Drumming Up Attention:
Fifers and Drummers in the Continental Army

During the Revolutionary War, officers in the Continental Army followed an old military tradition by using fifers and drummers to help convey their orders. Loud drums and shrill fifes could be heard for long distances or over the sounds of battle. Each company of soldiers (about 40 men) typically had one drummer and one fifer with them. On the battlefield, in camp, and on the march, fifers and drummers played tunes that alerted soldiers about when they had to get up in the morning or when they needed to push forward in battle. These military musicians were crucial to the Army’s communication.

How old were fifers and drummers, on average?
In the Continental Army, a few drummers and fifers were as young as 10 years old. However, most musicians were young men in their teens and early twenties.

What is a fife?
A fife is a small, simple woodwind musical instrument similar to a flute or piccolo. Fifes have six finger holes and an embouchure hole (blow hole) that allow a fifer to play different notes.

Did fifers and drummers play “Yankee Doodle?”
Yes! “Yankee Doodle” was one of many popular tunes that drummers and fifers played to keep the Continental Army in step while marching. Originally written as a song that made fun of colonials, Revolutionary Americans adopted “Yankee Doodle” to show pride for their country.

See reverse for more!
Look for these fife and drum highlights in the exhibits!

**A Massachusetts Drum** (below)
Robert Crosman of Taunton, Massachusetts made this drum in 1740. It is one of the earliest American military drums known to survive and may have been used during the Revolutionary War. The instrument is made of wood and features heads made of animal skin. The drummer needed to tighten the heads using ropes and leather lugs to make the drum playable. 

*Join or Die: An American Army Takes Shape, Boston, 1775*

**An English Fife**
Made in London in about 1780, this fife could have been used in either the British or Continental Armies during the Revolutionary War. Be sure to take a closer look at the fife’s details using the “Arms of Independence” touchscreens.

*Arms of Independence*

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**A Revolutionary’s Drum**
The 13 white stars painted on one side of this drum represented the new United States of America. Drums from the Revolutionary War often featured painted decoration to personalize the instrument or to make a political statement.

*Arms of Independence*

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**Photograph of Alexander Milliner**
Look for this photograph of an elderly man who served as a drummer in the Continental Army when he was a young boy. Originally from New York, Milliner witnessed the British surrender at Yorktown, Virginia and lived to be 95 years old.

*Revolutionary Generation in Photographs*