

WINDJAMMERS HALL OF FAME

JOSEPH GORTON (1835-1916), Inductee 2003

By Charles Conrad, WJU #1525

Josephus Gorton was born February 21, 1835, in a log cabin on East Hill near Friendship, a town in southwestern New York. His mother was the sister of one of America's pioneer music educators, James Baxter. Gorton started as a musician on violin and later took up the cornet, studying at Baxter's Academy and becoming an outstanding performer. There is little information about his early life. He became a bandmaster with the Union Army in the Civil War, leading the band of the Fifth Army Corps. He married Ellen Louise Church (1844-1921) of Friendship, and their first child, daughter Lottie, was born in 1869 and survived less than a year.

Most of Gorton's circus career seems to have been spent with a single show, the **John Stowe Circus** that was located in northwest Ohio. It appears that he began as bandmaster in the late 1850s and stayed until at least 1870. Photos of the show's band indicate a small ensemble, about six or seven musicians. Advertisements for the circus mention Gorton prominently, with an 1870 script reading, "*Sea Shell Band Chariot leads the parade and contains Prof. Gorton's Silver Comet Band.*"

In 1871 Gorton became bandmaster for **J. A. Wallace's Great Palace Circus and Performing Animals**, which claimed, "*Prof. Joe Gorton's Silver Comet Band - the Biggest and Best in America, 24 musicians in the Golden Chariot drawn by 10 Arabian steeds.*" His last known circus position was as bandmaster for the **Great New York Circus**, whose advertisement is an early example of the coming trend to capitalize on the seemingly enormous expenses of the circus: "*Prof. Jos. Gorton's Gold Band of 11 pieces furnish our music. The instruments were by "Besson" of London, England, especially for us, and cost to import \$13,500. We do not gull you with side shows, nor rob you with a gang of Blacklegs and Gamblers. We do not allow a horde of peanut vendors to run over and annoy our guests.*"

Gorton was one of the first true "star" bandmasters, and, although he was a fine cornetist, was principally known as a conductor and leader of an ensemble.

Joe Gorton was among the many circus bandmasters who were also involved with other forms of musical entertainment. He served as the orchestra leader for the **J. H. Haverly's Original and Famous New Orleans Minstrels**. In 1867, Gorton founded the **Great Original New**

Orleans Minstrels, which would soon be renamed **Gorton's Minstrels**. This show would prove to be one of the most important and long lasting of the many late nineteenth century minstrel shows touring the country. The first few years were limited to the off-season of the circus and to locations near Gorton's hometown of Friendship.

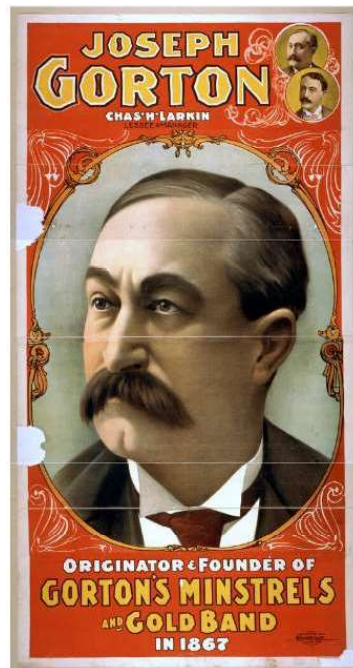
An 1886 Besson Musical Instrument Company advertisement contains Gorton's endorsement of the New Star cornet.

In 1877, Gorton's son Joseph, Jr. was born.

The child showed an immediate talent for music and would become an outstanding euphonium soloist and composer. Throughout his life, he was known as "Little Joe."

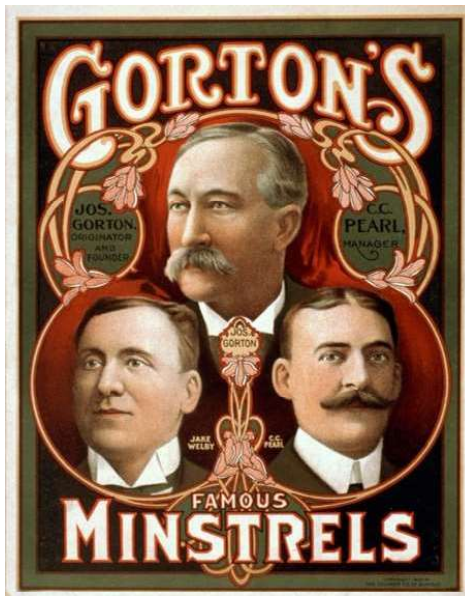
Joe Gorton, Sr. (now "Old Joe Gorton") was first mentioned as a composer and arranger of band music in 1886, and an article in 1888 credited his march "*Le Chevalier*" as being the outstanding new composition of a band competition in Nebraska. J. G. Richards & Co. published this work and 14 others in 1888. A letter to the editor of the September 1888 **The Cornet Band** confirmed the work was successful and well received when played at the Nebraska competition by the Bruce Commandery Band.

