

The Browns of Wintonbury, Makers of Brown Drums

In October 2004 the town of Bloomfield will hold its sixth annual Bloomfield Drum Festival. Many ask “why Drums? What is so important about Drums in Bloomfield?”

The Wintonbury Historical Society answered that question at the time of the first Drum Festival in 1999 in a publication titled “**The Browns of Wintonbury, Makers of Brown Drums.**” The following summarizes that research into the importance of the Brown drum and its manufacturers to Bloomfield’s history:

Peter Brown, a miller who first appears in Windsor records in 1658, purchased several parcels of land in Windsor and built two homes. The first of these was near the mill he operated and the second, a few years later, about one mile north of Windsor Center on Poquonock Avenue. He and his wife Mary (Gillette) had 15 children, eleven daughters and four sons. His youngest son Cornelius and his family settled in Simsbury and later immigrated to Norfolk Connecticut being the founders of that northwestern Connecticut Community. Grandchildren of the other three sons, (Peter, John, and Jonathan) settled in western sections of Windsor, three of them being original petitioners for the establishment of Wintonbury parish, which later became Bloomfield.

Some family members claim to be descendants of Peter Brown who arrived on the Mayflower and gave life to a son, Peter, who first shows up in Windsor records in 1658. Others dispute the link for the two Peters. If the descendancy from (Mayflower) Peter is accurate, then they are also descendants of William the Conqueror who married Matilda at the beginning of the second millennium.

Regardless of their ancient heritage, the Wintonbury Browns of the 18th and early 19th centuries are descendants of (Windsor) Peter who lived near and worked at the Warham Mill off Poquonock Avenue in Windsor. Peter and some of his 15 children were granted “proprietors” lands extending from a highway (later Brown Street) to the Simsbury town line (which at that time was east of Duncaster Road). Among them was David Brown who died in Albany in September 1756 during the Fire Point expedition of the French War. Another descendent, Benjamin Brown (whose father and son were also Benjamin), lived on Brown Street and served in several Revolutionary War campaigns. It has been reported that the family made drums carried in that war.

Early in the 18th century the third and fourth generation from (Windsor) Peter was well established in the church and the community with extensive land holdings in the western part of the parish in both Windsor and in Simsbury. (At that time the Simsbury town line was east of Duncaster Road.) Son John’s family split with one group (John II) concentrated in Simsbury, eventually emigrating over the Talcott ridge and, still later, further west in Connecticut. This generation included John Brown, the abolitionist, born in Torrington of grandparents who were born in Wintonbury. The family of Isaac and Daniel, sons of John, remained in Wintonbury. By the middle of the 18th century the Wintonbury Browns were primarily descendants of (Windsor) Peter’s sons Peter and grandsons Isaac and Daniel.

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Tax records indicate that the Browns, not unlike most families in Wintonbury, were farmers. Today we would call them subsistence farmers -- producing barely enough for survival. Like most farmers, they bartered their produce and their skills. Bloomfield tradition holds that the Browns used their particular skills as coopers to produce drums that were carried in the Revolutionary War. The Wintonbury Historical Society has not been able to document such use of Brown Drums. However, tantalizing circumstantial evidence presents itself:

- Eighteenth century tax records reveal that two of family members were coopers (barrel makers) and others were involved in a tannery, together providing the basic drum making supplies.
- ? Labels in extant drums indicate manufacture by some combination of Benjamin, Moses, Eli, and William Brown, with each label indicating Wintonbury or (later) Bloomfield.
- ? Eli Brown, the most prolific name in known drums is the son of Ann Eggleston (and Zadock Brown), a great grand daughter of Baggot Eggleston, the first Windsor town drummer.
- ? Benjamin Brown (1748-1834), the second most frequently appearing name in drums, served in several campaigns in the American Revolution.
- ? Benjamin's brother-in-law Samuel Colton also served in the Revolutionary War.
- ? Elias Brown (1758-1793), one of the few Browns from Jonathan's branch of the family to remain in Wintonbury served as a fifer (they were usually both fifers and drummers) in various campaigns between 1775 and 1782.
- ? Capt. John Brown, grandfather of the abolitionist John led a march to New York where he died from a disease that struck the troops shortly after the Declaration of Independence was signed.
- Almost 100 Brown Drums made by combinations of Benjamin, Moses, William and Eli, are carefully guarded by museums, fife and drum corps, and historical societies. Many drum corps still use them because, as one drummer told a reporter over 60 years ago "A Brown drum is to a drummer what a Stradivarius is to a violinist."

Did Benjamin the cooper make a drum to carry into battle? Did he make drums for his cousins who served in various campaigns? Did he sell drums to the state for use in the militia? We may never know. The Wintonbury Historical Society says in its publication, "At his point we can only offer that the family was well represented in the service of our country during the War of the Revolution"

This local drum business flourished until the mid 1800's as the most recent surviving drum is labeled 1848. The Brown family's contribution to Bloomfield was not limited to drums, however, as family members held town offices for most of the 19th century including service as moderator of town meeting, selectman, assessor, highway surveyor, constable, collector of town taxes, highway committee, and members of the Connecticut General Assembly.

