

Out of the Archives

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Olympia mayor started tradition of standing during National Anthem. Or did he?

by Jamison Murphy, Archives Outreach

Rossell Galbraith O'Brien was an accomplished veteran and public official. Born in Dublin, in 1846, his family uprooted and found themselves in Illinois when Rossell was still a boy. Before the age of 17, he was serving in Chicago's "Governor's Guard" as a private.

At 18, the Irishman enlisted with Company D, 134th Illinois Volunteer regiment, as second lieutenant, fighting in the Civil War, helping to conquer General Sterling Price's Missouri Campaign in 1864.

After mustering out and serving as first lieutenant until 1870, he was hand-picked by Washington Territory's newly appointed governor, Edward S. Salomon, as the territory's deputy collector of internal revenue.

O'Brien's new life in Washington would lead him through a winding path of public service... (The jump). He served as chief clerk to the House of Representatives, he served on Olympia's City Council, as Clerk of the Supreme Court, as a United States Commissioner, as quartermaster and Adjutant-General of the Territorial Militia, and as Olympia's mayor. Many of these duties overlapped, and he retired in 1895; and somehow, somewhere in there, he found time to seek a wife in Olympia, Fanny Steele, whom he married in 1878.

Certainly not the least of his accomplishments, he is regarded with the nickname, "father of the National Guard in Washington."

Needless to say, General O'Brien was an active member in whichever community he happened to be. However, the way he is remembered most, is for something he is probably granted a little too much credit. O'Brien did verifiably and successfully motion to declare the protocol of standing and



Brigadier General Rossell G. O'Brien in a full-body portrait from the Military Department, 1892.

removing hats during the National Anthem as a member of the Loyal Legion, Tacoma chapter, in 1893.

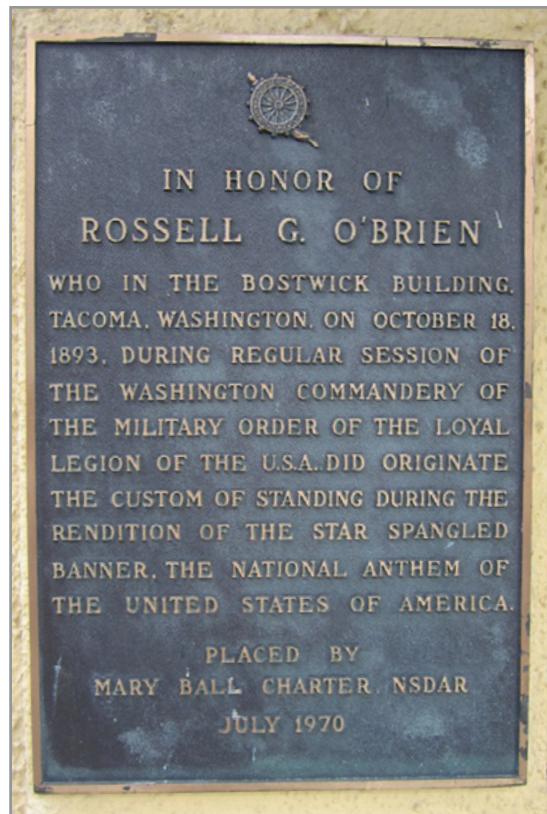
The rule only applied to themselves, though the group did play a role in urging other veteran organizations throughout the country to adopt and promote the tradition, but evidence suggests other groups had been making this effort several years earlier, and more effectively.

Don't get me wrong, I'm from Olympia and I'm Irish. I would love to think O'Brien is the primary reason we stand at attention during the anthem. That said, there's plenty to take into consideration.

As Historylink.org's [article by Dr. Duane Colt Denfield](#) cites, Marc Ferris' 2014 book, *Star-Spangled Banner: The Unlikely Story of America's National Anthem*, suggests a number of other historical figures and organizations that more likely played key roles in advancing the tradition. U.S. Senator Daniel Webster is a popular pick among historians as he led a trend in standing for the anthem at a concert in 1851.



Rossell G. O'Brien portrait, c. 1878.



Plaque on the Bostwick Building,
Tacoma, WA.

