

May 15, 1897

Sousa Presents His New March

The March King Sends an Important Message to Future Generations

On May 14th, 1897, John Philip Sousa presented his patriotic march, “The Stars and Stripes Forever”. As Sousa conducted the band, joy and excitement filled the audience. Performers had touched the audiences’ hearts so deeply that they demanded two encores. While several other compositions were presented, it was clearly a Sousa Night. His popular marches uplifted the patriotic spirit in the audience, and it was his music that they most enjoyed.

But how did Sousa become the March King? Sousa, born on November 6th, 1854, on 636 G Street, SE Washington, DC, on the side of town known as the ‘Navy Yard.’ His rebellious actions at just five years of age led him to severe pneumonia which incapacitated the young child, and he had to be homeschooled. More than a year and a half of dangerous illness after he deliberately soaked himself in chilly rain after his mother refused to give him his share of doughnuts. Once recovered, Sousa continued his early education in grammar school and started his musical education. He spent several years in the private conservatory, operated by John Esputa Jr. He studied piano and most orchestral instruments, but he loved the violin the most. Sousa was keen on the violin, his skills impressed everyone, including a circus band leader, who overheard him practicing the violin from outside, and persuaded him to secretly join the circus troupe. His father found out about the plot and had intervened by escorting his son to Marine Corps. Headquarters.

The long journey with the Marine Band began that day, and lasted seven years, five months, and twenty-seven days. He was discharged from the Marine Corps on May 18th, 1875, by then, he was already a professional violinist. He had taken multiple opportunities with various orchestras, but his journey brought him back to the U.S Marine Band as a director. It was Sousa’s first experience conducting a military band, and he brought many positive changes. Under his leadership, the band became the finest military band in the world. In 1891, President Benjamin Harrison gave official sanction to take the Marine Band on a tour for the first time in history.

After the conclusion of the Marine Band’s second tour, Sousa was approached by David Blakley, who convinced him to form a private civilian band. The two men enjoyed an immense success, and after four years of touring, Sousa, and his wife took a vacation trip to Europe in September 1896. A shocking newspaper article had found them in Naples, Italy, as they learned sad news; David Blakley had passed away. Sousa returned to the United States as soon as possible, accompanied by his wife, he boarded SS Teutonic, scheduled to arrive in New York City on November 25th

It is easy to picture Sousa walking up and down the ship deck, thinking about his late friend, his beloved country and looking at the American flag that flew at the foremast as a sign of

respect to the country of destination. These feelings combined led him to compose the greatest march in American history. The march sends an important message to future generations; that the American flag will always stand for freedom, liberty, and justice for all. When an oppressive despot rises to power, let them hear the words of Sousa's march:

“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.”

Resources:

Taps Historian and Professional Bugler (website) <https://www.tapsbugler.com/john-philip-sousas-christmas-gift-to-the-united-states/>

The Baltimore Sun (newspaper) <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-1997-05-18-1997138194-story.html>

Library of Congress (website) <https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200000018/>

The Official Website of the United States Marine Corps (website)
<https://www.marineband.marines.mil/About/Our-History/John-Philip-Sousa/>

The Official Website of the United States Marine Corps (website)
<https://www.marineband.marines.mil/Audio-Resources/The-Complete-Marches-of-John-Philip-Sousa/The-Stars-and-Stripes-Forever-March/>

Library of Congress (website) <https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200152755/>

Sounds of Sousa (website) <http://www.soundsofsousa.com/the-early-years> (This website has recently become inactive but is still on Google)