



Written by [John White](#) on August 21, 2009

Sousa's March of Greatness

Arielle Levin Becker of the Washington Post wrote about John Philip Sousa's professional stature as regards his past association with the Marine Corps Band: If there's any question about the place Sousa has in the band's memory, a visit to the director's office settles any doubts.

Sousa is immortalized in four photographs and paintings, including one of him in a Navy uniform, and perhaps in a fifth — there is speculation that, in the front row of a Civil War-era photograph of the band, a young Sousa is hiding between two trombone players.



The baton that [departing U.S. Marine band director Timothy] Foley passed to [new band director Michael] Colburn was given to Sousa in 1892 and bears his name in gold engraving. Sousa's Tiffany lamp, with a blue and green stained-glass shade decorated with outlines of fireflies, stands in a corner of the director's office. Across the room, a cabinet holds medals Sousa won for skeet shooting and other outdoor activities. The new band barracks may be named John Philip Sousa Hall.

Another Sousa portrait overlooks the room where band members often practice, an ever-present reminder of the tradition to which band members belong.

And Sousa's renown is not limited to the Marines; it transcends all levels of society. Every child in any school band in the United States likely knows who Sousa is and has played music Sousa composed. Most recognizable amongst his songs is "The Stars and Stripes Forever," the song that is the official march of the United States of America. (It is so stated in the U.S. Code, Title 36, Chapter 10, by an act of Congress in 1987. This was the result of a grass-roots movement that presented petitions to Congress with more than 250,000 signatures in support of the legislation.)

The "March King"

John Philip Sousa (1854-1932), known as the "March King," was a composer, conductor, and patriot. Over the course of his life, he composed 140 military marches. He was born in Washington, D.C., the third of 10 children of John Antonio Sousa (born in Spain of Portuguese parents) and Maria Elisabeth Trinkhaus (born in Bavaria). His father played trombone in the U.S. Marine Band, so Sousa grew up around military band music.

Sousa began his musical education around age six, studying voice, violin, piano, flute, cornet, baritone, trombone, and alto horn. His father enlisted him in the Marines at age 13 as an apprentice after he attempted to run away to join a circus band. He published his first composition, "Moonlight on the Potomac Waltzes," in 1872. In 1875, he was discharged from the Marines and began performing on violin, touring, and eventually conducting theater orchestras. He conducted Gilbert & Sullivan's *H.M.S. Pinafore* on Broadway.

In 1879, he married Jane van Middlesworth Bellis. The next year he returned to both the Marines and



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Washington to assume leadership of the U.S. Marine Corps Band, which he led for 12 years, until 1892. During that time he also conducted “The President’s Own” Marine Corps Band, serving under Presidents Hayes, Garfield, Cleveland, Arthur, and Harrison. After two successful but limited tours with the Marine Corps Band in 1891 and 1892, Sousa was convinced by promoter David Blakely to resign and organize a civilian concert band.

When Sousa resigned from his second stint in the U.S. Marine Corps, he gave a farewell concert on the White House lawn. An engraved baton was presented to him. That baton was given back to the Marine Corps after Sousa’s death by his daughters and is now traditionally passed to the new director of the Marine Band upon assumption of the duties.

In 1881, Sousa became a Freemason and remained so for 51 years of his life. One of the marches he composed, “Nobles of the Mystic Shrine,” is dedicated to the Shriners.

The first Sousa Band concert was performed in 1892. The band became America’s first superstar band. It was the first to go on a world tour, the first to log more than one million miles, and the first to perform before one million listeners.

Sousa continued his successful career to the end of his life in 1932, making European and world tours. During World War I, at age 62, Sousa joined the U.S. Naval Reserve (at the symbolic salary of \$1 a year) and was assigned the rank of lieutenant. He trained Navy bandsmen and took a band of recruits on tour to raise money for war causes. After the war he continued to tour with his band. He composed many of today’s popular marches, including “Semper Fidelis,” “El Capitan,” and “Washington Post.” He championed the cause of music education, received several honorary degrees, and fought for composers’ rights, testifying before Congress in 1927 and 1928. The sousaphone, designed by Sousa in 1899, continues to be a vibrant part of marching bands.

