

By Judy Gonyeau with Jay Jones,
sixth-generation owner of Noble & Cooley

Noble & Cooley Marching to the Sound of Their Drums

*Moving to the Sound of the Drums
The spirit-stirring drum, the ear-piercing fife,
The royal banner, and all quality,
Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!*

-William Shakespeare, Othello

From the time of the Greek and Roman Empires, music and percussion have been used for all things military. From giving orders for the march to battle and to direct soldiers in the field, to hailing the heroes and the fallen after victory or defeat, military music and the preciseness of percussion have bolstered the confidence and driven the forces forward as wars broke out around the world.



The Ancient Greed Drum, the Daouli (shown with Karamoudza) from Zevgolateio, Korinthias. The Daouli is the two headed drum and vary in size from the small 12 to 14 inch diameter toumbi, to the 3 to 4 foot diameter daouli in the north of Greece.

In Europe, the standardization of certain tunes for certain movements sometimes worked to the enemy's detriment, as when, according to HistoryNet.com, "During the Battle of Oudenarde in 1708, a key fight in the War of the Spanish Succession, Allied (Anglo-Dutch-Austrian) drummers played The French Retreat so convincingly that part of the French army did, in fact, withdraw from the field."

Right up through the World Wars, the Korean and Vietnam wars,

the music used by armed forces carried not only coded instructions, but the rhythms and melody gave soldiers added meaning and motivation to what the units were doing. In WWII, the Allies used the opening notes of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 5* because it had so many meanings – those three G's, then an E flat corresponded to three dots and a dash in Morse code signifying "V" for Victory and was widely used to inspire patriotism through its use in films and various propaganda.

Even today, these forms of signaling remain as a back-up for when the power goes out but is primarily used for the pomp and circumstance that encourages everyone to support the troops and honor their country.

The Drummer Boy

Among the other arts that celebrated the soldiers was fine art. Paintings depicting heroes, battles, and equipment on the field brought stunning renderings of war back to the homefront. Among these pieces were paintings of drummers helping to lead and direct the soldiers to victory. Younger boys wanted to partake in the glory of the wars and with the age restrictions regarding who could join up, these young boys joined in by supplying the drumming signals to the armies, earning the title "Drummer Boy."

But the drummer and other musicians carried out other roles during warfare. During battle, they often had to help out at the medical tents, assist physicians with amputations on the battlefield, and clean up after the surgeries by disposing of bloody bandages and severed limbs.

Because they did not carry weapons, drummers were placed at the rear of the fight, but stray bullets and cannon fire would make their way back there and drummers could be killed or wounded. Some would become famous. According to thoughtco.com, "One of the most famous drummers was Johnny Clem, who ran away from home at the age of nine to join the army. Clem became known as "Johnny Shiloh," though it's



unlikely he was at the Battle of Shiloh, which took place before he was in uniform.

“Clem was present at the Battle of Chickamauga in 1863, where he reportedly wielded a rifle and shot a Confederate officer. After the war, Clem joined the Army as a soldier and became an officer. When he retired in 1915 he was a general.”

Creating the Drums of Patriotism

In a small town in the Southwest corner of Massachusetts stand hardwood trees that have served the community’s timber businesses. One drum maker and supplier to the Union Army during the Civil War was Noble & Cooley, a business that today continues to make drums using those same hardwoods and working with several agencies to preserve the “Noble & Cooley Forest” for generations to come.

In 1853, Silas Noble, a farmer, started making toy drums in the family kitchen for Christmas gifts. Thinking a toy instrument was a good idea for a product line, he paid a visit to James P. Cooley, Silas’ friend—a farmer and a bit of an entrepreneur—and together they incorporated the business as a toy company in January 1854. To this day, Noble & Cooley continues to create toy drums sold at such establishments as the Vermont Country Store and Colonial Williamsburg using manufacturing equipment that has proven to be tried and true since predecessors created it in the mid-19th and early 20th centuries.



A rather impressive image of the Brown, Cooley, Noble, and Strong families of the Noble & Cooley Company taken and retouched by the photographer in Granville, Massachusetts

Noble & Cooley is the oldest drum company in the U.S. and one of the oldest in the world. Seven generations of the Cooley family have worked and continue to work steadily to keep the business alive and moving forward using not only the equipment created by their forefathers, but today using current, intricate, carefully engineered techniques for the creation of drum sets for the likes of Phil Collins (whose son uses the drums while on tour with Dad), Bill Kreutzmann of the Grateful Dead, Denny Carmassi (plays with Heart and Whitesnake), and Sir Paul McCartney. Company President Jay Jones (great-great-great-grandson to James P. Cooley) made this turn in direction, establishing the first U.S. custom drum shop.



