

This summer on a warm Monday evening, don't be surprised if you see an impromptu parade, complete with a big bass drum, spilling out of the Hancock Church and winding its way through the neighborhood around the Battle Green. It's most likely the Junior Fife & Drum Corps practicing for their next big event. Made up of students from local schools, the William Diamond Junior Fife & Drum Corps is celebrating its 10th Anniversary this year at their annual Tattoo & Muster, May 5th and 6th, at Lexington's Minuteman National Historical Park.



Right, William Diamond Junior Drum & Fife Corps march in New York City's 250th St. Patrick's Day Parade.

DRUM ROLL PLEASE

By
Digney
Fignus

Most school children in Lexington know the story of William Diamond. He was the little drummer boy at the first battle of Lexington. The actual drum he used is still on display at Lexington's historic Hancock-Clarke House. I learned about it when I was a student at William Diamond Middle School: "In the clear chill of an early April morning in 1775... Captain John Parker, commanding the Lexington minutemen, directed his drummer boy to go across the road to the Common and beat the call to arms. And when William Diamond, bringing the enthusiasm of his sixteen years to the beating of his gayly emblazoned drum, rolled out the call to the village's minutemen, the War of the American Revolution began." – *William Diamond's Drum*

by Arthur Bemont Tourtellot

The fife is an ancient instrument that has been used by armies since the 16th century. The sound evokes a certain patriotic emotion without fail, and has evolved over time from a rich tradition. Originally called a "Schweizerpfeife" or Swiss flute,



William Diamond Junior Drum & Fife Corps drummers at 2011 Tattoo and Muster.

fifers provided the music the first modern armies marched too. Most often they played popular or traditional songs from the soldiers' homeland. During the American Revolution, before bugles were used, fifes and drums were an important signaling device to soldiers in the field. In the din of battle, it was almost impossible to hear shouted orders over any distance. Commanders relied on the fifes and drums to beat out particular patterns to signal soldiers to either advance, regroup, or retreat. It had a tremendous advantage because drums and the piercing sound of the fife could be heard over a large distance, even as the battle raged. It was from this military background that the original Fife & Drum Corps came into being. In early armies, each company of 100 or so men would be assigned two fifers and two drummers to "sound signals." When these smaller companies were gathered together into a Regiment or Battalion, all the fifers and drummers would play together in a "band" that would march at the head of a column or parade.

Modern Fife & Drum Corps are arranged in a very specific way. Traditionally they march four abreast.

The Corps Color Guard will lead the way, followed by the Drum Major, brandishing a large ceremonial mace. He directs up to 16 fifes (4 rows) followed by one or two rows of "side drums" (snare or field



Director, Carmin Calabrese at the USS Constitution.

drums, and long drums also called tenor drums). Bringing up the back, are the big bass drums. It's a heck of a sound when they all get going together, and a little overwhelming to listen in an enclosed space, but on the street out in the open, there is nothing like it. The formation snaps to attention as the Drum Major's brass-topped mace comes down. The drums start their roll-off to cue the fifes, and all together the Corps takes off into one of about forty different songs that they might perform during a typical parade. Thankfully, there is a rich repository of military and traditional songs that can be drawn upon.

The William Diamond Junior Fife & Drum Corps is celebrating its 10th Anniversary

The Company of Fifers and Drummers, a non-profit in Norton, Connecticut, is the national Mecca for enthusiasts of this type of music. It also publishes "The Company Book" which Fife & Drums Corps everywhere use as a Bible when searching for marching music.

Heading up this year's parade is Drum Major Simon Rubenstein, 16, a sophomore at Lexington High School. He is like the conductor of an orchestra, holding the four-foot ceremonial mace high above his head or swinging it off to the side to signal the precision team's next move. The mace was a gift to the Junior Drum & Fife Corps. It was presented to them several years ago at the annual Tattoo & Muster by the well-known and long-established Middlesex County Volunteers Fife & Drum Corps from Medford. The veteran group had been so impressed by the Junior Corps performance (who at the time did not have a proper mace) they gave the young band one of their own in a show of respect.

Fife Sergeant Shayna Rubenstein, a 17-year-old senior at Lexington High, leads the fifes. She sets the pace at the head of the fifers at the top right hand corner of the column. Drum Sergeant Joesan Blackington, another 17-year-old senior at Lexington High School, directs the drummers from the center of the drum line. These three important positions are earned through a lot of hard work, so Simon, Shayna, and Joesan naturally take their jobs very seriously.

Marching with the Fife & Drum Corps is a little like rubbing your tummy and patting your head at the same time.



William Diamond Junior Drum & Fife Corps at Colonial Williamsburg.

Senior Fife Instructor Mark Poirier agrees but adds, "while hopping backwards on one foot." Not only are you required to have a certain level of proficiency on your instrument, the Senior Corps is also a well-rehearsed drill team (one of the only ones in the country) that incorporates complex marching maneuvers into their performances. Even for young folks, it takes tremendous concentration to play together and manage your instrument while weaving in and out of formation.

