

The Lehigh Valley welcomes “The Great American Bandmaster”

In the almost two-hundred-year history of American band development, 1892 is a key turning point. On July 30 of that year, John Philip Sousa retired from the Marine Band of Washington and began organizing his business band. Less than two months later, Patrick Gilmore, the immortal band organizer and conductor, who had been so warmly received by the Lehigh Valley, and who was a major influence on Sousa, passed into memory after conducting a concert in St. Louis.

No one should be surprised that Gilmore’s most popular successor, John Philip Sousa, would eventually visit the Lehigh Valley, but recent research shows that the event occurred sooner than previously known.

Born in Washington, D.C. in 1854, the third of seven Sousa siblings, John Philip spent his formative years during the turbulence of the Civil War—undoubtedly a major influence on his character and personality. At age thirteen, the high-spirited young man threatened to run off with a circus band, but his father, Antonio, a trombone player in the Marine Band of Washington, interceded, and managed to have his son enlisted as an apprentice in the band. John Philip left the Marine Band in 1875, usually to perform on the violin or to conduct theater orchestras. In 1880 he returned to Washington as director of the Marine Band which, at that time, was certainly in need of fresh leadership. Through strict rehearsals and discipline, Sousa turned the Marine Band into a major musical force—and a new era began.

The yearly tradition of taking the Marine Band on tour began under Sousa in 1891, with special permission of President Benjamin Harrison. The final Marine Band tour under Sousa took place the next year, 1892, beginning on March 21 in Chicago and ending in Baltimore on May 7.¹ On July 29 Sousa gave a farewell concert at the National Theater, and the next day gave his last concert with the Marine Band on the White House south lawn for President Harrison.

Only four days before that final White House concert, the Marine Band under Sousa’s direction had performed at the Academy of Music (Music Hall) in Allentown, a performance *outside* of the 1892 tour.

The *Allentown Democrat*, on July 20, 1892, announced that the concert would take place on July 26. The newspaper mentioned that the band was made up of at least sixty enlisted men and that the Good Will Fire Company of Allentown would sponsor the concert. The band was to be paid \$1100, and the fire company expected to make a handsome profit. Sufficient advance tickets were sold at \$1.50 to assure that profit.

Except for the notice that tickets could be purchased at Malthaner’s music store in Bethlehem,² little excitement was shown by Bethlehem or Easton, probably because no performance had been scheduled in either town, and possibly because Sousa’s Marine Band, which usually stayed in Washington, was

¹ E-mail exchange with MgySgt Michael Ressler, Chief Librarian, US Marine Band, Washington, D.C.

² “Marine Band at Allentown,” *Bethlehem Daily Times*, July 22, 1892.

consequently not as well known as Gilmore's. When Gilmore's Band had visited Bethlehem and Easton only two years earlier, they received sensational publicity.

On July 23, the *Catasauqua Dispatch*, typically supplying more detail than Allentown newspapers, noted that it took considerable "maneuvering by Senator Quay to secure the Marine Band engagement." They also hinted of some local jealousy. In their words, "the Marine Band is not a favorite amongst professional musicians, who see in the former a favored rival which they would confine to the capitol, and thus the difficulty of securing a leave of absence." This odd comment may have been a slap at the Allentown Band, which so dominated the band scene of the 1890s in Allentown, that they seemed virtual professionals. With so many engagements, there was little room for other bands. Indeed, they were probably playing at least a hundred concerts per year. By 1897, however, newspaper reports show considerable evidence that the Pioneer Band of Allentown was providing some serious competition.


But how or why would the Marine Band, only three days before its final two performances under Sousa's direction, be persuaded to travel to Allentown for a concert? We can only speculate that this trip may have had political implications. Benjamin Harrison was running for reelection later in 1892. Senator Matthew Quay was one of the most influential and politically savvy senators Pennsylvania has ever had, and served as campaign manager for Harrison's successful 1888 election. Perhaps Harrison was concerned about losing Pennsylvania's electoral votes and hoped to secure a little help from the Lehigh Valley, a major population center. It may have done some good. Harrison did win Pennsylvania in 1892, but it was not enough. He lost the general election contest to Grover Cleveland.

