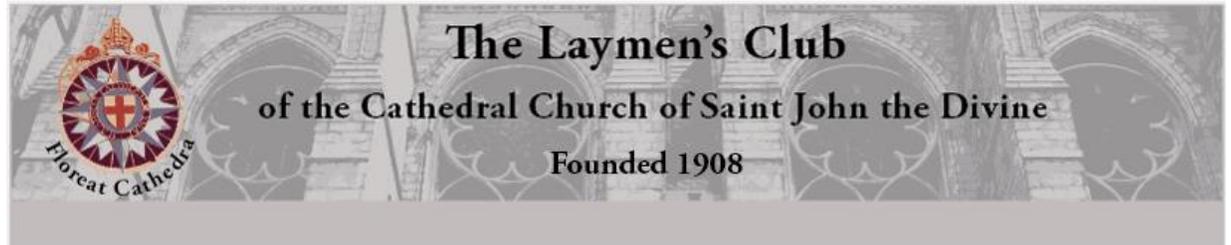




The Cathedral
Church of **Saint John**
the Divine

1047 Amsterdam Ave.
at 112th Street
New York, NY 10025
T (212) 316-7490
stjohndivine.org



A History of the Cathedral's Great Organ

The following is taken from the book, *The Great Organ of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, A Plan for Restoration*, 1992 out of print, by Paul A. Baumgarten.

The Great Organ: One of five organs in the cathedral complex, it was completed in 1911 by Earnest M. Skinner, and enlarged and rebuilt in 1952 by G. Donald Harrison of The Aeolian Skinner Organ Company. The organ is a 4 manual and pedal, 7 division elector-pneumatic action pipe organ of 118 speaking stops, 141 ranks, 8035 pipes with Cymbelstern, Harp, chest preparations for 3 additional stops, and console preparation for Chimes. The Great Organ has several extraordinary features which immeasurably heighten its tonal effect and our musical enjoyment including the famous high-pressure State Trumpet at the West End, the magnificent high-pressure Solo Tubas, a battery of Bombard reeds, and remarkably effective 32' voices. The organ pipes are divided between two large spaces above the floor of the Choir on the north and south sides. The console is located in the gallery above the South Choir stall. The organist, invisible to the congregation, can see the choir and clergy directly or by means of mirrors and video cameras.

The present-day replacement value of this organ would be well over \$8 million. It must be noted, however, that it would be impossible to replace this instrument today as many of the materials are no longer available and the skills and temperament that produced this work of art are not part of today's culture. In this sense, the organ is priceless.

The Great Organ's history is as colorful and intriguing as the cathedral in which it is housed. It has seen many changes and upheavals, the biggest being the conversion of the cathedral from a Byzantine Romanesque architecture as designed by the first builders, Heins and LaFarge in 1892, to the Gothic structure it became under Ralph Cram in 1916. The money to build the Great Organ of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine was donated in 1904 by then Governor of New York State, Levi Parsons Morton. He donated a sum of \$600,000 to cover the cost of the organ (\$50,000), the Choir (\$450,000), and the Altar (\$100,000). Morton's contribution for the organ was intended as a memorial to his recently deceased daughter, Lena Morton. An agreement was signed on May 19, 1906 by Ernest M. Skinner and W. R. Huntington, Chairman of the Fabric Committee, to build the organ for \$45,000. The instrument was to be "complete, in every detail, in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, within six months from the time when the building shall have been made weatherproof... and sufficient organ shall be in place for service purposes when the building shall be ready for worship."

Five years elapsed before the structure was sufficiently complete to allow the installation of the organ to commence. The installation was completed in early 1911, and a dedication ceremony was held in



The Cathedral
Church of **Saint John**
the Divine

Page 2 cont.

April of that year. A stone plaque in the ambulatory, beside the door to the organ console, is inscribed "The organ is Dedicated to the Praise of the Blessed Trinity and in Loving Memory of Lena Kearny Morton, 1875-1904, by her Parents, Levi Parsons Morton and Anna Livingston Morton." Skinner titled the organ Opus-150.