“The Stars and Stripes Forever”

In late 1896, Sousa and his wife went to Europe on vacation. While there, he received word that David Blakely, who had become manager of the Sousa Band, had died suddenly. The band was scheduled to begin another cross-country tour soon, and Sousa knew he must return to America at once to take over the band’s business affairs. Sousa tells the rest of the story in his autobiography *Marching Along*:

Here came one of the most vivid incidents of my career. As the vessel [the *Teutonic*] steamed out of the harbor I was pacing on the deck, absorbed in thoughts of my manager’s death and the many duties and decisions which awaited me in New York. Suddenly, I began to sense a rhythmic beat of a band playing within my brain. Throughout the whole tense voyage, that imaginary band continued to unfold the same themes, echoing and re-echoing the most distinct melody. I did not transfer a note of that music to paper while I was on the steamer, but when we reached shore, I set down the measures that my brain-band had been playing for me, and not a note of it has ever changed.

It was Christmas Day, 1896. The composition: “The Stars and Stripes Forever.”

Sousa’s Later Life

Sousa, a man of letters and author of several books, also wrote words for “The Stars and Stripes Forever” (see below). The march was an immediate success, and Sousa’s band played it at almost every concert until his death more than 25 years later. Veteran Sousa musicians said that it was always an inspiring experience to play the piece because, despite hundreds of repetitions, the tearful and heartfelt patriotic fervor communicated by the audiences to the musicians never seemed to fail.



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Sousa said he had been born “in the shadow of the Capitol dome,” and as he witnessed the sights and sounds of Civil War activities, his love of America grew. He loved his country with a passion seldom demonstrated more eloquently, and described his occupation as “a salesman of Americanism.” At all of his 15,000 concerts, there was a sense of patriotism. He was described as the “Pied Piper of Patriotism.” Late in his career, he was asked what single piece of music he would choose to hear just before he died. He replied, “‘The Stars and Stripes Forever.’ I would meet my Maker face to face with the inspiration that grows from its melodies and the patriotism that gives it meaning.”

A few days before his death, Sousa said to his friend, Dr. James Francis Cooke, editor of the famous music magazine *The Etude*, “I believe firmly in God. The trouble with modernistic music today is that it is written by men who don’t believe in any kind of God. That is the reason why it won’t last. Only that lasts which comes from God.... All of my music, all of my melodies are not of my own making; no matter how light, they come from a higher source. I have listened to a higher power.”

Sousa died of a heart attack on March 6, 1932 at age 77 in Reading, Pennsylvania, after conducting a band rehearsal. The last piece he conducted was “The Stars and Stripes Forever.” It is considered by many to be the finest march ever written. The remains of America’s most famous and beloved bandmaster were taken by train to Washington, D.C., where he lay in state for public viewing in the Marine Band auditorium and then was buried in Congressional Cemetery with military and Masonic honors. Thousands lined the curb to pay their last respects.

A statue of Sousa now stands at the Marine barracks building in Washington, D.C., one block from the home where he was born.

Here are the words to

“‘The Stars and Stripes Forever.’”

Let martial note in triumph float
And liberty extend its mighty hand
A flag appears ‘mid thunderous cheers,
The banner of the Western land.
The emblem of the brave and true
Its folds protect no tyrant crew;
The red and white and starry blue
Is freedom’s shield and hope.

Other nations may deem their flags the best
And cheer them with fervid elation
But the flag of the North and South and West
Is the flag of flags, the flag of Freedom’s nation.

Hurrah for the flag of the free!
May it wave as our standard forever,
The gem of the land and the sea,
The banner of the right.
Let despots remember the day
When our fathers with mighty endeavor
Proclaimed as they marched to the fray
That by their might and by their right



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It waves forever.

Let eagle shriek from lofty peak
The never-ending watchword of our land;
Let summer breeze waft through the trees
The echo of the chorus grand.
Sing out for liberty and light,
Sing out for freedom and the right.
Sing out for Union and its might,
O patriotic sons.

Other nations may deem their flags the best
And cheer them with fervid elation,
But the flag of the North and South and West
Is the flag of flags, the flag of Freedom's nation.

Hurrah for the flag of the free.
May it wave as our standard forever
The gem of the land and the sea,
The banner of the right.
Let despots remember the day
When our fathers with mighty endeavor
Proclaimed as they marched to the fray,
That by their might and by their right
It waves forever.

— *Photo: Library of Congress*



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