Even before his visit to Allentown as Marine Band conductor, Sousa had decided to form a business band, and during his 1892 tour had signed a contract with David Blakely, Gilmore's former manager. During the Allentown visit, Sousa may have taken the opportunity to mine musicians from the Allentown Band for his new band, probably to the dismay of conductor Martin Klingler. The passing of Gilmore was an added bonanza for Sousa's efforts to organize his new ensemble. He brought aboard nineteen members of the former Gilmore Band, including saxophonist Edward Lefabre, and cornetist Herbert L. Clark. These men formed the core of his new band, initially called "Sousa's New Marine Band."

Sousa must have enjoyed his Allentown experience with the Marine Band, because only months after forming his new civilian band, he brought them back to the Music Hall. The December 14, 1892 issue of the *Allentown Democrat* gave a fairly sophisticated review of the Friday, December 9 concert at the Music Hall, which opened with the overture to Rossini's *Semiramide*. The appearance of local men on the stage may have helped generate some enthusiasm. The *Democrat* noted that "two of the prominent members of his [Sousa's] present great organization until a year or so ago were members of our Allentown Band—Mr. Edward Fritz, a young German cornetist, and Mr. Samuel Schaich, a famous clarinet [*sic*] player." Fritz played with Sousa for only a year or two, whereas Schaich remained with the bandmaster for many years.

The *Democrat* complained that there were many empty seats at the performance, which they thought "remarkable for a city that claims to be the home of more music-loving people than any city of its size in the country." The *Bethlehem Times* paid little notice except to remind readers that a "special car on the electric road" [the brand new trolley system between Allentown and Bethlehem] would be added to

ABLE OPERA HOUSE
 W. M. K. DETWILLER, Manager.
 MONDAY EVENING, MARCH 11, 1895.



SOUSA'S
Peerless
Concert
Band
 50 Eminent Musicians

JOHN PHILIP SOUSA, Conductor.
 ASSISTED BY
 MISS MARIE BARNARD, Soprano,
 MISS CURRIE DUKE, Violinist,
 Playing Sousa's Magnetic Marches.

PRICES—\$1.00, 75, 50, and 25 cents. Seats on sale at Hohl's.

The correct and latest editions of Sousa's Famous Marches on sale by the Programme Boys.

Advertisement by
 Able Opera House, Easton
Easton Daily Express
 March 7, 1895

follow the regular car for the “accommodation of those who wish to hear the [New] Marine Band.”³ It is quite possible that many riders of that special car were members of the Bethlehem Band (the reorganized Beckel’s Cornet Band) and the Fairview Band of Bethlehem.

The name “New Marine Band” did not last long. The Marine Band of Washington objected, and Sousa was forced to change it. The band was later marketed in the Lehigh Valley as “Sousa’s Peerless Concert Band,” or just “Sousa and his Band.”


Sousa and his renamed band returned to the Lehigh Valley in 1895, 1896 and 1897, always performing at Allentown’s Music Hall at Sixth and Turner streets. The advertisements usually featured the great trombonist, Arthur Pryor.

As always, Sousa continued with his composing. Late in 1896, on his way home from a vacation in Europe, he was inspired to write “Stars and Stripes Forever.” We would expect to see that now-famous march performed locally soon afterward, but no documentary evidence has been found. It may, however, have been played as an encore. During Sousa’s 1897 visit to the Lehigh Valley, only the *Bethlehem Globe* printed a program for the April 8 concert in South Bethlehem. “Stars and Stripes Forever” was not on the program, but “El Capitan” was. Composed only months before Stars and Stripes, “El Capitan” seemed to be the most popular Sousa march performed locally. The earliest record we have of “Stars and Stripes Forever” being programmed and performed in the Lehigh Valley was at the June 27, 1897 (Sunday) evening concert by the Allentown Band at Central Park in Rittersville.⁴

During the Spanish-American War years (1898–99), Sousa visited only South Bethlehem and Easton. Easton provided only an advertisement, but the *South Bethlehem Globe* noted that at the April 19, 1899 concert at the Fountain Hill Opera House, the favorite numbers were “Tarantella,” from *The Bride Elect*, and “march


Opera House
 L. F. WALTERS, Manager.

