

# A Kimball Turns 100: Leigh Street Baptist Church, Richmond, Virginia

Donald R. Traser

The Richmond Chapter of the AGO gathered on the morning of November 19, 2011 to observe the centennial of a Kimball organ of three manuals and 29 ranks. The chapter was joined by church members who heard a talk by this writer, as well as musical selections by a past organist, the current organist, and a chapter scholarship student.

Leigh Street Baptist Church is one of only a handful of Richmond's legion of 19th-century churches to be both in its original location and original building. This landmark Greek Revival temple was designed by Philadelphia architect Samuel Sloan. The ground-floor basement was opened in 1853, though the church was not formally organized until 1854, and the upstairs main auditorium in 1857.

In an era when many of us lament the seemingly increasing number of churches that are abandoning their organs for other instruments, it may be interesting to note that this church stood for 25 years before it ever had an organ. Only a melodeon was in use when the church was completed, and what was considered appropriate in the way of music may seem very different to us.

After moving up from the basement when the main auditorium was completed, there was a group that insisted on forming itself into a choir and occupying seats in the gallery and from that elevation, leading the singing. After much discussion a vote was taken, resulting in the church asking those leading the singing to move to the main floor and occupy seats directly in front of the minister. The gallery element, however, kept up its agitation and when later after considerable discussion a vote was taken, the result was in its favor; accordingly, they moved back to the gallery, taking the melodeon with them.

In 1860 the minister brought to the church the following points for decision:

1. Does the church desire that the melodeon be used in the church music?
2. Does the church desire those who lead the singing to sit near the instrument?
3. Where does the church desire the leaders of the singing to sit?
4. Will the members of the church use their influence and do what they can to promote singing among the congregation?
5. Is the church in favor of having the congregation rise while singing the second hymn, which is given out from the pulpit?

The gallery element continued to lead the singing from on high, but in 1868 when it was proposed that \$20 be appropriated to purchase books for the choir, at least one opponent expressed his opposition:



The Leigh Street Kimball organ with its original console when new (photo by Leslie F. Watson; Donald R. Traser collection)



Leigh Street Kimball 100th anniversary

I, the undersigned, solemnly protest against the action of the church at the last meeting in appropriating funds to buy books for the choir, thus forcing members of this church who conscientiously believe a gallery choir to be an incubus on any church, to contribute to the support of a thing which they consider an evil, nothing but an evil, and that continually.<sup>1</sup>

The good brother was voted down, yet he continued to be a faithful supporter

of the church, despite his opposition to choirs and singing.

There is no reference of anyone to play an organ until 1871, at which time Mrs. Bettie MacKay was employed at a salary of \$100 per year.

It was the ladies of the church who procured the first pipe organ from New York in 1882. Realizing the necessity of having a competent person to play it, the church was authorized to spend up to \$250 per year, if necessary, to secure such a person.

The organ was built by the firm of L. C. Harrison (who had worked in the shop of Henry Erben and appears to have been his corporate successor) as their Opus 50 and cost \$1,500. It was shipped to Richmond free of charge by the Old Dominion Steamship Company, and was dedicated on April 14, 1882 by Mr. T. Bennett Dashiell, described in the newspaper as "the popular organist."<sup>2</sup>

Soon after the purchase of the new organ, Professor Leslie F. Watson (1859–1933), who had moved to Richmond in 1884, appeared on the scene to serve as organist (1885–1894) and was succeeded by his wife Laura (1860–1933) for the period 1894 to 1928. It was "Miss Laura" who had the longer association with Leigh Street, 34 years, and it is her name that is more associated with the church. She was a striking figure, well known for the large hats she wore. The Watsons were devout Methodists. A granddaughter related to me that since Miss Laura could not participate in the Holy Communion at Leigh Street, it was not difficult for her to slip out, walk the three blocks to Union Station Church where



Leslie F. Watson at the console of the 1867 Simmons organ at Richmond's First Baptist Church where he was later the organist (photo by Leslie Watson from the Watson family collection)



Laura W. Watson at the console of the 1882 Harrison organ at Leigh Street Baptist Church. She and Leslie both played this instrument. (photo by Leslie Watson from the Watson family collection)

she was a member, receive the sacrament, and return to the organ, all during the sermon. The Leigh Street preacher, however, had to keep his eye on the back door and make sure his sermon lasted until her return.

