

# COVER FEATURE

## RECONSTRUCTING THE 1930s

### AEOLIAN-SKINNER LANDMARK

#### Calvary Episcopal Church, Memphis, Tennessee

##### Aeolian-Skinner Op. 932, 1935

Rebuilt Reuter Organ Company, 1984  
Restoration of Great and Pedal, 2003  
(Spencer Organ Company; Jonathan Ambrosino/Jeff Weiler)

#### St. John's Chapel, Groton School, Massachusetts

##### Aeolian-Skinner Op. 936, 1935

Changes, rebuilding 1944, '45, '47, '50, '54, '62, '68, '75, '86, '91  
Removal, reinstallation, cleaning, mechanical repair, 2001–2002; Foley-Baker Inc./Jonathan Ambrosino and Jeff Weiler

#### Church of the Advent, Boston, Massachusetts

##### Aeolian-Skinner Op. 940, 1936; Op. 940-A, changes rebuilding, 1964

Restoration, 1979–81, 1988, 1990, 2001–2003, Nelson Barden Associates Inc. (tonal work Jonathan Ambrosino & Jeff Weiler, under contract)

**A**N English organbuilder chooses his trade at age 16, enters a firm and begins a five-year apprenticeship. At its conclusion, the man decides his ultimate company, and launches both career and adulthood. It was never so simple for G. Donald Harrison (1889–1956), who found his way to organbuilding in a serpentine fashion. While his father wanted him by his side as a junior patent attorney, the young Harrison's interest lay with pipe organs. After working eight years for Henry Willis & Sons, Harrison sold himself to Arthur Hudson Marks, president of the Skinner Organ Company, as someone who could assume the reins. In July of 1927, when Harrison sailed for America, he was heading to one of the world's two or three finest organbuilders.

For a restless organ culture, the Skinner organ was becoming stale: new approaches needed fresh sounds. Harrison's early advances merged contemporary English ideas of ensemble development with familiar Skinner voices and methods. Eventually, the transformation became more marked, and in the early 1930s, as Harrison gained technical control of the company and the artistic confidence of his customers, a personality began to emerge in a series of organs built during 1934 and 1935. Harrison was moving toward his own classical ideal and away from the conspicuously heroic outlook of his idolized Romantic-era builders, Willis, Cavallé-Coll, Schulze, and Lewis.

To this developing perspective was added another influence: the 1931 Steinmeyer at the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament in Altoona, Pennsylvania. This German-built instrument, with its lower wind pressures and large-scale trebles, low cut-ups and unforced voicing, embodied an altogether different approach to chorus and ensemble, giving Harrison his first concrete pointer since Schulze and Lewis as to how an ensemble might be developed in a Germanic manner (Harrison



would not visit Germany until the spring of 1936). A little-noted feature of these instruments was their novel balance structure: Great and Swell on equal footing; a milder but hardly inconsequential Choir, often with its own flue chorus and Trompette register; strong, largely independent Pedal divisions. Where present, Solo Tuba voices were increasingly looked upon as final chorus reeds rather than heraldic stand-alone voices.

The three instruments discussed here illustrate the progression of Harrison's work in this period. Op. 932 for Calvary Church, Memphis, replaced a 1911 Kimball thoroughly soaked when a tornado tore off the organ chamber roof. A comprehensive three-manual, the new instrument was noteworthy for an entirely straight scheme (even the Pedal), and a concentration upon ensemble over loud voices or 32' registers. The distinguished organist and pedagogue Adolf Steuterman was the church's musician for 53 years, from 1919 to 1972.

In November 1935, Harrison completed Op. 936 for St. John's Chapel at Groton School. Into a chamber that once housed a 30-rank Hutchings, Aeolian-Skinner installed 85 ranks, all straight save for one Pedal stop. Even at the time, the organ was seen to represent a watershed moment. While incorporating all of its predecessors' reform elements, the Groton organ advanced Harrison's style to a new plane of individuality and sophistication. The climax was now centered in the Great chorus and Pedal reeds. In the Great a battery of three mixtures capped the division, while reeds were absent. An unenclosed Positif, the first in any Aeolian-Skinner, was placed below and forward of the Great, with much of the inde-

pendent Pedal directly behind. The Positif flutes were made of 90% tin, the first such examples in an Aeolian-Skinner, among them the prototype Koppelflöte.

