

History of the Organs at St. Mary's Church, Rochester NY



Church History

St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church was founded in 1834, having purchased an unused Methodist church building one year earlier. The first church was located where the Joseph A. Floreano Riverside Convention Center now stands. In 1858, the present building was constructed. 1916 saw the addition of the two transepts which give the church its present cruciform shape, as well as the installation of the Tiffany rose window at the rear of the nave. There is mention of 'an organ' during this time, but no specific details about it are currently available. The bell tower, planned as part of the original design of the church, was added in 1940. Today, St. Mary's is part of the Southeast Rochester Catholic Community, which also includes Blessed Sacrament and St. Boniface churches.



Left side



Right side

Austin Organ

Signing of the contract for the Austin organ, Opus 2186, took place on April 24, 1951. Installation was completed in February, 1953 at the cost of \$50,000. The organ was designed by Samuel Warren and Richard Piper (the latter of whom had worked previously for the Willis firm in England). It was designed as an eclectic instrument of the 'American Classic' tradition, balancing moderate mid-century classical ensembles with a complement of coloristic registers. Jeanne Demessieux notably played the dedication recital of Opus 2186 on March 18th, 1953 during one of her American tours. The organ was updated electrically by Austin in 1990 with the addition of a solid state combination action, and again in 2019 by the Parsons Organ Company, when a sequencer was added and the wiring was updated to bring it up to modern fire safety standards. It remains tonally intact.



Hook & Hastings Organ

Built in 1896, Hook & Hastings, Opus 1697 began its life in St. Joseph Roman Catholic Church in Pepperell, Massachusetts. In September of 1967, the organ was removed from the church prior to its impending demolition. In 1968 Carolyn and Noel Nilson purchased the organ through the Organ Clearing House, and moved it to their home in Sandisfield, Massachusetts. The installation of the organ was a family affair, as Mrs. Nilson recounted: “we needed somebody small to stand inside the organ and put the pipes in the pipe rack. The children fit beautifully.”

When the Nilsons sold their home in 2007, the organ was moved to Christ Episcopal Church in Rochester, New York, and installed there by Rob Kerner and Eastman students in the “Organ Design and Maintenance” course. There, it was used as a temporary main service instrument until the installation of the Craighead-Saunders organ in 2008. It was then moved to its present location in the transept of St. Mary’s Roman Catholic Church, and inaugurated April 18, 2010. The organ has been well-cared for over the years and preserved with all of its original pipework. Although the Oboe appears to have had its reed tongues and wedges replaced, the rest of the pipework retains its original 1896 voicing.



Left side



Right side

*Isaac Dreves, 2018
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