It is interesting to note that immediately after the organ was installed, a maintenance agreement was signed with the Skinner Organ Company which provided for weekly maintenance of the instrument and technicians to be on standby at regular and special services in case of emergencies. Until the fire of last year, this policy was still adhered to with Douglass Hunt being the organ's curator.

By the late 1930's the second phase of construction was under way, and the Nave of the cathedral was nearly complete. The new nave would provide a completely new acoustical environment for the organ. Plans were made to finish the Chancel ceiling with limestone rib vaulting, which up to that time was unfinished Guastavino tile. Drawings were made by Cram's office indicating minor alterations to be made to the organ chambers. Services were to move to the completed Nave, and portions of the Great Organ were to be moved to the Nave as well.

Construction work on the Chancel ceiling was nearly complete by March 19, 1941, and plans were being made to demolish the partition wall between the Nave and the Crossing. Skinner was given approval to move the organ back to the Great Choir at a cost of \$6,554. The last service in which the organ was used before being moved was on June 8, 1941.

After this phase of construction was completed, the trustees realized the need to update the voicing and generally improve the sound of the instrument. In 1950 G. Donald Harrison, president of the Aeolian Skinner Organ Company, was contacted by the cathedral's organist, Norman Coke-Jephcott to examine and report on the condition of the Great Organ. Mr. Harrison took this appointment very seriously and noted many fallacies. He attended services and took notes stating that the organ's "use as an accompaniment for the choir was extremely limited" as well as the organ's effect in the room "when vast throngs of eight to ten thousand worshippers were present on the great festivals." Harrison outlined his plan for tonal revision of the organ in a report to the trustees and drew up a detailed specification. He also recommended mechanical repairs to correct worn parts which he thought would soon fail. He estimated the total cost, depending on the extent of mechanical repairs, would range from \$39,878 to \$48,373. Harrison's enthusiasm for the project was very apparent in his letter. He wrote: "The cathedral offers a possibility of the most thrilling instrument I have ever built because of its architectural and acoustical properties, and I am absolutely confident that the plans I am enclosing herewith, if carried out, will produce an effect for you that will be unequalled anywhere."

His prediction proved right. What was born out of his insight and creativity was an instrument unlike any other in the world. He later added in his proposal the addition of the State Trumpet, located at the West End underneath the Great Rose Window and a full 500 feet from the organ console, operating on 50" wind pressure, making it the most powerful organ stop in the world. The new Tubas would operate at 20-25" pressure making the Great Organ one of the most powerful instruments on the face



The Cathedral
Church of **Saint John**
the Divine

Page 3 cont.

of the planet. The work was finally completed in early 1954 and Harrison titled his work Opus-150a. He had great pride in his work, which he felt had been more than successful. In a promotional brochure put out by The Aeolian-Skinner Company, he wrote the following: "One and all, the men whose hearts, minds and hands constructed this instrument, felt the magnificence and privilege of opportunity and were inspired by the glory of the edifice. More than the mere exhibition of their skills, this organ is their act of faith. I feel that through those of the Cathedral who sensed and met the need for this comprehensive instrument, a significant contribution has been made to our American culture."

Since the re-construction of the Great Organ at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, there have been seven organists: Norman Coke-Jephcott, Alec Wyton, David Pizarro, Paul Halley, Dorothy Papadakos, Timothy Brumfield and Bruce Neswick. Restoration of the instrument was undertaken in 1994 by organ curators Douglass Hunt and Anthony Bufano. The State Trumpet was fully restored as was the Swell Division. However, work ceased when a leaky roof kept undoing the work being done. A devastating fire in the unfinished portion of the North Transept on Dec. 18, 2001 resulted in heavy smoke damage to the Great Organ which silenced this magnificent instrument for a time. Under the supervision of organ curator Douglass Hunt, removal of the organ began in July of 2003. Cleaning of the cathedral's interior began in July of 2004. The cleaning and restoration of the Great Organ and the interior of the cathedral was completed in November of 2008.