Two Brown family homes still stand on Brown Street -- The clapboard house at #45 and a brick house at #49 which has been documented as the home occupied by Eli Brown, the most prominent of the drum makers. By the start of the twentieth century, however, the Brown family no longer owned these properties.

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The Moodus (Connecticut) Drum and Fife Corps is the best in the nation. Anyone in the corps will attest to it. They are a living legend of the drummer who has been woven into the fabric of history since colonial days. A New Haven newspaper reported in 1933 that their "...style drumming is very powerful, rangy, and graceful. It is difficult to describe in detail and must be heard in comparison with other styles to be fully appreciated.

The Mattatuck Drum Band in Waterbury would counter claims of the "best" label. Others, too, would present their case. More than a dozen Brown drums are in the hands of these two groups or are owned by individuals who perform with the groups.

The use of Brown Drums by these two groups and their penchant for drumming, in the old-fashioned style and manner, certainly gives them a head start in the race for the "best" label. Many of these treasured pieces are played regularly in performances around the nation." Those who attend the 2000 Drum Festival will have an opportunity to hear the Moodus Corps on the Park Avenue Stage at 11:00 AM.

The Company of Fifers and Drummers in Ivoryton Connecticut presents many theme displays featuring fifes, military swords, music, uniforms, medals, awards, photographs, and drums. Included in the display are eight (8) Brown Drums. Susan Cifaldi librarian and assistant archivist at the Company has devoted over ten years to a search of authentic Brown Drums. She has uncovered many but also believes that a lot of "fakes" have been created. Cifaldi relates that a member of an old drum corps "...sought to alleviate the dismay that arose at the demise of the famous drum shop. He made several replicas so closely mimicking the originals that it is difficult to tell the impostor from the genuine article." It is also suspected that he was aided by a fellow drummer, a printer by trade, who replicated the Brown labels

Cifaldi's extensive research has identified more than 90 Brown Drums still in existence, including the eight in the possession of the Museum of Fife and Drum operated by the Company. Others, in addition to those in the hands of the Mattatuck and Moodus drum corps are in the Smithsonian Institute, Nathan Hale Homestead (Coventry, CONN.), Connecticut Historical Society, West Point Museum, Alexander King House (Suffield CONN.), Buffalo/Erie County Historical Society and our own Wintonbury Historical Society. The remaining drums are in private collections.

The mystery of when the first drum was made may never be solved. Virtually all known and verified Brown Drums have a distinctive label and date inside the drum opposite the air hole. The earliest date known to the Company of Fifers and Drummers is 1810 and bears serial No. 108 and the name B. E. & M. Brown, believed to be Benjamin, Eli, and Moses. Was the first drum numbered 1? Did the Browns make 500 drums before they started using labels and numbers?

There were not many historians writing current events at a time that we now call history. However, here are some examples of "later" historians' thoughts on the matter of Brown's drums.

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- ? 1886 Mrs. Elizabeth Warner, in a chapter entitled "Bloomfield" in Trumbull's History of Hartford County writes. "A great many years ago two brothers named Brown made drums, including small ones for toys."
- ? 1891 Henry Stiles, Windsor historian writes. "At a time many years ago, the brothers Brown made drums, including toy drums."
- ? 1935 Frederick C. Bidwell of Bloomfield writes "In the late 1700's the Brown family began the manufacture of snare and bass drums, the former mostly of a large size, 16" to 18" in depth. The wood was either maple or white wood and it is said that regardless of size, the price was always \$12.00. The shop was torn down about 1915."
- ? 1935 The Hartford Times report on a ceremony in Old Saybrook at which Brown Drums were played and displayed stated, "...the drums still beat. Many of these are Eli Brown Drums, and a Brown drum is to a drummer what a Stradivarius is to a violinist."
- ? 1935 Peter F. Mietzner of The Moodus Drum and Fife Corps is quoted in the Hartford Times as saying "It stands out like a real instrument no matter how many drums are playing."
- ? 1976 "The town of Bloomfield in a program describing events planned for the occasion of the celebration of the Bicentennial of the United States reported, "During the Revolutionary War, the deep staccato roll of the Brown Drum mustered the farmer and shopkeeper to arms -- and to its beat men, young and old, marched in the sacred cause of liberty -- in that historic struggle against tyranny"

That celebration continues in Bloomfield at the sixth annual drum festival this October.

The Wintonbury Historical Society has a (59 page) 1999 publication "The Brown's of Wintonbury, Makers of Brown Drums" by Town Historian Frederick A. Hesketh that contains many details on this family and their drum making. Copies are available at \$12.50, postpaid to US addresses.

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