

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MAY 4, 2016

**State Leaders Gather to Celebrate 50th Anniversary of Justice of the Peace Court
Joining the Delaware Court System**

At noon on May 11 at the Delaware Public Archives in Dover (121 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. North), Court officials including Delaware Supreme Court Chief Justice Leo E. Strine Jr. and Delaware Chief Magistrate Alan Davis, along with Governor Jack A. Markell and leaders from the Delaware General Assembly, will gather to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the Justice of the Peace Court formally joining the Delaware State Court system.

In honor of the 50th Anniversary, the Delaware Public Archives is unveiling an exhibit on the history of the Justice of the Peace Court that features photographs and rare documents related to the history of the Court, including an arrest warrant signed by Caesar Rodney in 1767. (See attachments)

The Justice of the Peace is one of the oldest offices in Delaware, tracing its roots back through English and Dutch colonization to the 1600s. The role of the Justice of the Peace has evolved significantly over the years but has maintained its general purpose as a “middle term” between citizens and the Courts. Just as at their founding, Justices of the Peace are not required to be attorneys (except for the Chief Magistrate) but are to be “well-informed citizens” with “good sense and integrity.”

Until the newly-created Justice of the Peace Court began its operations in 1966, Justices of the Peace were paid based on fees imposed. This and other standard practices that had existed for hundreds of years had long been rightfully critiqued.

At the request of the Delaware Bar Association and others – and with the strong support of Governor Charles L. Terry Jr. – legislation was enacted in 1965 and implemented in 1966 to reform the Justice of the Peace Court and bring it formally into the Delaware State Judiciary. As a result, Justices of the Peace – also often known as magistrates – became salaried employees. While a law degree is still not required, Justices of the Peace as a result of joining the Delaware Judiciary began to receive training to provide for a more professional Court that emphasizes procedural fairness and consistency in its rulings. Justices of the Peace are currently trained in criminal and civil law, as well as judicial ethics and other critical topics.

“We are not only celebrating fifty years of the statewide Justice of the Peace Court, but also centuries of judicial history and a spirit of reform in the name of justice for all that has not ceased since 1966,” said Chief Magistrate Alan Davis.

In Fiscal Year 2015, the sixty Justices of the Peace across the state handled a total of 250,622 criminal cases and 32,381 civil cases. They also review approximately 99 percent of all search and arrest warrants authored in the State of Delaware and act as committing magistrates on all crimes up to and including Murder in the First Degree.

For more information, please contact:

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Attachments:

All images courtesy of the Delaware Public Archives.

Warrant signed by Caesar Rodney (1767)

In addition to his more well-known roles, Caesar Rodney also served as a Justice of the Peace in Kent County. This warrant, signed by Rodney on July 17, 1767, orders the arrest of a man to answer to a debt he allegedly owes.

Georgetown Justice of the Peace at his court (1925)

Justice of the Peace William Wilson is seated at his desk at his court in Georgetown in September 1925.

The signing of the legislation reforming the Justice of the Peace Court (1965)

The modern-day Justice of the Peace Court was created with the signing of legislation by Governor Charles L. Terry, Jr. on March 31, 1965. The newly-reformed court began its operation in January, 1966.