The William Diamond Junior Fife & Drum Corps is open to boys and girls between the ages of 8 and 18. You don't have to live in Lexington or need



Vincent Canciello bearing the William Diamond Junior Drum & Fife Corps guidon.

any musical experience to join. Mark explains, "We are giving them a musical education as well. If a kid doesn't know how to read music we'll teach them." When I was there, Kirea Snell, 10, a 4th Grade student from the Harrington school was taking her first lesson on fife. Her mom waited patiently in the hall as Shayna took Kirea aside and gave her one-on-one instruction on rudimentary fife technique. Within a few minutes you could hear the familiar trill burst forth as Kirea started to get her first



Corps Clerk and "master of details" Tanya Morrisett left with Board member Susan Rubenstein.



Suzie Lee-Snell and daughter Kirea Snell.

I can't describe the satisfaction and big smiles on everyone's faces as Kirea finished up her lesson to enthusiast praises.

Getting started is easy, and just takes a small \$10.00 investment in a practice fife to learn the basics. Once you are able to master a few simple songs you can graduate to a wooden parade fife and start to participate in some of the marching drills. Drummers can get started with a minimum investment in a pair of sticks, a drum pad, and stand.

The program has a dedicated support staff. I was met by the Corps Clerk and "master of details" Tanya Morrisett, who gave me a quick tour and introduced me around. The Monday rehearsals are a little chaotic, but Board member Susan Rubenstein is another dynamo on the scene keeping things on schedule and getting things done. Lee Caron, the Senior Drum Instructor

graduate of the Boston Conservatory. He has extensive experience and has been a member of and performed with prestigious groups like The Old Guard Fife and Drum Corps 3rd US INF (Escort to the President), and The United States Army Band.

Mark Poirier is the Senior Fife Instructor. A founding member, he has been teaching fife to the Junior Corps since it started. He typically works with the youngest students. Tanya explains, "Mark has a special way of getting the kids to play. He's extremely patient." Mark has a simple approach to teaching fife, "I ask them all the same thing: 'Can you count to seven? Do you know the first seven letters of the alphabet? Do you have ten fingers? Can you tap your foot?'" And in order to get an eight year old to visualize the proper aperture (the way you shape your lips when blowing across the fife; the hardest part about

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Fife & Drum, continued from previous page

learning how to play), “I tell them to think about a food that they absolutely hate to eat, or a rotten piece of dog food on the tip of their tongue ... it’s worked for ten years.”

For a modest \$40.00/month, weekly music lessons, custom uniforms, and performance-grade instruments are provided to everyone enrolled in the program. The Junior Corps wears 1775 authentic yeoman fashions, hand sewn by Lexington seamstress Judy Crocker. The Senior Corps jackets, waistcoats, and breeches are the creations of Anita Bausk, another talented seamstress. The Corps even gets a fashion contribution from their Director, Carmin Calabrese, who besides directing rehearsals and contributing his wealth of expertise, has managed to master the art of making a tricorne hat, which makes him the go-to-guy for Revolutionary headgear.

While I was chatting with Tanya, I also got a chance to meet Bill Mix, current Captain Commanding of the Lexington Minutemen, and another one of the founders of the Junior Fife & Drum Corps. In the battle re-enactments Bill plays Captain John Parker, leader of the Lexington rebels. He gets to utter the famous line, “Don’t fire unless fired upon, but if they mean to have a war, let it begin here!” The Lexington Minutemen have been doing re-enactments and marching in the Lexington Patriot’s Day parade for as long as I can remember. A veteran of the group, Bill reminisces, “Back then (2002) we didn’t have a band, and for a parade, you have to have music to march to. There wasn’t any program in the schools, so we decided to create our own.” Bill put an ad in the paper and was initially able to recruit about fifteen students from the Lexington schools. He got a few of his fellow Minutemen involved, including Mark and current Director Carmin. Carmin had grown up in the Fife & Drum tradition and has been fifing for 60 years. Mark had also been playing fife for years in a number of area Fife & Drum Corps. Mark says besides having music to march to they wanted to “make fife and drum music the signature sound of Lexington.” They started out rehearsing at Buchman Tavern but Bill, a long-time member of the Hancock Church, persuaded the church to let them rehearse the newly formed group in the church’s back hall, where they still rehearse today. The program caught on and has been a terrific success ever since. What’s the attraction? Mark reflects, “It’s a simple

thing, but a meaningful thing.” He smiles and adds, “and we get to dress in funny clothes, and go to really interesting places.”

This year, the Junior Fife & Drum Corps has also recorded their first CD, chock full of patriotic songs. The disk should be available by the 10th Anniversary Tattoo and Muster on May 5th and 6th, and it’s just part of the group’s very exciting schedule. The season is stacked with 22 events throughout Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island, including Lexington’s 300th Anniversary Opening Ceremonies on September 26th. In addition, the Corps performs at community service events like the annual Opening of the Lexington Town Meeting, Discovery Day (May 26th), the Opening of the Farmer’s Market (May 29th) and the Flag Day Ceremony (June 16th). On top of all that, this summer, the whole group has been invited to represent Lexington and attend the Fife & Drum Corps International Muster, June 28th – July 1st, in Basel, Switzerland. Fife & Drum music originated in Switzerland, so it’s a huge honor to be asked to perform.

Wow, “Lexington Invades Switzerland.” That’s a headline I never expected to see. Best of luck to the William Diamond Junior Fife & Drum Corps, and congratulations on ten years of continuing the tradition!

For more info:

www.williamdiamondjrs.org

Colonial Times contributor DIGNEY FIGNUS performs at Nourish Restaurant, 1727 Mass Ave, Lexington Center, Thursday, April 26, 2012, 8:00-10:00PM, NO COVER