The Special Edition CHRONICLE

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The pipe organ is a musical instrument that produces sound by driving pressurized air through pipes selected via a keyboard.

This special edition of The Chronicle is devoted to a single subject: the pipe organ at Bruton Parish Church. Many parishioners who completed the recent survey asked for more information about this important part of our worship life and its current condition.

Please save this issue for future reference and listen for announcement of forums reviewing this information. Thank you for reading and seeking to understand Bruton's long relationship with the remarkable "king of instruments".

Beginnings

Pipes are grouped into sets called ranks. Most organs have multiple ranks of pipes, increasing the number of sounds available.

The year was 1756 when the first, long-awaited organ arrived at Bruton Parish from England. A real novelty, it was installed and played by Peter Pelham, Jr. for the next 46 years. The church's prosperity waxed and waned in the 19th century, as did its ability to maintain an organ and qualified organist.

Upon completion of the 1907 restoration of the church, Bruton had a vested choir and working organ in time for two festival services. Lora Thorpe Purcell was hired as organist in 1914 and music at Bruton stabilized for a time. The mid-20th century brought successes as well as perennial organ problems. The 1938 restoration, World War II, and disagreements over the correct way to voice the organ pipes each contributed to erratic progress in the growth of music at Bruton Parish.

voice: Adjustment made by the builder to produce the desired tone and volume.

About the present organ

Typically there are many more pipes in an organ than are visible. Each rank includes one pipe for each note: a keyboard with 61 notes will have 61 pipes. Each pipe in one row, or rank, produces the same timbre. If a different timbre is desired, it is necessary to have a second rank of pipes that differs from the first: in diameter, in shape, or perhaps with a vibrating reed inside.

Today's instrument dates from 1937, when the Aeolian-Skinner Organ Company built an organ with two keyboards and 13 sets of pipes. In 1939, an 18th-century Samuel Green English organ was placed in the front gallery to represent the look of the original organ. Additional pipes and a new 3-manual console were added to the Aeolian-Skinner instrument.

Over the next 40 years, it was enlarged and pipes were exchanged and revised five more times in attempts to make it better suit the parish's needs. The largest expansion and rebuild was in 1955, a generous gift from John D. Rockefeller, Jr. dedicated to parishioner Vernon Geddy, his friend and colleague in the Restoration. In the 1970s, the failing 18th-century Samuel Green organ was removed to storage. Its case remains in the east gallery today, and is filled with a positive division added to replace the Green pipes. Our present organ has 105 ranks and 5,686 pipes.

division: Self-contained part of the organ consisting of its own windchest, pipes, and keyboard, usually, but not always, connected to one specific manual of the organ.

The pipes in most organs are enclosed in a case. The case blends the organ's sound and aids in projecting it into the room.

Its current difficulties

- The 1937 organ was designed to avoid visual compromise in the space. With every expansion the pattern continued: locating the pipes in places that would not conflict with the Colonial style of the church. Thus, three divisions are "hidden" in the east gallery over the altar, three divisions are in the attic above grills in the ceiling, and one division is in the Tower. Of the three divisions located in the front gallery, only one is housed in a case intended to project the sound into the room. The other pipes project their sound upward toward the attic grills.

Tonal problems result when pipes are squeezed into multiple places. This unorthodox placement forces sound to be pushed into the nave from spaces far from those who are hearing it. Clarity is lost. Seasonal climate changes are particularly hard on the division in the Tower and those in the attic, making it nearly impossible to keep the organ in tune. In short, there are difficulties inherent in our organ's placement that would not be solved with yet another rebuilding project.

- The keyboards were replaced in the 1990s, but notes continue to fail. Some can and have been repaired at reasonable expense. However, the frequent use sustained by the instrument as well as some poor design issues have resulted in repeated dead notes and uneven action that makes playing the organ very difficult. The pedalboard is original and was never replaced; it is in dire need of reconditioning.

Keyboards played by the hands are known as manuals. A pedalboard is played by the feet. Each keyboard has its own group of stops. Stops allow the organist to control which ranks sound at a given time. The organist operates the keyboards and stops from the console.

- Many pipes have been mitered (bent) in order to remain hidden, so they are experiencing metal fatigue. The construction of some of the pipes was badly compromised in order to fit them into the tight space available. A number of dead notes have resulted that would be extraordinarily costly to repair, and more are sure to follow.

- The last major work on the organ occurred in 1995. That work was intended to address malfunctions in console and mechanism, but mechanical failures have continued to plague the instrument, and the repairs made provided no solutions for the tuning and voicing issues explained above.

