Parade brings echoes of the past
Ancient and Honorables celebrate their 373d year

By Andrew Ryan
GLOBE STAFF

The Confederate battle flag paraded yesterday through the winding streets of downtown Boston can be explained. So can the pikes and lances, and the bonnets and ankle-length dresses. There was even a purpose for the black bear skin shakos — enormous cone-like fur hats fit for Siberia, not a sunny afternoon in June.

Yesterday was June Day, the annual election of officers and sergeants for the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company, an only-in-Boston tradition almost as old as the Shawmut Peninsula. That meant a parade filled with antique militias from across the country and echoing blasts of musket fire on streets crowded with bewildered office workers and confused tourists.

"Should we know what this is?" asked

Mike Bodnar of the Wilmington Minutemen prepared for the parade.
Militia parade brings echoes of the past

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Christine Graton, 87, from Saco, Maine. Added her husband, Brett Graton, 88: “We’ve been standing here, trying to figure it out.”

The Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company dates to 1638, which makes it the third oldest military organization in the world after the Honourable Artillery Company of London (1567) and the Vatican’s Pontifical Swiss Guard (1506). The Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company of Massachusetts from wars and civil unrest. The motto underscores the mission: Facta Non Verba, Deeds Not Words.

As years passed, the establishment of the National Guard changed the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company. The company has not taken up arms since the Boston police strike of 1919, said Ancient and Honorable Captain Dan May.

The group now serves a ceremonial role and provides fraternality for its roughly 850 members. Headquartered on the fourth floor of Faneuil Hall, the artillery company lends its pageantry to parades and other patriotic holidays, such as the Fourth of July. But its big day in the spotlight is yesterday’s annual right as scores of Minutemen and other militias come to honor the American original. “This has been happening on the first Monday in June since 1638,” May said.

Yesterday’s parade started at Faneuil Hall and processed up Congress Street as a disparate collection of militias in brightly colored uniforms with flamboyant accessories. The troops hoisted swords and guns as passersby stopped cold in their tracks to watch.

“I don’t know what it is, but it’s interesting,” said Sean Patterson, 23, who stood in a suit and tie with his mouth agape, explaining that he just moved to Boston from West Palm Beach.

Minutemen began firing muskets, filling the air with acrid smoke. The blasts echoed off the tall buildings lining Tremont Street. The noise proved too much for 3-year-old Isabella Cortis of Medway, who covered her ears with her palms and burrowed into her father’s legs. The volley of muskets continued unabated. On the sidewalk, locals exchanged blank glances and asked out-of-towners if they knew what was happening.

“Today is D-Day, right?” said Carter Anderson, 12, who left behind a catfish pond in New Braunfels, Texas, to explore the Freedom Trail with his family.

It was, indeed, D-Day, but that was a coincidence.

Yesterday brought out a spectrum of military from the Ancients to the Massachusetts National Guard. The Confederate flag came in the hands of two members of the Washington Light Infantry (founded 1807) from Charleston, S.C.

“It’s a damn good flag,” said Henry Sieglilng, 69, of Charleston. “But we’re rookies compared to this bunch.”

Sieglilng and his partner spent a long weekend in Boston before yesterday’s festivities. They took in the sights and even went whale watching. “They wouldn’t take our Confederate money,” Sieglilng said with a chuckle. “So we had to use US dollars.”

Ryan can be reached at acryan@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter @GlobeAndrewRyan.