It was in 1911 that Mr. W. J. Parrish (1865–1938) gave the gift of the current Kimball organ to the church in memory of his wife, Jennie Martin Parrish (1865–1909). The old organ was given to Tabernacle Baptist Church, and then to St. Philip's Episcopal Church, according to the Leigh Street Church centennial history. There is no record of the Kimball organ's cost, though the similar-size Kimball installed at Second Baptist Church in 1906 cost \$9,000. That organ was transported free from Chicago to Richmond by the Chesapeake & Ohio Railway; it seems likely the Leigh Street organ was carried over the same route, whether free or not.

W. W. Kimball (1828–1904) began manufacturing pianos in Chicago in 1857. The company began making reed organs and produced its first pipe organ in 1890. By the time the pipe organ division closed in 1942, it had produced more than 7,000 organs.<sup>3</sup>

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## The Penitent's Prayer

Gt. Dulciana or Gemborn.

Sw. Oboe, St. Diapason, Violina 4' or Flute 4'

Leslie F. Watson

Ped. Bourdon. Gt. to Ped. *Grazioso, con espressa.*

*The Penitent's Prayer*, by Leslie F. Watson



100th anniversary gathering: (l to r) Donald R. Traser, Robert Ford, Charlie Laughlin (great-grandson of Jennie Martin Parrish), Leezie Parrish Laughlin (granddaughter), Betsy Stringfellow Ward (great-granddaughter), Connor Wood, and Larry Robinson (photo credit: John DeMajo)

Following the fashion of the time, the decision was made to place the new organ and the choir behind the pulpit. But there was a problem—the back wall was directly behind the pulpit, and behind that a public alley. The solution? Build a 14-foot deep addition to house the organ, supported on stilts over the alley! The organ was dedicated on Sunday, November 26, in conjunction with a large Sunday School addition to the building and general rededication.

Leslie Watson gave the opening recital on the Kimball organ the following Tuesday evening, assisted by Mrs. F. D. Hequembourg, violin, and Mrs. Sallie Montgomery Brown, soprano. A capacity audience filled the church. One would have thought that Watson would have been the designer of the instrument, and probably was involved, but the dedication program states that Mr. Parrish selected Mr. H. A. Burke, "who is considered the foremost organ voicer and tone expert in the country," for that task.

While the organ's tonal scheme is reflective of many instruments of its time,

there were several features, described in the dedication program, that were considered to be unusual:

In the Choir Organ there is a 16-foot Contra Salicional. This stop has only two duplicates in this country, having been recently introduced by Mr. Burke.

The Viola d'Amour (also in the Choir Organ) is a very rare stop.

Another new idea is that of the Pedal Treble Separation, which allows the performer to separate the Pedal keyboard in itself so that the upper twenty notes can be coupled to the manuals at super octaves, and leave the twelve lower notes to be used for a bass, thus permitting the organist to use both hands and both feet at the same time, in such a way as to produce many unique effects.

Chimes were donated by the Parrish children and dedicated at the church's centennial in October 1954. A decade later Lawrence Walker, a local organ technician who represented Casavant Frères, converted the action from tubular-pneumatic to electro-pneumatic and replaced the console, but the voicing



Organ chamber over alley

seems to have had little change, if any. Suzanne Bunting (b. 1936), long-time organ instructor at the University of Richmond, who grew up in the church and whose mother had previously been the organist, played the rededication recital.

When the Parrish Memorial Organ reached its 70th year, I was the parish musician and arranged for a commemorative recital by Earl L. Miller. The plan was for him to play as many of the 1911 recital pieces as possible, most of which had long passed from popularity. In the planning process, Earl wrote to me that several of the original compositions had surfaced but he had re-submerged them. Instead, he substituted other numbers by the same composers. A large crowd turned out, including descendants of both the Parrish and Watson families.