Sound is produced when air under low pressure (wind) is blown into the bottom (foot) of a pipe from the box-like chamber called the windchest. The wind comes from a blower driven by an electric motor (modern version of bellows, which used to be hand pumped). Leather valves control the flow of air into the individual note channels. Each valve is opened and closed by depressing the corresponding key on the keyboard.

How we addressed the difficulties -- a timeline

January 2008 — The organ displays performance failures and needs frequent re-tuning. The rector appoints six lay people to an Organ Assessment Committee. The church engages Foley-Baker, Inc., an organ consulting and restoration firm, to survey the organ. Excerpts of their conclusions, from the 40-page report, by Michael Foley:

On recondition: I would foresee this project involving total removal of the organ from the building, reconditioning and some restructuring of the existing chamber spaces plus a tonal rebuild from the ground up. Reasonably a price tag of less than $2M.

On replacement: We are mainly in the business to service and recondition pipe organs and in over forty years we rarely tell a potential client (especially one with a job this size) to purchase a new organ, but here we're suggesting just that.

On Bruton Parish Church: We do a lot of surveys and seldom become so passionate about a job. But just look at what we found: a large and active congregation with one of the biggest music programs in America working within one of America's most important liturgical structures all based within a beautiful, historically important community. Frankly, it doesn't get much better…the only part missing here is an organ installation equal to the task.

"We found a large and active congregation with one of the biggest music programs in America ... the only part missing here is an organ installation equal to the task."

September 2008 — The church engages Jonathan Ambrosino, a Boston organ consultant, to visit and evaluate the organ. He attends three services (singing with the Pelham choir and sitting in two different places for the other two morning services) and summarizes his findings in a report:

On retaining the instrument: Even with everything in top-notch mechanical and musical condition, this organ will never be more than it presently is. Climate and tuning problems will persist, and the frustration of the musicians will remain.

On exploring every option: With Bruton's active worship schedule and extraordinary musical outreach, a superb organ isn't a luxury, but rather a programmatic cornerstone. Particularly in such a place, there should be no apology for pursuing the very finest.

The Organ Assessment Committee contacts four highly-reputable American organ builders, researches their work and philosophies, and travels to hear examples of their organs. The four builders each visit Bruton Parish and report back to the committee about their vision for a new organ.

The response from the Organ Assessment Committee to the Vestry: The Organ Assessment Committee has inspected our organ from top to bottom; has listened to its flaws; and has traveled to other churches to hear their organs. We are unanimously of the opinion that the parish would be better served by using its resources to replace the organ than by spending excessive monies to repair it.

Bruton may be a fine old building, but it is just as surely a thriving modern congregation.

Jonathan Ambrosino

October 2008 — The Vestry accepts the Organ Assessment Committee's recommendation, expands the committee and re-names it the Organ Committee, charging it with researching how best to replace the current organ.

March 2009 — The Organ Committee reports to the Vestry: The Organ Committee strongly recommends the Vestry enter into a design agreement with Dobson Organ Builders, Ltd., of Lake City, Iowa. The amount of $30,000 is secured from the Bruton Parish Church Endowment Fund, Inc. to enter into contract for the organ design.

May 2009 — Mr. Lynn Dobson, company founder and principal, and his associate come to Williamsburg to inspect the church. They consider any structural issues with the building that might impact the organ's design, and confer with Colonial Williamsburg's architectural historians as to the proposed organ's appearance. The resultant design takes into account the directives given by the CW architects. The design is subsequently unanimously approved by them and deemed a finely-balanced compromise between our historic past and present needs. A forum is held in Lewis Hall with a PowerPoint presentation followed by questions and answers.

The visible portion of the case is called the facade, and the facade may or may not include actual speaking pipes. Those visible in the Green case are only decorative, but those planned for the new organ will all be actual sounding pipes.

November 2009 — The Dobson organ design is received.

December 2009 — Merl Renne, Organ Committee Chair, and Helen Phillips, Vice-Chair, compile the history of the committee's work, present the design to the vestry and its mission is complete. The vestry approves the design, postponing commencement of a campaign until the next rector is called.

A new organ's attributes: How will Bruton Parish be better served?

An organ contains two actions, or systems of moving parts. When a key is depressed, the key action admits wind into a pipe. The key action on our organ is electro-pneumatic, with an electrical current between the keys and pedals controlling the valves that allow the pipes to sound. Such a connection allows the organ console to be physically separated from its pipes, as in our case. (A tracker action organ uses a mechanical linkage, which requires the console to be placed close to the pipes.)

Jonathan Ambrosino asks and answers: Is there any organ solution more appropriate to what Bruton once was, is now, and may yet become?

