

John Philip Sousa

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John Philip Sousa (1854-1932), the man called "March King," was proud to be a native-born American. And make no mistake that he was also proud to be a Mason.

Sousa's Masonic affiliations aren't common knowledge, but he entered Masonry at age 26 and was a Master Mason for 51 years. A summary of his Masonic career is seen at the end of this article. Three of his best known marches have Masonic origins: "The Crusader" (1888), "The Thunderer" (1889), and "Nobles of the Mystic Shrine" (1923).

He came about petitioning the Craft naturally since his father was a Mason. Also, when Sousa became leader of the United States Marine Band in 1880, he learned the importance of military bandmasters being Masons and took the first steps shortly thereafter.

It is interesting that quite a few members of Sousa's professional civilian band, formed after he left the Marine Corps, were Masons. The percentage increased when Sousa became a Shriner in 1922, and toward the end of his career, nearly half the bandsmen themselves were Shriners. Shrine organizations around the country sponsored many Sousa Band Concerts in the late 1920s.

Masons in America have traditionally been outspoken on the subject of patriotism, and it could be said that Brother Sousa led one section of that parade. As a matter of record, he probably expressed his patriotism in a more dramatic way than any other composer of any era of any country.

Sousa loved his native country with a passion seldom demonstrated more eloquently, and he took every opportunity to let the world know. If asked about his occupation, he was quick to answer, "I'm a salesman of Americanism." No shirtsleeve patriot, this Sousa.

He was born in our nation's capital in a section then known as the "Navy Yard." As he put it, his home was "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 enlisted as an apprentice in the U.S. Marine Band at age 13 and eventually spent a total of 19 years in military service.

Some of Sousa's marches have strictly military titles, but his colors show through clearly in his patriotic titles. Consider these examples: "America First," "Hail to the Spirit of Liberty," "The Invincible Eagle," "The Messiah of Nations," "Liberty Bell" and, of course, his most famous composition, "The Stars and Stripes Forever."

If we take a look at other titles, we'll see that he was actually telling the story of his beloved country through his music: "The American Maid," "The National Game," "Boy Scouts of America," "Washington Post," "High School Cadets," "New York Hippodrome," "Northern Pines," "Dwellers of the Western World," "Fairest of the Fair," and "Daughters of Texas." The list goes on and on.

His patriotism was manifested in his music, but, more importantly, he lived it in his everyday life. With his professional band, which was considered the best in the world, he traveled widely to show other nations what America had to offer in the way of artistic development. When he organized his band in 1892, many of the musicians were of foreign extraction. When he died 39 years later, the band was 100 percent American.

While making tours of his own country, patriotism was always part of the Sousa showcase. He made the most of every situation, to be sure. During the Spanish-American war, for instance, he developed an extravaganza called "The Trooping of the Colors" which brought audiences to an unprecedented patriotic height. At that time he volunteered to leave the highly lucrative band business to be a United States Army bandmaster, but he was stricken with bouts of typhoid fever and pneumonia, and he did not recover until after the war.

His patriotism was even more evident during World War I. At age 62, he enlisted in the U.S. Navy (at the symbolic salary of \$1/ month) to train Navy bandsmen at Great Lakes Naval Training Station north of Chicago. While there, he took a huge "jackie" band (a band made up of recruits) on a tour to raise money for war causes. When regrouping the Sousa Band after the war, he usually wore his lieutenant commander's uniform at concerts.

At every Sousa concert (some 15,000 of them!), one would find a taste of patriotism. This was no accident, because he was a patriot at heart, thus accounting for the inspirations which led to many of his most popular compositions. The most famous of all his marches is, of course, "The Stars and Stripes Forever." It is our official national march and is considered by many to be the finest march ever written. The title says exactly what Sousa meant it to say. One can only

imagine the lecture received by his publisher, who suggested that "Forever" be removed from the title!

"The Stars and Stripes Forever" is now part of our national heritage, and Sousa did his utmost to make it that way. Members of his band caught the spirit and carried the tradition through one more generation after Sousa passed on. This author has personally interviewed over 50 former Sousa bandsmen, and when asked if they ever tired of playing "Stars," the consensus was that this would have been unthinkable.

Sousa never tired of it either. Late in his career, he was asked what single piece of music he would choose to hear just before he died. His answer? "The Stars and Stripes Forever." His reason? "I would meet my Maker face to face with the inspiration that grows from its melodies and the patriotism that gives it meaning." This year, incidentally, marks the centennial of the march's first performance in Philadelphia on May 14, 1897.

A patriotic thought could bring tears to Sousa's eyes, and his inspired melodies have brought tears of joy to the eyes of millions of his fellow Americans. Stories of his personal acts of patriotism could easily fill a book. When we speak of him as one of our Masonic Brothers, we can all stand a little taller.

John Philip Sousa's Masonic History:

15 July 1881, Initiated, Hiram Lodge No. 10, Washington, DC (never transferred); 2 September 1881, Passed, Hiram Lodge;

10 November 1881, Raised, Hiram Lodge;

16 September 1886, Received Capitular Degrees and exalted in Eureka Chapter No. 4 (later Eureka Naval Chapter);

3 December 1886, Received Order of Red Cross, Malta, and Temple- 10 December 1886, Knighted in Columbia Commandery No. 2, Knights Templar, Washington, DC;

21 April 1922, Initiated in A.A.O.N.M.S., Almas Temple, Washington, D.C., named honorary leader of Almas Temple Band; 10 March 1932, a Masonic memorial service was held at the grave site in Congressional Cemetery, Washington, DC, after Sousa's death. This band has performed several ceremonies at Sousa's grave.

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