

CONNECTICUT

A Party 300 Years In The Making

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COLCHESTER — The biggest bash in the town's 300-year history culminated over the weekend with a gala ball, a mammoth parade and an immense fireworks display that lit up the rural night sky.

In the 300 years since Colchester was incorporated, it has been home to immigrants who worked on farms, in industry and resorts. During the past six months, that rich history has been relived through tours of historic buildings and sites, a Civil War re-enactment and a colonial fashion show.

This weekend, the town came together to party, enjoying the kind of celebration that only comes around every few centuries.

"It was just magnificent. The streets were lined with people. It chokes you up," said First Selectwoman Jenny Contois, who wore a multicolored colonial dress and a Victorian straw hat, as she rode in the parade on a white Victorian horse and carriage used in the filming of the movie "Amistad."

Along with state Attorney General Richard Blumenthal and other political dignitaries, a family from Colchester, England, joined the festivities.

Greg and Jane McCausland had visited Colchester several times before, and decided to come back for the 300th anniversary. They made their formal debut at the ball, after attending some local cocktail parties, and were given a hardcover book that details the town's 300 years.

Colchester is 10 times larger than its sister city in Connecticut, but the McCauslands have come to feel at home here.

"I think it's brilliant," Jane McCausland said of the town. "This part of the state is so nice."

They watched as marching bands, color guards, firetrucks, bagpipe groups and 25 floats marched down the 2-mile parade route, celebrating history.

Among the floats were a towering, three-tiered birthday cake, replicas of historical buildings and churches, and one called "How Times Have Changed." This float carried an outhouse and a spinning wheel on one side, with an exercise bicycle and a computer terminal on the other.

"Such a change. When I was a kid, we didn't have electricity," said Catherine Korostek, who has lived in Colchester all her 77 years and watched from the town green as the parade wound along South Main Street.

Lauren Chmielecki, who marched in the town's high school band with her twin sister, Kelly, felt the historical significance of the day.

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"It hit me watching all the people dressed up in old costumes," she said.

"It was like the whole town was there," said Kelly. "It was the only time in our lifetime we're ever going to have this parade. Not everyone has a tricentennial."

The weekend's festivities began Saturday night, when the gymnasium of Bacon Academy, the town's high school, was transformed into an elegant ballroom, complete with a bell-shaped chandelier made of tiny lights hanging from the ceiling.

The bleachers in the gym were concealed by white curtains and the lights were dimmed, except for the flashing lights on the ballroom dance floor, where guests, young and old, moved to a live band.

Tables were adorned with bouquets of white roses, and each guest received a blue and silver box of chocolates. Most guests arrived in elegant ball gowns or tuxedos; others dressed in colonial-era clothing, wearing mop hats and even George Washington-style wigs.

The party ended Sunday night at the town's parks and recreation field, with a 30-minute fireworks display that included a dazzling 10-minute finale. About 15,000 people turned out to say happy birthday to Colchester.