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Lew, Barzillai

By: Devlin, Paul

(5 Nov. 1743–1822)

professional musician and soldier in the French and Indian War and War of Independence, was the freeborn progenitor of a large Groton, Massachusetts, family. The family later spent time in Dracut and Pepperell, where they owned land. His father, Primus Lew, was a skilled artisan (a cooper, or barrel maker) and it is unclear if he was ever a slave and later freed, or was himself freeborn. The historian Benjamin Quarles claimed that Barzillai Lew was also a cooper, and it has been claimed that Primus was also a musician. His mother was named Margret; nothing else about her is known. Father and son both served in the French and Indian War, with Barzillai (also known as "Zeal") serving for thirty-eight weeks in 1760 under the command of Thomas Farrington. In 1768 he married Dinah Bowman, whose freedom he bought for \$400. They later had at least thirteen (according to some accounts, sixteen) children and lived in Chelmsford, Massachusetts, early in their marriage. At some point along the way, Lew learned to be an outstanding musician.

In 1775, a few months after the Battle of Lexington and Concord, Lew joined the Twenty-Seventh Massachusetts Regiment, for which he fought and played the fife. Under the command of Captain John Ford, Lew served at the Battle of Bunker Hill. Gary B. Nash, professor emeritus of history at the University of California, Los Angeles, described Lew as "tall and strong," and claimed that "Barzillai Lew was typical of the free black patriot under arms" in that he enlisted several times (Nash, 7). For a period of time early in the Revolutionary War, George Washington had barred black enlistment for fear of arming slaves, but reversed his stand after Great Britain promised freedom to blacks who agreed to serve the Crown. In Lew's next enlistment, in 1777, he joined Joseph Varnum's militia, which was from Dracut, with which he marched to Fort Ticonderoga in New York where he fought under Benedict Arnold.

After the war the Lew family performed as a traveling band all across northeastern New England. Lew's son Zadock was also known as a particularly talented musician. It is not clear exactly what sort of music this band played. There is a frequently repeated, but apparently apocryphal, story of Lew's band performing at George Washington's inauguration. Lew's half-legendary musicianship may have inspired Duke Ellington to compose a piece called "Barzillai Lou" in 1943. It is unclear if the piece was ever recorded, but the manuscript of the music is in the Smithsonian. Ellington also mentioned Lew in his autobiography, *Music is My Mistress* (1973).

The Lew family settled in the area that was to become Lowell, Massachusetts. They owned a farm and lived on Totman Road, which then was known as "Old Zeal Road," "Old Zeal" being Lew's nickname later in life. Lew (and his sons) worked on the construction of the (now defunct) Middlesex Canal from 1793 to 1805. He was also a musician with the Pawtucket Society Church, which later became a local center of abolitionism.

When Lew died in 1822, his property was divided between two of his sons, Zimri and Zadock. The Lew family went on to thrive in Massachusetts throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, producing many prominent citizens. There is a portrait in the State Department building in Washington, D.C., titled "The Flutist" that may be a portrait of Barzillai Lew.

Bibliography

Further Reading

Nash, Gary B. *The Forgotten Fifth: African Americans in the Age of Revolution* (2006)

Quarles, Benjamin. *The Negro in the American Revolution* (1961)

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