Evening Only, Wed, Apr. 19
 The March King Coming!



SOUSA
 AND HIS
BAND
 JOHN PHILIP SOUSA,
 Conductor.

Maud Reese Davies,
 Soprano.
 Dorothy Hoyle,
 Violiniste.
 Arthur Pryor,
 Trombone.



Prices, . . . 50, 75, \$1.00
 Box Seats, \$1.50.

Advertisement by Fountain Hill Opera House
South Bethlehem Globe
 April 14, 1899

³ “Special Car to Allentown,” *Bethlehem Daily Times*, Dec. 9, 1892.

⁴ “Central Park,” *Allentown Morning Call*, June 25, 1897.

from the Charlatan, Sousa's latest opera."⁵

In Allentown during the 1890s, Sousa's concerts were always held at the Music Hall (the Academy of Music, where the *Morning Call* building now stands), the major venue in town. By the turn of the century, however, a change was in order. On Court Street, only a half block from the Music Hall, was another center for local entertainment and commerce called Central Market Hall. Built in 1891, the same year as Carnegie Hall in New York, Central Market Hall was used for many local events, such as fund-raisers, hospital fairs, and concerts by local bands. This structure would eventually be remodeled and improved, first to the Lyric Theater in 1899,⁶ then into Allentown's Symphony Hall of today.



Lyric Advertisement
Allentown Morning Call,
March 27, 1900

Sousa's next performance in Allentown, a matinee on Friday, March 30, 1900, would naturally be booked at the remodeled Central Market Hall—the Lyric. The Music Hall, a half block away, was still there, but the Lyric was becoming the preferred venue. One would expect a certain amount of excitement from the newspapers for the next arrival of Sousa's band to

Allentown in the new theater. Not so! The newspapers showed little interest and provided no reviews. The Lyric ads billed it as a "Farewell Concert," probably because the band was preparing for their first European tour. A short article in the *Morning Call* noted that audiences could expect to see Arthur Pryor and Herbert L. Clark.⁷ Immediately following the Allentown concert, Sousa's band was on its way to a same-day evening concert at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia. We can easily believe that such a busy schedule would help to validate the stories about Sousa band members living on sandwiches and sleeping on their trunks.

Sousa's band returned to the Lyric in 1908 and 1910, and performed in Central Park in 1912 and 1913. They last performed in Allentown (again at the Lyric) in 1920. Sousa most likely used one of the recently removed backstage dressing rooms to prepare for his concerts.

Sousa continued the band's brutal touring schedule well into his late seventies. On March 5, 1932, he visited Reading, Pennsylvania, as a guest conductor for the eightieth anniversary concert of the famous

⁵ "Sousa, the March King," *South Bethlehem Globe*, April 20, 1899.

⁶ The Lyric opened October 10 with the play, *Frederick the Great*; the orchestra under the baton of Martin Klingler. Only nine days after the debut of the Lyric, the monument to the veterans of the Civil War in the middle of Center Square would be unveiled with great fanfare, with many bands on parade.

⁷ "A Short Sousa Tour," *Allentown Morning Call*, March 27, 1900.

Ringgold Band, scheduled for the next day. Following a successful run-through rehearsal, where the last number was Sousa's "Stars and Stripes Forever," a banquet was held that evening in his honor. Later at Sousa's suite at the Hotel Abraham Lincoln, his secretary found him ill and summoned the house physician. Sousa died at 12:30 a.m.⁸

Like the great Patrick Gilmore before him, John Philip Sousa was an extraordinary man and extraordinary musician. But Sousa soared to new heights with his prolific writing of marches, musical comedies, and operas, which are ever-present in today's band libraries. His many years of touring went well beyond that of his predecessor. Gilmore was at least partly sustained by his affiliation with the 22nd New York Regiment. Sousa's band, however, was the first and the last touring band to be completely independent and profitable.

Copyright © 2008 Jack Baker

[To contact the author, click here](#)

⁸ "John Philip Sousa Dies Suddenly in Reading," *Allentown Morning Call*, March 6, 1932.