Another 30 years have now passed, and the Kimball organ continues its faithful service as it has for a century. It is a unique survivor, and while different from today's instruments, is worthy of our interest and commemoration.

### Leigh Street Baptist Church, Richmond, Virginia W. W. Kimball

#### GREAT

8'	Open Diapason (metal)	61 pipes
8'	Gamba (metal)	61 pipes
8'	Dulciana (metal)	61 pipes
8'	Doppel Flute (wood)	61 pipes
4'	Octave (metal)	61 pipes
4'	Forest Flute (wood)	61 pipes
8'	Trumpet (metal)	61 pipes

#### SWELL

16'	Bourdon (wood)	61 pipes
8'	Horn Diapason (metal)	61 pipes
8'	Salicional (metal)	61 pipes
8'	Aeoline (metal)	61 pipes
8'	Vox Celeste (metal)	61 pipes

8'	Stopped Flute (wood)	61 pipes
4'	Flute Traverso (wood)	61 pipes
8'	Cornopean (metal)	61 pipes
8'	Orchestral Oboe (metal)	61 pipes
8'	Vox Humana (metal)	61 pipes
	Vox Humana Tremulant	
	Swell Tremulant	

#### CHOIR

16'	Contra Salicional (metal)	61 pipes
8'	French Diapason (metal)	61 pipes
8'	Viola d'Amour (metal)	61 pipes
8'	Dolce (metal)	61 pipes
8'	Melodia (wood)	61 pipes
4'	Flute Octaviente (metal)	61 pipes
2'	Piccolo Harmonique (metal)	61 pipes
8'	Clarinet (metal)	61 pipes
	Tremulant	

#### PEDAL

16'	Open Diapason (wood)	32 pipes
16'	Violone (metal)	32 pipes
16'	Lieblich Gedact (wood)	32 pipes
16'	Bourdon (wood)	32 pipes

### 1911 dedication program by Leslie F. Watson

Elegy	Alfred Hollins
First Sonata, Introduction and Allegro	Alexandre Guilmant
Violin solo, Andante from Concerto, Op. 64	Felix Mendelssohn
	Mrs. Hequembourg
Romance and Barcarolle	W. Wolstenholme
Flute Concerto	Rinck
Song, The Message	Blumenthal
	Mrs. Brown

Cantilena	Clifford Demarest
Fughetta	Theodore Dubois
Sunset Melody	Charles John Vincent
Funeral March of a Marionette	Charles Gounod

Violin solo, Lullay	Rudolf Friml
Overture to William Tell	Gioachino Rossini
	Transcription by Dudley Buck

### 100th anniversary program

Suite Gothique, Op. 25	Leon Boëllmann
Connor Wood, Richmond Chapter	scholarship recipient

Benedictus	Alec Rowley
The Penitent's Prayer	Leslie F. Watson
	Donald R. Traser, former church organist
Pavane pour une infante defunte	Maurice Ravel

Robert Ford, organ;	
Lawrence Robinson, current organist,	
piano	
Le Jardin suspendu	Jehan Alain
Litanies	Jehan Alain
Lawrence Robinson	

#### Notes

1. Dr. W. C. James, *Leigh Street Baptist Church, 1854-1954* (Richmond: Leigh Street Church, 1954), p. 82.
2. *Richmond Dispatch*, April 9, 1882.
3. Orpha Ochse, *The History of the Organ in the United States* (Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press, 1975), pp. 302-04.

Donald R. Traser is the author of *The Organ in Richmond* (reviewed in *THE DIAPASON*, December 2002). Organist and/or choirmaster of several Richmond-area churches since 1970, he has served as organist/choirmaster at Second Presbyterian Church, Petersburg, Virginia, since 2009, and is a past dean of the Richmond, Virginia AGO chapter. He is the author of the article, "Austin Lovelace, March 19, 1919-April 25, 2010: A Remembrance," published in the October 2010 issue of *THE DIAPASON*.

Traser played the carillon for 27 years. He has written four books and numerous articles on such topics as hymnology (life member of The Hymn Society), trains, travel, organs, and stained glass. He is currently working on a book about stained glass in Richmond.