

# Bethinking of Old Orleans

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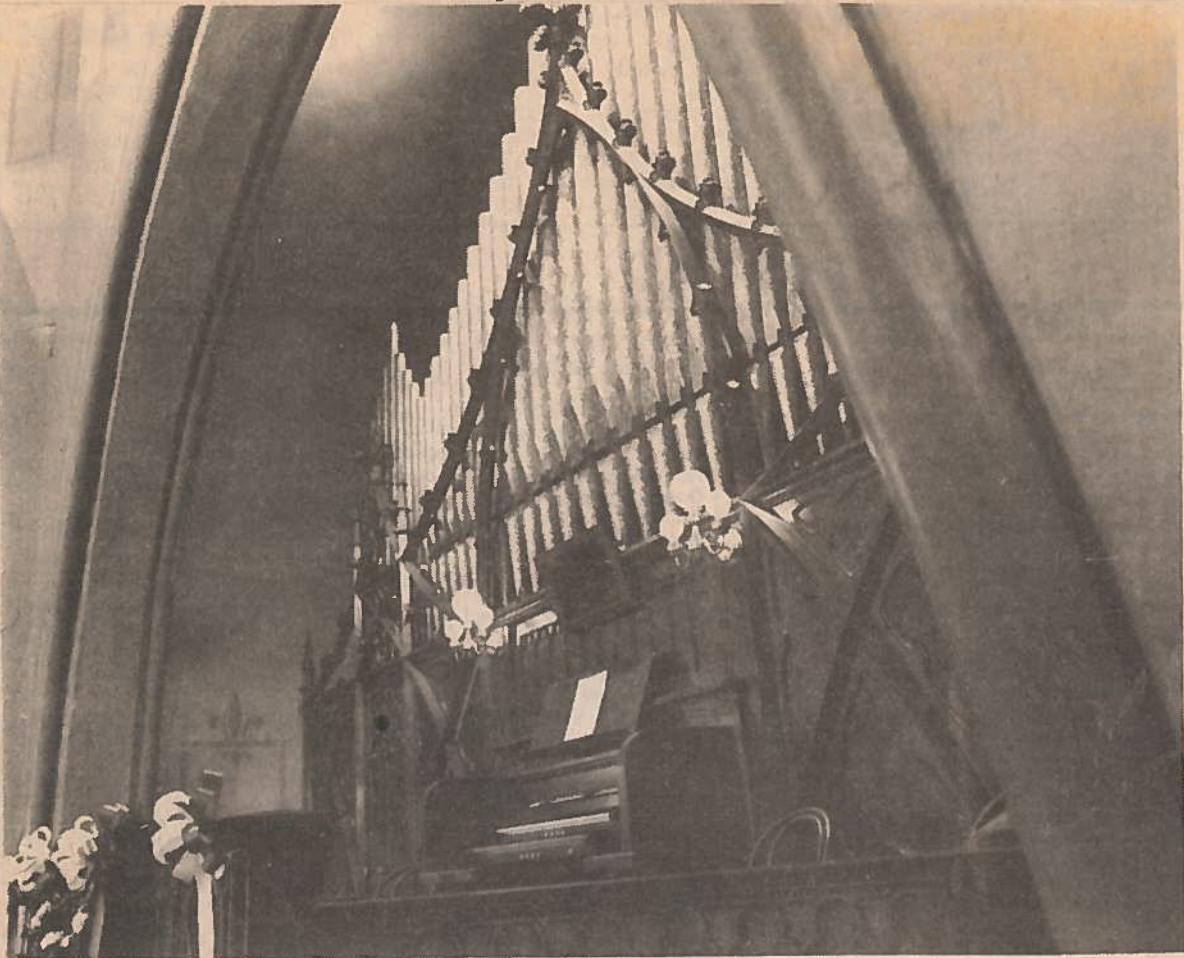
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THE GREAT JOHNSON ORGAN

Opus 812



On Sunday, April 17 at 7:30 P.M. the Pullman Memorial Universalist Church in Albion will "kick off" its Centennial with an organ concert featuring Wade Gidley at the console with Susan Collins Thaine, vocal soloist and Adam Wallis, trumpet. The public is most cordially invited to attend. It was just one hundred years ago that actual construction of the Pullman Church began to take place, this being a gift of George M. Pullman to Albion Universalists as a memorial to his father and mother. Construction progressed fairly well through the spring, summer and fall of 1894.

In the November 8, 1894 issue of the Orleans American it was reported: "The pipe organ of the Universalist Church has arrived." In the November 15 issue of the same paper we find: "Workers from the east are setting up the organ in the Pullman Church. A Rose water motor has been put in the Pullman Church to supply power to operate the pipe organ." And finally, this reference is found in the Dec. 6, 1894 Orleans American, "The work of setting up the organ in the Pullman Church was completed last week." The organ was reputed to cost \$6,000 which was a sizable sum of money one hundred years ago. You may wonder what is so special about this pipe organ.

