

## Delaware's gay nuptial boom may ebb



James Fisher, *The News Journal* 4:09 a.m. EDT July 14, 2014

*Pennsylvania and New Jersey residents flocking to Delaware can now marry at home*



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### STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- More than 2,000 gay and lesbian couples got married in Delaware once the state's same-sex marriage law took effect in July 2013
- Federal statistics show the marriage rate in Delaware has dropped from 6.7 percent in 1999 to 5.2 percent in 2011, a decline mirrored in most other states
- Last year, there were 5,175 marriage licenses issued to a man and woman in Delaware; the year before, there had been 4,922 such licenses.

Jim McNeely and Rob Smith very much want to leave North Carolina, where a constitutional amendment forbids [gay marriage](#). It is one of the reasons they got married last year in Delaware.

At the time of their beach wedding last September, the First State had become the 11th state allowing gay and lesbian couples to wed.

Now their Charlotte, N.C., home is under contract and they want to move to Philadelphia's Main Line. Once they do, they won't be strangers to Delaware.

"We expect to be spending more time in Rehoboth now that we're moving back to Pennsylvania," said McNeely, 78.

More than 2,000 gay and lesbian couples got married in Delaware once the state's same-sex marriage law took effect in July 2013. It was a wedding boom that made Sussex County's marriage bureau run a surplus in 2013, for the first time in years, as many gay couples availed themselves of the sand-underfoot weddings straight partners have made popular here.

Observers say many U.S. service members stationed in Norfolk, Virginia, and other nearby bases also came to Delaware for Las Vegas-style quick weddings, especially since Sussex County has waived the \$100 out-of-state marriage fee for active-duty service members and veterans since November 2012.

New Castle County and Sussex County saw the most intense interest from gay couples, with 92 percent of Delaware's same-sex licenses issued in those counties.

But the frantic pace of same-sex weddings has slowed after an initial rush.

And since the law took effect, the Pennsylvania and New Jersey residents who have been filling Delaware's courthouses and chapels for same-sex marriages now find it legal in their own states. That will likely dampen Delaware's marriage boom.

"There is going to be a steady decline," said Ken Boulden, the New Castle County Clerk of the Peace, whose office grants marriage licenses. "We cannot maintain those numbers. We were drawing from states all over the country."

Data from the three county Clerk of the Peace offices, tabulated by the New Castle County office, show that 2,092 marriage licenses were issued to gay and lesbian couples between July 1, 2013, and June 30, 2014, the first 12 months since the law took effect.

Most of those licenses were issued in the first six months of the first year the law was on the books. There were 1,784 gay and lesbian couples who got married or converted civil unions between July and December 2013, with just 380 same-sex couples taking the leap in the six months after that.

In 2013, Delaware solemnized one same-sex union for every three opposite-sex marriages it sanctioned, the numbers show, even though same-sex marriages were only legal for half of that year.

"It was clearly reflective of the many couples who wanted to get married, and wanted to get married in their home state," said Lisa Goodman of Equality Delaware, which lobbied for the 2013 passage of the gay-marriage law. Her group had estimated 700 couples entered into civil unions – before 2013, the only way for gay couples to see their commitment legally recognized – over three years.

"To say the marriage numbers beat that is an understatement," Goodman said. "Marriage is different. Marriage is true equality."



Rob Smith (striped shirt) and Jim McNeely (black shirt) were married on the beach with friends watching by Annie Besche of the Clerk of the Peace's Office in September. (Photo: Special to the Daily Times/CHUCK SNYDER)

Meeting the demand meant a harried schedule for clerks of the peace, who issue all marriage licenses in Delaware and performed more than 2,300 ceremonies in 2013 for gay and straight couples alike.

One day in September 2013, Sussex Clerk of the Peace John Brady recalls, he officiated at 10 weddings. "The burnout factor," he says, is his memory of the months following the July 1 enactment. "I've done weddings in almost every block in Rehoboth on the beach."