An image of inspiration that hangs in Jay Jones’ office.

Civil War Drums

“The military drums we made were contract drums for the Union Army,” says Jay Jones. The contract went out for the drums with select specifications: they had to be 16 inches in diameter, 12” deep, and with a set number of leather keepers on it – ears for tensioning.” The drums needed to be small enough to be portable for the players, and having produced a variety of sizes of toy drums Noble & Cooley fit the bill. “We could meet those requirements so we made thousands of drums for the Civil War.”

Following the Civil War, Noble & Cooley was established as the largest manufacturer of military drums in the world. At the same time, the company expanded to make toy drums and other playthings – including “rolling hoops,” tambourines, and zitherns. The 1888 catalog cover shows they were manufacturing it all in Granville and had a salesroom on East Broadway in New York.

“Unfortunately, the company burned down in 1889 and we lost all the records specifying how many drums we made and where we shipped them to. We salvaged what equipment we could from the fire but pretty much lost everything.” This included samples for current sales and examples of the drums created for the Civil War.

The Company moved quarter-mile down the road. “Between 1854 and 1889, there was another drum manufacturing company operating in Granville so after the fire, we bought their factory and then built the building where the current offices are to this day in 1889,” said Jones.



Noble & Cooley built this drum for the Union Army during the Civil War. It was picked up off the battlefield at Gettysburg by James B. Forrest, a musician and rifleman from Pennsylvania. The drum remained in Forrest’s family until the drum changed into the hands of a broker of Civil War Memorabilia. “We are thrilled to have recovered this drum through the help of very generous donations.”

Noble & Cooley Center for Historic Preservation

World War II

Not only did Noble & Cooley play an important role in the Civil War, but with new technology developed to use in the Second World War, they found themselves working in concert with a nearby company located in Simsbury, Connecticut.

The Ensign-Bickford Explosives Company (E-B) was established in 1836 by William Bickford and started out by creating the world’s first safety fuse for mining that saved hundreds of lives every year. E-B followed that up by introducing several other versions of detonating cord. In 1937, they trademarked the word “Primacord,” which was often used as a generic name for detonating cord from that point forward. With WWII fast approaching, they turned to Noble & Cooley to create the wooden reels that would hold the product while it was sent to the battlefields and then used by the explosives experts. The reels were on the



Above, 1937 reels of Primacord showing the trademark awarded in that year. photo: Ensign-Bickford

Shown below are some of the reels created for hauling detonating cord into battle during World War II.



smaller side, measuring a maximum of 2-feet in diameter so it could easily be transported by a soldier with a length of cord to set up an explosion. Thousands of reels were made and sent overseas and deployed with troops on missions.

The current building used for its offices was built by the workers of Noble & Cooley in 1889 after the company purchased another drum company nearby and moved into its factory following the 1889 fire.



Get the Skin-ny on Drum Production

The vast majority of the equipment being utilized at the factory is original to the start of the business. “The bending equipment for bending the drum survived the 1889 fire. We are using that same equipment today for our modern product— bending wood on a machine that my great-great-great-grandfather built in the 1870s. because it meets our one requirement: it works.”



The structure of a drum is created by steaming and bending one piece of local hardwood into the shape of the drum. After World War II, “everything was all about speed of production,” said Jones, “and everything moved to plywood. You could put together 8-10 plies of plywood, put it in the press, and have a shell in 10 minutes. A solid wood drum takes 10-12 weeks of aging and curing after it was steamed and bent. However, the tonal characteristics of the plywood box and the resonant solid hardwood chamber were very different.”

As for the drum’s playing surface, or “skin,” said Jones, “originally, the skins used on the drums were animal skins – typically calfskin. The bottom skin had to be a little thinner for the snares to work so they were typically goat.” The process to prepare the skins was messy, smelly, and time-consuming, and after soaking the skin to put onto the drum they had to dry.

When it came to creating images on the drums, intricate stencils were impressed onto the wood drums with wood-burning equipment. As for the toy tin drums that came into



The two machines shown directly above are the bending machines that survived the fire of 1889.

