



The History of the Drummer Boy

Musicians have played an important role on the battlefield for centuries. Fifes, bagpipes, and trumpets have been used to instruct friends and intimidate foes. And since at least as long ago as the days of ancient Babylon, the beating of animal skins has rallied the troops on the field, sent signals between the masses, and scared enemies half to death. Sometimes the drummers given these monumental responsibilities were mere lads.

by Michael Aubrecht

During the Revolutionary War, drummers in the Continental and English ranks marched bravely into the fight with no more protection than their drums and sticks. Some of these musicians were young children, resulting in the cultural portrayal of “the little drummer boy.” Like many iconic images, the drummer boy’s popularity is the result of a certain amount of oversimplification and hearsay—but it’s also rooted in real events.

In “The Music of the Army: An Abbreviated Study of the Ages of Musicians in the Continental Army,” originally published in *The Brigade Dispatch* Vol. XXIV, No. 4, Autumn 1993, John U. Rees writes, “Boy musicians, while they did exist, were the exception rather than the rule. [Yet even] though it seems the idea of a multitude of early teenage or pre-teenage musicians in the Continental Army is a false one, the legend has some basis in fact. There were young musicians who served with the army. Fifer John Piatt of the First New Jersey Regiment was ten years old at the time of his first service in 1776, while Lamb’s Artillery Regiment drummer Benjamin Peck was ten years old at the time of his 1780 enlistment. There were also a number of musicians who were twelve, thirteen, or fourteen years old when they first served...with the army.”

Sixteen years of age, although young by today’s standards, was considered mature in the days of the American Revolution. It was also the average age of many fifers and drummers who volunteered to march in the ranks of General George Washington’s Continental Army. For example, the Eleventh Pennsylvania Regiment boasted the following drummers in its musician’s roll in 1780: Thomas Cunningham, eighteen years old; Benjamin Jeffries, fifteen; Thomas Harrington, fourteen; Samuel Nightlinger, sixteen; and David Williams, seventeen. All had in fact enlisted three years earlier, in 1777.

Despite the drummers’ noncombatant role, many of these musicians’ war stories are as compelling as those of the fighting men around them. For instance, in a deposition given in 1845, the son-in-law of Charles Hulett, a drummer in the First New Jersey Regiment during the Revolutionary War, described Hulett as having been engaged in the battle of Monmouth, wounded in the leg, taken prisoner by the enemy, and put into captivity to the West Indies. Hulett “relieved himself from the horrors of his imprisonment” by joining the British Army as a musician, and was sent to the United States. Upon his return he deserted from the British ranks and again joined the U.S. Army under General Greene. He was present at the siege of York, and after the surrender of Cornwallis he was one of the

corps that escorted prisoners sent to be held in Winchester, Virginia. He remained in service until the end of the war, at which point he was believed to have held the rank of drum major.

It’s rare to have access to a detailed service record of a military musician, since they were primarily noncombatants. One exception is the case of John George, who served the Continental Army’s supreme commander as his personal percussionist. George’s descendants have done an exceptional job of keeping his legacy alive through public commemorations. Arville L. Funk’s study *A Sketchbook of Indiana History* includes a profile of the first “famous” American drummer. Here’s an excerpt:

In a little-known grave in southwestern Marion County, Indiana, lie the remains of an old soldier traditionally acclaimed as “George Washington’s drummer boy.” This is the grave of Sergeant John George, a Revolutionary War veteran of the First Battalion of the New Jersey Continental Line. Through extensive and alert research by Chester Swift of Indianapolis into Revolutionary War records, muster rolls, field reports, pension records, etc., there is evidence that Sergeant George might have been the personal drummer boy of Washington’s Headquarters Guard during a large portion of the Revolutionary War.... On September 8 of that year, Private George, who was listed on the company’s rolls as a drummer, fought in his first battle, a short engagement at Clay Creek, which was a prelude to the important Battle of Brandywine. Later, Ogden’s battalion was to participate in the battles of Germantown and Monmouth, serving as a part of the famous Maxwell Brigade. The Maxwell Brigade served during the entire war under the personal command of General Washington and was considered to be one of the elite units of the American army. According to John George’s service records, he served his first three-year enlistment as a private and a drummer with the brigade at a salary of \$7.30 a month. When his three-year enlistment expired, George reenlisted as a sergeant in Captain Aaron Ogden’s company of the First Battalion [Maxwell’s Brigade] for the duration of the war.

