
Call to Arms: Military Musicians in Colonial and Revolutionary America

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In the morning, before relief came, [I] had the pleasure of seeing a drummer mount the enemy's parapet, and beat a parley, and immediately an officer holding up a white handkerchief, made his appearance outside their works; the drummer accompanied him, beating . . . I thought I never heard a drum equal to it—the most delightful music to us all.

—Ebenezer Denny

In an iconic image of the Revolutionary War, two drummers and a fifer stand resolute, determined, and, in a sense, calling the shots. The drummer boy to the left of center, looks to the elderly drum major for leadership, inspiration, and likely, to confirm his tune. Aptly named the *Spirit of '76*, A. M. Willard's painting portrays much more than three military musicians; it depicts the chaos of the battle flowing about them and their role in directing the course of the action.¹ As this paper illustrates, military musicians played a larger than life role in the American Revolution, especially given their often very young age and consequently small stature.

Revolutionary War military musicians have not been the sole focus of a great deal of historical research and as such, historians tend to reference the work of several experts to describe the role that these soldiers played in the American Revolution. Historians of the Revolutionary War often quote the research and writings of Raoul F.



Figure 1 *Spirit of '76*. Oil on canvas by Archibald Willard, 1875. The original hangs in Abbot Hall, Marblehead, MA.

Camus, professor of music at Queensborough Community College of the City University of New York, particularly his work *Military Music of the American Revolution*. Baron Friedrich von Steuben's *Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States* is also frequently cited, as he provided specific directions for the actions and duties of all military personnel, including the musicians. American and British military leaders' letters, as well as the memoirs and pension applications of the officers and soldiers who fought in the Revolutionary War, frequently illuminate the past with small, telling details, some of which describe the actions of steadfast drummers, fifers, trumpeters, and buglers.² Through these and other records, pictures of the past unfold to help interested historians reconstruct the contributions of early American military musicians.

Music was important in the daily life of the American colonies. Among others, historians Benson Bobrick and Benjamin H. Irvin each portrayed music's role in their respective work, and mentioned trumpets and drums as accompaniments to activities ranging from peaceful barn-raising to not-so-peaceful tar and featherings.³ Describing the emotionally charged incidents leading up to armed conflict, Bobrick illustrates the arrival of British troops in Boston during September 1768 as they "marched with insolent Parade, Drums beating, Fifes playing, up King Street."⁴ Later, as tensions escalated, he recounts incidents of "rebels parading through the streets 'with drums beating and colours (sic) flying.'"⁵ It is clear in the episodes that the military music not only accompanied the marching men, but that it also spoke to the participants and bystanders on a variety of levels. The British meant their parade to offend some of the spectators, to incite others to join the cause heralded by the parade, and, of course, to inspire the marchers with martial ardor and provide them with encouragement for their mission.

A number of accounts clearly show military music's capacity to pack an auditory punch. In addition to conveying signals and directing troop movements, the British occasionally used music to insult the Americans in battle; during the Battle of Harlem Heights, a British bugler mockingly played a fox hunting call to humiliate the defeated Continental troops. Significantly, this slur backfired, as General George Washington used the memory of its sting to drive his troops forward during the Battle of Princeton with "It's a fine fox hunt, boys!"⁶ Both the British forces and the American rebels used a widely known martial melody,

“Yankee Doodle” to make a musical statement—the British used it to express “contempt for [the Americans’] provincial rusticity.” For the rebels, it became “The Lexington March,” a symbol of their courage and newly found confidence after gaining small victories over the renowned, professional British troops.⁷

Historian Robert Middlekauff spiced up his portrayal of an incident that occurred during the Stamp Act crisis with a bit of humor. He related that when Governor Francis Bernard “ordered the colonel of the militia ‘to beat an alarm,’” the officer said, “if a drummer could be found who was not in the mob, he would be knocked down as soon as he made a sound.”⁸ This passage implied several insights into the scene and its corresponding social setting. It inferred that military drum commands would be recognized over the sound of the mob tearing apart Bernard’s home; that drummers were common enough that one might be found on relatively short notice, and third, that drummers themselves were just as likely as others to be caught up in the mob activities so common during the period.

