The Simsbury Powder Horns of the American Revolution

[Top to bottom] Powder horns belonging to Nathaniel Humphrey and Israel Wells
Introducing “The Simsbury Powder Horns of the American Revolution”

Few objects from colonial America maintain such a personal and temporal connection to their owners as the powder horns used by soldiers, settlers, and Native Americans. In a world where firearms were necessary tools for survival, the powder horn – made from the lightweight and hollow horns of cattle – stored gunpowder and served as the constant companion to thousands of frontier residents. Many owners recognized the smooth surface of their horn as the ideal place to leave their mark. They etched names, dates, maps, and war records, as well as purely whimsical figures, into the objects. Engraved scenes often provide us with an immediate and vivid connection to events in the soldier's life.

The Simsbury Historical Society is pleased to present “The Simsbury Powder Horns of the American Revolution,” an exhibit that examines the engraved powder horns of two Simsbury soldiers to uncover the stories of their time in the Continental Army and the life they left back home. Lieutenant Nathaniel Humphrey, answering the call from Lexington and Concord, experienced one of the earliest battles of the Revolution at Bunker Hill in April 1775 under the command of Colonel Samuel Wyllys in the 22nd Continental Regiment. Private Israel Wells would join the same regiment in January 1776, marching together from Boston, Massachusetts to Peekskill, New York in the following winter.

After the Revolution, the subsequent history of the Wells horn is difficult to follow. Carved twice onto the Wells horn is the name “HENRY ELY,” first son of Benjamin Ely and brother to Dudley Ely, whose powder horn is also on display at the Society. While Dudley Ely did not fight in the War, his father was instrumental in organizing new townships in Ohio during Westward Expansion in the same area Israel Wells would settle with his family in 1804. It is possible the Wells horn found its way into the Ely family’s possession around the same time. Because all three of these powder horns are historically linked, the Dudley Ely horn became a part of the research process on campus and the report below.

Josh Picoult
August 2021
Inscription:
“Israel Wells his horn/made att[sic] Peekskill December/9 1776”
“WITH My/Powder Ball/AND GUN I WILL/MAKE THE H…”

[1] Israel Wells (1757-1831)

Despite centuries of wear having rendered the final letters of Israel Wells’ inscription inscrutable, his horn tells a vibrant story of a young man’s journey as a Revolutionary soldier and gives us insight into his later years as a town commissioner and father.

Powder horn belonging to Israel Wells of Simsbury. Served with other Connecticut volunteers in the American Revolution from January 1776 to January 1777 as a private in Colonel Wyllys’ 22nd Continental Regiment. After the war he continued to serve in the militia and became a Lt. in the 18th Regiment, 3rd Company under Capt. Job Case. At the age of 46, he chose to uproot his life and take his family to settle in Granville, Ohio between 1804-1805 to establish a new church with other Simsbury, Farmington, and Massachusetts travelers. He served as the town commissioner of Granville from 1808-1811.
Headstone of Israel Wells, Old Colony Burial Ground in Granville, Ohio.

What this tells us:

- Israel Wells was born on July 3rd, 1757 (in New London / Lebanon, CT).
- Israel Wells died on April 3rd, 1831 (in Granville, Licking County Ohio).
- Israel Wells was buried in the Granville Old Colony Burial Ground in Granville, Ohio.
What this tells us:

- Private Israel Wells served in the 22nd Continental Regiment under Capt. Abel Pettibone in May 1776.
- Nathanial Humphrey is listed as the 1st Lt. of the 22nd Continental Regiment.
- Israel Wells likely spent some time in Boston after he enlisted, but would have been in New York with Nathaniel Humphrey by the time this war roll was written.
1790 U.S. Federal Census for Simsbury
(Names are underlined in yellow)

What this tells us:
Israel Wells was living in Simsbury in 1790.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Relationship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Israel Wells</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1800 U.S. Federal Census for Simsbury

What this tells us:
- Census records show that Israel Wells was still living in Simsbury in 1790 and 1800.
Massachusetts, Town and Vital Records, 1620-1988

What this tells us:

- Israel Wells began his move to Ohio with his family in 1804. His name was dropped from Simsbury tax rolls in 1803, meaning that he had sold his property.
- Israel Wells did not travel directly from Connecticut to Ohio in 1804, but rather travelled to Granville, Massachusetts first. It was common for newcomers to name newly discovered Western towns after distinguished Eastern towns, hence the name Granville, Ohio.
- His eldest son, Israel, would die here before the family made the trip to Ohio.
Israel Wells was a prominent figure in the establishment of a new Calvinistic church in Granville, Ohio in 1805. He joined other New Englanders from Simsbury and Farmington, Connecticut and Granville, Massachusetts in forming this religious community in one of the earliest occupied Ohio territories.

Israel Wells is listed as a resident of Granville, Ohio by the 1810 U.S. Federal Census.
What this tells us:

- In the 1820s, Israel Wells filed for federal pension for his war service but never received it. He was dropped from eligibility for his pension in the Pension Act of May 1, 1820, a resolution instituted by President James Monroe’s administration. The U.S. did not have enough money to support all Revolutionary War veterans, resulting in a cut to compensation for those who did not appear to be in need of financial assistance.
What this tells us:

- Israel Wells was living in Ohio in 1820.

