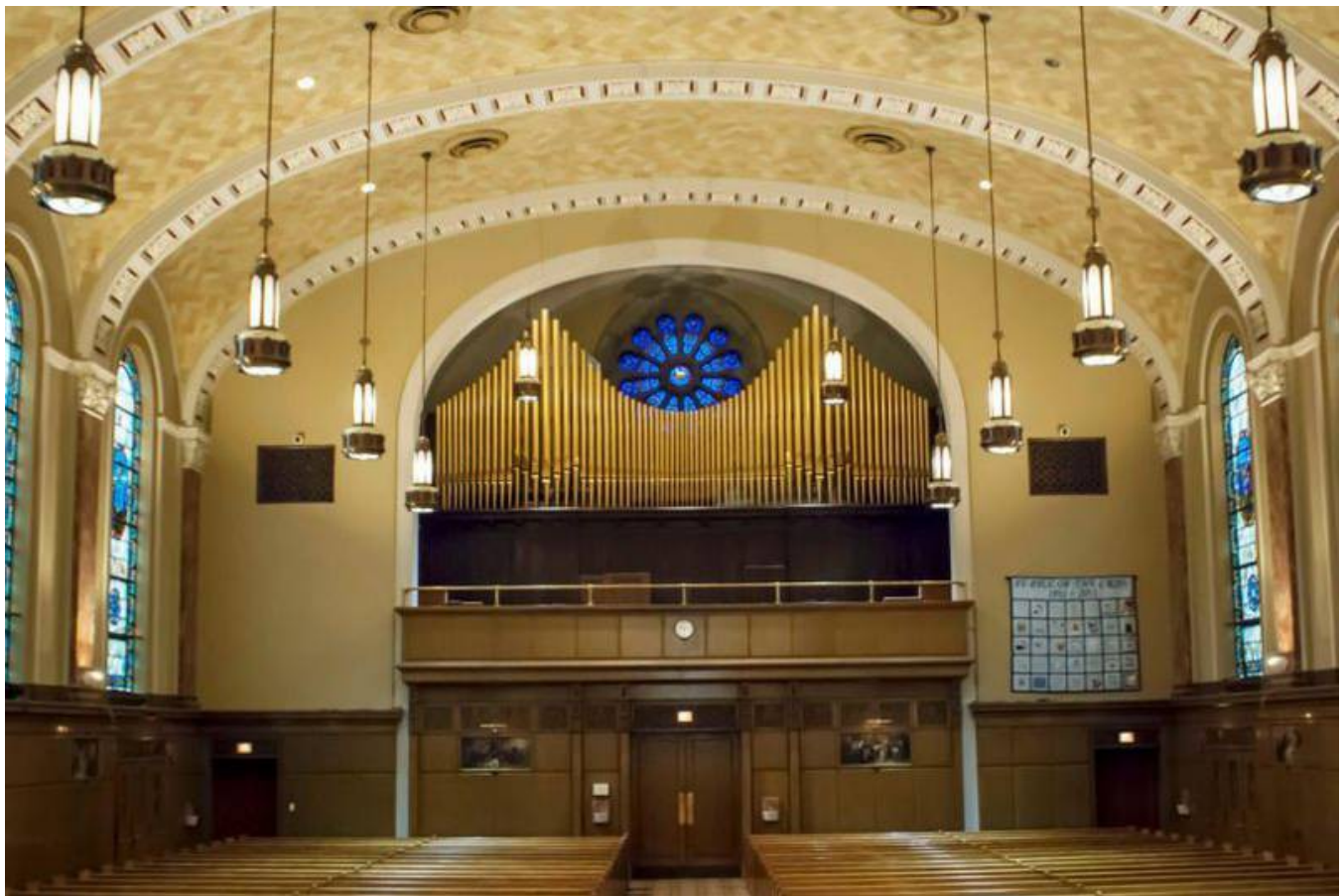


## Casavant pipe organ from former Sackville United Church finds new home

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The 1928 Casavant pipe organ that once graced the Sackville United Church has found a new home at St. Paul of the Cross Catholic Church in Park Ridge, Illinois. PHOTO SUBMITTED

**SACKVILLE, N.B. – It has been taken on a two-year and 2,400-kilometre journey but the sweet sounds of the 1928 Casavant pipe organ from the former Sackville United Church are being heard from the rafters once again.**

The organ, rescued from the Sackville church just prior to its demolition in the summer of 2015, has found a new home and is being enjoyed by a new congregation at a large Catholic Church in Park Ridge, Illinois.

“It has a new life,” said Pastor Britto Berchmans of St. Paul of the Cross Catholic Church. “And it’s just amazing . . . the sound is wonderful.”

The organ was “inaugurated” just this month during the Easter vigil Mass and Berchmans said the new instrument, with its stunning sound and beauty, was a hit with the church-goers. The organ will certainly be put to good use, he noted, as St. Paul of the Cross includes a parish of more than 4,500 families and conducts more than 120 funerals and 50 weddings each year, as well as nine Masses every weekend.