Camus, the frequently cited professor of music, traced the origin of the drum as an instrument of war. Like many other Islamic innovations that found their way north following the Crusades, returning Christian knights adopted the drum from their Saracen adversaries and brought it back to Europe. As early as the sixteenth century, references appear to the drum’s beat setting the cadence for English marching troops. The drum, later joined by the fife, trumpet, and bugle, became critical to European military maneuvers and tactics as a “conveyor of signals and orders.” The British Army used the drum and fife to convey commands in the infantry and artillery—they used the trumpet and, later, the bugle primarily to relay signals to mounted troops.⁹

The ranks of American Revolutionary War military musicians, particularly drummers, were an assorted mixture of boys and men. Historian Lois Horton estimated that as many as five thousand African Americans, both slave and free, served the patriot cause.¹⁰ African American soldiers were more likely to have been cooks, servants, or drummers than to carry weapons, as many states, particularly those in the South, were alarmed about “arming black soldiers to fight for the freedom of slaveholders.”¹¹ Two widely reported incidents from the Battle of Cowpens in January 1781 illustrate the relative youth and racial diversity of military musicians. As the British mounted troops fled the field, the American cavalry hero, Lieutenant Colonel William Washington gave chase, and soon outdistanced his own men. Engaging the infamous leader of the famed British

“Green Dragoons,” Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton, in a sword fight, Washington suddenly found himself in deadly danger. An African-American bugler, described as a fourteen-year-old Virginian by historian Burke Davis, raced to the scene, and shot a British officer who had joined Tarleton in the counterattack on Washington. There is very little information known about Washington’s small savior. Davis described



Figure 2 *Battle of Cowpens*. Oil on canvas by William Tylee Ranney, 1845. Located at the South Carolina State Senate.

him as Washington’s servant or as a bugler-boy. The Washington-Tarleton sword fight, together with the bugler-boy’s brave actions, are immortalized in *Battle of Cowpens*, an 1845 oil painting by William Ranney, which clearly shows the young man’s bugle, strapped to his shoulder, as he fires his pistol at Washington’s assailant. Likewise, battle accounts mention a youthful Cowpens drummer—following the victory, Brigadier General Daniel Morgan “was so elated he hoisted a nine-year-old drummer and kissed him.”¹² Studying the records of New Jersey and Pennsylvania Continental Army musicians, historian John Rees found drummers and fifers as young as ten years old. The median age of Pennsylvania’s drummers upon entering the service was eighteen, while that of fifers was seventeen. New Jersey’s drummers ranged from fourteen to thirty-five years of age, while the fifers were a bit younger, and ranged from ten years to twenty-eight years of age.¹³

Military music served a variety of purposes, the most important to convey orders to the troops. Baron Friedrich von Steuben’s *Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States* listed the various drum beats and drum signals to be used, beginning with “*The General* . . . to be beat only when the

whole are to march, and is the signal to strike the tents, and prepare for the march” as well as “*The Assembly . . . The March . . . The Reveille*,” and others—each with its own specific purpose.¹⁴ The “*Tattoo*” for instance, “is for the soldiers to repair to their tents, where they must remain till *reveille* beating the next morning.”¹⁵ These are followed by “*The Signals*” which include “Adjutant’s call . . . First Sergeant’s call . . . All non-commissioned officers call . . . To go for wood; water; provisions . . . Front to halt . . . For a fatigue party . . . For the church call,” and many more. Unlike the descriptions for the various drum beats, which depicted the specific purpose of each beat, the description for the signals provided the drummer’s required drum-strokes, such as the signal “to go for water” which is described simply as “two strokes and a flam.”¹⁶ Von Steuben’s manual provided instructions for each member of the military, including for the “private soldier” who is instructed, among many other things, to “acquaint himself with the usual beats and signals of the drum, and instantly obey them.”¹⁷

The Continental Army suffered terrible deprivations and tremendous turnover during its life, and Commander in Chief George Washington made many efforts to not only support and supply it better but also to transform it into a more professional fighting force. A set of Congressional Resolves passed in May 1778 made changes to the structure of infantry regiments. Unfortunately, while reducing the cost of the regiment as compared to that of 1776, Congress created a regiment that “was only seventy percent as strong.”¹⁸ The May 1778 Resolves created the infantry regiment which included headquarters, composed of one colonel, one lieutenant colonel, and one major. The staff positions included one drum major and one fife major; the company officers performed other largely administrative positions, including adjutant, quartermaster, and paymaster. The new infantry regiment also included a Light Infantry Company, composed of one captain, one lieutenant, one ensign, three sergeants, three corporals, one drummer, one fifer, and fifty-three privates. Field Officer and Line Company configurations varied; “in regiments with three field officers, [there were] five line companies; in those with only two field officers, [there were] six line companies.”¹⁹ Field Officer and Line companies included one drummer and one fifer.²⁰ As in the British military tradition during the Revolutionary War period, the Continental Army frequently used drummers and fifers in recruiting efforts. This assigned task reduced the total complement of the regiment, as the “staff drummer, fifer, and one lieutenant were normally on recruiting duty in the regiment’s home state.”²¹ The musicians’

