

In the Beginning

The family tree of American bands has its roots in mid-nineteenth-century Boston, where Irish immigrant Patrick Sarsfield Gilmore planted the seed. Gilmore's influence on modern American band development cannot be overestimated. We often think of John Philip Sousa as the quintessential American bandmaster, but Sousa himself considered Gilmore "The Father of American Bands."

Gilmore was born in County Galway on Ireland's west coast in 1829. As a youth in Ireland, he observed British military bands and studied cornet under British bandmasters. In 1849, at the tender age of twenty, young Patrick left famine-ravaged Ireland and settled in Boston. Soon he led a series of bands in the Boston area, including the Charlestown Town Band, the Suffolk Brass Band, the Salem Brigade Band, and the Boston Brigade Band.

At the start of the Civil War in 1861, while many community bands were volunteering for military duty as regimental bands, The Boston Brigade Band, reorganized as Patrick Gilmore's Band, was attached to the 24th Massachusetts Infantry. Their tour of duty did not last long. When the Union Army realized that this was a war that would not be over as quickly as initially thought, and that these regimental bands were an unaffordable expense, all of these bandsmen were discharged in September 1862. Included among the bands serving the Union cause during the Civil War were: Easton's Pomp's Cornet Band, under Thomas Coates, which volunteered for the 47th Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry, and the Millerstown (Macungie) Band, under Peter Weiler, representing the 54th PVI. After their discharge, bands were still needed, but would be formed from the ranks of volunteer soldiers.

After the war, Gilmore's fame and fortune grew, especially after his organization of the National Peace Jubilee in 1869, held in Boston. Audiences were treated to five days of performances, often *en masse*, with more than a thousand instrumentalists and ten thousand vocalists. In 1872, the end of the Franco-Prussian War triggered an even bigger spectacle, the World Peace Jubilee, with two thousand instrumentalists and twenty thousand vocalists performing over an eighteen-day period. For this event, many European and American bands performed, as well as Johann Strauss Jr. and his orchestra, the only time Strauss ever visited America. In 1876, his newly-reorganized band (1873), the 22nd New York Regiment Band, usually known just as "Gilmore's Band," toured the United States, and in 1877 toured Europe. His band had plenty of exposure in Philadelphia, with multiple performances at the 1876 Centennial Exposition. At the Exposition, twenty-two-year-old John Philip Sousa was a violinist with Offenbach's orchestra, and when not performing, was undoubtedly picking up some ideas while watching Gilmore in action.

After his 1877 European tour, Gilmore and his band spent many years performing in New York—mostly at Gilmore's Garden, formerly P.T. Barnum's Hippodrome—or touring America with a band of a different instrumental makeup than Americans were used to. Most American community bands at the time consisted mainly of brass instruments. Gilmore, on the other hand, greatly increased the proportion of woodwinds, a point not lost on many American bandmasters. More important, with a band designed to be as effective as a fine symphony orchestra, Gilmore brought the great classical

composers to the heartland of America through programming that included band transcriptions from operatic and orchestral works.

This basic Gilmore background leads us to a pertinent question: Did Gilmore's Band ever visit the Lehigh Valley? The answer is, of course, yes. This area was known for its interest in bands and was well positioned along a major rail route to the West. The Lehigh Valley would certainly be included in a Gilmore tour, but not always without controversy.

Only a year after Gilmore took over the 22nd Regiment Band, the band visited Easton to take part in the commencement activities of Lafayette College. On June 27, 1874, the *Easton Daily Times* reported that a concert, sponsored by the senior class, would be given at Able's Opera House on Monday, June 29, by Gilmore's Orchestra.¹ Gilmore was not previously known to have assembled an orchestra, but on this occasion it did happen. In fact, the *Times* somewhat lamented the situation, noting that "the Melody of the Orchestra was very sweet, and 'replete with liquid tones,' but the orchestra contrasted with the band, is sadly wanting."²



Patrick Gilmore in
22nd Regiment uniform

Two days later, in the commencement parade through town to the opera house for the usual speeches, Gilmore's Band was in the lead. The *Times* noted that the procession was "met by the street band improvised by Gilmore's twenty-second regiment band . . ."³ And so we learn that Gilmore's Band had at least one marching engagement.

At the Monday concert at Able's Opera House, the audiences were fortunate to witness a performance of America's earliest saxophone soloist, Edward Lefebre, and two of the nineteenth century's greatest cornetists, Matthew Arbuckle and Jules Levy. In a few years, the feud between Arbuckle and Levy would become legendary. Their formidable skills were matched only by their egos. They did not like each other and even came to blows on one occasion. By 1880 both had left the band, possibly because of the stress and strain of competition. Gilmore would have each of the men play a solo during the same performance—pitting Levy, an Englishman, against Arbuckle, a Scot. Their fanatical followers would cheer their favorite, and boo and hiss the other. One can picture Gilmore, an Irishman, enjoying every minute of it. The controversy kept the audiences coming, and the organization profitable.