The data for Licking County, Ohio, where Granville is situated, is not available in the 1830 census, but we can assume Wells continued to live there with his family.
**Inscription:**
“Nathaniel Humphrey his horn/Made at Roxbury Nov. 1st 1775 In cp”

[2] Nathaniel Humphrey (1735-1822)

A 1775 map of Boston Harbor, where Humphrey was stationed, with Roxbury circled.
Roxbury, the 17th of June 1775.

Sir, I rec'd yours of the 12th of this instant informing you were well of yours & that things did not go for - ward at New York as was expected. More Troops that embarked at New York are likely arrives hear at is some Troop came in some say to the amount of 4000 but we do not believe it; They have some stores arrived m' Govin informed that they lost six horses out of them that came in last. 

Sir reported the regulars Dr. ring in last the 17th of June, we are ready to receive them after that we shall be able to give a better account of the affairs. Can we receive Regt. at Roxbury, we are in hopes to yet. 

June 17th.

Last night a party went to Dorchester point & began entrenching several heavy cannon were fired this morning from the fort on Bacon Hill for sake at a party on cobble island who are at work there give my love to all friends & encry with you. Send me word how the days.

Remember my love to my family &c.

I am Sir yours to send Nath Humphry.

No. 13 we expect to be in business every hour. Some think they will settle out. But I do not believe it if they do they will make a heavy Prize.
Roxbury __th June 1775

Sir I Rec. your dated the 12th of this Instant Informing you was well & yours & that things Did not go forward at New York as was Expected, those troops that embark, at New York are likely arived hear as there is Some Troops Come in some say to the amount of 4000, but we do not believe it, they have some stors arived, m. gordin Informed that they lost six horses out of them that Came in Last Tis Reported the Regulars Dring in Last the 17th June we are ready to receive them & after that we shall be able to give a better account of the affairs General Spencers Regiment is at ~

Roxbury we are in Houses as yet ~

June 17th

Last Night a party went on Dorchester point & began Entrenching several Heavy Cannon ware fired this morning from the fort on Beacon Hill, Tis said at a party on Noddle Island who are at work there give my Love to all friends & to azariah Piney etc. send me word how he Does ~

Remember my Love to my family etc. ~

I am Sir yours to serve

Nath. Humphrey

N:B we Expect to be in Business Every hour some think they will salley out but I do not believe it if they Doe they will make a heavy Push ~

Note: Spelling is as it appears in the original letter.

Humphrey’s letter was most likely written over the course of a week. While the date is ripped at the top of the letter, the first part of the note must have been written between the 12th (the date he mentions in the first section of the letter, and the same week that the Battle at Bunker Hill began) and the 17th, where the letter continues on a new dated entry. While Humphrey’s regiment arrived in Boston to participate in the Siege of Boston, it is unclear whether Humphrey saw action on Bunker Hill. On June 17th, Humphrey recounts a “party… on Dorchester point” entrenching in anticipation of the British militia.
The Powder Horn Timeline

April 1775
Nathaniel Humphrey answers the call at Lexington and Concord and arrives in Boston with the 22nd Continental Regiment to participate in the Siege of Boston.

November 1775
Nathaniel Humphrey’s powder horn is carved at Roxbury, Mass. on November 1st by the well-known Simsbury carver. The horn, more artistically sophisticated than Israel Wells’s horn, features stylized flowers and a polish.

January 1776
Israel Wells enlists in January as a private in 22nd Continental Colonel Wyllys’ Regiment under Capt. Abel Pettibone while Humphrey continues to serve in the same regiment and is promoted to 1st Lieutenant. The men march to Peekskill, New York that summer.

December 1776
Israel Wells’s powder horn is carved at Peekskill, New York on December 9th, though the carver is not known. The Wells horn presents a cruder aesthetic, with a fainter inscription that includes a short chant along with his name, date, and location: “With my Pow/der, Ball and/Gun/I Will make/My enemies/Disburse and run.” The horn also boasts a drawing of a sailing ship with portholes for cannons.
The HENRY ELY Inscription

The name “Henry Ely” is inscribed on the Israel Wells powder horn twice. The name “Henry Ely” is written twice around the Israel Wells powder horn. Henry Ely was the brother of Dudley Ely and the second son of Benjamin Ely. Benjamin, in addition to being a teacher, founding The Aquatics temperance group, and becoming the Simsbury town clerk in 1809, was a speculator for Ohio townships during the Westward Expansion movement in the early 19th century. Below is one of Benjamin Ely’s work documents where he shows Township XVI and Township XVII bordering the highlighted Township VI. This area of land is 40 miles from Israel Wells’ township where he settled with his wife in the fall of 1803.
1803 draft of Benjamin Ely's Township VI in Ohio, approx. 40 miles northwest of where Israel Wells would come to settle just months later.
Dudley Ely (1817-1895)

Inscribed “Dudley P. Ely/Horn/Made in Simsbury/April 4th 1839.” Also inscribed is “With my Pow/der, Ball and/Gun/I Will make/My enemies/Disburse and run.” These inscriptions were common phraseology used by soldiers of the Revolution.

The Dudley Ely horn comes two generations after the two Simsbury horns of the American Revolution. Half as small as the war horns, and made of a darker and thicker ox horn, the Dudley Ely horn carried significantly less gunpowder and was designed for short hunting trips. The engraved date on the Dudley Ely horn is April 4, 1839 -- a bit old for this type of crude handcrafting, one might imagine. Dudley, unlike his brother Henry, did not spend his life in Simsbury and was a prominent figure in South Norwalk, CT.