### **Fateful find**

Berchmans said his church began the search for a new organ about three years ago when an inspection uncovered a number of problems with their existing pipe organ. The organ, which was acquired by the church in the early 1980s, had been installed improperly. It was missing some of its pipes and was becoming more challenging to play as time went on. “Over the years, it had been giving us trouble,” he said.

He said Casavant explained during the evaluation that if the organ were a car, the check engine light had come on a number of years ago. It was in such a state of disrepair that it was not worth putting any more money into it, he was told.

But with a long tradition of glorious choral music, Berchmans said there wasn’t any question of whether the church would acquire a new organ – but where would they find one and how would they fund it.

“We couldn’t afford not to have an organ,” he said.

By divine providence perhaps, the church was contacted several months later by Casavant about a beautiful pipe organ that had been saved from a shuttered church in Sackville, New Brunswick, Canada and was being stored and refurbished by Casavant Freres in Saint-Hyacinthe, Quebec.

But because St. Paul of the Cross was in the midst of a fundraising campaign for other building renovations at the time of the organ’s demise, Berchmans said the church had to first get approval to dip into its reserves to fund the project. The restoration and installation would cost about \$650,000 while about \$230,000 was required for improvements to the choir loft and the electrical system. Once given the green light, the organ was then transported to Illinois. Installation of the massive 1,952-pipe organ began this past February.

And as luck would have it, the “footprint of the organ fit exactly into our choir loft,” he said, almost like it was destined to be there.

Berchmans said while the project didn’t come cheap, he sees the organ as a vital investment into the church. And he said a new organ would have cost upwards of \$1 million and wouldn’t have had the craftsmanship that comes with those built in the 1920s.

“It’s almost like a heritage treasure . . . it really is a blessing.”

### **Local residents played key role in saving organ**

The story of the organ’s salvation, however, didn’t start with St. Paul of the Cross. It actually began about a year before the Catholic church even showed interest in the instrument. And much of the credit for that can be attributed to former Sackville resident Robert Summerby-Murray.

With an intrinsic interest, both professionally and personally, in pipe organs, Summerby-Murray said when he heard the news that the United Church property had been sold back in the spring of 2014, one of his first thoughts was how to go about saving this instrument that had regaled Sackville church-goers for more than eight decades.

So that summer, he approached the new property owner John Lafford about the possibility of saving the organ. Lafford didn’t hesitate, he said, and Summerby-Murray then took the next step and sought advice from the Nova Scotia Organ Rescue Project, a group of enthusiasts dedicated to the preservation and repurposing of important instruments.

With their guidance, Summerby-Murray began the process of dismantling the instrument with assistance from his two sons throughout that fall and winter. It wasn't an easy task by any means.

With the building beginning to deteriorate, and the leaks from the roof and walls starting to damage the organ, "it was clear that I had to move quickly to protect the instrument."

"By early 2015, working nearly every weekend, I had removed all of the valuable pipework and had begun to transport it to safe, offsite locations," he said.

Summerby-Murray, a former Mount Allison professor who now serves as president of St. Mary's University in Halifax, said he also began talks with the senior leadership of Casavant Freres at that time. While they had initially declined interest, he said by the spring of 2015, they had identified potential clients for the organ.

Continuing to work on removing and storing all of the fragile pipework, Summerby-Murray said he knew time was running out, however, and the demolition of the church was looming.

Working with Lafford and Simon Couture, vice president at Casavant, Summerby-Murray assisted as a team from Quebec, including one of this country's most respected pipe organ technicians, was brought to Sackville to complete the disassembly of the instrument. In one of the fastest disassemblies in Casavant's history, the entire instrument was loaded onto a tractor trailer in one weekend – and that included retrieving pipework from Summerby-Murray's basement, garage and other sites where he had been storing all of the pieces.

### **Organ will play on**

With the organ now in Casavant's hands, and soon to be on its way to a new home, Summerby-Murray said it was satisfying to know that the rescue of this historically-significant instrument had been completed.

"With the refurbishment of this instrument and its installation in the parish of St. Paul of the Cross outside Chicago, Illinois, we have ensured that this instrument continues to serve worship, liturgy and artistry for years to come. It is unfortunate that we were not able to find a home for this beautiful instrument in Maritime Canada - but with its installation in St. Paul of the Cross, it is good news that the instrument will continue to bring joy to many people."

Summerby-Murray, an organist himself with a professional diploma in pipe organ performance from Trinity College, London, also acknowledged Lafford's significant contributions in ensuring the organ was given new life. Lafford, a former student of Summerby-Murray's, was very obliging throughout the entire process, he said.

"He came to appreciate what we were doing as part of salvaging a significant component of the heritage value of the church."

As well as the organ, Lafford also identified other heritage components of the building such as stained glass windows, pews, and paneling, and began looking actively at ways of repurposing these for other congregations in Canada and the US.