By 1889, Gorton was so well respected in Friendship that the local fire department named a hose company in his honor. The Gorton Band is shown in a full-wall mural canvas display held by the Allegany County Historical Museum. It depicts 3 women playing piano, guitar, and trombone; there are seven men, playing bass, clarinet, drums, violin, and the traditional minstrel instruments of bones and tambourine. Gorton is pictured playing trumpet. They are all wearing formal attire and the canvas is extremely elaborate and accurate in detail. The exhibit also features costumes and kerosene



Courier Litho Co., c1899

stage lanterns used by the company. One of the lanterns was designed to hang from the performer's belt - this was surely a dangerous practice! The troupe suffered a disastrous fire at the St. Johns Quebec Opera House on June 10, 1890, according to that day's edition of the *Brooklyn Eagle*. They were reported to have "lost nearly the whole of their effects." The May 30 *New York Clipper* reports of a train accident in which their coach upset while rounding a curve on a trip from Milltown to Calais in Maine. Some of the instruments were damaged and Gorton suffered "an ugly cut over the right eye." Accidents involving rail travel were a common hazard faced by traveling entertainers in the late nineteenth century.



Griffin and Marks' "Fun in a Chinese Laundry." The company is going out over the Northern Pacific, and will play two weeks in 'Frisco and return East in time for the early Fall business."

Things did not go according to plan, as this *New York Clipper* entry states:

"Gorton's Minstrels were booked through California, including two weeks at San Francisco, but owing to bad business through the Puget Sound country and reported worse prospects throughout California, the management decided to cancel all coast territory south of Portland, and go East. After returning from an extended Pacific Coast trip, the boys were all happy

to once more cross the "muddy Missouri." The business in our western tour was all the way from good to very bad. The coast country from British Columbia to San Diego was in a horrible state, and no show could make a dollar. Many showmen dislike to acknowledge the fact that they did a losing business, and according to their statements, very few lose; but we do not hesitate in saying that we are from \$2,500 to \$3,000 losers on the trip which commenced at Brainerd, MN. If election excitement does not tear up the country too much, we have a chance of soon retrieving our lost fortune."

Around 1891, Little Joe became involved with the **Gorton Minstrels**, both as a performer and as a regular correspondent with entertainment journals, particularly the *New York Clipper*. The Gorton Minstrels began the aggregation's twenty-fifth annual tour in Hornellsville, NY on August 25, 1891. The set was handsomely draped with cr me satin and plush, and the entire company appeared in evening dress. Gorton's Gold Band proved to be one of the most effective traveling and was constantly named by reviewers as one of the most important features, as were instrumental solos. Some of the outstanding soloists with the Gorton Minstrels included cornetists Sam Lee and L. P. Benjamin, whose specialty was the extreme high range on the Eb cornet. He played variations on "Comin' Thro' the Rye" with one finger. Other features of the show were Zouave military drills and a clogging tournament. The 1892 season opened in Brainerd, MN and received this revue:

"Gorton's Minstrels, now on their second Pacific coast tour, report business to be uniformly good and the entire company enjoying good health. The company number 25 people. The uniformed street parade, led by Corporal Johnson, the musket drillist, and accompanied by Gorton's Gold Band, is a strong outdoor feature. The program embraces six end men, the Crescent City Quartet, comic songs by Hughey George, Eddie Marks, and John Elliott; Tom Sweeney and Eugene Elliott in ballads, and J. Walter Wilson in bass solos. The first part concludes with the Brothers Elliott in their "Colored Swells." This is followed by an excellent cornet solo by Prof. Sam H. Lee. The second part is opened by a plantation song and dance by six good dancers, introducing Griffin and Marks, and is followed by the beautiful costume novelty, "The March of the White Hussars," in which Corporal Johnson does some clever work with rifle and bayonet. After this comes Hughey George in his budget of absurdities, Dewitt Cooke in Indian club exercises, and a neat song and dance arranged by Eugene Elliott. The show closes with

They had played such cities as Seattle, Tacoma, Puyallup, Snohomish, Walla Walla, Waitsburg, North Yakima, and Colfax in Washington before turning east, and Joe Sr. was exhausted at the season end. His health improved, and by May he was writing a new show for the next season. In 1893, band publisher C. L. Barnhouse published the "Gorton's Gold Band Series." It included "Tacoma March," "On the Trail March," "Free Silver March," "The Demon's Rally March," and the quicksteps "Crescent City," "Looking Back," "All Aboard," and "To the Front."

By 1895, Gorton had started a publishing company that concentrated primarily on works of his son. He wrote music to an anonymous poem entitled "Allegany Hills" for the 1895 Allegany County Centennial Celebration. The Gortons became quite prosperous and purchased their own custom railroad car, the Crescent City. It was replaced in 1897 by a newer model, the Gortona. The Gorton's Minstrels continued to be extremely successful for several more seasons, and composer Erdell Mutcheler wrote "Gorton's March" in 1904.

Joseph Gorton, Jr., "Little Joe," died in 1908 and his early death had a dramatic impact on his father. Gorton retired immediately, although the Gorton Minstrels continued for several seasons even after the elder Gorton's death on November 21, 1916. He received a Masonic funeral and was buried in Friendship at Mount Hope Cemetery.