Drummer boys during the American Civil War were younger than their predecessors but more advanced in their playing. Each drummer was required to play variations of the twenty-six rudiments. The rudiment that meant attack, for instance, was a long roll, while the rudiments for assembly and the drummer’s call were composed of series of seven-stroke rolls and flams. Additional requirements included double-stroke rolls, paradiddles, flamadiddles, flam accents,

flamacues, ruffs, single and double drags, ratamacues, and sextuplets.

Many drummers learned how to play by attending the Schools of Practice at Governor’s Island, in New York Harbor, and at Newport Barracks, Kentucky, although the vast majority learned in the field. Some were aided by texts, the most popular of which was Bruce and Emmett’s *The Drummers’ and Fifers’ Guide*.

According to historian Ron Engleman, the word *rudiments* first appeared in 1812, in Charles Stewart Ashworth’s *A New Useful and Complete System of Drum Beating*. On page 3, under the heading “Rudiments for Drum Beating in General,” Ashworth describes twenty-six patterns required of drummers by contemporary British and American armies and militias. The word *rudiment*, Engleman goes on, wasn’t used again in U.S. drum manuals until 1862, in *The Drummers’ and*

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Fifers’ Guide. And in 1869, Gardiner A. Strube’s *Drum and Fife Instructor* included a section titled “The Rudimental Principles of Drum-Beating,” comprising twenty-five individual lessons, beginning with “The Long Roll,” “The Five-Stroke Roll,” “The Seven-Stroke Roll,” and so on.

Prior to the Civil War, military drums were usually about 18" deep. Eventually they were made between 12" and 14" deep (and 16" in diameter) in order to accommodate younger drummers. Ropes were joined all around the drum and were manually tightened to create tension that stiffened the drumhead, making it playable. The drums were hung low from leather straps, necessitating the use of traditional grip. Regulation drumsticks were usually made from rosewood and were 16"

to 17" in length. Ornamental paintings were very common on Civil War drums, which often displayed pictures of Union eagles and Confederate shields.

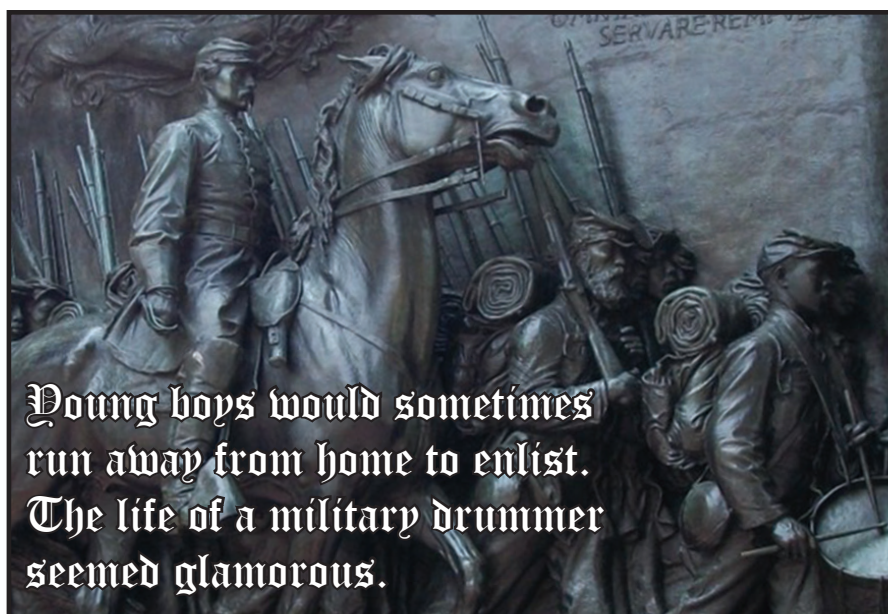
The younger the drummer, the more difficulty he would have lugging around these cumbersome instruments. However, that aspect didn't deter boys from taking up drumming, and they sometimes ran away from home to do so, as the life of a military drummer seemed glamorous. This impression was encouraged by nineteenth-century artists and poets, who idealized the image of the boy drummer.

Twelve-year-old Union drummer William Black was the youngest person on record to be wounded in battle during the American Civil War (1861–65), and it's believed that the youngest soldier killed during the American Civil War was a thirteen-year-old drummer named Charles King, who'd enlisted in the Forty-Ninth Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry with the reluctant permission of his father. On September 17, 1862, at the Battle of Antietam, King was mortally wounded in the area of the East Woods. He was carried from the battlefield to a nearby field hospital, where he died three days later.

