

Drums in the Civil War: Pa Rum Pum Pum Pum

by Patricia Kelleher Bartram

Musicians played an important role in the military during the American Civil War. While they offered diversion, boosted morale, and incited patriotic spirit in soldiers, drummers, buglers, and fifers regulated every event in camp and served as key agents of communication on the battlefield.

Key Means of Communication on the Battlefield

Drums helped to regulate soldiers' marching but also allowed soldiers to "hear" the commands of officers during the noise and confusion of battle. Drummers in both the Confederate and Union armies were required to learn dozens of drum calls, each with meaning that would tell the soldiers what they needed to do. Standard drum rolls meant "meet here" or "retreat." A long drumroll when a drummer would just beat-beat-beat - and every other drummer in hearing distance would do the same - meant "attack now." The drumming would become an overwhelming thunder serving to push the army forward.



Civil War Drum
Battlefield Communication
Boylston Historical Society Museum



Corporal James Henry Flagg
Musician
5th Massachusetts Infantry, Company B
BHSM Photograph Collection

When the fighting began, drummers generally moved to the rear and stayed away from the shooting. They were noncombatants and did not carry weapons. Despite this, drummers were often assigned to other duties besides drumming, which nonetheless put them in dangerous positions. They walked around the battlefield searching for wounded soldiers, and as stretcher bearers then brought them to medical care. They were expected to help and assist medical personnel in makeshift field hospitals and were known to assist surgeons by holding patients down during amputations. Drummers might be charged with taking away severed limbs and even to bury the dead.

The Boylston Historical Society Museum has in its collection a photograph of a Boylston soldier of the Union Army, Corporal James Henry Flagg, born on 22 May 1842 in Boylston, the son of Marshall Flagg and Sarah Stiles. J. Henry Flagg, as he was known locally, served as a musician during his first tour of 3 years as a member of the 5th Massachusetts Infantry, Company B.

The history of his life and military service will be depicted in the upcoming Veterans of the Civil War book coming this Spring!

Among the collections of the Boylston Historical Society and Museum (BHSM) is a Civil War drum used by a Union Army soldier by the name of Eames of Northborough. The drum is 12 inches in height with a diameter of 13 inches. The hoops at the top and bottom are held together by 10 rope ties (that today would be tuning bolts used to tighten the head). It is made of a light weight wood and painted cranberry color and black, although its painted surfaces are severely scratched and show that it was much used. There is a canvas drum sling that the drummer would use to carry the instrument either around his neck or over his shoulder. Earlier slings used knots to attach the sling to the drum, while later ones used a clip or hook. This drum's sling is knotted in place.



**Hoops, Rope Ties, & Sling
Civil War Drum**



**Wooden Head
Civil War Drum**

Donated to BHSM in 1980

The drum was donated to the Boylston Historical Society in 1980 by Arthur Weston Knight who was born in Boylston on 6 April 1906, the son of Charles Sumner Knight and Anna Eliza Rice. In 1961, Knight moved to Vermont, where he was self-employed in the manufacture of bleaching equipment. He died there in Saint Johnsbury, Caledonia County on 3 August 1983 at the age of 77 years and was interred in Boylston's Pine Grove Cemetery.

Arthur Knight's mother, Anna Rice was a descendant of the Eames family of Northborough, Boylston, and West Boylston. Research is underway to determine the given name of the soldier who carried this drum. Northborough

records indicate, a Private Warren Fay Eames of Northborough was wounded at the Battle of Ball's Bluff, Virginia, however he was not listed as a musician. Broadening our search for an Eames who served as a musician has uncovered, a John Beaman Eames, who was a musician 2nd class in West Boylston at the time of the war. John Beaman Eames was the son of Levi Eames (born in Boylston in 1782) and his wife, Betsey Rice! The donor of the drum, has graciously donated many items to the BHSM taking care to make sure that related to Boylston, so this soldier is possibly the drummer. Is there another Northborough veteran by the surname of Eames who served in the Civil War as a musician or was there a connection between Anna Rice, (the mother of Arthur Knight, the donor) and Betsey Rice (the mother of John B. Eames, the musician) that might help to solve the mystery of the given name of this Eames drummer?

Acknowledgements:

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- <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/kidspost/drummer-boys-played-important-roles-in-the-civil-war-and-some-became-soldiers/2012/01/31/>
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- Collections of the Boylston Historical Society and Museum, Inc.
- Photographs by Patricia Kelleher Bartram
- Editor by Nancy A. Filgate, Director, Boylston Historical Society and Museum, Inc.

Published

Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Inc.

10 March 2023