

The state of New York founded Fredonia Academy as an institution of higher learning in 1826. It was elevated to the status of State Normal School (specifically for teacher training), one of four statewide, in 1866. In 1887 professor Jesse Hillman founded what was to become the school's famed music department which today is the State University system's signature facility for the music education disciplines. In 1900 a tragic fire burned the academy building to the ground taking the lives of six students and the janitor. The resulting inquest found the loss of life avoidable and due to a cascade of mistakes.

A large new brick structure was built on the site in 1901 and remained the center of the school's activity until 1946 when the first of the school's off-site facilities was built-- Mason Hall, the School of Music building-- on a 256 acre site that is the location of the school's large campus today. The building won the silver medal for architecture at the 1903 St. Louis Worlds Fair. In 1948, the State Normal School was incorporated into SUNY, the State University of New York system, and discipline degree programs outside of teacher preparation were introduced. "Old Main" remained an integral part of the school facilities until it was decommissioned ca. 1973.

The 1901 building contained a large chapel/auditorium which was fitted with a 2-manual and pedal Hillgreen-Lane organ, installed in 1902, a year after a similar new instrument was installed in the Fredonia Methodist Church.

In recent memory, "Old Main" contained a proscenium-arch stage and auditorium, but no chapel, and that function room may have evolved into the latter performance space. Until the construction of the large concert hall on campus in 1969, this was the main performance space for the college. Circa 1962, the Schlicker company installed a large 2-manual concert organ in the auditorium, with the third manual and divisional expansions prepared for, with planning for a Fine Arts complex including a new concert hall already under way, and this would be the eventual home for the Schlicker concert organ in greatly expanded form. The Schlicker was removed in 1968 for enlargement, and was installed in the King Concert Hall of the I.M. Pei-designed Rockefeller Fine Arts Center in 1969.

The people with any memory of the Normal Chapel and its Hillgreen-Lane instrument or what might have become of either, have long passed. After years of dereliction and threatened destruction, the building has been modernized and re-purposed as a subsidized senior apartment complex. To my knowledge, nothing remains extant of the former chapel or auditorium spaces.

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