

# VERMONT WELCOMES HER HERO HOME

## *Dewey Day in Montpelier, 1899*

“WELCOME HOME” read the large metal letters over the State House doors on October 12, 1899. Above them was a painting of Admiral George Dewey, the hero of Manila Bay, who was born and raised in Montpelier. It was Dewey Day and everyone for miles around must have hurried to the Capital City to honor the most famous American of the day.

George Dewey was born in a small frame house across the street from the Vermont State Capitol on December 26, 1837. His father, Julius Dewey, was a doctor and founder of the National Life Insurance Company of Vermont. When he was fifteen, George attended Norwich University in Northfield. In 1854 he entered the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis.

During the Civil War Dewey served with Admiral David Farragut in the Battle of Mobile Bay. Thirty-four years later, when he ordered his own ships into Manila Bay, Dewey remembered Admiral Farragut’s famous words, “Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead!”

In 1897 he was appointed commander of the Pacific Fleet. Dewey was near Hong Kong in China on April 23, 1898, when the United States and Spain declared war on one another. He quickly led his ships to Manila Bay in the Philippine Islands, where he had been ordered to capture or destroy the Spanish fleet.

On May 1, 1898, from the **bridge** of his **flagship** the *Olympia*, Dewey led his **squadron** into the bay. He had been told the waters were not safe, but he remembered Admiral Farragut’s words and pushed on. The ships got through without harm, and when the Spanish began firing on them, Dewey called to

the captain of the *Olympia*, “You may fire when ready, Gridley.”

Those words are famous now, and so is the fact that Dewey withdrew from the battle at 7:35 for breakfast, attacked again at 11:00 and by noon had either sunk or captured every Spanish ship. Meanwhile, there were no serious injuries to any American crew member.

When Dewey returned to America, he was greeted by the nation as the greatest living naval hero. The school children of America collected 70,000 dimes, which were made into an eight-foot tall **loving cup** and given to Admiral Dewey. The U.S. Congress gave him a gold and silver sword with diamonds on it. Everywhere he traveled, from New York to San Francisco, he was greeted by admiring, cheering crowds.



1899 photo of the school George Dewey attended in 1850 decorated in his honor

*Inset*— Photo of Admiral Dewey in uniform

The best part of Admiral Dewey's tour to the towns and cities of America must have been his welcome home to Montpelier on October 12, 1899. In his special railroad car Admiral Dewey met with friends and relatives. He visited his brothers Charles and Edward in their homes on State Street. At two o'clock there was a grand parade for the Admiral. It was half a mile long and ended at the **reviewing stand** in front of the State House.

Many Montpelier buildings were handsomely decorated for the day, including the Admiral's boyhood home and the village school where he was a pupil. But the finest decorations were on the State House where 260 red, white and blue lights made up a U.S. flag measuring eight by fourteen feet. A special electrical motor made the flag seem to wave in the breeze. There were strings of lights covering the entire building. In all, fifteen hundred light bulbs were used. There were red, white and blue streamers everywhere and a large painting of Admiral Dewey with the words, "WELCOME HOME."

As night began to fall, the lights were lit all over the State House. Then the largest and finest display of fireworks ever seen in Vermont began. There were 350 rockets, 290 shells, 75 golden fountains and much, much more. The fireworks were made to spell out messages and symbols, such as "Vermont Welcomes Her Hero Home," "Manila, May 1, 1898, Montpelier, October 1899," the Vermont state seal and "Good Night."

Then a gigantic bonfire was **ignited** on Capitol Hill behind the State House. A pile of wood 69 feet high and 40 feet across was shaped into a cone and contained 800 barrels, 600 railroad ties, the lumber from two buildings and a vast quantity of boxes. When the fire was lit, the flames were 100 feet high and could be seen for miles around.

A five-year-old Montpelier girl, Margaret Pitkin, had been chosen to light the bonfire. It must have been an exciting moment for her, as she held her match to the huge cone of wood and stepped back to watch the flaring of the flames. Perhaps she shook the hand of the famous Admiral.

But Little Margaret died just one year after Dewey Day. A lovely granite statue of her marks her grave at Green Mount Cemetery in Montpelier. Her parents gave a photograph of Margaret to Mr. Bonazzi, the sculptor, to help him make the statue look exactly as Margaret had looked. Even the missing button on her high-topped shoes and the numbers on the dial of her watch match her picture.



For Margaret Pitkin and for most everyone else in Montpelier, Dewey Day was a day unlike any other. It was the day Vermont welcomed her hero home.

—Karen Lane

## VOCABULARY

<b>bridge</b>	a platform above the ship's deck where the commander often stands
<b>flagship</b>	the ship that carries the commander of the fleet and flies his flag
<b>squadron</b>	a group of ships
<b>loving cup</b>	a large cup given as a prize or special gift
<b>reviewing stand</b>	a platform with seats for guests and officials watching a parade set on fire
<b>ignite</b>	

# THE GREEN MOUNTAINEER

**Dewey  
Day  
Bonfire  
Montpelier  
October 12, 1899**  
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