

William C. Hammond
Another Musical Prodigy from Rockville
By Jean Luddy

Rockville has been the hometown for more than one gifted musician. In the 19th century, Rockville was the birthplace of a musician who started out as a drummer in a marching band and went on to a successful career as an organist and professor of music. William Churchill Hammond was born on November 25, 1860 to Josiah C. Hammond and Katherine B Hammond. The Rockville branch of the Hammond family was actively involved in the textile industry and various civic organizations. William, his brother Charles and father Josiah played music together as a family. In his book, *Cascades and Courage*, George S. Brookes describes how the Hammond celebrated the 4th of July in the late 1860s.

“The Fourth of July was a busy day in the life of the Hammonds on Elm Street. Father “Joe” in the early morning light called to the boys in bed to be ready for their annual patriotic demonstration. After a hasty breakfast, the family started on their curious parade: William Churchill Hammond, a thrilled boy of eight years, smote his snare drum lustily. Before him his ex-solider father blew his fife in martial tunes. Behind him, brother Charles Hammond hugged a base drum, and behind the drum, Mother Hammond handled the base drum sticks. As the parade was on- through the streets of the sleeping city, the Hammond Drum and Fife Quartette passed.

In 1868 these two boys, proficient drummers, appeared on numerous occasions in the city. They went to Hartford and drummed in a parade there. They were so small that they could not march, so they rode in a carriage while they drummed.”

Brookes also relates the time when the Hammond brothers played for General Ulysses S. Grant when he visited Connecticut [as President of the United States].

“In the year 1870, General Ulysses S. Grant accepted an invitation to visit Connecticut and to speak at Woodstock on the 4th of July... Vernon people had a delightful part in the visit of the President. Early Monday morning, July 4th, a special train left Hartford and proceeded to Putnam via Plainfield....The train stopped at Manchester, Vernon, Willimantic, Baltic and Plainfield. Superintendent McManus of the Hartford, Providence and Fishkill Railroad had thoughtfully planned to have the two Hammond boys-proficient drummers- Will Hammond, eight [10] years of age and Charles, five [7] years of age-play for the President. As the train pulled in at the depot, the boys saluted the General on the platform and then demonstrated their musical ability. The President shook their hands heartily and warmly congratulated them.”

Several years later, Josiah Hammond formed a drum corps which numbered eleven players including William and Charles Hammond. Brookes describes the Hammond Silver Drum Corps.

“In 1876, The Hammond Silver Drum Corps was organized under the inspirational leadership of J. C. Hammond, Jr. This juvenile drum band was composed of boys from ten to sixteen years of age, and became famous throughout New England. Often they were invited to participate in various celebrations. They appeared in red shirts and white pants, with a tall drum major at their head.” Brookes continues his narrative of the Drummer’s Convention that was held in Rockville in 1876.

“The Convention of 1876 at Rockville brought a hundred drummers and fifers from adjacent counties. They had come to compete for honors. On the veranda of the Rockville House were piled stacks of drums of various shapes and sizes. They woke the echoes. The line of march was through Main, Union, Village, Orchard, Main, Vernon Avenue, Brooklyn, Market, Elm, Prospect, Main and Park Streets to Talcott Park, where competition for prizes took place. While the procession was marching, the church and mill bells and steam whistles helped by their joyous sound to swell the chorus, and there was a general hubbub the like of which was never heard before... The veteran horse of J. C. Hammond was brought into requisition and Joe rigged out in Yankee Doodle style, with drum strapped upon his back and a six-foot fife in his hand.”

William Hammond was one of five players awarded a special prize on that day.



The Hammond Silver Drum Corps stands at attention in front of the Rockville Hotel on Main Street during the 1876 Drummers Convention. William Hammond is the second player from the left, standing next to the Drum Major.

In addition to playing percussion, William Hammond became skilled as an organist. In 1876, at the age of 16 years, he became the organist for the Second Congregational Church of Rockville. During this time, he studied music in Hartford. Between 1878 and 1884, Hammond gave several organ recitals in Rockville and Hartford. One organ concert on July 9th 1881 was held at First Congregational Church in Rockville to raise money to fund improvements at Central Park including the purchase of a lawn mower. In 1883, the proceeds from a concert in Hartford were donated to the Humane Society. Most of his other recitals were free to the public. In 1884 he left Rockville to become the organist at the Pearl Street Congregational Church in Hartford.

Hammond left Hartford in 1885 to move to Holyoke, Massachusetts to become the organist for the Second Congregational Church. He served there from 1885 to 1949. In 1898, he married Fanny Bliss Reed. They had two children, William Churchill Hammond, Jr. and Lansing V. Hammond. William Hammond taught music in Holyoke and taught organ at Smith College from 1889-1899. He joined Mount Holyoke College as a professor of music in 1899 where he remained until 1937. In 1924, he directed the Mount Holyoke Glee Club. In that year, the College granted him an honorary degree as a Doctor of Music. He died on April 16, 1949 in Holyoke, Massachusetts.



William Hammond returned often to Rockville and willingly played at various functions over the years. He was well known as a skilled organist and his performances were well attended. When the newly built Union Church was dedicated on September 18, 1890, he gave an organ recital the night before on the new instrument. By 1911 the organ need to be renovated. Hammond served as a consultant to the organ committee. In 1912, he put on a concert using the newly refurbished organ. In 1926, he presented an organ recital to commemorate the centennial anniversary of Vernon's First Congregational Church building. Upon his death, the Rockville paper ran a lengthy obituary, citing his musical achievements and his connections to his hometown.

William C. Hammond in his later years as a professor of music at Mount Holyoke College)

Information for this article came from *The Rockville Journal*, *Cascades and Courage* and the Library website at Mount Holyoke College.

<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/lits/library/arch/col/msrg/mancol/ms0724r.htm>