

A Glance at the History of Burtonsville Day Celebrations:

"I think the community was just waiting for something like this to happen. The whole thing is just to get the community together!"

From Ed O'Hara, Founder and First Burtonsville Day Celebration Organizing Committee Chair's speech in 1991

What is Burtonsville Day Celebration?

Burtonsville Day Celebration is an annual interactive community event that takes place in the Eastern Part of Montgomery County at Burtonsville, Maryland. This annual celebration involves diverse members of Burtonsville residents, notable members of local organizations, event sponsors, local businesses, non-profit organizations, and representatives of county and state agencies, representatives of local schools, students and children of all ages, volunteers and organizers who join to participate in different activities. The event activities include parade, floats, and marching group festivals, business displays, live bands, and craft fairs, games for children, and entertainment, food trucks/food vendors.

How and when did the celebration start?

On the bright day of Saturday, September 28, 1991, the Burtonsville Day Celebration was launched. According to the report by the *Free Press* newspaper of October 3, 1991 the festival drew more than 2,500 people who came from all places to be part of that event. The activities took place the whole day on both sides of Route 29 in Burtonsville, Maryland.

The event activities started at different locations. The first activity was at the Greencastle Lakes. It started with walkathon from the Greencastle Clubhouse, located off Greencastle Road at Turnbridge Drive. The walkathon was organized by the Paint Branch High School Key Club and National Honor Society to benefit Children's Hospital. Fifty bands, floats and marching group took part in the Parade including units from Laytonville, Oxon Hill and Gaithersburg.

The next event was at the Burtonsville Elementary School where School majorettes twirled batons and antique cars lined up while residents assembled along Route 198. The Parade Judges' stand was near Burtonsville Baptist Church where parade groups stopped and performed. The crafts, gaming activities, entertainment and food vendors assembled at the Lions' Den which served as the main venue for the festival. At the conclusion of the festival awards were given out to the participants. There were eleven categories of awards which included awards for float, community service, Fire unit, Marching Band, Boy Scout unit, Girls Scout, Clowns, Antique car, Antique Fire Unit, Marching unit and School Patrol.

Prominent State and County officials as well as Community leaders attended the event. They included the then County Council members Marilyn Praisner, Isiah Leggett and Michael Gudis. Maryland State Senator Chris McCabe also attended. Grand Marshal Roy Hunt had officiated the event. The 1st Burtonsville Day Celebration Organizing Committee was set up by volunteers including Ed O'Hara and Larry Hairfield. The idea to organize the committee was initiated and led by Ed O'Hara. In a speech he delivered at the end of the event, he said the response erased any doubt that Burtonsville Day would

become an annual event. He further said *“I think the community was just waiting for something like this to happen. I think it brought the community together”*.

After the first celebration took place successfully, Ed O’Hara took the initiative to create a permanent institution that would ensure the continuity of Burtonsville Day celebration on annual basis. Accordingly, he filed an Articles of Incorporation that officially established the *Burtonsville Day Celebrations, INC*. The Maryland State Department of Assessment and Taxation approved and registered the corporation on February 28, 1992. According to the Article of Incorporation the Purpose of the corporation was *“to organize, plan and conduct a community celebration in the community of Burtonsville, Maryland and surrounding areas and for any other lawful purpose as permitted by law in the State of Maryland.”* The principal office of the Corporation was registered at 12510 Prosperity Drive, Suite 150, Silver Spring, MD 20904. Three Directors were named in the Articles of Incorporation. They were Edward O’Hara, Donna Durrani and Larry Hairfield who provided leadership to the succeeding celebrations.

Following the approval of the Articles of Incorporation, an Article of Amendment was approved. It further clarified the activities of the Corporation and noted that *“the Corporation shall not carry on any other activities not permitted by a Corporation exempt from Federal Income Tax under section 501(c) 4 of the Internal Revenue Code”*. The Corporation Bylaw was also adopted on March 22, 1995 and expanded the number of Board of Directors to seven and limited their term of service to one year. The Bylaws also redefined the Corporation as non-stock, membership and non-profit organization. It further clarified the activities, duties and responsibilities of the Corporation.

After the corporation was set up and the leadership was put in place, the 2nd Annual Burtonsville Day Celebration took place on Saturday, September 26, 1992. It was reported that the festivities grew as even more clubs, businesses and community groups joined the celebration. Similar to the first celebration, the main gathering venue was at the Lions’ Den on Route 198. The 3rd Burtonsville day Celebration took place on Saturday, September 18, 1993 and the activities were somehow similar to the first and second festivals. The 4th Burtonsville Day celebration took place on Saturday, September 24, 1994. It was reported that about 5,000 people attended the event with more expanded activities, more sponsors and more awards made available. It also took place following the usual routes and ended up at the Lions’ Den. The Burtonsville annual celebrations from 1995 and 2000 continued to take place at the same locations but that situation changed in 2001.

In 2001 the 11th Burtonsville Day Celebration took place. It took place on Saturday, September 29, 2001 at its new location- the newly inaugurated Fairland County Recreation Center and the Fairland library complex (now Merrily Praisner Library) at Columbia Park. Since then the main venue has shifted from its previous location at the Lions’ Den on Route 198 to its current location on Old Columbia Pike. The Organizing Committee called it *“a new decade, a new century and a few new features, but Burtonsville Day 2001 still carry familiar goal and mission- bringing our hometown together for a celebration of our roots, our future and our community spirit.”* The opening of Fairland Recreation Center and Library complex offered a focal point for the Burtonsville Day Celebrations and a *“true home base for activities”*.

