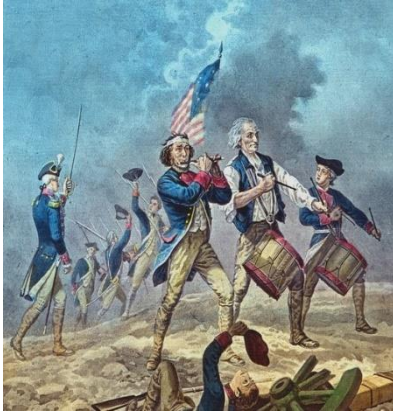


Fife and Drum in America

It is totally impossible to locate, and thereby make available, a published history of the development of fifing and drumming in America. The activity has never been considered that important to serious-minded historians, nor unusual enough to have mention made of it in publications other than newspapers reporting parades and the roisterous gatherings there following.



We do know that the drum came over to the areas of English Settlements with some of the very earliest colonists. Considered a most necessary adjunct to the art of war, the drum was also used for calling the people together for church services and town meetings. Some of the early churches were known to have been constructed to include a platform on which the drummer beat his “calls,” and records of many of these early communities indicate that tax assessments were often adjusted to meet the expense of hiring and maintaining a Town Drummer.

The fife had fallen into disuse in the England of that period and consequently did not accompany the early drum migrants. In the 1740s, the Duke of Cumberland returned from the continent of Europe with musicians long absent from English shores — Fifers. Soon the fife was actively engaged with the military drum, and by the French and Indian War, known in Europe as the Seven Years War, we started hearing it in the Colonies.

At the time of the Lexington Alarm (1775), many of the Colonial Regiments making their way to Massachusetts included one or two fifers and drummers per most companies. Whether they, at any time, played together as a unit of music is not generally known. However, since some companies listed as many as two fifers, with no drummers, there may be some reason to assume so.

Following the years involving the Revolutionary War, the Army continued in a rather reduced state, with a consequent reduction in the number of active fifers and drummers therein. A school for field musicians was formed at Governor’s Island in New York Harbor in the early 19th Century and continued, at least, until the time of the Civil War (1861-1865). Said school provided most of the fifers and drummers in the “peace-time” Army, as well as the musicians attached to the Army of the Potomac.

Many of the musicians returned from the service to organize fife and drum units in their own towns and neighborhoods. Although a good number of these groups functioned without benefit of regulations or uniforms, they all fancied themselves participants in a military-type unit of “Martial Musick” and continued to play the type of music they had learned in the Army and the Organized Militia. This was also a period of extensive publication of “manuals,” each designed to “elevate the state” of contemporary fifing and drumming. Between 1801 and 1826, twenty-six such method books were to be copyrighted.

These units functioned throughout the settled areas of the country and slowly developed regional styles that reflected the attitudes and systems of the more prominent musicians teaching throughout the various locations. Some units changed, in the interests of “modernization,” and were soon playing music originally designed for military bands... with the drum line being reduced in size and importance to the category of percussive accompaniment.



In New England, and more particularly the state of Connecticut, the older, more primitive systems remained popular due to the conservative nature of the inhabitants. “Quicksteps,” rather than modern marches, on the fifes vying with full, heavy lines of open rudimental snare drummers and “two-stick” rudimental bass drummers... this regional style came to be known among the participants themselves as Ancient. Following an

almost terminal decline precipitated by WWII, the Ancients went on to experience a slow resurgence, first in Connecticut and soon in neighboring states. Then, with the advent of our country’s Bicentennial Celebration, Ancient fife and drum corps were springing up throughout the country. Most of the once popular modern fife and drum corps had long since fallen into oblivion.

Following WWII, Ancient corps started getting together regularly for purposes of fifing, drumming and sundry revelries. These gatherings eventually developed into (and by 1953 were being called) “Drum Corps Musters.” The gatherings at the small town of Deep River, Conn. became the largest and most popular. By 1976 it was drawing as many as 80 participating units from many different states as well as from Basel, Switzerland... a musical community with which American Ancients have formed an extremely close association.

The year 1965 witnessed the founding of The Company of Fifers & Drummers and the organization now enjoys a membership of more than 100 fife and drum corps stretching from Switzerland “on the East” to the Pacific coast in the West. On July 12, 1987, we had the official grand opening of our Headquarters and Museum of Fife & Drum, the first... and only... such edifice we know of.

Several of the fife and drum corps are quite old, with some claiming organizational dates of 1767, 1860, 1868, and the styles played often vary in sound, tempo, and choice of music. The uniforms embraced by the Ancients are usually of the 18th Century variety although the dress of the late 19th Century (American Civil War and following) is also popular.

While many units insist that they are authentic reproductions of our earliest fife and drum groups, most are satisfied in the knowledge that theirs is the logical development of the sounds that heralded this country’s earliest history and, in that sense, they are folk musicians in uniform.

- Ed Olsen, Archivist-for-Life and Curator “The Museum of Fife & Drum”