Although the acoustics at Groton were marvelous, the organ's location remained a challenge. The deep, narrow chamber lent prominence to the Great, Positif, and Pedal, but suppressed the Swell and submerged the Choir. Nevertheless, Harrison labored onsite and produced a masterpiece of musical sensibility and political savvy. Far from being the shrill, screechy instrument some detractors feared, Op. 936 emerged as a calmly majestic, complex ensemble of particular cohesion and clarity. A further departure was its mildness; full organ was perhaps as loud as other instrument's full Swells. The organ's restrained polish challenged the ear through texture rather than power, while the incredibly smooth build-up satisfied even the most hardened Anglophile.

Perhaps never again would timing so favor Harrison's high moment. The very month Groton was finished, Aeolian-Skinner signed with Boston's Church of the Advent for Op. 940: ten fewer stops than Groton, a far better chamber, equally good acoustics. The Positiv pipework (this time spelled in German) was now entirely of tin, as were the three Great mixtures. Though a tin 8' Principal was tried in the Great, it was rejected, as was an initial spotted metal example. (Part of the tin rank ended up as the minor Diapason on the Great at Wellesley College, Op. 943; the spotted metal reject was used to make the Advent's Pedal 4' Principal.) The Advent was another mild marvel, speaking with beauty and balance into the crystalline acoustic. Being a half-dozen trolley stops from the Aeolian-Skinner plant, Advent became an ideal showcase for prospective customers.

Over the years, different conditions caused each instrument to be changed. At Groton, the energetic Edward B. Gammons, organist from 1941 to 1974, came to view the organ as a laboratory, not merely the birthplace of Harrison's American Classic style but the incubator of its future form. In 1944, Harrison wrote out the changes he wanted to see, several being carried out before 1950. Water damage in 1953 led to a final series of alterations, embodying most of Harrison's 1944 directives. This precedent for change, coupled to evolving tastes in organ tone, led to further alterations after Harrison's death and Gammons's departure. Revoicing of the Great and Positif occurred during Dan Hathaway's tenure as organist in the mid-1970s; mechanical changes and rebuilding were carried out by Kinzey-Angerstein, Nicholas Bradford, and Nelson Barden Associates.

At Advent, a few refinements took place early on; hooding the Choir Trumpet and repitching the Great Sesquialtera. In 1964, widespread changes and revoicing occurred, combining the ideas of then-organist John Cook and Aeolian-Skinner Tonal Director Joseph Whiteford, executed principally by voicer Donald Gillett.

