

A Lost Overture from the Great White Fleet

David Hare, Band Manager – July 2023

The St. Johnsbury band is very fortunate to possess an extensive music library of several thousand pieces dating from the late 19th Century to the current day. Public donations fund new purchases. However, Band Librarian Jim McGregor reports that we are running out of storage space.

Early this year I started going through the library looking for pieces that either did not have good instrumentation for our band or were incomplete. Our library is organized by style of music and then arranged by number in file folders. For example we have approximately 265 overtures. I thought this would be a good place to find pieces that we could get rid of. What I found surprised me and I believe surprised the band members too; they are wonderful to play.

Some of these overtures bear the stamps of the cruisers USS Minneapolis and USS Chicago and date to the late 19th Century or early 20th Century. These were given to then Band manager Larry Webbley, probably around 1960, many years after these ships were decommissioned and scrapped. Overtures were no longer popular for military bands to play.

Music Librarians put music in “score order” before filing them away so they are easy to get out and play. I opened up the music folder of ‘The Enchantress’ and found that it was all mixed up. Our librarians would not have done that, so it is likely we never played it. However, what really grabbed my attention was that the music was stamped USS VERMONT!

The USS Vermont was a new, steel hulled battleship and part of what became known as the Great White Fleet. (The nation was at peace and the hulls of the ships were all painted white.) After the Civil War, world powers thought of the American Navy as simply a “coastal navy” sticking close to home.

President Teddy Roosevelt set to change world opinion by having the 16 new battleships visit 20 ports of call as it sailed around the world. The fleet even survived a typhoon off the coast of Japan. The fleet returned safely to Hampton Roads Virginia in 1909 and President Teddy was there to greet them along with an enthusiastic crowd.

It is unlikely that any other band has this overture and if they do it isn't stamped USS VERMONT!

The St. Johnsbury Band will perform ‘The Enchantress’ at a benefit concert Monday evening, July 17th at 7:00pm to support the St. Johnsbury History and Heritage Center located at 421 Summer Street in St. Johnsbury. This is an outside concert with a free ice cream social. You may want to bring a chair or a blanket to sit on.

After her service in the Great White Fleet, the USS Vermont made two trips to Europe, supported American interests in the Vera Cruise intervention in Mexico in 1914 and supported the Marine Corps in Haiti in 1917-18.

During World War I, the USS Vermont primarily served as a training ship for engine room crews. At the close of the war she made four trips to France to bring 5000 veterans home. She was decommissioned in 1920 and sold for scrap to meet treaty obligations in 1923.

Sources:

Naval History and Heritage Command <https://www.history.navy.mil/our-collections/photography/us-navy-ships/battleships/vermont-bb-20.html>

Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_White_Fleet