

# **Growing Up Chatham:**

## **The Fourth of July**

### **Friends, Food and Family Fun**

**Submitted by** Luke Bruss, Communications Committee Member

**T**he Fourth of July celebrations in Chatham Village have unceasingly been a big deal for our neighborhood. It's events like this, requiring a lot of volunteer work from our fellow Villagers, to really illustrate how lucky we are and what makes our community so special. Independence Day is my favorite holiday. Both because of what it celebrates and also because of how we celebrate it here. It's always been the highlight of the year, but the ones of my childhood seemed to be so much bigger. Maybe it's because I'm looking back through the prism of years gone by – or maybe it's because my entire world was encircled by Pennridge, Olympia, Bigham, and Virginia – but they are lasting, cherished memories. It all started in the morning with the Children's Parade down Sulgrave Road. Bikes, Big Wheels and Rollerblades, all decked out in American flags and red, white and blue crepe paper, lined up behind a beautiful antique MG roadster, driven by the late, great Al Vestal who always wore a top hat and an "Uncle Sam" beard for the occasion. The kids in the Old Village had a bit of an advantage, so those of us in the New Village would try to arrive a bit early to get a prominent position. Occasionally, "gentle pushing" for a front-row spot would occur, but the adults always did a good job keeping us in and well-behaved.

After the parade, the bake sale on Pennridge was the next stop for juice, cookies, and pastries of all types. Then the historical speeches and the Pledge of Allegiance at the flagpole always had my interest, and may have been the genesis of my love for history. Everyone attached who was attached to wheels, though, was waiting for the main event to begin: The Slip n' Slide. In those days it was placed in the field next to the park. Everything happened in that field: the tent; the grill; the piñata; and everything else.

As the Slip n' Slide was being laid out and soaped up, we'd excitedly line up across Bigham, sometimes stretching all the way to the Old Village steps. One at a time we'd take a running leap before sliding head-first all the way down the field. Sometimes over-sliding into the grass, which would cover us from head to toe. It really was a brag-worthy feat if you could achieve it! Then the grilling of all sorts of meats would start to fill the air with savory scents; it was pretty much the only thing that would briefly lure us away from soap-covered

adventures. I remember a few times when some of us took a Slip n' Slide run, hot dog-in-hand. That day was always filled with so much to do. Pinatas, water slides, parades and food all packed into a few hours. As the neighborhood festivities wound down, bicycles and Big Wheels would again start to rumble around the streets and courtyards. As I've mentioned in previous articles: growing up in Chatham Village was the ideal suburban childhood even though it was just outside of downtown Pittsburgh. To me, nothing else shows that more than the amazing Fourth of July celebrations. The holiday changed, and got a bit more meaningful to me, as I'm sure it did with everyone who saw the horrors of 9/11 unfold on their TVs. That day changed my life, and changed the way I look at the world. As the months of cleanup and recovery dragged on, I felt like I needed to do something that could show unity as a nation and respect and gratitude for those who answered the call to action: first responders, military personnel, medical professionals, and everyone else who gave their time and talents so selflessly. I thought about my time as a Boy Scout, and our troop trips to the Flag Plaza close to where Mellon Arena once stood. I decided that I would do a colonial flag display, and I'd start it on the Fourth of July 2002. This was the fountainhead of the Festival of Flags. It started with four flags, and has now grown to more than a dozen, with a few more in mind that I'd love to add if I can figure out where to put them.

We are blessed to live in a country where we all may have differing political beliefs, and during a time that began to tear us apart along partisan lines, I thought this would be a way to unify us and to remind us all of our common heritage. I begin to plan how and where to hang each flag around late May or early June. The display usually begins in the third weekend of June, and each day a new flag or two is added leading up to the week of the 4<sup>th</sup>, when our porch is covered in a colorful display of the flags from the earliest days of our Republic.

As each flag is added, I post it to my Instagram account, @monsterandskittles using the #FestivalOfFlags hashtag as well as the Chatham Village geolocation tag. Please feel free to follow along for the story of each flag and what it represents, but I invite you to come up into the New Village on the Fourth and check them out for yourself!

*Stay tuned for the next installment of Growing Up Chatham. Part three of the series: the fall, which included bonfires, Halloween and football games in the field beside the park!*

*Following is the story of the first four flags that began the Festival of Flags in July of 2002.*

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## The Fourth of July continued...

### 1: The Bedford Flag



This is one of the oldest flags in existence today. It's kept at the Bedford Public Library, in Bedford, MA. It dates

back to the late 17<sup>th</sup> to early 18<sup>th</sup> Century and is said to have been carried, by Bedford Minuteman Nathaniel Page, into the Battles of Lexington and Concord – the beginning of the American Revolution. The original version was made with crimson silk damask and had silver fringing around the border; the arm with the sword represents the arm of God aiding the Americans in this momentous task. The motto "Vince Aut Morire" emblazoned around the field translates from Latin as "Conquer or Die". By taking arms against King George, and the most powerful army the world had ever known to that point, it certainly echoed the prevailing sentiment at the time. As Ben Franklin once said: "We must indeed, all hang together or, most assuredly, we shall all hang separately."

### 2: George Washington's Headquarters Flag



On June 19<sup>th</sup>, 1775, George Washington was named the Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army. He assumed command on July 3,

1775 at Cambridge, MA. Just like military units had their own standards, commanders had one as well. This flag followed Gen. Washington around anywhere he went. The design is said to be the inspiration of the field of stars on subsequent American flags.



### 3: The Gadsden Flag

Christopher Gadsden designed this flag and presented it to

Commodore Esek Hopkins, commander of the founding United States Navy. The design is based off of Benjamin Franklin's writings in

which he mentions that a rattlesnake "never begins and attack, but once engaged, it never surrenders. She is therefore an emblem of magnanimity and courage." The motto "Don't Tread On Me" speaks to that demeanor. The rattlesnake is fairly docile until provoked, then it reacts out of self-preservation. This was one of the key characteristics of liberty-minded Americans of the period: a live and let live attitude.

### 4: The Whiskey Rebellion Flag



This is the most locally-oriented flag of my collection. It tells a story of how intertwined

our region's history is to that of the United States. It is certainly one of my absolute favorites, from both aesthetic and historical aspects.

Just about two decades after the American Revolution, the U.S. Government found itself in a financial pinch. Alexander Hamilton, Secretary of the Treasury saw the need for revenue and he took his shot by proposing an excise tax on distilled spirits produced in the United States. It was approved by Congress and did not sit well with many Americans who saw it as an abuse of federal power. Many farmers in our region distilled and sold whiskey and felt they were being singled out.

In July of 1794 around 400 of these Whiskey Rebels, mostly living in Washington County, attacked the home of John Neville, a tax inspector just south of the city of Pittsburgh, in what is today known as Mount Lebanon. The rebellion began to grow in strength and boldness. The threat of its expansion was intolerable to President George Washington, as it threatened the newly-formed government. Alexander Hamilton himself, along with Virginia Governor Henry Lee, led a force of 13,000 militia troops into Western Pennsylvania, but by the time they had arrived, the rebellion had fizzled out.

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