

CHAPTER XIV.

THE STATE MILITIA - OFFICERS OF THE MILFORD COMPANIES – TRAINING DAYS – OLD FASHIONED MUSTERS.

At the time of the incorporation of the town, in 1794, the state had a thoroughly organized military system, requiring all free able-bodied white male citizens between the ages of eighteen and forty years to be enrolled for service. Milford was included in the Fifth regiment, and, in 1796, Joshua Burnham of this town was its major.

In 1808, the militia law was amended and a new arrangement of towns forming regiments made, but Milford still remained a part of the Fifth regiment and Josiah Osgood of this town was its colonel.

The militia laws of the state in force in 1794, as remodeled in 1808, remained the laws of the state without essential alteration for forty years, and our militia was well disciplined and a credit to the state. But time brought changes. The long peace following the War of 1812, made our citizens forgetful of the truth embodied in our Bill of Rights, that “a well regulated militia is the proper, natural, and secure defence of a state.” Our militia, by legislative enactment, became a mere skeleton, and that existing only on paper.

We have made no attempt to obtain an exhaustive list of the officers of the regiment which, from time to time, included the town of Milford. Among the earlier regimental officers were Col. Joshua Burnham and Col. Josiah Osgood. Many years after we find the name of Col. Benjamin Hutchinson, who also was commissioned a brigadier-general, and still later Col. Stephen Peabody, a nephew of Colonel Peabody of revolutionary fame. In the '40s we find the name of Maj. Abel Chase of this town. The writer remembers well the soldierly bearing of Major Chase at the muster upon Amherst plain (1844), when Gen. John McNeil, whose gallant conduct in the War of 1812 reflected great honor upon his native state, reviewed the militia assembled for drill and display. Major Chase was mounted upon the famous Morgan horse, then known as the Royalston horse. That officer was taken ill before the close of the day, and Capt. Edmund P. Hutchinson, then the ranking captain of the regiment, took his place and acted as major the remainder of the day.

During the first half of this century Milford was noted for its military spirit. The following is a partial list of names of those commanding the Milford company or companies from time to time: Capt. Joshua Burnham, Capt. Joshua Osgood, Capt. Joshua Moore, in the earlier days of the town's history; and later Capt. Jacob Hutchinson, Capt. Frederick Crosby, Capt. Franklin Abbott, Capt. Peter Burns, Capt. Joel W. Duncklee, Capt. Joseph Crosby, Capt. Freeman Hutchinson, Capt. John B. Hutchinson, Capt. Martin Hall, Capt. George W. Came, Capt. Edmund P. Hutchinson, Capt. William J. D. Burt, Capt. Abel C. Crosby, Capt. William B. Burns, Capt. Christopher C. Shaw.

While all citizens between prescribed ages were compelled to do military duty, such as chose to do so were allowed to form themselves into volunteer companies of light infantry. Most towns of the size of Milford, in 1800, had a light infantry company. All such companies had uniforms and presented a striking contrast to the ordinary militia companies in citizen dress. The light infantry company of this town was always well disciplined and officered. The Amherst *Cabinet*, in an account of the muster held in that town Sept. 12, 1821, says: “The Dunstable cadets and the Milford light infantry gained great and merited applause by their soldier-like appearance and the ease with which they performed various evolutions new to most of the spectators.”

The light infantry company was of course made up of those citizens who enjoyed training days and the muster field, and who took an honest pride in the praise that was often awarded to the Milford light infantry company.

There were two training days during the year the May or spring training and the fall training. The members of the light infantry company came out without urging, for they had fine uniforms in which to appear. But among the remainder of the men in town who were liable to military duty, there were always some who appeared with the greatest reluctance and often in many-colored clothes. This was especially the case in the latter years of the old-fashioned militia. Ingenuity was often exercised to enable a member of the town company to appear as grotesque as possible. To get his men out for parade drill the captain issued a warrant to one of his corporals requiring him to warn every man in town, liable to duty and not a member of a uniformed company, to appear on a certain day at a certain place and wait for orders. Every delinquent was subject to a fine. This fine could be paid in money, or the soldier in contempt could expose personal property to be levied upon in satisfaction of the fine and costs.

The last year of the training days, Samuel Ames, who was somewhat of a non-resistant and a great lover of fun, having been fined for non-attendance and other acts of an unsoldierly character, when called upon to pay his fine, exposed to the officer, as his presentation of personal property for levy, some codfish and new rum. These articles were attached and sold at auction in presence of a large crowd. The liquor was drank on the spot, and the codfish disposed of, some crackers having been provided to help it off. Owing to an irregularity in the sale, a suit was brought by Ames for the value of the property irregularly taken by the officer, in which he prevailed.

The regimental muster was an annual affair of interest to almost everyone. Not only were the soldiers on the training field (some large area of level land easily accessible by the different companies of the regiment; in case of the fifth regiment usually at Amherst, sometimes at Milford), but almost all the people of the neighborhood, together with peddlers and dealers in all sorts of wares. The muster attracted all sorts and conditions of people. Men, women, and children went to the muster, some to practise their arts and to cheat, some to be practised upon and to be cheated. Gingerbread was sold and cheap confectionery. All sorts of games of chance could be indulged in, and occasionally the professional gambler appeared with his gaming apparatus. At sunrise the companies were on the ground. The bugle sounded and the muster began. The first corporal marshalled the men into an orderly line. The officers were received and the morning manœuvring commenced. Early in the forenoon the regimental line was formed and the staff officers rode upon the field. The best horses the country afforded were called into service upon these occasions. Some well-known parade horses appeared several times during the fall, as the regiments, as a rule, mustered on different days.

The review and inspection occupied most of the forenoon. After this the soldiers were dismissed for dinner. Lunch or dinner over, they joined the crowd in looking at the fat lady, the two-headed boy, the Siamese twins, and pigs with eight feet. The sham fight which ends the day, comes on with the declining sun, and the companies are matched, one half against the other in a sham battle. This over, the lines are again formed and the men drawn up in a hollow square. The colonel, always mounted, takes his place in the centre and thanks his soldiers for their good appearance. The reviewing brigadier-general makes another speech, and the regiment is dismissed. Much intemperance prevailed at these old musters, but on the whole good order was observed until the close of the parade.

Twice, at least, the regimental muster was held at Milford on the ground opposite the Jonathan Towne house on the Nashua road, afterward the Fair Ground, in the years 1832 and 1840.