- An organ placed within the room, for line-of-sight tone communication to congregation and choir
- A handsome visual design, echoing and enhancing the building's interior
- An organ in scale with the building and its heritage — about half the size of the present one, cheaper to maintain and rebuild
- Strong, rich tone that concentrates on fundamental warmth over brash brilliance
- A variety of tone to reflect the broad range of music performed here

The Organ Committee concluded that long-term operating, tuning and repair costs of a new, smaller organ, built completely within the east gallery of the church (not subject to the attic's temperature fluctuations) would indeed be less than those of the current organ, even after a complete overhaul and re-installation. Moreover, the result would be an instrument built to serve our congregation well into the future.

Next Steps: Where do we go from here?

The price update provided by Lynn Dobson in July 2013 for the organ Specification I:

39 Registers
41 Stops
45 Ranks
Includes painted poplar case with appropriate 18th century-style gilding
Carved pipe shades
Facade pipes of burnished tin with gilded mouths
Electric key action and stop action
$1,782,000

register:
Rank(s) of pipes controlled by a single stop.

The stop action allows the organist to control which ranks of pipes are engaged. Our stop action is likewise electrical, allowing the organist to set registrations, or combinations of sounds that can then be saved and recalled with the push of a piston.

Why Dobson? In his report, Michael Foley expresses confidence in the Dobson firm's credentials: We are in a wonderful time of organ building in America. There are artisans out there who will create a masterpiece that will perfectly fit Bruton Parish's architecture and musical challenges. One that comes to mind is Lynn Dobson. Appearance would obviously play a nearly dominating role and therefore only very experienced builders should be considered.

Discussions by the Organ Committee led to two significant decisions:

pistons:
Buttons and toe studs on the organ console that allow the organist to recreate saved combinations of sounds, or ranks of pipes engaged.

- They would pursue an American builder to avoid the potential pitfalls of currency exchanges which were extremely volatile at the time; and

- They would give high priority to quality of craftsmanship, so that any new organ could withstand the demands of our active music program.

Given Foley's recommendation, the committee included Dobson as a candidate. They pursued research into other builders and design possibilities. They travelled to hear Dobson organs and spoke with those who play his instruments. Eventually they reached the unanimous conclusion that the firm would be the best choice.

At this time we are planning a campaign. The preparation includes work such as determining projects, leadership, volunteer roles, and a host of related items. This newsletter is a tool to increase understanding of the top capital priority in the campaign. Further communication will come.

As members of this community, we will enjoy the benefits of a new organ: the beauty and warmth of tone, the improved expressive qualities that will enrich choral worship. Each of us will make this project a reality by giving as generously as possible.

Conclusion

Readers of Bruton Parish Church, An Architectural History by Carl Lounsbury will recall that it is essentially the story of our building's long history of change. The organ is a major part of the narrative. With each of the church's interior alterations, the organ was moved, modified or replaced to meet the needs of the day.

This time we are the ones called to address a situation and make a decision. Lay people, organists, and professionals have done the research and shared informed opinions. They agree that replacing the organ is the path to take.

The connection between building, organ, and worshipper is as important as ever, and our music outreach is well-known and appreciated. We must do right by our space and its inheritors, with an appropriate new organ that will serve Bruton Parish well for many years to come.

When a builder has risen to the top, place your confidence in them, trust them to price their work fairly.

Jonathan Ambrosino

Organ Assessment Committee

Rebecca Davy
JanEl Will
Dan Hawks
Roger Jones
Helen Phillips
Merl Renne

Organ Committee

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Helen Phillips, Vice Chair
Rebecca Davy
JanEl Will
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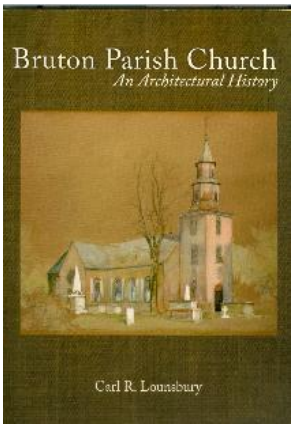
Further Reading



Bruton's Organ, Rebecca Davy, The Bruton Fount Fall 2013, pages 7-8
http://images.acswebnetworks.com/1/1318/THEBRUTONFOUNTFALL2013.pdf

Bruton Parish Church, An Architectural History, Carl Lounsbury

Let the Anthems Swell, James S. Darling

Visit The Link Library at http://www.brutonparish.org/link_library
From there you may navigate to other sources of information, including:

- ❑ Excerpts from the report by Foley-Baker
- ❑ Summary of findings by Jonathan Ambrosino
- ❑ More information about Dobson Pipe Organ Builders, Ltd.
- ❑ Preliminary specification I of an organ for Bruton Parish Church

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