The figures show same-sex marriages are most popular in Sussex County, where Rehoboth Beach has been a popular gay resort for decades. About 37 percent of the marriage licenses granted in Sussex in 2013 were to gay or lesbian couples, compared with 26 percent statewide. In Kent County, 10 percent of marriages were of same-sex partners.

Michael Shane, 41, of Newport, said he asked his husband, Brian Daley, to marry him days after Delaware legalized gay marriage. But they didn't carry out their plans until June 28, getting married in their back yard before a small gathering of friends and family.



Brian Daley, 42, (left) and Michael Shane, 41, of Newport, were married June 28. (Photo: Courtesy of Michael Shane)

"If one of us passes, we don't have to lose our house. And to make medical decisions, that was a big part of it. Those were the two main reasons," Shane said. "The third reason is, we are in love." For a honeymoon of sorts, Shane said, they took a week off of work to spend in Rehoboth.

In Pennsylvania and other states, some county clerks are battling judicial orders to begin issuing same-sex marriage certificates. But getting the marriage license in New Castle County, Shane said, was painless. "There were no judgments or anything like that," he said of the county staff. "They were thrilled."

For Deana Gregory, 40, and her wife, Deana Fagan, 44, getting married on July 30, 2013, in the first month it was legal, was a hedge against a court challenge limiting their marriage rights, something Gregory had seen happen in other states.

"We wanted to do it as soon as possible because there was uncertainty," Gregory said. "It's brought peace of mind. I'm not taking away from the religious part of it at all. But for us it's a civil contract."

One year in, Gregory said, the Wilmington couple is blissful about being wed. "I kind of always told myself it was a piece of paper, it didn't really matter," Gregory said of a marriage certificate. "But having been married for a year, I can tell you it matters. It's a shift in thinking. It's a wonderful thing to have."

When Delaware made gay marriage a reality within its borders, same-sex couples could not yet marry in New Jersey or Pennsylvania. But at the moment, they can. Virginia, the Carolinas and other southern states still forbid it. Gay couples in those states can make I-95 their highway to marriage by coming to Delaware, which has a one-day waiting period compared to Maryland's 48-hour wait between applying for a license and getting one.

But if gay marriage comes to the South, clerks here expect a drop in those trips.

For many Delawareans who agitated for same-sex marriage for many years, finally getting married has been a blessing. "It has meant a great deal to us. It feels like being an accepted human being, with us being a married couple," said Jeffrey Sytsma-Sherman. He and his husband, David Sytsma-Sherman, obtained a civil union in Delaware in 2012 and held a ceremony to convert it into a marriage last year.

"I belong to a club, basically," Jeffrey Sytsma-Sherman said. "It feels good."

Boulden, the New Castle clerk, said he always expected a surge of same-sex marriage applications starting last July. But he was struck, when he looked at year-end statistics, to see the number of traditional opposite-sex marriages in Delaware climbed in 2013, too.

Last year, there were 5,175 marriage licenses issued to a man and woman in Delaware; the year before, there had been 4,922 such licenses.

It was only a 5 percent bump, but was also five times the estimated increase in the state's population from 2012 to 2013. And it runs counter to a years-long trend of declining interest in marriage. Federal statistics show the marriage rate in Delaware has dropped from 6.7 percent in 1999 to 5.2 percent in 2011, a decline mirrored in most other states.

As gays and lesbians in Delaware were jumping on the marriage bandwagon, it seemed, more straight couples were too.

"It's in the face of every prediction," Boulden said.

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**By the Numbers**

**2,092:** Marriage licenses issued to gay and lesbian couples between July 1, 2013, and June 30, 2014.

**37:** Percentage of marriage licenses granted in Sussex in 2013 that went to gay or lesbian couples.

**26:** Percentage of marriage licenses granted statewide in 2013 that went to gay or lesbian couples.

**5:** Statewide percentage growth in marriage licenses for a man and woman last year.