

Building a Dream: The History of the John Philip Sousa Memorial Band Shell

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Researched by Ron Meadows with Floyd & June Mackey



Caption T/C



It was in 1915 that John Philip Sousa, the world famous “March King” moved his family to the then-sleepy town of Port Washington. Sousa would make his home at “Wildbank,” a waterfront estate on Hick’s Lane in Sands Point, for the rest of his life. By doing so, he would unwittingly bequeath an ongoing musical legacy to his adoptive hometown, one which continues to the present day.

Beginning in 1932, the Port Washington Community Band became a regular local feature. Formed originally by Paul Bergan, the Community Band had its roots in Port Washington's recently organized school band. The Community Band was soon part of the local landscape, playing a summer concert series each year. The Band was blessed with both able conductors and abundant local talent, especially when Port Washington boasted the title of National High School Champion Band. From its inception, the Community Band went hand-



Caption T/C

in-hand with Port Washington's public schools. The Band was led and conducted by a succession of Port Washington's school band directors: Paul Bergan, Paul Van Bodegraven and George Christopher. Standing behind them all was Superintendent of Schools, Paul D. Schreiber, who saw the value of grooming and nurturing local talent.

The Second World War interrupted the Community Band, and summer concerts became another casualty of war. Luckily, this interruption was only temporary. With the return of peace came a return of the Community Band and a new commitment to fund and build a

permanent home for the Band. It would take time, however, for this particular dream to be realized. The plans for a permanent concert venue in Port Washington languished for some time, until in 1962 they were given a new start. A fresh breath of air — or one might say a tornado of energy — blew onto the scene in the petite form of Grace A. (Gay) Pearsall. Gay saw a unique opportunity to “kill two birds with one stone” giving the Community Band a permanent home while creating a lasting memorial to a famous local resident, John Philip Sousa. By the early 1960's, Gay had formulated a plan to make her dream of the John Philip Sousa Memorial Band Shell a reality. Working with Schreiber High School Band director George A. Christopher, Gay felt the first step should be to secure the blessing of the Sousa family in the form of his sole surviving child, Helen Sousa Abert. Gay succeeded in securing not only her approval, but also a pledge of support from the Sousa Corporation. The plan could now begin in earnest, with the imprimatur of The March King's family on the undertaking.

When fund-raising began, it was appropriate that the first sizable donation came from the Paul D. Schreiber High School Band. In an



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especially fitting turn of fate, the \$1400 donation came in part from surplus funds raised by the Band during World War II, when wartime austerity had forced the Band to curtail its concert tours. Now, after many years, those funds would find a worthy home.

Gay became a tireless champion of the new Band Shell idea, devising clever ways to enlist the entire community in her fund-raising efforts. With her expenses covered by a donation from the Auxiliary of American Legion Post #509, Gay developed her unique “Mile of Dimes” drive. This event consisted of marking off each half inch of sidewalk from Campus Drive to Sunset Park (the future home of the Band Shell). Each segment could then be “bought” for a dime, but the result was more than monetary. It also forged in the minds and hearts of the community an unbreakable bond between Port Washington’s schools and the dream of a new cultural hub. Campus and concert hall would be “joined” forever by shared goals and ideals.

Not content to restrict her efforts just to Port Washington, Gay also cast a broad net in her search for donations. Both former President Eisenhower and future President Nixon received personal letters from Gay, as did Princess Grace of Monaco. No one, from foreign royalty to local schoolchild, was immune to Gay’s charm, and it was a rare recipient who could say no. Land for the Band Shell having been

secured from the Port Washington Sewer District, Henry Aspinwall consented to draw up the architectural plans for free, in memory of his son Peter, who had been a member of the Port Washington High School Band before his death in World War II. Working with his partner, Joseph Hnatov, Aspinwall had the daunting task of designing a wholly unfamiliar structure, one that tested his admirable talents. Creating an acoustically appropriate building without massive cost overruns was a constant concern. Despite their misgivings, Hnatov and Aspinwall plunged ahead with their designs.

A total of \$18,975 having been raised thus far, the Committee felt that the next phase of project could begin. And so it was that, on the fine autumn day of October 30, 1966 ground for the Band Shell was broken. Alongside Gay Pearsall at the gala ceremony were two living connections with John Philip Sousa — his daughter Helen, and William Hlavac who, at age 17, had become a member of Sousa's band. Providing appropriate musical accompaniment to the event was the Schreiber High School Band, cementing their ties to the Band Shell ever firmer. Ambitious as ever, Gay was determined that the Sousa Band Shell would formally open for business in time for the summer of 1967.



Caption T/C



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The contractor, Charles Wysong, expressed his doubts as to the timetable, but he had not counted on the resolve of Gay Pearsall. An unexpected January thaw allowed the concrete foundation to be poured, and the timetable was back on track.

The dedication of the Sousa Band Shell was formally set for June 11, 1967. From start to finish, using only local talent and voluntary

contributions, the idea that had been in the minds of Gay Pearsall and George A. Christopher had become a reality in just five years. The gala ceremony, which included local politicians, clergy, and civic organizations, climaxed with Gay Pearsall and Helen Sousa Abert cutting the ribbon to declare the Band Shell open for business.