While there are probably hundreds, maybe thousands, of patriots we can thank for the tradition, O'Brien is officially touted by the U.S. House of Representatives with the honor. In January 1973, *House Resolution 137* proclaimed, "... Rossell G. O'Brien, former mayor of Olympia, Washington, is hereby recognized and honored for originating the custom of rising and standing with head uncovered during a rendition of the Star-Spangled Banner..." This was several years after Congress formally adopted the custom in 36 U.S.C. sec. 301, 1931.

There is also a plaque at Tacoma's Bostwick Building, where the Loyal Legion unanimously adopted the tradition in 1893. The plaque was donated by the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) in 1970, and it reads:

"In honor of Rossell G. O'Brien who in the Bostwick Building, Tacoma, Washington, in 1893 during regular session of the Washington Commandery of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the U.S.A. did originate the custom of standing during the rendition of The Star Spangled Banner, the national anthem of the United States of America."

So, maybe O'Brien did originate the custom, maybe he didn't. Maybe it was someone else's idea entirely, and O'Brien was "just" the predominant force in making it happen. Surely, someone out there thought, *gee, it would be nice to just flip a switch and make this room light up*, before Thomas Edison went out and made the lightbulb a reality. Maybe that's not a fair comparison. Either way, Rossell G. O'Brien is an important historical figure who did a lot of amazing things.

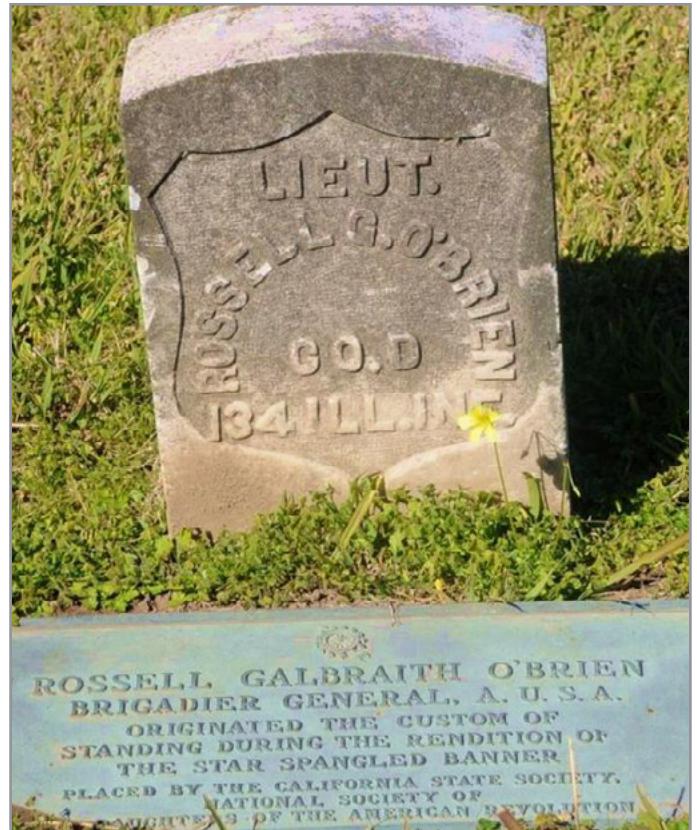
Things we know he did: fought in the Civil War, served as Olympia's mayor, served as a U.S. commissioner, created and oversaw the National Guard in Washington, among several other admirable feats.

Things he might have done: started the tradition of standing during the National Anthem, and planted the redwood now known as the Daniel J. Evans Centennial Tree.

Pretty impressive résumé.

"Father of the National Guard in Washington" is a pretty amazing moniker no matter which way you look at it.

And, as if his efforts in the public and political arenas weren't enough, he went on to spend the rest of his life as a successful realtor in San Francisco and Oakland, California. Unfortunately, Mr. O'Brien was killed by a streetcar in Pasadena at the age of 67. Who knows what he may have done with his remaining years? He didn't seem to show signs of slowing down. Rossell's wife and three children buried him in Oakland, at Mountain View Cemetery. Part of his family remained in Olympia for several generations. Their home stood on what is now Centennial Park downtown, on Union Avenue between Franklin Street and Washington Street.



Rossell G. O'Brien's grave, Mountain View Cemetery, Oakland, CA.