

The First Baptist Temple Organ
Broad and Berks Streets, Philadelphia, PA
William King & Son, Elmira, NY, 1891

This article corrects previous commentary in the Organ Database regarding the organs and the history of Grace Baptist Church which in a few short years after the completion of the church's original structure at Berks and Mervine Streets, built The Baptist Temple around the corner. My interest here stems from research into the life of blind Philadelphia organist, David D Wood (1838-1910) who was associated with this congregation from 1885 to 1909. The following article focuses on the first organ of the congregation's second building, known as "The Baptist Temple."

Russell Conwell (1843-1925) assumed the pastorate of Grace Baptist Church at Berks and Mervine Streets in Philadelphia in November 1882, just weeks before the completion of their church building. The congregation had been founded in 1872 and up until that time worshipped under a tent. The new church facility boasted a new Hook and Hastings organ of two manuals, thirty note pedal board and 25 registers, opus 1097. Music played an important role in the ministry of Rev. Conwell who played the organ himself and even sang solos in worship.

Grace Baptist prospered under Conwell's charismatic leadership and captivating preaching and teaching. The personality driven congregation quickly outgrew their building at Berks and Mervine and on March 2, 1891 opened its doors on a mammoth new building, The Baptist Temple at Broad and Berks streets, a 35,000 sq ft structure with a seating capacity of over 4,000 and a William King & Son organ. At the time, it was the largest church auditorium and the largest Protestant congregation in America. Grace Baptist's Hook and Hastings organ remained in the original building and continued to be used until 1968 when the building was razed. A four manual William King & Son organ designed by the church's organist was built for the new Baptist Temple. That organ would be replaced in 1911 by a Hope-Jones Organ.

Such was the reputation of David D Wood, the fabled blind organist of St Stephen's Episcopal Church on Tenth below Market Street, that Russell Conwell engaged him to head the music program of Grace in May 1885 regardless of the fact that Wood's continuing responsibilities at St. Stephen's precluded his participation on Sunday mornings. Wood, who happened to live nearby, directed the Temple's music program and its 150 voice choir and played the evening service, the morning service being handled by very capable assistants under Wood's direction. Dr. Wood managed the music program in this capacity from 1885 to 1909 concurrently with his post at St Stephens where he served from 1864 until his death in 1910.

The public flocked to Conwell's seminars at Grace as word spread of his dynamic teaching, giving rise to Temple College of Philadelphia (later Temple University) founded by the church and Conwell in 1884. 120 years after it opened, the abandoned 1891 Baptist Temple building was fully renovated by the University after years of sitting idle. It is now the university's Performing Arts Center.

David Wood engaged the firm William King & Son of Elmira, New York to build the organ for the new edifice. When the Baptist Temple opened in March 1891, the instrument was ready for service. It was described by Robert Burdette in his 1894 book "The Modern Temple and Templars"...

The case is of oak, natural finish, 35 feet wide, 35 feet high, 16 feet deep. It was built by King & Son of Elmira, New York. Professor David D. Wood superintended the details of its construction. It has 41 stops; 2133 pipes; four sets of manuals, each manual with a compass of 61 notes; there

are 30 pedal notes; nine double-acting combination pedals; all the metal pipes are 75 per cent pure tin. The cost of the organ, with all the additions, reaches \$20,000.

The organ was similarly described in Agnes Rush Burr's 1908 edition of her biography of Conwell.

The organ which rears its forest of beautiful pipes in the rear of the church is one of the finest in the country. It was built under the direct supervision of Professor Wood at a cost of \$10,000. The case is of oak in the natural finish, 35 feet wide, 35 feet high, 16 feet deep. It has 41 stops, 2,133 pipes, four sets of manuals, each manual with a compass of 61 notes; there are 30 pedal notes, 9 double-acting combination pedals; all the metal pipes are 75 percent pure tin.

In September 1909, Wood suddenly resigned from his position at the Baptist Temple after twenty-four years of service. By the fall of 1911, the William King & Son organ had been replaced by a more "modern" and "cutting edge" 17 rank instrument built by Robert Hope-Jones, a move which must have been accompanied by an associated change of musical direction for the church and likely not unrelated to Dr. Wood's sudden departure. As of the writing in 2021, nothing more is known about the William King organ.

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