# ORIGINAL AEOLIAN-SKINNER SPECIFICATIONS

## CALVARY EPISCOPAL CHURCH Memphis, Tennessee Opus 932 — August 1935

## GROTON SCHOOL—ST. JOHN'S CHAPEL Groton, Massachusetts Opus 936 — November 1935

## CHURCH OF THE ADVENT Boston, Massachusetts Opus 940 — April 1936

<p>PEDAL — 5" wind pressure, unenclosed</p> <p>16 Principal 32</p> <p>16 Violone 32</p> <p>16 Salicional SW</p> <p>16 Bourdon 32</p> <p>16 Flute Conique CH</p> <p>8 Octave 32</p> <p>8 Flute Ouverte 32</p> <p>8 Salicional SW</p> <p>8 Flute Conique CH</p> <p>5½ Quint 32</p> <p>4 Super Octave 32</p> <p>4 Flute Conique CH</p> <p>VI Fourniture (5½') 192</p> <p>16 Bombarde 32</p> <p>8 Trompette 32</p> <p>4 Clairon 32</p> <p>GREAT — 3¼" wind pressure, unenclosed</p> <p>16 Sub Principal 61</p> <p>8 Principal 61</p> <p>8 Diapason 61</p> <p>8 Flute Harmonique 61</p> <p>8 Gemshorn 61</p> <p>4 Octave 61</p> <p>4 Gemshorn * 61</p> <p>2½ Quint * 61</p> <p>2 Fifteenth * 61</p> <p>IV Fourniture (2') 244</p> <p>III Cymbel (1') 183</p> <p>8 Trumpet * 61</p> <p>4 Clarion * 61</p> <p>8 French Horn CH</p> <p>SWELL — 3¾" wind pressure, enclosed</p> <p>16 Contra Salicional 73</p> <p>8 Geigen 73</p> <p>8 Viol de Gamba 73</p> <p>8 Viol Celeste 73</p> <p>8 Rohrflöte 73</p> <p>8 Flauto Dolce 73</p> <p>8 Flute Celeste (t.c) 61</p> <p>4 Geigen Octave 73</p> <p>4 Flute Triangulaire 73</p> <p>2 Fifteenth 61</p> <p>VI Plein Jeu (2½') 366</p> <p>16 Bombarde 73</p> <p>8 Trompette 73</p> <p>8 Oboe 73</p> <p>8 Vox Humana 61</p> <p>4 Clarion 73</p> <p>Tremolo</p> <p>CHOIR — 3½" wind pressure, enclosed</p> <p>16 Flûte conique 73</p> <p>8 Spitzflöte (principal) 73</p> <p>8 Lieblich Gedeckt 73</p> <p>8 Dulciana 73</p> <p>8 Unda Maris (t.c) 61</p> <p>4 Gemshorn 73</p> <p>4 Lieblichflöte 73</p> <p>2½ Nazard 61</p> <p>2 Piccolo 61</p> <p>1½ Tierce 61</p> <p>V Sesquialtera (2½') 305</p> <p>8 Trompette 73</p> <p>8 Clarinet 73</p> <p>8 English Horn ** 73</p> <p>8 French Horn ** 73</p> <p>Tremolo</p> <p>Great flue basses = 3" wind pressure</p> <p>* = 5" wind pressure</p> <p>** = 10" wind pressure</p>	<p>PEDAL — 5" wind pressure, unenclosed</p> <p>32 Contrebasse 56</p> <p>16 Principal 32</p> <p>16 Contrebasse EXT. 32</p> <p>16 Flute Conique SW</p> <p>16 Bourdon 32</p> <p>10½ Grosse Quint 32</p> <p>8 Octave 32</p> <p>8 Flute Ouverte 32</p> <p>8 'Cello EXT. 32</p> <p>8 Gedeckt SW</p> <p>5½ Quint 32</p> <p>4 Super Octave 32</p> <p>4 Flute Harmonique 32</p> <p>III Mixture (3½') 96</p> <p>III Fourniture (2') 96</p> <p>16 Bombarde 32</p> <p>8 Trompette 32</p> <p>4 Clairon 32</p> <p>GREAT — 3" wind pressure, unenclosed</p> <p>16 Sub Principal 61</p> <p>8 Principal 61</p> <p>8 Diapason 61</p> <p>8 Flute Harmonique 61</p> <p>8 Gemshorn 61</p> <p>5½ Grosse Quint 61</p> <p>4 Principal 61</p> <p>4 Octave 61</p> <p>3½ Grosse Tierce 61</p> <p>2½ Quint 61</p> <p>2 Super Octave 61</p> <p>1½ Tierce 61</p> <p>IV Full Mixture (2½') 244</p> <p>IV Fourniture (2') 244</p> <p>III Cymbel (1') 183</p> <p>SWELL — 3¾" wind pressure, enclosed</p> <p>16 Flûte conique 73</p> <p>8 Geigen 73</p> <p>8 Viole de Gamba 73</p> <p>8 Viole Celeste 73</p> <p>8 Gedeckt 73</p> <p>8 Echo Viole 73</p> <p>4 Geigen Octave 73</p> <p>4 Flute Triangulaire 73</p> <p>4 Fugara 73</p> <p>2½ Nazard 61</p> <p>2 Flautino 61</p> <p>1½ Tierce 61</p> <p>VI Plein Jeu (2½') 366</p> <p>16 Bombarde 73</p> <p>8 Trompette I 73</p> <p>8 Trompette II 73</p> <p>8 Vox Humana 61</p> <p>4 Clarion 73</p> <p>Tremolo</p> <p>CHOIR — 3¾" wind pressure, enclosed</p> <p>16 Quintaton 73</p> <p>8 Viola 73</p> <p>8 Orchestral Flute 73</p> <p>8 Dulciana 73</p> <p>8 Unda Maris (t.c) 61</p> <p>4 Lieblichflöte 73</p> <p>2 Zauberflöte 61</p> <p>16 English Horn 73</p> <p>8 Trompette 73</p> <p>8 Clarinet 73</p> <p>Tremolo</p> <p>POSITIF — 2½" wind pressure, unenclosed</p> <p>8 Rohrflöte 61</p> <p>4 Principal 61</p> <p>4 Koppelflöte 61</p> <p>2½ Nazard 61</p> <p>2 Blockflöte 61</p> <p>1½ Tierce 61</p> <p>1 Sifflöte 61</p> <p>IV Scharff (1½') 244</p>	<p>PEDAL — 4" wind pressure, unenclosed</p> <p>32 Subbass (from FFFF) 39</p> <p>16 Principal 32</p> <p>16 Contrebasse 32</p> <p>16 Bourdon 32</p> <p>16 Lieblich Gedeckt SW</p> <p>8 Principal 32</p> <p>8 Flute Ouverte 32</p> <p>8 Still Gedeckt SW</p> <p>5½ Quint 32</p> <p>4 Principal 32</p> <p>4 Flute Harmonique 32</p> <p>III Mixture (3½') 96</p> <p>II Fourniture (1½') 64</p> <p>16 Bombarde 32</p> <p>8 Trompette 32</p> <p>4 Clairon 32</p> <p>GREAT — 3" wind pressure, unenclosed</p> <p>16 Diapason 61</p> <p>8 Principal 61</p> <p>8 Diapason 61</p> <p>8 Flute Harmonique 61</p> <p>5½ Grosse Quint 61</p> <p>4 Principal 61</p> <p>4 Octave 61</p> <p>2½ Quint 61</p> <p>2 Super Octave 61</p> <p>IV-V Sesquialtera (2') 293</p> <p>IV Fourniture (2') 244</p> <p>III Cymbel (1') 183</p> <p>SWELL — 3¾" wind pressure, enclosed</p> <p>16 Lieblich Gedeckt 73</p> <p>8 Geigen 73</p> <p>8 Viole-de-Gambe 73</p> <p>8 Viol Celeste 73</p> <p>8 Stopped Diapason 73</p> <p>8 Echo Salicional 73</p> <p>4 Geigen Octave 73</p> <p>4 Flauto Traverso 73</p> <p>4 Fugara 73</p> <p>2 Fifteenth 61</p> <p>III Grave Mixture (2½') 183</p> <p>III Plein Jeu (1') 183</p> <p>16 Bombarde 73</p> <p>8 Trompette I 73</p> <p>8 Trompette II 73</p> <p>8 Vox Humana 61</p> <p>4 Clarion 73</p> <p>Tremolo</p> <p>CHOIR — 3¾" wind pressure, enclosed</p> <p>8 Viola 73</p> <p>8 Orchestral Flute 73</p> <p>8 Dolcan 73</p> <p>8 Dolcan Celeste (t.c) 61</p> <p>4 Zauberflöte 73</p> <p>8 Unenclosed Trumpet 73</p> <p>8 Clarinet 73</p> <p>Tremolo</p> <p>POSITIV — 2½" wind pressure, unenclosed</p> <p>8 Rohrflöte 61</p> <p>4 Principal 61</p> <p>4 Koppelflöte 61</p> <p>2½ Nazard 61</p> <p>2 Blockflöte 61</p> <p>1½ Tierce 61</p> <p>1 Sifflöte 61</p> <p>IV Scharff (1½') 244</p>
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In Memphis, chancel reorientation in 1953 caused the organ to be divided. The Great and Pedal, formerly located in front of the Swell and Choir and housed behind facade pipes (see photo), were moved to their own chamber on the opposite side of the chancel, each side now fitted with grilles. Although certain cone-tuned ranks were sleeved at this time, no attempt was made to change the organ's voicing. In 1984, the Reuter Organ Company broadly re-cast the instrument, revoicing principals with new languids, installing new mixtures and other stops, and making various other shifts and changes.

