

History of the Organ Project (2011)

In 1986, Harley Piltingsrud, a physicist with NIOSH, became impressed with the acoustics of the rotunda of Union Terminal and thought a pipe organ would sound wonderful in the space. He talked with two organists on the faculty of the University of Cincinnati's College Conservatory of Music (CCM), Roberta Gary and David Mulbury, about the idea of placing a concert organ there. That May, the Cincinnati Historical Society and the Cincinnati Museum of Natural History succeeded in passing a county-wide bond levy to develop Union Terminal into a "Heritage Center." Soon thereafter, Harley Piltingsrud and David Mulbury met with the director of the Cincinnati Historical Society, Gale Peterson, to discuss the possibility of incorporating a pipe organ into the extensive renovations being planned for the building. Working through a committee represented by board members from both organizations, additional information was requested that led to testing the sound of organ pipes in the rotunda. Judged a great success, Piltingsrud was encouraged to investigate the matter further. Among other efforts, endorsements of the concept were obtained from a variety of local and national figures in music including letters from: Nelson Barden, Restorer in Residence, Boston University; Roberta Gary, Professor of Organ, CCM; Gerre Hancock, Organist and Master of the Choristers, St. Thomas Church Fifth Avenue, NYC; Ann Marie Koukios, Director of Byzantine Singers; Erich Kunzel, Conductor, Cincinnati Pops Orchestra; John Leman, CCM faculty member and Director of the May Festival Chorus; David Mulbury, Professor of Organ, CCM; Thomas Murray, University Organist, Yale University; Eugene Pridonoff, Head, Keyboard Studies Division, CCM; Earl Rivers, Head, Division of Ensembles and Conducting, CCM; John Strader, funder of an organ installed at CCM; Frederick Swann, Director of Music, and Organist, Crystal Cathedral; William Van Pelt, Director, Organ Historical Society; Robert Werner, Dean, CCM; and Todd Wilson, Organist, the Cathedral of the Incarnation, Garden City, NY.

These letters, along with a report on the acoustical tests in the rotunda, were included in a project proposal presented early in 1987 to David Phillips, the chair of the committee through which the two sponsoring organizations were working to create what is now called Cincinnati Museum Center at Union Terminal. The proposal was approved and work began to find an appropriate organ for the space and to raise money for the project. Past Board Chair and attorney, John Weld Peck, and arts administrator and organist, James Edgy, were especially helpful at that time.

It was decided that the organ should be of the "American Symphonic School" of organ building, which was popular at the time Union Terminal was built. In early 1987 supporters learned that an organ built in 1929 by Boston organ builder, Ernest M. Skinner, was becoming available from Immaculate Conception Church in the Germantown part of Philadelphia. The church had lost nearly all of its once-large congregation and the roof was leaking over part of the organ. The church was eager to see the organ go to a better home. The organ service person, Brandt Duddy, contacted the Organ Historical Society Director, William Van Pelt, and Mr. Van Pelt made this information available to us. E. M. Skinner organs,

once hugely popular for both church and residential installations, had fallen out of fashion after a turn of interest toward what was known as the new “American Classical Organ School” of organ building in the post-1935 time period. During the next 50 years many churches with adequate resources had their organs of the “American Symphonic School” redesigned to sound more like the new organs or, frequently, had them removed altogether and replaced with organs currently in fashion. However, the wheel of fashion tends to turn, and things that were once out of fashion often return into fashion -- sometimes as treasured artworks of the past. In 1987, E. M. Skinner organs were just beginning to gain renewed interest, and by the early 1990s they were considered artistic treasures. Finding an instrument of the size and state of preservation of this one had become difficult, if not impossible. Thus, the timing of Museum Center’s organ project was perfect. A modest purchase price was agreed upon, using a generous gift to the Historical Society from Elizabeth D. (“Bea”) Herschede. In August 1987, Brandt Duddy managed the removal of the organ from the church and the shipping of it to Cincinnati, where it went into temporary storage.

In 1988, the Sisters of Mercy, owners of Provident Hospital located on the property where Cincinnati inventor and businessman Powel Crosley, Jr. once lived, had decided to convert his mansion into offices. In doing so, they planned to remove the 1929 E. M. Skinner organ installed there. Remaining members of the Crosley family, particularly his sister, Edith Chatfield, and his granddaughter, Lida Montgomery, helped convince them that incorporating the instrument into the Skinner organ at Museum Center would be the perfect solution, and they donated funds for its removal and storage. That organ became the Antiphonal Division of the organ at Museum Center. Components from the E. M. Skinner organ that was once in the auditorium of Withrow High School were donated by Stacey Smith (windchests) and Jeff Johnson (16’ Violone). Nelson Barden contributed an 8’ Flugelhorn, some components, and much advice.

Initially, Museum Center engaged a local firm, M. W. Lively and Co., to restore and install the organ. However, shortly after that the company went out of business and Mark Lively left the Cincinnati area. Two of the workers from his shop were hired, Edward Abernathy and Robert Yunker, and a new shop was developed in the lower level of Cincinnati Museum Center to carry out the work. Harley Piltingsrud agreed to donate his time to supervise their work and that of several part-time people hired temporarily through the years, as well as to work on the project. He contributed over 18,000 hours over twenty-five years to carry out the restoration and installation of Museum Center’s organ.

Beginning in 1989, through a series of generous gifts from Mrs. Richard R. (Ann Taylor “Pinney”) Deupree, work began on the restoration and installation of the organ. With the completion of the installation of the main organ a decade later, the organ shop was closed. On April 12, 1999, Museum Center’s first organ concert took place, featuring Thomas Murray. The “Music in the Museum” concert series began in 2003. Helped by a gift from Susan Deupree Jones and the Deupree Family Foundation, work on the Antiphonal division started in 2004, and is now nearly complete.

People who worked on the project from 1988 to 2011 include: Harley Piltingsrud (project leader), Edward Abernathy (shop lead person), Tyler Langley, Chris Novy, Matthew Schweiterman, Jeff Weams, Richard Wheeler, Nicki Wheeler, Paul Wilkie and Robert Yunker. Facilities and operations staff at CMC that helped with work on the Antiphonal division include: Steve Fry, Rick Lattrell, Clyde Powers, Mike

Reed, Steve Terheiden, and Foster Troy. Ruby Rogers, Director of the Cincinnati Historical Society Library, has served as staff liaison for the Organ Curator since 2002.