The first attempt to arrange a visit by Gilmore's Band to Allentown did not come off as smoothly as Easton's experience. On April 16, 1879, the German-language newspaper, *Allentown Friedens-Bote (Allentown Peace Messenger)*, reported that "Gilmore's famous band, consisting of 50 musicians, has given hugely successful concerts in all capitals of the west since its return from an extensive tour in

¹ "College Notes – About Commencement," *Easton Daily Express*, June 27, 1874.

² "Gilmore's Concert," *Easton Daily Express*, June 30, 1874.

³ "Lafayette College Commencement," *Easton Daily Express*, July 1, 1874.

Europe. It is presently returning to New York and will give a ‘Sacred Concert’ on April 20 in the Opera House in Allentown.”⁴

Ominously, the newspaper also noted that “an informal meeting was held in the home of the Hon. J. W. Wood to protest the concert on a Sunday . . .” and that “several preachers supposedly warned Sunday evening from the pulpit against attending the concert.” Uh, Oh!

A week later, instead of reviewing the concert, the *Peace Messenger* reported that almost all the local clergymen signed a letter, crafted by a Presbyterian preacher and a Methodist preacher, which was presented to the mayor, and that “all preparations for the concert had been completed and many tickets had been sold. Gentlemen and ladies arrived by train, coach and foot from near and far to attend. But the concert was not to be.”⁵

Wishing to avoid controversy, Gilmore and his manager, then in Reading, indeed cancelled the concert, and the band passed through Allentown without stopping. Even billing the concert as a “Sacred Concert” was not good enough. The *Easton Daily Express* on April 21 editorialized: “Those who took sides with the clergy in this matter are no doubt congratulating themselves on the potency of the ministerial protest, while a large number of others, who were almost certain of enjoying one of the most refined musical entertainments yet given in Allentown, have cause to lament their disappointment.”⁶

Allentonians would have to wait many years for another chance to experience Gilmore’s Band.

In the meantime, local interest in famous bands continued undeterred, undoubtedly reinforced by many performances—mostly for picnics, serenades, and town parades—not only by city bands, but by innumerable local bands from towns such as Siegersville (Orefield), Hosensack, Colesville, Center Valley, Aineyville, Mountainville, Cherryville, and Stemton (Northampton), to name only a few. Any village without a band would have been considered a backwater, an unacceptable situation. In the Allentown area, the publicity was dominated by the Allentown Cornet Band, led at the time by Waldemar Grossman, and the Pioneer Cornet Band of Catasauqua, probably led by George Bagwell.

By 1890, the Allentown Band (having dropped “Cornet” from their name), under the leadership of Martin Klingler, was honored to perform in the new Academy of Music, or as it was usually called, the “Music Hall” (located at Sixth and Linden streets, where the *Morning Call* building now stands. The Music Hall had become the focal point for entertainment and the major venue for touring performers.

Local concerts were not the only choices for a populace more mobile than we imagine today. Rail was king, and the railroads, knowing the keen interest in Allentown for great bands, were always ready to profit from it. On July 8, 1884, an announcement for an excursion, probably placed by the Lehigh Valley Railroad, appeared in another Allentown German-language newspaper, *Lecha Bote* (*Lehigh*

⁴ “Big Concert by Gilmore’s Band,” *Allentown Friedens-Bote*, April 16, 1879.

⁵ “Sabbath Concert Rejected,” *Allentown Friedens-Bote*, April 23, 1879.

⁶ “Gilmore’s Band Gives Allentown the Go By,” *Easton Daily Express*, April 21, 1879.

Messenger): “Arbuckle’s Band and Levy, the cornet player, will be on Coney Island on July 12. Tickets for the excursion: \$2.25.”

What? The only way Jules Levy would be playing in Matthew Arbuckle’s band would have been if Arbuckle were dead. And research confirms that is exactly what happened. Arbuckle had died after forming his band but before his band’s first performance.

The next opportunity for Gilmore’s Band to visit Allentown was reported by the *Catasauqua Dispatch* on March 17, 1888. The newspaper noted that an “afternoon matinee and evening concert would be given at the Music Hall on Thursday next.”⁷ Trying to verify this account in Allentown newspapers has not been successful, because English-language newspapers for these dates have not survived, and oddly, the German newspapers did not mention the concert—nor did the Bethlehem or Easton newspapers. Possibly the concert never took place. Maybe something else aborted the scheduled performance .

The *Dispatch* was a reliable newspaper and would not likely have been mistaken, so what might have happened? Could the reason be related to a monster snowfall that thrashed the eastern states on March 12 through March 14? All transportation was halted, including trains stalled on their tracks, with telegraph and telephone lines down for weeks. Gilmore’s Band probably had to bypass Allentown again. (Today we remember this historic storm as the “Great Blizzard of ‘88.”)

In 1890, Gilmore’s Band again arrived in the Lehigh Valley. On April 30, an advertisement appeared in the *Easton Daily Express* noting that the band would play an afternoon and evening concert, sponsored by the local Elks lodge, on Tuesday, May 6 at Able’s Opera House. The timing was perfect. Gilmore arrived in the midst of Easton’s Centennial celebration, which had started a day earlier with a massive parade that included twenty bands—led off, of course, by the Easton Cornet Band. Thousands of visitors arrived to take part in the celebration. In Allentown alone, almost two thousand train tickets were sold.

