

# The Organ of Grace Epiphany Church

*Nick Fennig*

Grace Epiphany's organ was designed and built by one of the foremost names in American organ building. Mr. Ernest M. Skinner and his company, the Skinner Organ Co. of Boston, MA, built their Opus 320 in 1920 and installed it here in 1921. The early 1920s was a boom time for his organ company, as they built twenty-eight other organs around the country in the same year as this instrument.

Pennsylvania-born Skinner was known for having a keen ear and a talent for mechanical invention, being self-taught from an early age and pushed the technical limits of the day. E. M. Skinner's organs sound the different instruments of the orchestra. For instance, the Aeoline, Salicional, and Voix Celeste stops all sound like strings. Add the tremolo stop on top of these to vibrate the sound like a string vibrato. Flute stops vary from the Concert Flute to the Harmonic Flute. The brass and reed stops consist of a French Horn, a Trumpet, and a Clarinet. Craig Whitney, assistant managing editor of the *New York Times*, in his book "All the Stops," writes that "what he was trying to do, better than anyone before him, was to make the organ into an instrument of orchestral beauty, with tones ranging all the way from warm and shimmering to proud and majestic, and solo voices just as versatile, pure and plaintive as any orchestra's." Mr. Whitney goes on to say that "Skinner organs could roar like elephants or warble as sweetly as nightingales." Grace Epiphany's organ is no exception.

On an early trip in his career to England in 1898, Mr. Skinner was impressed with the sounds and technical characteristics of the British organs. He was also struck by the powerful French organs and the highly rhythmic-sounding German instruments. He returned to America to make a truly American sound, one that forged together all the different tonal qualities he found in Europe, one that surely reflects the cultural "melting pot" that makes our nation so unique and great. In a way, Grace Epiphany has an all-American organ.

We as a parish are indeed proud of our historic gem of an organ that is a product of the noble ambitions of the "Golden Age" of organ building. Many of these organ gems have not survived or have fallen into disrepair. Philadelphia once had a total of 17 organs built by Mr. Skinner. However, we are proud that not only has our instrument survived, but it also thrives and continues to serve our church. For almost 90 years, over 2,000 pipes of Mr. Skinner's handiwork have led our congregation in prayer and praise.

Whitney, Craig R. "All The Stops: The Glorious Pipe Organ and Its American Masters." PublicAffairs, New York. 2003. pp. 1-20, 51-81. Thanks also to Mr. Jonathan Bowen, Organist & Choirmaster of The Church of St. Luke and The Epiphany, Phila.