To begin with, it's a Johnson which was the "top of the line" or the Cadillac of pipe organs a century ago. It was built in Westfield, Mass. by the William A. Johnson and Son organ builders. Between 1844 and 1898 the Johnson Company produced 860 pipe organs. Each one was given a consecutive number in order of completion. The Pullman Memorial Church instrument is Opus 812. It is the only one now remaining in Orleans County.

The First Baptist Church of Medina originally had Opus 384 made in 1872. This was located in the gallery. However, it was later removed and eventually in 1948 an Austin organ was placed in the chancel. The Methodist Church in Medina also had a Johnson Organ, Opus 483 built in 1876. It was replaced with Mohler in 1933.

As to the Pullman Church organ, it is interesting that one of the news clips mentions a Rose water motor to supply power. At the time, this was an innovative technique and a modern method of pumping air into the bellows. The Rose water motor operated off the municipal water pressure which in turn, caused a ratchet to move up and down which was connected to the bellows. Therefore, a church using the Rose water motor did not need to hire a blow boy to pump the organ as many churches would had to have done with older pipe organs. Most of the Old Rose water motor still remains in place in the Universalist Church basement.

As to the man behind the name of the Johnson Organ, he was William Allen Johnson who was born in October 1816 at the Village of Nassau, N.Y. In 1819 his parents moved to Massachusetts and shortly thereafter settled in Westfield. William Johnson apprenticed as a mason and set himself up as a contractor. In 1839 he married Mary Ann Douglas and they had one son, William H. Johnson.

In 1842 work began on a new Methodist Church in Westfield where William Johnson did a great deal of masonry. In the spring of 1843, while he was still working on the construction of the church, a pipe organ was delivered from the Boston factory of Elias and George G. Hook. William Johnson helped

uncrate the instrument and asked questions about it. As a result, he was hired by Hooks to help them install it. In the winter of 1843-1844 William Johnson's outside masonry work came to a halt, but he had decided that he could build an organ too. His first, was a parlor organ. When the warm weather came, he resumed the contractor business, but that winter he built two organs. The following winter he built three organs. By the fall of 1847, he had decided to lay aside his mason's trowel and devote all his time to organ building. From this humble beginning William A. Johnson became one of America's most renowned organ builders of the 19th Century.

In 1871 William H. Johnson became a member of his father's distinguished firm. He was in his own right, a very talented organist who gave concerts on Johnson Organs throughout the country. All of the organs built during his presence with the firm, display an excellent balance, splendid dignity and beautiful voicing.

Johnson & Son furnished the background for several other organ builders of the time. John Wesley Steer (1825-1900) and George William Turner (1829-1908) both worked for William A. Johnson. In 1867 these two men went into business for themselves as Steer & Turner. Christ Episcopal Church in Albion has one of their organs built in 1877. I believe First Presbyterian Church in Holley also has a Steer & Turner.

Organs of this time frame were "tracker-action." In other words, to transmit the motion from the keys to the pallets, long thin wooden strips called trackers were used, hence the term tracker-action. Consequently, consoles or key desks had to be located fairly close to the chests of pipes.

The Johnson Co. closed in 1898. William A. died in 1901 and son William H. in 1922, but they left many monuments of their artistry and craftsmanship. As styles and tastes changed, and as we entered the electronic age, many Johnson organs were disposed of or altered and upgraded with electronic action rather than tracker-action.

In 1959 the Pullman Memorial Church voted to electrify the organ and move the console from the organ loft to the west transept of the church. The work of rebuilding was done by Carl H. Radmaker of Middleport. In 1948 a set of chimes was added in memory of Thomas Sweet given by Mae Sweet. The organ has 1255 pipes. This past January the Pullman Church undertook the job of moving the console back into its original position in the organ loft. This act of restoration was done in an attempt to bring back the aesthetic integrity of the church interior in preparation for the Centennial. The work was performed by Heritage Pipe Organ of North Tonawanda and church volunteers. The restored organ case side-lights were given by the children of the Sunday School. The organ retains its original facade pipes, most of which are actual speaking pipes. These are decorated in gold leaf with stenciled designs at Tiffany Studios in New York in 1894. The organ has been called the "king of instruments" and rightly so, for it is the largest and most complex of musical instruments. The Johnson Organ at the Pullman Memorial Church remains as one of the best of its kind in Western New York. Come and hear live, the thrilling sounds of this great organ on April 17, at 7:30 P.M.