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The Little Civil War Drummer Boy

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Abstract
When I think about the battle front, I think about soldiers in uniform marching off to fight with their weapons and small mementos from home. I also think about the many doctors and nurses who provided care to men riddled with bullet holes and disease. I never thought of drummers, though, until I saw the snare drum pictured above. However, this drum and the many others like it were an integral part of army life. For the drummers themselves, their instrument represented a unique avenue of service where zealous, but often underaged, patriots could join the war efforts without being directly engaged in active combat. To soldiers in the midst of battle, listening to the drum could either inspire patriotism or fear, depending on whether the staccato taps came from their own drummers or those of the enemy. Outside of combat, the drum helped to create order in camp and in drill, as well as provide some musical relief from the dullness of a long march or extended period of encampment. Drum-based music accompanied nearly every aspect of life for Civil War soldiers. [*excerpt*]

Keywords
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Comments
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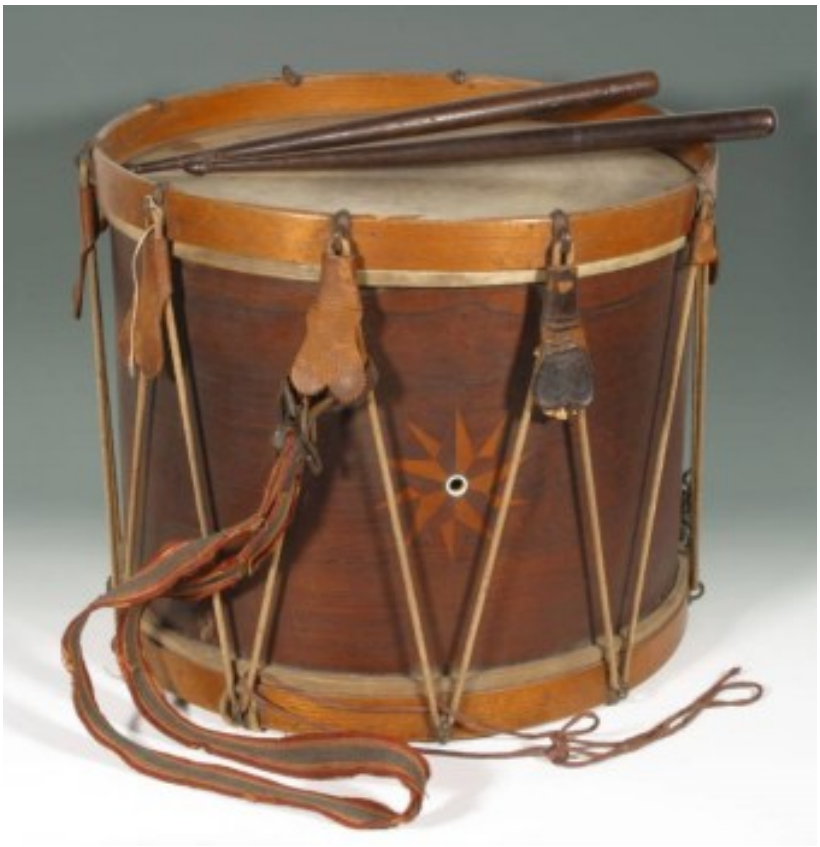
THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER
ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

The Little Civil War Drummer Boy

By Cameron Sauers '21



Civil War snare drum.
(Image Courtesy of Special Collections,
Musselman Library, Gettysburg College)

When I think about the battle front, I think about soldiers in uniform marching off to fight with their weapons and small mementos from home. I also think about the many doctors and nurses who provided care to men riddled with bullet holes and disease. I never thought of drummers, though, until I saw the snare drum pictured above. However, this drum and the many others like it were an integral part of army life. For the drummers themselves, their instrument represented a unique avenue of service where zealous, but often underaged, patriots could join the war efforts without being directly engaged in active combat. To soldiers in the midst of battle, listening to the drum could either inspire patriotism or fear, depending on whether the staccato taps