contributions were effective; stirring military music became a siren call for potential enlistees. Camus recounts that the “act of enlisting (or reenlisting) was called ‘following the drum.’”²²

Both the British and the Continental Army used drummers to inflict some forms of military discipline. It fell to the drummer to administer lash punishments, a task few desired, and a task that at least one drummer refused to perform, resulting in his own arrest and court-martial.²³ The Americans adopted many British traditions of military discipline, including the practice of “drumming out” serious offenders. Capping his physical punishment, a soldier “drummed out of the Army” received a very public humiliation before his regiment cast him out. The practice—even in its severe form—applied to both combatants and camp followers alike; the women who accompanied the soldiers and provided cooking, nursing, and washing chores. A certain Mary Johnson, “for plotting to desert to the enemy, received one hundred lashes and was ‘drum’d out of the Army by all the Drums and Fifes in the Division.’”²⁴ References to the practice mention instances where as many as fifty-five drummers and sixty fifers participated in the ceremony, which included playing the tune *Rogues March*, as they paraded the guilty party in front of the entire regiment. At the end of the ceremony, the thoroughly shamed miscreant received one final bit of humiliation: a “kick from the youngest drummer” sent him on his way with “instructions never to return.”²⁵

Drummers were often vulnerable in battle, as similar to their unit’s officers; they were instrumental to the effectiveness of the troops to whom they signaled commands. They therefore became targets for the enemy.²⁶ Drummers dressed differently than the typical rank and file soldier to be readily visible to their captain in the heat of battle, which, of course, also made them conspicuous to the enemy. While Continental regiments often had distinctive regional dress, the drummers and fifers wore the “reverse color of the regimental uniforms.”²⁷ Not all performed nobly, as seen at the Battle of Brandywine, when the “2nd Maryland Brigade, from the colonels to the drummer boys, turned on their heels and ran.”²⁸ Many more, however, were steadfast in duty and served admirably, as evidenced by their pension records, which attest to the service they performed and the wounds they suffered in the line of duty. A First New Jersey drummer, Daniel Applegate, risked his life to save his colonel’s horse from a bog, while the enemy fired at him. Another First New Jersey drummer, Martin Chandler, wounded during the Battle of Elizabeth Town, continued in service through the siege of Yorktown. Swain Parsel,

a fifer for the Third New Jersey, was wounded twice, while John Piatt, a fifer for the First New Jersey, who enlisted at the age of ten, served through Ticonderoga, Trenton, Princeton, and Elizabeth Town. The pension records of these men record heroism and misery; some contain lengthy recitations of battles fought and won or lost; others merely list enough information to substantiate the musician's service.²⁹

From the early days of colonial America's rebellion against Britain, through the long years of war, military musicians were part of the fabric of the American Revolution; adding their music to the sounds of life, death, and battle. Musicians played a special role throughout the period and historians often remembered them for the dramatic flourish they added. It is only fitting that memories of the British surrender at Yorktown include one young drummer, who alone "mounted the enemy's hornwork and began to beat a parley. . . As for being heard . . . he might have played till doomsday, but he could readily be seen and the cannonading stopped."³⁰

Drummers, fifers, trumpeters, and buglers played their respective parts in the Continental Army and with its passing in 1784, marched into history with their comrades, having secured liberty for America.³¹

Notes

1. A.M. Willard, *Spirit of '76*, 1876, "Pictures of the Revolutionary War," *Military Records*, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, <http://www.archives.gov/research/military/american-revolution/pictures/index.html#prelude> (accessed August 5, 2011).

