

# John Philip Sousa couldn't say no



A tapestry at Mercy Medical Center in Baltimore commemorates a performance by John Philip Sousa in the 1880s. The concert benefitted a new Baltimore hospital built by the Sisters of Mercy. (Mercy Medical Center Photo/Kevin Parks)

Nuns with a good cause are generally unstoppable.

Consider this fascinating story I learned Dec. 9 while on a media tour of Mercy Medical Center's new \$400 million Mary Catherine Bunting Center in Baltimore.

Back in the 1880s, when the Sisters of Mercy were building a new hospital in Baltimore, someone suggested they book John Philip Sousa and his U.S. Marine Band for a fundraising fair. The famed composer and "master of the march" was the Bono of his day, drawing huge crowds across the country for concerts.

The nuns hatched a plan to travel to Washington, D.C., where they intended to meet President Grover Cleveland and ask his permission for Sousa and his band to appear at the fair.

Sister Mary Borgia Leonard, one of the nuns who traveled to the capital, wrote in a letter that the sisters departed from Calvert Station in Baltimore without a clue as to how they would secure a meeting with the president.

The sisters somehow managed to get into the White House, where Sister Mary Borgia reported that a "liveried brass-buttoned official" informed them that the president was "out riding" and that it would be impossible to see him. Another official later suggested they consult the Secretary of the Navy, helping them set up the meeting.

Sister Mary Borgia wrote that the secretary "listened attentively to our story and responded to our request without the least hesitation."

Sousa performed on the opening night of the Baltimore fair, helping the sisters raise an astounding sum of \$20,000 – the equivalent of about \$440,000 in today's dollars.

Sousa once said that “sincere composers believe in God.” Sounds like they also believe in God’s nuns.