The inaugural concert that evening featured, fittingly enough, the Schreiber High School Band as the opening act, followed by the U.S. Navy Band. If the author may interject, he remembers the concert clearly, although he was only five years of age. Alas, being five brought with it a certain shortness of attention span, and so part of the concert was spent running in circles around the little house at the rear of Sunset Park, pursued by my father, who wished to listen to the music in peace. This climaxed in the author being dragged out, kicking and screaming, from beneath a juniper bush, to be taken home and sent to bed. Others, however, had a more stirring experience, as Sousa's "Stars and Stripes Forever" burst out with a flight of a thousand red, white and blue balloons. Summers in Port Washington would never be the same.

Her dream now complete, Gay did not rest on her laurels. She remained at the helm as fund-raising chairwoman, overseeing an ever-expanding schedule of activities. While the Band Shell had originally been envisioned strictly as a summer home for concerts by Port Washington's schools and the Community Band (now known as the Senior High-Community Summer Concert Band), it soon became

apparent that many other groups might want to take advantage of this wonderful new venue. By 1968, an ambitious schedule of fourteen concerts — including three over the July Fourth weekend — was presented. A similar schedule of between thirteen and sixteen concerts each summer has been maintained ever since. The Sousa Band Shell soon became a local fixture in Port Washington. Each season was built around the Port Washington Schools' Summer Music Program and the Senior High-Community Summer Concert Band. If funding allowed, both amateur and professional groups would be invited to play additional concerts, and so the schedule would be constructed. Many different bands performed, but always with one constant — Gay Pearsall. From the opening concert in 1967 until her death in 1984, Gay missed only a single performance. She became a summertime institution, whether it was dancing to her beloved Long Island Banjo Society or being honored with a performance of "Stars and Stripes Forever" played in her honor.

Almost as soon as the Band Shell was constructed, it became not just a performance space, but something of a memorial park for the community. The first inclusion came just a month after the dedication, when a time capsule was placed in front of the Band Shell and marked with a granite plaque, indicating that it should be opened on the 100th anniversary of the original dedication. More plaques and monuments have followed, including recognition of the American Legion and Auxiliary for their early assistance in raising initial funds for the Band Shell. Memorials to some of those instrumental in the creation of the Band Shell are also included in Sunset Park, such as a plaque



Caption T/C



Vince Borkowski with Sousa plaque.

inset into the Band Shell wall in memory of Gay Pearsall and a linden tree planted on the grounds to honor George A. Christopher.

The Band Shell also began attracting community functions over and above the scheduled concerts. The Memorial Day Parade has ended with ceremonies there for more than three decades, as have special events like the Bicentennial Parade on July 4, 1976. Other

community groups have also made the Band Shell their home, like the Teen Summer Theater, which was encouraged by George A. Christopher and the Band Shell Committee. Local performers got the unique opportunity to perform musical theater in a charming, al fresco environment, and audiences had another opportunity to enjoy the local talent. The journey has not been without some bumps, however. While the Band Shell Committee estimates that no more than ten percent of performances have had to be cancelled due to rain, fate has not always been kind. The Band Shell, while sturdy and in remarkable shape for its age, lost its roof in a 1997 Nor'easter, which caused a new generation of boosters to open their hearts and their wallets. Another time, a performance was interrupted by a blown circuit, plunging the Band Shell into darkness. Bandleader Bill Buzzeo and "The All Americans" were undaunted, however, and they played on until power was restored thirty minutes later. Showing the indomitable spirit which has always been the hallmark of the Band Shell, they even extended their performance by thirty minutes because they didn't want to short-change the audience.

Since its inception, a dedicated team has provided guidance to the Band Shell Committee. With Gay Pearsall's passing, a talented group has stepped in to fill her shoes. In from the very beginning have been Floyd and June Mackey, who signed on when the Band Shell was still

just a dream. June, who is Gay Pearsall's daughter, worked with early Band Shell supporter George Knowles on the program for the dedication ceremony and has been instrumental ever since. Her husband Floyd is the "voice" of the Band Shell, serving as M.C. for many performances, and both have worked tirelessly in fund-raising, volunteer coordinating and community outreach.

A third member of the original Band Shell Committee is still active. Already a member of the Community Band, Ron Meadows first became involved with the Band Shell plan when he spotted a commotion on Main Street. The commotion was caused by George Knowles driving a fire truck as part of the "Mile of Dimes" fund-raiser. One thing led to another and Ron came on board as a member of the Committee. In his spare time, Ron still plays with the Senior High-Community Summer Concert Band on Friday nights in July. Since 1967, more than six hundred concerts have been offered by scores of performing groups at the John Philip Sousa Memorial Band Shell. Begun as a simple dream of a place for local students and alumni to express a love of music, the Sousa Band Shell has grown to be a cultural and community hub for the people of Port Washington. More than that, the Band Shell has allowed the Port Washington Schools to play a year-round role in the education and enrichment of the larger community. Summer, instead of being a cultural nadir, has become a rich, rewarding opportunity for both performers and audiences. The musical legacy of John Philip Sousa, coupled with the vision of the Band Shell Committee, encouraged the people of Port Washington to build and support a lasting memorial. Across more than forty summers, the Band Shell has welcomed generations of grateful listeners to enjoy the music, feel the breeze and watch the lights of the boats as they float on the magical summer night.