In a review of the Tuesday concerts, the *Express* noted that by request of the Elks, the grand finale consisted of “A Trip to Manhattan Beach” and “Anvil Chorus.”⁸ During this tour, Gilmore was known to have brought along a set of anvils and six bronze cannons. Assisted by three well-known operatic vocalists, they must have put on quite a show. In 1890 the band was at its peak of popularity and skill.

The next morning, Gilmore members were on their way to South Bethlehem, and, according to the *Bethlehem Daily Times*, arrived at the Lehigh Valley Railroad terminal at 10:40 a.m. for a concert at 2:30 p.m. in the Fountain Hill Opera House at Fourth and Wyandotte streets.⁹ Older readers may remember this building as the Globe Theater (now a parking lot).

The probable impetus for the creation of the Fountain Hill Opera House had much to do with another touring band, which had made a big impression in Catasauqua and Allentown in 1874. This group,

⁷ “Gilmore’s Concerts,” *Catasauqua Dispatch*, March 17, 1888.

⁸ “An Evening of Music,” *Easton Daily Express*, May 7, 1890.

⁹ “South Bethlehem Briefs,” *Bethlehem Daily Times*, May 7, 1890.

which may have had considerable influence on Gilmore, had the impressive name of “German Royal Imperial 11th Battalion Pioneer Band,” and was on an American tour as a reward for good service in the Franco-Prussian War. When the band left Allentown, they performed on February 10 in South Bethlehem at the Hildenberger Opera House, then only a year old, located on Third and Elm streets. (Elm is now Webster.)

According to newspaper accounts, many of the patrons retired after the concert to the saloon below to refresh themselves and discuss the performance. As they were leaving, they were horrified to see the opera house on fire. Unfortunately, the incident took place the year before the creation of a South Bethlehem fire department. The nearby Lehigh Zinc Works tried to help by dragging their fire hose to the site, but it was too late. The year-old Hildenberger Opera House was a total loss. Controversy arose concerning the fire’s cause, because the band had used firecrackers for their final number, “Battle Waltz.” In the end, though, the fire was blamed on a faulty heater.

Shortly after Gilmore’s concert at the Fountain Hill Opera House, the band must have gone straight to the train station for the short trip to Allentown for their same-day evening concert at the Music Hall. The *Times* noted in a small separate article that the band was taking a Lehigh Valley special train at 5:00 p.m.

Allentonians knew about the upcoming May 7 concert from having read the April 30 issue of the *Allentown Democrat*.¹⁰ The newspaper noted that there would be an afternoon and evening concert; however, the report of an afternoon concert was a mistake, since at that time the band would be playing in South Bethlehem. Without evidence to the contrary, we should probably assume that the evening concert was played as scheduled even though the *Democrat* did not provide a post-concert review. It is easy to speculate that Gilmore may have viewed an Allentown concert with some trepidation after two previous botched attempts to perform there. Fortunately, it was not a Sunday concert, which might have aroused the wrath of the preachers.

Newspaper accounts of the concerts from all three towns mention some of the band members by name, revealing a “Who’s Who” of top nineteenth-century musicians. Among them were P.K. Matus, E-flat clarinet soloist, cornet player Benjamin Bent, and still in the band, Edward Lefabre, whom the *Easton Daily Express* described as “a Hollander, who had a wide reputation as a saxophone player in Europe before he introduced the instrument in America. . . .” The *Express* was particularly impressed with Michael Raffayolo, who “is conceded to be without rival as a euphonium player.” (The audiences missed seeing the famed cornetist, Herbert L. Clarke, who joined Gilmore’s band less than a year later.)

Gilmore’s 1890 circuit through the Lehigh Valley demonstrated a finely-tuned machine, practiced by years of touring. In a two-day visit to the Lehigh Valley, the band played four concerts in three different cities. One cannot help but wonder if the remaining concerts of the tour would continue at this pace.

A year-and-a-half later, on December 18, 1891, Gilmore’s Band returned to the Lehigh Valley, but only to the relatively new Fountain Hill Opera House in South Bethlehem, where they opened to a packed

¹⁰ “Gilmore, The Wonderful Leader,” *Allentown Democrat*, April 30, 1890.

house with the overture from *Tannhäuser*.¹¹ Before the band's final number, Maestro Gilmore stepped forward to the footlights to acknowledge the appreciative crowd. He promised that his band would increase in size to one hundred members for the upcoming World's Fair—a promise he kept—and that he would return to Bethlehem the following December (1892)—a promise he would *not* be able to keep.

Gilmore did not quite make it to the Chicago World's Fair. He died in September 1892 after conducting a concert at the Exposition Music Hall in St. Louis. The Gilmore Band survived without its widely-acclaimed leader for only short time, but his legacy lived on. In the Lehigh Valley, the stage was set for the arrival of Gilmore's most important beneficiary—John Philip Sousa.

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¹¹ “The Gilmore Festival,” *Bethlehem Daily Times*, December 19, 1891.