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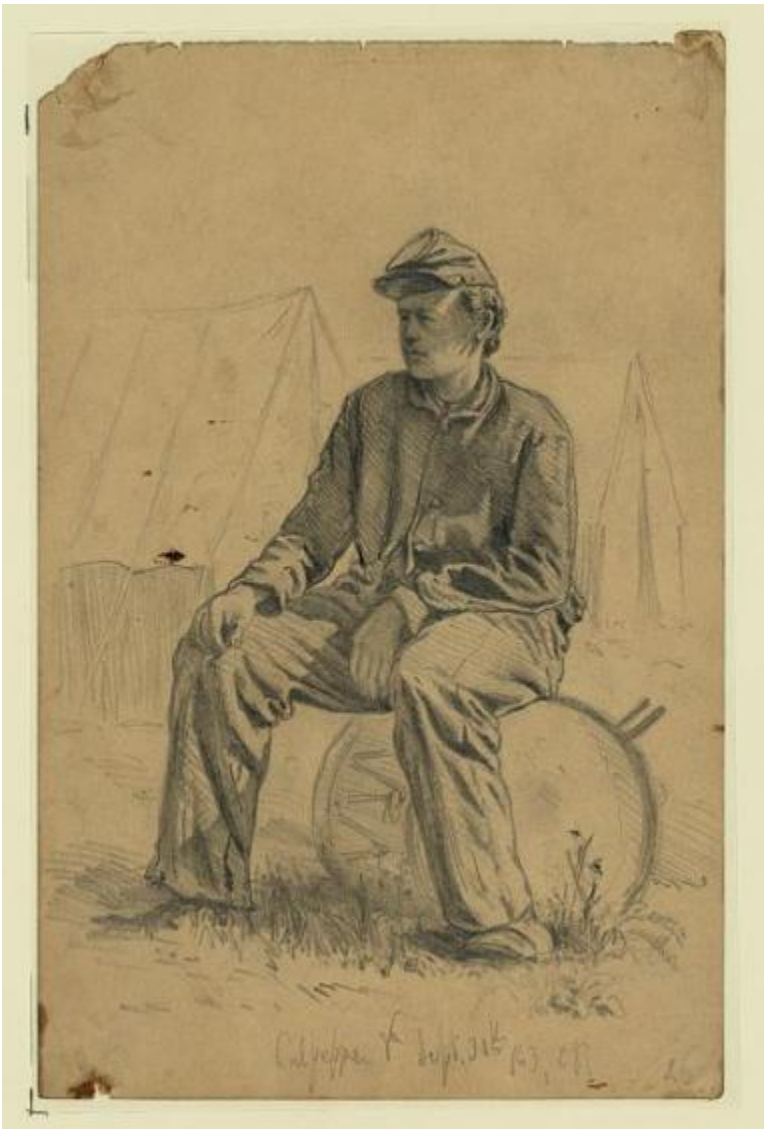
Over the course of the war, about 40,000 men served as drummers. With so many drummers and musicians, the music industry boomed during the Civil War. The army's need for musicians created a high demand for instruments, with companies like Stratton & Foote, the New York producers of the above drum, created by enterprising citizens. Union army guides for the drums dictated that the arms of the United States and regimental designation be painted on the drums; however, this was a rule which was hardly followed. Generally, field drums ranged from 15 to 16 inches in diameter and 10 to 12 inches in depth. The shells were generally single, double or triple ply made of maple, ash or holly. The variety of different compositions for drums was matched by the diversity of men who served as drummers in Civil War armies.

Since there were no strict age requirements for drummers, like in other forms of service, the age range of drummers who might have used the above pictured drum varied. Many of the drummers were young boys, some as young as twelve years old. Although these boys were not old enough to carry a musket onto the battlefield, they could still contribute to the war effort with their musical skills. Other men volunteered as drummers in order to avoid active combat, hoping that serving as a musician would keep them at a safe distance from the fighting. However, field musicians regularly set aside their instruments to serve as stretcher-bearers and in other roles of assistance to medical staff that still exposed them to the grisly realities of warfare. At times, musicians also did find themselves in the midst of battle. Twenty-eight army musicians received the Medal of Honor, mostly for bravery displayed while removing wounded soldiers from the field. Other musicians intentionally set aside their drums and other instruments to fight, such as George Palmer of the 1st Illinois Cavalry. Palmer was awarded a Medal of Honor for picking up a musket and taking part in a charge to reclaim an overrun hospital at a battle in Lexington, Missouri. Palmer's service is evidence that for Civil War soldiers, musicians included, their experience was not always what they expected it to be when they enlisted.



