 12th, 1899, as follows:

Lv. Bellows Falls	8.30 a.m.	
Stowe	8.50	
Chester	9.00	
Galilee	9.15	
Cornwall	9.25	
Proctorville	9.27	
Ludlow	9.30	
Healdville	9.40	
Stonewall	9.45	
St. John	9.50	
East Wallingford	9.55	
Cuttingville	9.58	
East Clearendon	9.59	
Ar. Montpelier	10.30	

RETURNING.

Trains will leave Montpelier at 6.00 p. m. and at 9.00 p. m., after the fireworks.

EXCURSION TICKETS will be good only on Special Trains OCTOBER 12, 1899.

Special Train will arrive at Montpelier in ample time, as excursions will not commence until 2 o'clock P. M.

To enable passengers to get the right train returning, they should show their tickets to the Gate Keeper at Montpelier Station.

C. L. PIERCE, H. A. HODGE, R. T. McKEEVER,
Subst. Superintendent Traffic Manager Gen. Pass. Agent.



In addition to electric lights on the State House, the celebration also featured a giant pyre on the hill behind the capitol that was set on fire at nightfall. The bonfire was 60 feet high and 40 feet wide; its flames reached more than 100 feet high when lit and could be observed for miles around.

York to San Francisco, during which he was deluged with loving cups and souvenirs.

Vermont's own occasion to honor its native son had to await completion of the national tour. With Vermont "Dewey Day" set for October 12, the admiral made his return to the Green Mountain State on October 10, on a special train provided by Dr. William Seward Webb of Shelburne. At the state line in North Bennington, 1,000 people, including Governor Edward C. Smith, greeted him. At Shelburne, where he stayed overnight, a 17-gun salute and a crowd of 3,000 met him, including 200 flag-waving children. The next day, George boarded another special train, bound for Montpelier. The trip was slowed by several pre-arranged stops along the route, each accompanied by large receptions. He arrived in Montpelier on the evening of the 11th.

The next day, Montpelier, Vermont celebrated its Dewey Day. Preparations had been two months in the making, under the responsibility of a committee appointed by the governor that included representatives from every county in the state. The Central Vermont Railroad, according to a newspaper report, built 13 special tracks and a temporary station to handle the trains bringing Vermonters into Montpelier for the occasion. Grandstands were erected along the line of the parade to help accommodate the estimated 40,000 people who crowded into downtown streets. Montpelier's mayor appointed special policemen to assist in managing the crowds. The town's buildings and the state house were draped in red, white, and blue bunting. A large portrait of George and 1,555 electric lights for nighttime illumination also adorned the state house. An illuminated "Welcome Home" sign hung



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Being Offered at \$1,095,000 4BR/3.5 Baths 4276 q. ft 35.40 Acres



Surprisingly, close-up photographs of George Dewey enjoying the celebration in his honor are very rare. This underexposed image was created by amateur photographer Philip S. Smith of Montpelier who was standing along the parade route with his camera and glass-plate negatives at the ready.



The parade to honor Admiral Dewey stretched down Montpelier's Main Street and doubled back on itself.



The school that George Dewey attended, located on Court Street close to the center of festivities at the Vermont State House, was decorated in honor of its most famous pupil.

above the porch of the Pavilion Hotel, and most of the town's private houses were also lighted with decorations.

A parade and a fireworks display highlighted the day's events. George led the parade in full dress uniform and feathered hat, riding in an open horse-drawn carriage. Included in the elaborate, 500-participant line of march were veterans' groups, fraternal groups, local bands, and other organizations. According to accounts, he smiled and waved to swarms of children who jammed against the picket fence that surrounded the state house grounds calling for his attention. George eventually mounted the reviewing stand where, along with 1,000 distinguished guests, he observed the proceedings. A witness reported that "the whole line of march was an ovation, the crowd yelling itself hoarse along the entire route." "All went wild," another observer reported. The festivities included a presentation to Dewey by the state of a gold badge spelling out "welcome home" in diamonds, struck by Tiffany Company of New York City.

That evening, in Montpelier's Langdon meadow, a huge fireworks display climaxed the day. "Set pieces of the *Olympia* [Dewey's flagship], the Battle of Manila, a likeness of Admiral Dewey, and a view of the State House flamed their way across the evening sky." Also included were "1,000 exhibition candles, rockets by the 100s, 75 mammoth meteors, and 100s of pounds of colored fire, all topped off by the lighting of the bonfire extraordinaire on Capital Hill."

The day was, indeed, one of the grandest occasions Vermont had ever seen. But the event was symbolically bigger than George Dewey and his military feat. It celebrated the emergence of America as a forward-looking worldwide power. At the same time, it celebrated the myth of opportunity and fame open to every small-town American boy. The books written about him, and his own autobiography, chuckled and winked at his youthful high jinks—sledding down Montpelier's steepest hills, pummeling his teachers and schoolmates with snowballs, running blindfolded and backward down the steps leading to the state house. This confirmation of small-town life, Yankee high-spiritedness, and independence fit well with the image of Vermont and the nation. In a state struggling to resolve the tensions between its traditions of rural life, agriculture, and small-town independence of mind and action on the one hand, and the emerging culture of urbanism, industrialism, and national identity on the other hand, Dewey Day was an eloquent expression of what Vermonters valued, sought to retain, and saw themselves more or less willing to sacrifice as they tried to define a valued place for themselves in a changing, expanding nation. ▮

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