

History of the First Parish Organ

In 1880, the Ladies Organ Society began raising money for the present organ through teas, suppers and entertainments. Among the committee to choose a new organ was Joshua Chamberlain, who from time to time is reported to have played the instrument. Hutchings, Plaisted & Co. of Boston (one of America's finest organ builders of the 19th century) was commissioned as builder. It was their opus 112, designed with tracker (mechanical) action, two manuals (61 notes each), pedals (27 notes) and 23 ranks. The console was placed against the organ case, under a bronze tablet dedicating the instrument to Dr. George Adams (minister of First Parish Church from 1829-1870). The new organ arrived in Brunswick on January 29, 1883. For twenty years the organ was hand pumped by Bowdoin students. Many carved their initials into the south wall of the organ chamber. In 1903, the Parish was given a water motor which supplied the wind for nineteen years. There were problems, however, not the least of which was that the water froze solid in the winter. In 1922 an electric blower was installed.

In 1969 the original Hutchings, Plaisted & Co. tracker mechanism was discarded, as was the reservoir and feeder bellows. Ray Douglas of South Harpswell, Maine installed pneumatic pull-downs, stop actions, regulators, duct-work and console. There were no substantive changes made to the pipework. The organ gallery (which prior to 1969 had only been deep enough for the organ bench and pedal board) was expanded to accommodate the choir.

By the 1980's the "modernized" parts of the organ were having significant difficulties with electrical contact and pneumatic malfunctions. The Music Committee contracted David E. Wallace, Inc. of Portland, Maine to return the organ to its former configuration and to re-trackerize it. A new console was designed and built, using stop knobs, labels and keyboards from Hutchings, Plaisted's opus 81, which had been installed in Dover, NH. A 30-note concave-radiating pedal board was installed in place of the original 27-note flat pedal board and 3 new pipes were added to each of the pedal stops. The pipework remained unchanged. The 27 façade pipes were re-stenciled by Brunswick artist Hati Modr using the original patterns on the pipes and colors to compliment those in the sanctuary. Gold leaf was re-applied where gold was originally used.

In the early 1990's the choir loft was further enlarged to accommodate the growing choir. David Wallace moved the console even further from the pipes and extended the trackers. In April 2003, the Andover Organ Company of Methuen, Massachusetts was engaged to thoroughly restore the organ. The work included completely restoring the wind chests and replacing the cracked and split chest tables with new voidless plywood tables to better withstand constant heating. A new console coupling mechanism was built along with new mechanical key and stop action. The pipes were cleaned, repaired and checked for proper speech and volume. A few tonal changes were made so that the organ could better serve the needs of today's worship service. The 4' Violina and 2' Flautina in the Swell were made larger in scale, so that the pipes could speak louder and with a quality of tone that would give more support to the singing. Likewise, the Pedal 8' Violoncello was made larger to give the bass line a stronger foundation. A two-rank Cornet, which provides a fine solo sound, was added to the Swell. The blower was moved to the space behind the organ pipe chamber to reduce its noise and built a larger wind trunk from the blower to the organ in order to fully wind the instrument. The original voicing style of the Hutchings, Plaisted & Co. has been retained. The organ now speaks with new-found vigor much the way it did in 1883.