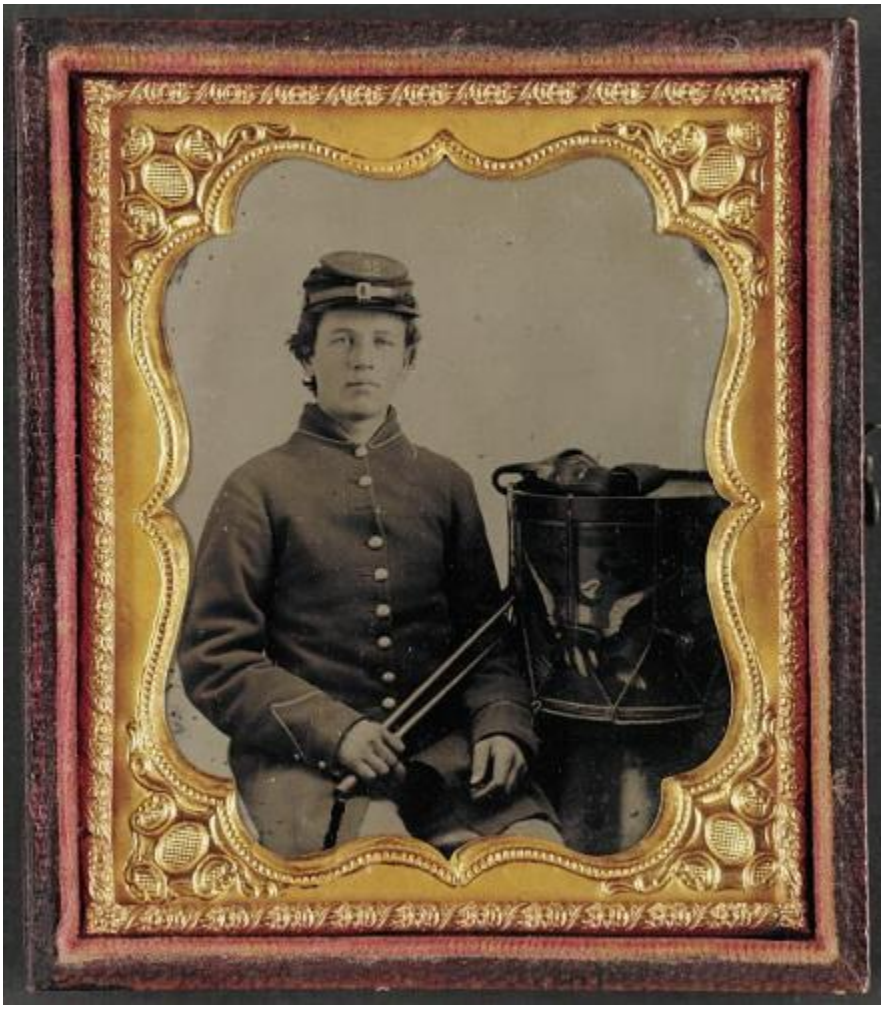
Drummer boy, taking a rest, Culpeper, Va.
(image courtesy Library of Congress)

There also was no specific requirement that one had to actually be able to play an instrument like the above-featured drum in order to join either a regimental or brigade band. Often times, drummers and other field musicians enlisted without the ability to read music or play an instrument. The resulting unpleasant music was best described as a ruckus, and sometimes even led to moments of hilarity. Timothy H. Pendergast of the 2nd Minnesota wrote about one such incident where camp mules mistook a band's "music" for the sounds of an incoming wagon train. This poor-quality music was less amusing for officers, who simply became frustrated with the noise. In this particular instance, Colonel Adelbert Ames of the 20th Maine staged an actual "charge" upon the drum corps with his sword in order to make the "music" stop. Training a regiment of green soldiers was frustrating enough, but poorly trained drummers who bungled commands became a nuisance on the training ground and a liability in combat. However, over time, with constant practice and rigorous training, , regiments and their

musicians learned how to function effectively. Despite the initial learning curve for some Civil War musicians, however, others entered the service already accomplished, such as famous band leader Patrick S. Gilmore who enlisted in the 24th Massachusetts in an attempt to attract young men to join the army with his patriotic music. Gilmore's service manifested itself in the song "When Johnny Comes Marching Home," a song with a recognizable use of the drum. The frequency of the drum in every regimental company meant that its music touched the ears of most Civil War soldiers.

