

Naperville Bands

Naperville Heritage Society History Stories

What would a summer in Naperville be without the boom of drums, the oompa-pa-pa of tubas, and the crisp trill of horns drifting through Central Park? For 150 summers, musicians have met, marched and made musical magic in the streets, parks, schools and churches of Naperville-establishing quite a legacy.

The ability to make music is one of the hallmarks of civilization. Some of the most enduring cultural traditions are passed from generation to generation through music - usually in the form of singing or instrumental composition. Music traditions and instruments were brought from the Old World centuries ago and over the course of time, New World or American traditions were formed. When Joseph Naper and 12 other families left Ashtabula, Ohio, in 1831, they most likely brought with them an instrument or two and their own musical heritage.

Most music in early Naperville was confined to the home, schoolhouse or church. One of the questions debated by the members of the Naperville Lyceum after a special lecture by Mr. Chapman on Dec. 23, 1839, was "Ought the science of Music to be taught in our common schools?" The answer was decided in the negative! Perhaps it was the wave of German immigrants to Naperville in the mid to late 1840s that brought music outdoors and into the streets.

Drums and horn were first used in the battlefield to direct troop movements, and after victorious battles, to march through the streets in jubilation. The tradition of marching bands used in patriotic parades was thus born. The earliest record of a band used for outdoor entertainment in Naperville occurred July 4, 1859. The Naperville Brass Band, led by James Jassoy, had blue uniforms trimmed in white and performed not only in Naperville but also Wheaton and as far as west as Sycamore, Ill. During the Civil War, many members of the band enlisted and served in regimental bands.

After the Civil War, the Naperville Brass Band re-organized as the Naperville Light Guard Band, under the baton of Joseph Bapst and James G. Vallette. Although this band experienced a series of setbacks regarding performance schedules and venues between 1877-1897, it provided Naperville with lively performances and beautiful summer music. Its members later merged with the Naperville Lounge Company band, which was composed mostly of employees of the

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furniture factory. Between 1916 and the state charter that organized the Naperville Municipal Band in 1928, Naperville had at least two different bands and several band leaders simultaneously.

In 1929, Elmer Koerner, a high school mathematics and band instructor, was selected to lead the Municipal Band. Under Koerner's baton (1929-1965), Naperville's public band would be forever molded and secured in parades and concerts at Central Park. His successor, and the present-day director, Ron Keller, continues Naperville's grand and glorious tradition of providing summer evening memories and music with his own compositions and band favorites.

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