Important people whose names were closely associated with Burtonsville Day event – Ed O’Hara, Larry Hairfield, Carol Smith and Claire Iseli- were part of the Organizing Committee in 2001. The 12th Burtonsville Day Celebration took place on September 28, 2002. In addition, other activities took place on Friday, September 27. The Committee Co-Chair was Carol Smith and she “*estimated the attendance at around 6000, the highest ever (by then) with Friday night’s Sock Hop (dance event for youngsters) alone attracting 300 people.*” She noted that “*the parade had 63 units, many more than were expected*”.

The 13th Celebration took place on Saturday, October 4, 2003 on the rainy day that affected the event. Some participants in the parade or food vendors’ left early and a good number of participants braved to stay on. Despite the rain and relative low turnout, the Committee’s Co-organizer, Carol Smith said “*I think we pulled it together* “. The 14th celebration (2004) and the 15th Celebration (2005) took place on cloudy days but the 16th annual celebration took place during a bad weather. It took place on Saturday, September 30, 2006 where the parade from Paint Branch high School to the Fairland Community Center went through continuous rainy condition. In the Community Center parking lot, local businesses gave away goody bags, county agencies handed out information packets, and churches and local businesses sold their wares. Some open-air booths closed almost as quickly as they opened because of the rain.

The 17th Annual Celebration took place “under a clear blue sky for the first time in years”. It was held on Saturday, September 29, 2007. The festivities began Friday night at the Cedar Ridge Community Church, with hayrides and an outdoor showing of “Charlotte’s web,” but kicked into full gear Saturday morning with a parade down Old Columbia Pike led by grand marshals. The Grand Marshals were Montgomery County executive Isiah Leggett, County Council President Marilyn J. Praisner and Board of Education President Nancy Navarro. Between 2008 and 2019 the annual Burtonsville day celebrations were held every year uninterrupted. Since 2017 the Burtonsville Day Celebration Organizing Committee was managed and conducted under the leadership of Mark Pharaoh, Peter Myo Khin, Claire Iseli, Jewru Bandeh and other longtime volunteers and supporters. Also that same year, the motto for the celebration was adopted as “Multicultural: Better Together” reflecting the fast- changing demography of our community. But the theme of the annual event changes annually.

The 2020 Burtonsville Day Celebration was suspended due the global pandemic- COVID 19- that also affected our community. Some of our area residents including notable individuals (such as Jerry Samet) who were well respected and contributed a lot to the well-being of our community lost their lives because of that pandemic. As the spread of the pandemic subsided, the celebration took place on Saturday, September 25, 2021. The event Theme was “Remembrance- Hope- Normal!” Remembrance: to remember those who lost their lives to COVID; Hope: to hope for a better future and Normal: signifying the return of life to normalcy. The next event took place on Saturday September 24, 2022 with almost “record breaking” participation of businesses, sponsors and community members. The theme for the event reads “Discovering East County”. Montgomery County Executive Mark Elrich who joined the Celebration explained “there is a lot to discover here in East County; Montgomery College will be opening its Campus and Burtonsville Crossing shopping center will also open soon.”

In spite of extensive preparations, the 2023 celebration, which was planned for Saturday September 23, 2023, was cancelled due to a sudden and unexpected bad weather condition. On Friday afternoon of

September 21, the Organizing Committee announced that the celebration was cancelled due to *life threatening tropical storm*. In an urgent Notice to the community the Organizing Committee Treasurer Mr. Peter Myo Khin announced “*Please know that we do not make these types of decisions lightly and do so only if life and safety concerns arise, such as we did when we cancelled our event during the COVID pandemic. This tropical storm could be one of those times. Thank you for wanting to join with us to celebrate our community event*”. In less than five years into 2020s, two events were cancelled due to force majeure- in 2020 due to COVID- 19 pandemic and in 2023 due to bad weather.

It has to be noted that it was during these times that Burtonsville Day took advantage of the Internet and social media to make its presence known through Facebook and its own website, BurtonsvilleDay.org. It also presented vendors and exhibitors with a new payment option giving them the ability to pay online using their credit cards This year the Burtonsville Day Celebration Organizing Committee has begun its preparations to celebrate the 32nd Event which will take place on Saturday September 21, 2024. The sequences of events were impacted by the previous two cancellations of events and the 2024 celebration will be the 32nd Burtonsville Day Celebration instead of 34th. Our entire community, supporters, sponsors and all stakeholders are looking forward to this much anticipated celebration with hope and excitement.

Where we go from here?

For over three decades the Burtonsville Day Celebrations have continued the tradition of bringing together the ever growing multicultural and diverse residents living in Burtonsville and adjacent areas. This annual community festival has become a vehicle for celebrating our heritage and our diversity while emphasizing our unity as neighbors and friends in the growing and vibrant multicultural environment not only in Burtonsville but also the entire East County region, encompassing Hillandale, White Oak, Briggs Chaney, Colesville, Cloverly, Spencerville, and of course Burtonsville. The Organizing Committee invites everyone to join this important community event as members of the organizing Committee, as volunteers, donors and supporters in order to keep and grow this great tradition in our area. The Committee expresses its gratitude to the founders for their vision in creating this great tradition. It also expresses its appreciations to all community members, to County Executive and County Council members, the East County Regional Director, our law enforcement agents, partnering Montgomery County government departments and agencies, and the many volunteers who have continued their selfless services to the Burtonsville Day Celebrations. By bringing the community together, we strive to make Burtonsville the best place to work, live and raise family!

September 15, 2024

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- For more information, please visit our website at: <https://www.BurtonsvilleDay.org>
 - This piece is compiled and written by Fisseha Adugna, Resident of Burtonsville and Member of the Burtonsville Day Celebration Organizing Committee since 2019. For any comments or feedback you can reach the writer at: fisseha92@gmail.com
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