

# A History of Music at Grace Epiphany Church, Mt. Airy

Although records of Grace Church (now Grace Epiphany) date back to 1857, we can trace the musical history back to the late 1800s. The church flourished during the 1880s. The cornerstone was laid at the present location in 1888 on land donated by Franklin Gowen, President of the Reading Railroad. The first organ to exist in the church was a three-manual Johnson & Sons of Westfield, Massachusetts (Opus 717), installed in 1889. In 1890, organist Vernon Cassel was hired, and a boys' choir was started, taking over for the mixed quartet that had been offering their music up until this time. The year 1907 brought some change to the music at Grace Church. Anne Snyder states that "In 1907 the women exerted a bit of pressure on the Vestry, perhaps feeling they had earned the right to do so. They were dissatisfied with the choir and music, complaining that the boys were not properly trained, had poor enunciation, and incorrect time; were unruly; and that the music selection was poor. Capitulating to their charges, the organist of twenty years resigned. Another organist was hired but he, too, resigned after two years. We can only speculate as to his reasons." (p. 13). A similar push was made in 1912 when it was suggested that girls be able to join the choir. The Vestry Music Committee eventually decided to forego this step and "leave the choir's purity intact."

In 1909, George Alexander West becomes Organist & Choirmaster, *FRCO, FAGO*. Choirboy Robert Cridlund recalls that Mr. West "pounded out the beat with his oversized wedding band. When we got off key he'd call out with his Scotch accent, 'Beastly tone don't you know.' Mr. West was a Fellow of the Royal College of Organists (England) as well as a Fellow of the American Guild of Organists (AGO). An important Philadelphia organist, Mr. West served from 1912 to 1921 as the second Dean of the Philadelphia Chapter of the AGO.

World War I took Grace Church's Rector away from the parish to serve the war efforts. Upon his return, there came new inspiration for progress and in 1919 the parish launched a very ambitious capital campaign, raising \$25,000 for a new organ, a new heating plant, a parish office, and for paying off the debt from the land behind the church. On October 5<sup>th</sup>, 1921, the installation of the new Skinner organ began. The cost was \$15,000, and another \$3,500 for the wiring. Also, carved wooden screens, given by James Bayard, were put up to shield the organ pipes. The Johnson & Sons organ was sold to St. Nathaniel's Church, Philadelphia. The new Skinner organ was made ready for an opening recital on November 30<sup>th</sup>, 1921, with Mr. William E. Zeuch, of Boston, playing.

On March 7, 1922, Newell Robinson was engaged as the Organist & Choirmaster. Mr. Robinson came to be known as "Fess," short for professor, "perhaps because of his penchant for teaching the background and meaning of the liturgy to his young charges." (p. 25) "Fess" also held the position of Instructor at the Philadelphia Divinity School and the Eastern Baptist Seminary, as well as having private piano and organ students, and was both a Fellow and held the Choirmaster Certificate from the AGO.

During the peak of Newell Robinson's time at Grace Church (1930s and 1940s), he oversaw two groups of choristers: the Girls' Choir and the Men & Boys' Choir. The Girls' Choir was unpaid, rehearsed once a week and offered their music at the early children's service. The Men & Boys' Choir was a paid choir, rehearsed three times a week (once with the men), and offered their music at

the 11 o'clock service. Carol Faris remarks that "it was my understanding before we moved here (1966) that it was the finest boys choir in Philadelphia." Jeanne DaCosta Shelton recalls that "We had an excellent choir under the leadership of Newell Robinson. He had red hair, a fiery temper, but boy, could he make us sing, and we all loved him." (p. 26) Besides singing for the Sunday services, "Fess's" choir offered operettas such as *Hansel and Gretel*, *Rumpelstiltskin*, and *Iolanthe*.

On December 1, 1961, a new Möller organ console was installed and shortly after, in 1964, Newell Robinson started to admit a few girls to his alto section in the Men & Boys' Choir. Soon after, Carol Faris became the first woman alto, followed by an adult soprano, Claire Bauder. On April 16, 1972 there was a celebration of Newell Robinson's fifty years of service to the church, including more than five hundred in attendance, many of them former choir members returning to pay tribute to their beloved "Fess." It was not until Sept. 22, 1980 that Mr. Robinson resigned, having served as organist for a staggering fifty-eight years. His many years of service mirror that of the great French organist Charles-Marie Widor, who served the Church of St. Sulpice in Paris for sixty-four years. Dr. Robinson died on Dec. 2, 1984.

Following Newell Robinson's departure, Linda Kershaw became the organist for three years, followed by Carol Faris. In the fall of 1987, Rosemary Colson was called as the organist and choirmaster, serving for 13 years. During her tenure, restoration efforts got underway on the Skinner organ. Sharon Bertha McCabe followed in 2000, and Quentin Lane came in 2003. In 2004, John Van Sant began his service as Music Director. A rebuilt Skinner organ console was purchased in the spring of 2005 to replace the Möller console. In the fall of 2008, Nicholas Fennig began as Music Director. Highlights of the 2009-2010 church season includes the establishment of a Children's Choir, hosting the Philadelphia Chapter American Guild of Organists (AGO) Competition Winner Recital, and concerts by the University of Pennsylvania's early music vocal ensemble "Ancient Voices."

*Nick Fennig, 25 August 2009*

*If you have anything of importance to add to this historical account,  
please e-mail Nick at [NFennig1@gmail.com](mailto:NFennig1@gmail.com).*

*Sources: oral history with Carol Faris & Rosemary Colson, 2009.*

*Organ Historical Society website database, [www.organsociety.org](http://www.organsociety.org)*

*Snyder, Anne. "Witness to Grace: The History of Grace Church Mt. Airy: 1857-1988. June 1988. pp. 3,4,11,13, 15,20,22,25,26,37,40,42,43.*