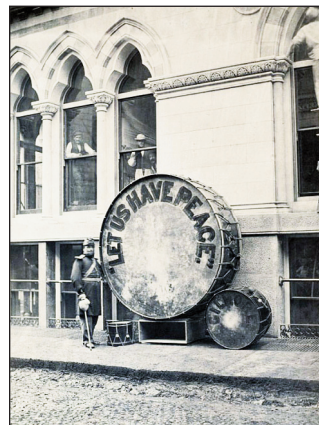
fashion around 1900, a die would be pressed into the metal and an ink roller would pass over the impression, then the next die would be set and so on until the drum had two or three colors. Dies would be stamped, lined up or registered to the metal color blocks on the printer, and run through. The problem there was that if you had more than three colors for thousands of drums, you had to re-register the piece, clean off and re-ink the blocks, and run all of them through again.

“My grandfather took what they learned there and designed and had built an 8-color self-inking rotary printing press in 1926,” said Jones. Jones went on to describe a visit from a printing specialist from the Smithsonian Institution who believes it is the earliest such multi-color printer ever made. She tried to obtain it for the Museums, but it is still in use today so they will have to wait.

Veneer would also be applied to the wood rims to give them a finished look. Always looking for innovative ways to stretch their product line, the veneer strips that were left over from production became another product – cigar lighters. “It was just a thin strip of veneer that people would stick into a wood stove to light it and use it as a match,” said Jones. “These pre-date matches and electricity.”

Hitting the High Notes

One of the points of pride for the Company was when it created a drum for



The Peace Jubilee Drum made by Noble & Cooley

“it was celebrated at every stop along the way,” noted Jones.

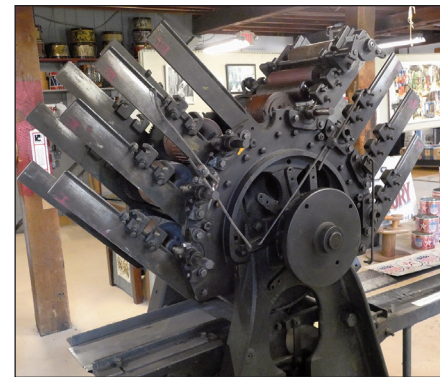
Noble & Cooley Marches On

Said Jones, “We went through the transition from water power to steam power; from DC electricity to AC electricity. Not many companies have gone through that many transitions of power generation. And we still have examples of all of it here.”

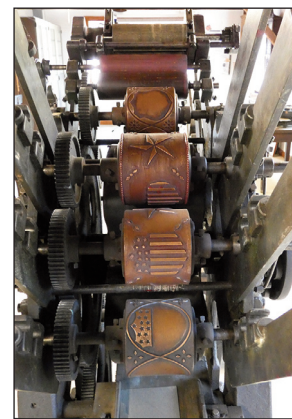
In the first year, Noble and Cooley made 631 drums. After the Civil War, they had a large factory that made 80,000 drums per year and had 18 employees, and by 1873 they were producing 100,000 drums per year.

Oddly enough, it was the difference in drum construction after World War II that led to their current success. Musicians had begun to scour estate and tag sales for pre-WWII drums that had the hardwood construction vs. plywood. The tone and overall sound these drums made were more full-bodied. When approached by a musician seeking just such a drum, Jones said that while they did not have any in stock, they could re-create exactly what the musician was looking for, igniting the crafting of non-toy and non-military drums for higher-end customers while still using the equipment created by earlier generations. You could say the story had come, with apologies from the author, full circle.

Jay Jones started working at Noble & Cooley while in grade school and learned the many crafts of construction, electrical wiring, plumbing, welding, and running all of the machine tools at an early age. By June of 1973, Jay served as general manager and purchasing agent. Always looking for different products to enrich their production calendar, Jay jumped on the opportunity to make steam-bent, professional drums. What started out as Jay’s innovations have now become industry standards worldwide.



Above and below, the 8-color press made at the turn of the century and still going strong



A b r a h a m

Lincoln using a rail he had split for the hoops of the drum. In August of 1860, James P. Cooley wrote in his diary: “Finished the Lincoln drum today, the finest thing ever made.” This drum was presented to the First Massachusetts Regiment serving in the Civil War and used across the state of Massachusetts at political rallies for Lincoln’s campaign.

In June of 1869, the end of the War was celebrated at the National Peace Jubilee in Boston, Massachusetts, and Noble & Cooley built the largest drum in the world (at that time) with an 8-foot diameter and “Let Us Have Peace” around its edge. As the drum made its way to Boston by rail,