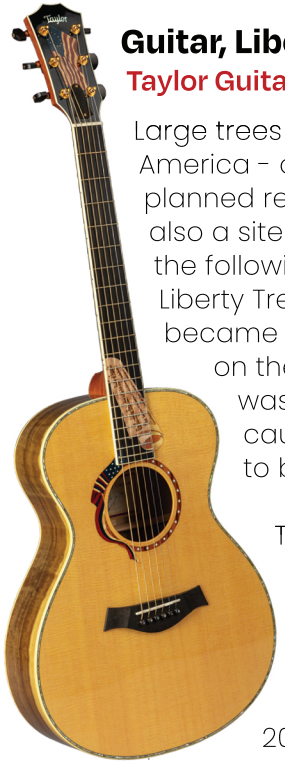
American Makers and War

C.G. Conn Instruments

Conn became the largest instrument maker in the world, but began as a shop in Elkhart, Indiana, run by a Civil War Veteran named Charles G. Conn. The Conn company were important innovators who established the first large scale band instrument production in the United States. Conn also made the first American saxophone, the first commercially successful sousaphone, and the Stroboconn tuning device. During WWII, the Conn Company factories ceased production of civilian instruments and focused their efforts on making weapons and tools for war. The NMM has over 500 instruments made by the Conn Company.

Gibson Guitars

Gibson Guitars was started by Orville Gibson, an instrument innovator in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Orville Gibson performed and experimented with guitar and mandolin design. Gibson guitars became extremely popular, and the company continued to innovate in the design of Hawaiian lapsteel guitars and solid body guitars like the Les Paul. During WWII, many Gibson employees went to fight in the war, and women replaced them for the duration of the war. These women made Banner Guitars, which were only made for a few short years during WWII until their remake several decades later. See many Gibson models in our Lillibridge Gallery!



Guitar, Liberty Tree Grand Theater Model, No. 194

Taylor Guitars, El Cajon, California, 2002

Large trees were common meeting places in 18th century America - one, an elm in Boston, became the location of planned rebellion over the Stamp Act of 1765. The tree was also a site of celebration following the repeal of the act in the following year. Trees in other towns came to be named Liberty Trees after the original, and Liberty Trees also became a symbol of the French Revolution. A tulip poplar on the site of St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland was one of these trees. In 1999, Hurricane Floyd caused catastrophic damage to this tree, and it had to be removed, after an estimated 400 years of life.

Taylor Guitars purchased 80,000 pounds of wood from this tree and used it to make the backs and sides of 400 LTG Liberty Tree guitars. After those sold out, remaining wood was used for 400 Baby Liberty 3/4-size guitars. Serial No. 20020325126 / No. 194 of 400. Lynn and Steve Dillon Collection, 2021. NMM 15565.

American Made. American Played.

The Sounds of Freedom

This July, the NMM is celebrating American musical traditions and their support of the military across the nation's history. Military bands have accompanied and inspired American troops for generations.

Although music and the military don't seem to be a natural pair, they have complemented each other throughout American history. Even Confederate General Robert E. Lee is quoted as having said "I don't believe we can have an army without music," which emphasizes the fact that music has been an important part of American military history for a long time.

American Made

Military History

American Played

Explore our galleries to discover the stories of music and military represented in our collections, and keep an eye out for red stars, which indicate instruments which are American made, blue stars, which indicate instruments which are American played, and flag icons which highlight important stories in American military history.

national music museum

NMMUSD.ORG

LAMONT GALLERY

Star Spangled trumpet
Trumpets have been an integral part of American military bands for a long time. Trumpet or bugle calls signal troop movements and were important parts of daily camp life in the military. Later, military bands transitioned to be largely ornamental, and trumpets like this one evoke the modern tradition of military bands as a means for celebration. NMM 07147.

Guitar (Johnny Cash)
While many of us know Johnny Cash for his country music hits, he also served in the United States Air Force. His time in the armed forces influenced his music, and Cash maintained a great deal of respect for soldiers and other veterans throughout his life. NMM 10770.

Civil War Violin (James Cross)
Music has had both official and unofficial roles in armed conflict for a long time. Lieutenant James A. Cross brought his violin with him when he left his home in New York to fight in the Civil War. This violin undoubtedly offered him and his comrades necessary respite from the horrors of both battle and camp life with the music he played. Cross also carved different images into the violin: 13 stars for 13 original American colonies, his name and regiment identification, and his wife's name, Mary, with the year he left for war. Representing his country, those he fought with, and those he fought for, this instrument highlights what was important to Cross, and likely many other soldiers. NMM 05794.

Keyed bugle (Thomas Harris)
The Civil War was an important turning point for both Black Americans and band culture in the United States. During the Civil War, Black Americans were finally allowed to join the military and fight for their country. Additionally, the Civil War inspired a flourishing period of band music, often known as the Golden Age of Bands, during which composers like John Philip Sousa and Patrick Gilmore composed popular tunes for bands. This bugle was owned by the first two leaders of one of the first Black bands in Ohio! NMM 07060.

Clarinet, E-flat (Bruce E. Howden, Jr.)
While this clarinet originally belonged to a German citizen, American Private First-Class Bruce E. Howden, Jr. received this instrument while recovering in a hospital from an injury he received at the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944. One of the other patients was an elderly German man, who was grateful for the medical assistance and companionship he got from the Americans. Howden kept this clarinet for the rest of his life. This instrument represents the ways music brings people together, even across wartime divides. NMM 09940.

KNUDSON GALLERY

Over-the-shoulder cornet, B-flat; Over-the-shoulder cornet, E-flat; and Over-the-shoulder tuba in E-flat
During the Civil War, military bands had many important purposes. Music signaled many of the troops' daily activities, which had a profound impact on those who fought. "Taps," a trumpet solo now used to commemorate fallen troops, originally was a Civil War nighttime bugle call which told soldiers to go to bed. During battle, troops suggested that the music bands played had the capacity to turn the tide of the conflict and felt braver because of the music. NMM 07033, 06984, 00317.

Bass drum, Snare drum, and Side drum (Daniel "Straight" Bailey)
Drummer boys were an important part of many wars, especially the Civil War. During battle, drum signals informed troops of their next task. The drummers were often young boys who were not old enough to enlist as a soldier and were often high school age or younger. Musicians during the Civil War not only assisted with the war effort using their music, but also often helped medical teams collect and treat wounded soldiers, a grisly task for young boys. NMM 02815, 02866, 14910.

Blue electric guitar
Troops have used music to pass the time for generations. Across different wars, the music and instruments they played changed. This guitar was made in Vietnam during the 1960s and was presumably bought by an American soldier during the Vietnam War. Just like many others, the soldier who owned this guitar played music in his free time to express himself during a difficult time in his life. What kind of music do you imagine was played on this guitar? NMM 14999.

Green Ocarina
Small instruments like these plastic ocarinas were part of the War Department's Special Service Entertainment Kits. These ocarinas were easy to learn and could entertain and distract soldiers during downtime. Troops could also pass these ocarinas out to citizens of occupied territory to make friends with the locals. At some points during the war, these ocarinas were ordered at a rate of 60,000 instruments per month! NMM 14986.

LILLIBRIDGE GALLERY

Guitar (Elvis Presley)
While Elvis is best known for popularizing rock and roll, Elvis also served in the US military for two years following the Korean War. Prior to his military service, Elvis's music and dancing infuriated many older Americans. His time in the armed forces helped ingratiate him with Americans across generations. This guitar was played by Elvis later in his career but was damaged during a performance—proof he hadn't mellowed much after the military! NMM 14715.