One of the most famous drummers was John Clem, who'd unofficially joined a Union Army regiment at age nine as a drummer and mascot. Young Johnny became famous as the "the Drummer Boy of Chickamauga," where he is said to have shot a Confederate officer who'd demanded his surrender.

Among the young musicians in the Union Army were those who marched with the U.S. Colored Troops. Unlike their counterparts in the South, African-Americans, both free men and former slaves, were looked upon as soldiers and not as camp servants. Grateful for their newfound freedom, many Southern slaves savored the opportunity to line up in the Union ranks and raise their muskets toward their former oppressors. Free men from the North took the opportunity to serve as their brothers' keepers. Throughout the war their drummer boys provided essential camp and field communications.

One African-American drummer boy of particularly noteworthy service was Alexander H. Johnson. At the age of sixteen, Johnson—who was adopted by William Henry Johnson, the second black lawyer in the United States and a close associate of abolitionist Frederick Douglass—was the first African-American musician to enlist in the U.S. military, joining the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Volunteers under Colonel Robert Gould Shaw in 1863. He was with the unit when it left Boston for James Island,



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South Carolina, where it fought its first battle. The skirmish, along the coast near Charleston, occurred on July 16, 1863. Two days later the Fifty-Fourth unsuccessfully stormed Confederate-held Fort Wagner on Morris Island while sustaining massive casualties, including its commanding officer.

Johnson remained in the Fifty-Fourth until the end of the war. In the summer of 1865 he returned to Massachusetts, bringing the drum he'd carried at Fort Wagner. Four years later he married, settled in Worcester, Massachusetts, and organized Johnson's Drum Corps. He led the band as drum major and styled himself "the Major." In 1897 a memorial to the Fifty-Fourth sculpted by artist Augustus Saint-Gaudens was unveiled in Boston. The bronze relief [shown behind the pull quote on this page] depicts Colonel Shaw and his men leaving Boston for the South with a young drummer in the lead. In 1904, Johnson visited the monument during an event hosted by the Grand Army of the Republic, the influential association of Union veterans. Many of those in attendance pointed out the resemblance of the young lead drummer, and it's said that Johnson felt a great sense of pride for his participation in the war. Today the statue remains as a timeless tribute both to Johnson and the men he served.

On the Southern side of the Civil War, an eleven-year-old drummer in the Confederate Kentucky Orphan Brigade known only as "Little Oirish" was credited with rallying troops at the Battle of Shiloh by taking up the regimental colors at a critical moment and signaling the reassembly of the line of battle.

Another noted drummer boy was Louis Edward Rafield of the Twenty-First Alabama Infantry, Co. K, which was known as the Mobile Cadets. Rafield enlisted at the age of eleven, and at age twelve, at the Battle of Shiloh, he somehow lost his drum. Rafield managed to commandeer another drum

from the opposing troops and kept on going, thus earning the title of "the Drummer Boy of Shiloh."

According to an article in the Indiana, Pennsylvania, *Democrat* from November 15, 1883, there was a drummer boy whose youth eclipsed them all. Thomas Hubler, according to the story, was born in Fort Wayne, Indiana, on October 9, 1851, and two years later moved with his family to Warsaw, Indiana. When war broke out, his father, a former German soldier, raised a company of men in response to President Lincoln's first call for 75,000 troops. On April 19, 1861, at the age of nine years and six months, "Little Tommy" was reportedly the first to enlist in his father's company, which was assigned to the Army of the Potomac regiment throughout its campaigns in Maryland and Virginia. When his term of service expired in August 1862, Little Tommy reenlisted and served until the end of the war. He was said to have been present in twenty-six battles and to have beaten the first long roll of the Civil War.

As the years passed, the drum was eventually replaced on the battlefield with the bugle, although it often returned during veteran reunions. Many of the Civil War's drummers had gone on to become drum majors or drum instructors themselves.

No one can dispute the service of the drummer boys who left the safety of their homes and firesides to serve their respective cause in a man's war. It's unfortunate that their contributions are so often overlooked. Their legacy lives on, however. Today America's armed forces boast some of the most talented musicians in the country, with many of them still playing traditional instruments and cadences.

Michael Aubrecht is a drum and Civil War historian whose books include *The Civil War in Spotsylvania* and *FUNDamentals of Drumming for Kids*, the latter cowritten with Rich Redmond.