Each situation reflected a similar philosophy of change. However pioneering these organs had once been, they came to be seen as early, and thus half-baked examples of reform, occurring too soon in the movement to adopt "true" principles of historical tone production. No generation is immune: do we not errantly wonder why the organs of Phelps or Schlicker play neither Franck nor Buxtehude as we today might wish to hear it? As with the appreciation of the Hook brothers or Ernest Skinner, it has taken several generations to accept Harrison's style for what it really was: an intellectual, personal, modern amalgamation of tonal principles from Silbermann to Skinner. In this generation, it has become apparent that the untouched pre-1941 Harrison organs were often clearer, more versatile, and more musical than the changed ones.

At Memphis, the desire for tonal reconstruction was unambiguous. Organist Thomas Pavlechko and assistant Sumner Jenkins made a research trip to hear unaltered organs, and became convinced that more had been lost than gained at Calvary Church. Concurrently, significant termite damage was discovered in the Great and Pedal chamber. Funds were secured to rebuild that side of the organ. The contract was awarded to the Spencer Organ Company of Waltham, Massachusetts. Between Easter and November of 2002, the chamber was cleared for rebuilding; in the course of systematic restoration, the elements were re-engineered for improved tonal egress and maintenance access.

Musical goals here were straightforward: rationalizing the tone of these two departments into something reminiscent of the 1935 effect, while preparing for future re-instatement of the original specification. Tonal work was aided by the fact that, of the three projects discussed here, Reuter's efforts were

easily the most conscientious and consistent. Reuter took the responsible course of inserting new languids in those stops from which they wanted a significantly different tone; they replaced those stops they felt would not suit their scheme (the original mixtures); finally, they thoroughly documented their work in a report filed with the church. In no detail did their documentation diverge from the condition in which we found the pipes and mechanism.