2. Arthur Schrader, "'The World Turned Upside Down': A Yorktown March, or Music to Surrender By," *American Music* 16, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 212-215, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy2.apus.edu/docview/215873956?accountid=8289> (accessed August 5, 2011); Warren P. Howe, "Early American Military Music," *American Music* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 114-116; <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy2.apus.edu/docview/215871656?accountid=8289> (accessed August 5, 2011); Sterling E. Murray, review of *Military Music of the American Revolution*, by Raoul F. Camus, *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 30, no.3 (Autumn 1977): 531-535, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/831056> (accessed August 8, 2011).

3. Benson Bobrick, *Angel in the Whirlwind: The Triumph of the American Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 42; Benjamin H. Irvin, "Tar, feathers, and the enemies of American liberties, 1768-1776," *The New England Quarterly* 76, no. 2 (June 2003): 197-238, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy1.apus.edu/docview/215294471?accountid=8289> (accessed October 29, 2011).

4. Bobrick, *Angel*, 83.

5. *Ibid.*, 119.

6. Ross Rosenfeld, "Battle of Princeton: The Fox Bares His Fangs," *Military History* 21, no. 6 (February 2005): 26-32, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy1.apus.edu/docview/212604341?accountid=8289> (accessed October 29, 2011).

7. Bobrick, *Angel*, 148.

8. Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789* Rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 42.

9. Raoul F. Camus, *Military Music of the American Revolution* (1975; repr., Westerville, Ohio: Integrity Press, 1995), 6.

10. Lois Horton, "From class to race in early America: Northern post-Emancipation racial reconstruction," *Journal of the Early Republic* 19, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 636, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy1.apus.edu/docview/220951193?accountid=8289> (accessed October 22, 2011).

11. Lois Horton, "From class to race," 636; James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In hope of liberty: culture, community, and protest among northern free Blacks, 1700-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 59, 67, *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 3, 2011).

12. Burke Davis, *The Cowpens – Guildford Courthouse Campaign* (New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1962), 39-40; John Ferling, "100 Days that Shook the World," *Smithsonian* 38, no. 4 (July 2007): 45-51, 54, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy1.apus.edu/docview/236859459?accountid=8289>. (accessed October 29, 2011); William Ranney, "The Battle of Cowpens," 1845, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2h46.html> (accessed October 29, 2011).

13. John U. Rees, "The music of the Army: An Abbreviated Study of the Ages of Musicians in the Continental Army," *The Brigade Dispatch* 24, no. 4 (Autumn 1993): 2-8, <http://www.revwar75.com/library/rees/musician1.htm> (accessed October 29, 2011).

14. Friedrich von Steuben and François-Louis Teissèdre, *Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States* (Philadelphia: Styner and Cist, 1779), 90-93, <http://memory.loc.gov/service/rbc/rbc0001/2006/2006batch30726/2006batch30726.pdf> (accessed October 29, 2011). Note: The archaic Latin *f* has been changed to *s* in accordance with "13.7 Permissible changes to punctuation, capitalization, and spelling," *Chicago Manual of Style*, 16th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 2010), http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org.ezproxy2.apus.edu/16/ch13/ch13_sec007.html (accessed October 30, 2011).

15. *Ibid.*, 92.

16. *Ibid.*, 92-93.

17. *Ibid.*, 152.

18. Robert K. Wright, Jr. *The Continental Army* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983), 127-128, <http://www.history.army.mil/books/RevWar/ContArmy/CA-06.htm> (accessed October 30, 2011).

19. *Ibid.*, 128.

20. *Ibid.*

21. Howe, "Early American Military Music," 97.

22. Camus, *Military Music*, xi.

23. Harry M. Ward, *The War for Independence and the Transformation of American Society* (London: Routledge, 1999), 109-110; Caroline Cox, *A Proper Sense of Honor: Service and Sacrifice in George Washington's Army* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 88.
24. Camus, *Military Music*, 111-113.
25. *Ibid.*, 113.
26. Edward Roach, "Locust Gove and Revolutionary War Encampment/Eighteenth Century Thunder," *The Public Historian* 30, no. 4 (Fall 2008): 125-127, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy2.apus.edu/docview/222792398?accountid=8289> (accessed August 5, 2011).
27. Camus, *Military Music*, 158-159.
28. Allen G. Eastby, "Battle of Brandywine: Setback for the Continental Army," *Military History* 15, no. 5 (December 1998): 61, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy1.apus.edu/docview/212673261?accountid=8289> (accessed November 2, 2011).
29. Rees, "The music of the Army," 2-8.
30. Bobrick, *Angel*, 462.
31. Wright, Jr., *The Continental Army*, 181.

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