

The “New” Hook Pipe Organ at Sts. Peter and Paul Church

With the exception, perhaps, of a Stradivarius violin, few instruments could have travelled such a convoluted route as this 19th century vintage pipe organ.

Originally installed in 1874 in the Unitarian Church of Keokuk, Iowa – just a few miles to the southeast as the crow flies – this E. and G.G. Hook organ will once again provide sacred and classical music in the surroundings for which it was originally designed and crafted: a house of worship.

The instrument represents some of the most creative and innovative American engineering and craftsmanship available in the 1800s. Elias and George Greenleaf Hook were the sons of a prominent Salem, Massachusetts cabinet maker, but their creative interests were more musically inclined. After apprenticing with another organ builder, William Goodrich, the brothers decided they could produce better, and in 1827 set out on their own to design and build these incredible pipe dreams.

Up until 1935, when the company closed its doors, E. and G.G. Hook designed and crafted over 2000 pipes organs, many of which are still extant today. Indeed, trained organ aficionados talk of a unique Hook “sound” possessed by these instruments.

Hook’s most famous organ is the massive instrument that provides worship music in the Cathedral of the Holy Cross in Boston, Mass.

Our organ provided similar praise across the Mississippi for over a century. However, for over a decade until 1981, the organ had remained unplayed. It was then that Fort Madison’s Phillip Hoenig, a musician, organist, and organ restorer was called in to clean the organ and perform minor repairs. Phil was to play the major role in preserving Hook organ over the next 28 years... But because the organ continued lying dormant in the old Unitarian church building – itself largely vacant during the 1970s, ‘80s and ‘90s – Mr. Hoenig purchased the organ in 1996 to ensure its preservation. However, it remained in the church for storage...

Four years later Phil found a pipe organ enthusiast in Florida to take over the instrument’s stewardship. But when the new owner arrived in Keokuk to help dismantle and truck the instrument to its new home, as well as perform a major restoration, the gentleman was simply overwhelmed with the project and wanted out of the deal.

That turn of events found them advertising the organ was for sale... and several months later a new owner was found: A physician in Ashland, Kentucky who was looking for such an instrument to fill a special addition to his mansion. Phil Hoenig dismantled the old Hook and performed a comprehensive restoration in his shop in Fort Madison – a process which took over fifteen months to complete. He then packed the refurbished Hook onto a truck for its delivery to the new home in Kentucky.

Hoenig subsequently travelled to the site to assemble the instrument, and soon the organ was once again playing classic hymns and melodies.

And then...

A few years later, changes in the new owner's life prompted yet another "sale" of the organ: Looking to replace his mansion with a smaller home in order to care for his aged parents, the Kentucky doctor began his search for a new owner. But none could be found.

Then his mansion sold sooner than expected, and the organ needed to be removed in two months. That was June, 2009. It was then the good doctor was inspired to give the mammoth instrument to a church needing such a pipe organ. This was quite an offer in that the organ now had a replacement value approaching \$500,000...

So he contacted Phil Hoenig, his organ "builder," with his donation offer along with a plea to help him out of his dilemma: it had to be removed that August! Phil was aware that Sts. Peter and Paul church had no organ in its loft, and wasted no time in contacting a member of Sts. Peter and Paul church, Paul McKoon, to relate the details of the deal. McKoon subsequently took it to the Parish Council, during which Fr. Tony said "yes!"

The Parish provided the necessary funds to transport the organ back west and for Mr. Hoenig to reassemble the instrument in the old abandoned organ loft at Sts. Peter and Paul.

So today, we can now worship and enjoy heavenly music again in our church.