In the end, the new languids permitted voicing very close to the Aeolian-Skinner style. Two vintage Aeolian-Skinner mixtures were employed for the Great Furniture and Cymbel, permitting a recognizable effect. This is particularly true with the Cymbel, which sits usefully atop lighter combinations while still telling in the full chorus. This phase of the project was completed in June 2003. The church is now raising funds to complete the rebuilding and tonal reconstruction of the Swell and Choir.

At St. John's Chapel, Groton, the prospect of interior masonry cleaning in the summer of 2002 presented the opportunity for handling outstanding organ issues: mechanical details, solid-state upgrades, reinstating traditional wind to the Choir, removal, cleaning and overhaul of all the flue pipes, and finally, remedial voicing and tonal finishing. The vendors for this project were chosen at the outset in a collaborative arrangement. Foley-Baker of Tolland, Connecticut, executed all removal, reinstallation, mechanical inspection and rebuilding. As he has done since his arrival at Groton in 1976, organist Craig Smith ensured the organ's visibility in the context of a larger project.

While the Op. 936 had strayed well beyond Harrison's intentions, the organ's history of change meant that the usual preservation rules did not necessarily apply. Its very creator sought and accomplished changes that form an important aspect of the organ's historical voice. This could never be restoration, but rather an informed rationalization that aimed toward plausible and effective results, and scrupulously preserving every bit of unaltered material.

The project gave all parties a chance to approach the organ with fresh ears and considerable documentary evidence. The starting point was speech: most pipes spoke poorly. Either they chuffed in a manner Harrison sanctioned only in the occasional flute, or they had been loudened (though not actually revoiced) beyond the point of comfortable at-

tack or tone. We began with the material that had merely been loudened, which turned out to be a good number of ranks. In the process, many clues surfaced about how the revoiced stops might best be resolved. Our guide was to bring balances and timbres as close as could be conjectured (based on research) to the organ's 1954 state, as Harrison last knew it.

The glory of this instrument remains the 21-rank Great chorus and 18-rank Pedal. Even if present conditions merely echo what Harrison himself knew, there is clarity, cohesion, and flexibility, a full rather than shrill treble, and an engagingly complex texture produced by many ranks of similar power and scale. This is Harrison at his best—a chorus that, while voiced with late-romantic methods, remained firmly conceived and balanced in the classical tradition.

The Church of the Advent is one of the earliest instances of an electropneumatic organ being restored *without* tonal changes. Nelson Barden has cared for Op. 940 since 1979. From 1979 to 1981, pouchboards and key primaries were releathered (one of the first American instances to benefit from research into chrome-tanned leather). In 1988, the wind system was restored, and in 2003, the console was rebuilt and solid-state combination action introduced (retaining the elegant pneumatic knob mechanisms). The final stage of this work is the restoration and regulation of about a third of the pipework, making certain repairs while addressing the more exaggerated color registers resulting from the 1964 changes. That work is occurring at this moment, and will be complete in January 2005.

In each case, the tonal work has been a collaboration with the voicer Jeff Weiler, with whom I have worked often and happily. He shares a passion for the past and is energized by the discipline of working within someone else's style. In turn, we have been fortunate to collaborate with some of the country's outstanding rebuilding firms. Nelson Barden pioneered respect for Skinner and Aeolian-Skinner; Foley-Baker has done superb rebuilding work on prominent New England organs, most recently Symphony Hall, Boston; Joseph Rotella of Spencer Organ Company trained with Nelson Barden and now runs his own highly respected shop. Quite apart from the ease of working with old friends, each firm was diligent in making the mechanism a transparent agent of music making.

Finally, a climate of welcome can produce extraordinary inspiration. At Groton, daily contact with the sensitive and witty Craig Smith made short the long commute; the amazing Calvary staff and musicians attacked termites and tonal problems with equal gusto (not to mention a cart of fresh coffee and iced tea brought up daily to the nave voicing keyboard); and it is an honor to work again at the Church of the Advent with Nelson Barden, who started me in the organ business, as well as the legendary organist-choirmaster Edith Ho and her associate Ross Wood, uncommonly devoted musicians who serve in the very church at which G. Donald Harrison considered himself a communicant. These fine people have been willing to risk the partially unknown in pursuit of the unusual and worthy. For that we are grateful.

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