In battle, drums were used to provide inspiration to soldiers, as well as communicate orders and direction to troops. Musicians used their instruments to play patriotic tunes that might inspire soldiers to stand their ground and perform bravely in battle. Aware of the impact that music could have, officers often ordered their musicians to strike up a patriotic song to bolster the spirits and courage of their soldiers. In perhaps the most famous instance, General George Pickett's men stepped off on their fateful charge at Gettysburg to "The Bonnie Blue Flag," which prompted the waiting Federals to strike up "The Star-Spangled Banner" as both a rallying call to their own troops and an attempt to douse the spirits of their attacking foe. Both songs begin with the beating of a drum. One can imagine the wide range of emotions of a Confederate drummer, perhaps a young boy, solemnly playing his drum as friends and comrades slowly marched off towards their fate. The Union drummers likely watched the approaching Confederates with renewed determination but also apprehension, aware of the destruction that was about to ensue, yet in awe of the enemy's martial courage. Solders clearly understood the impact that music had on their courage, as one told the Sanitary Commission, "I can fight with ten times more spirit, hearing the band play some of our national airs, than I can without the music." At Dinwiddie Courthouse on March 31, 1865, Phillip Sheridan ordered his musicians to stand directly behind his men and play patriotic music. One band continually played "Hail Columbia" for the duration of the attacks launched by Fitzhugh Lee's Confederates. Seeing how the music sweetened the sounds of battle to inspire Sheridan's men, Lee ordered his bands to play. The result was not just dueling armies, but a symphony of bullets, brass and beating drums that rang in the eardrums of all.

On a more practical level, drums were also used during battle to give orders and direct troops amidst the fog and chaos of combat. Drums were kept near the line whenever possible in order to help ensure that the correct order was sounded down battle lines. Officers relied heavily upon drummers to sound the proper orders, as wrongly communicated messages could lead to chaos – and needless casualties- in battle. Some units took advantage of this chaos, using musicians to mask the true size of a force and make the unit look larger to intimidate the enemy. On at least one occasion, music was also employed to draw soldiers away from their lines and into enemy hands during combat. Additionally, during lulls in combat, musicians often played tunes to mask the sounds of the wounded and dying that lay on the field, thereby steadying the nerves of those still fighting. For nervous or inexperienced men under fire, or even those in their fifth or sixth battle, the familiar rhythms of the drum helped to bring clarity and order to the combat confusion that could so easily stunt a regiment's successes on the battlefield.



Unidentified young drummer boy in Union uniform.
(image courtesy of Library of Congress)

Another example of the use of drums and music as a means of order and focus during combat is when George Custer had his musicians perform "Yankee Doodle," a song played partially on the drum, when on the attack at Brandy Station. Mounted cavalry bands, like infantry bands, had drums at the center of their operations. Following Brandy Station, Custer wrote that "it required but a glance at the countenances of the men to enable me to read the settled determination with which they undertook the task before them. The enemy, without waiting to receive the onset, broke in disorder and fled." Custer's anecdote shows the ability of Civil War music to lead to gallantry in combat. Music steadied the nerves of anxious soldiers and calmed them down so that they could more effectively perform their duty in combat. Musicologist James Davis argues that musical performances were recognized by soldiers in the same way that they recognized the bravado of their officers. A band's performance during battle became a public presentation of the unit's courage, so it was imperative that bands perform properly to represent the bravado and martial masculinity of their regiment. While serving in a different capacity than "fighting" soldiers, musicians and their instruments retained the ability to inspire their comrades to acts of bravery. The tapping of the drum was more than just music; it was a gallant patriotic expression that could help turn the

tide of battle. Musical instruments, like this drum, reminded soldiers of their solemn duties in combat and of the need to perform honorably alongside their comrades.

Outside of combat, this drum sounded the more mundane tasks like waking soldiers up in the morning, ordering their tasks throughout the day, and sending them to bed at night. Musicians learned eighteen different signals that helped in fundamental ways to bring daily order to a unit. Music encouraged soldiers as they marched into battle, but it also kept them company on long marches, as Confederate drummer boy Delavan Miller reminisced, "for a marching column ther [sic] is nothing like martial music of the good ol fashioned king." Music comforted soldiers when they felt homesick and provided a sense of camaraderie and togetherness, as evidenced by the 30th New York's use of "John Brown's Body" and various hymns to relieve stress and reinforce their soldierly bonds, even as the unit approached its June muster out date.

Music accompanied all aspects of life during the Civil War. The drum, and other Civil War musical instruments, had an intense power over the soldiers who regularly heard its familiar beats. If played poorly, humor ensued. If played well, a wide range of emotions, from patriotic pride to solemn reflection, could be produced. Music took on heightened value during combat, reinforcing the courage of soldiers and encouraging acts of gallantry when needed. Civil War soldiers were deeply attached to the musicians that served with them and carried with them a great appreciation for the instruments they carried. This drum, perhaps carried by a boy as young as 12, looks simple. It looks like a standard, typical drum. But to Civil War soldiers, it bolstered their spirits in combat and in camp in immeasurable ways.

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