

March, “King Cotton”

John Philip Sousa* (1854–1932)

Perhaps more than anyone else, John Philip Sousa is responsible for bringing the United States Marine Band to the level of excellence upheld today. He also composed the best known and most loved marches in the repertoire and was hailed as an innovator who shaped the future of “The President’s Own.”

Sousa was born in southeast Washington, D.C., near Marine Barracks where his father Antonio was a musician in the Marine Band. Sousa studied piano and most orchestral instruments, but his first love was the violin. He became very proficient on the instrument and at age thirteen was almost persuaded to join a circus band. His father intervened, however, and enlisted him as an apprentice musician in the Marine Band where he remained until age twenty. He returned in October 1880 to become the seventeenth Director of the Band, a position that he held until 1892 when he left to form his own civilian ensemble, The Sousa Band.

“King Cotton” was composed at a time when cotton was “king” and extremely important to the country’s economy. The Sousa Band had been hired to perform for three weeks at the Cotton States and International Exposition of 1895 in Atlanta. The Exposition was turning into a huge financial disaster, but when word got around that Sousa and his band were to perform, attendance started to improve. Atlanta was grateful for the success bestowed upon their event by Sousa’s appearance. “King Cotton” was one of his personal favorites and has secured its place as one of his more popular marches.