Some history of the South Norfolk Baptist Church Pipe Organ

The history of the pipe organ dates from around 250 BC when the first organ, crude by today's standards, had only a few pipes, a small keyboard and mechanical wind supply regulated by water pressure. The electro-pneumatic organ made its appearance around 120 AD when a bellow was first used. Through the years many refinements have been made and since the turn of the century, electric blowers replaced the human-powered bellows.

The manufacture of any pipe organ is a tedious and extensive process. Every piece of this organ was custom tailored specifically for South Norfolk Baptist Church by the firm of Henry Pilcher's Sons, Louisville, Kentucky.

Henry Pilcher's Sons

Henry Pilcher, Sr. was born in Canterbury, England and apprenticed as an organ builder in London. In 1832 he arrived in New York and established his business in Newark, New Jersey. His sons, Henry Pilcher, Jr. and William Pilcher II, opened an organ building shop in St. Louis, Missouri in 1852. During the Civil War era, the firm relocated to Chicago, Illinois. This factory survived the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 and, in 1874, the Pilcher firm once again moved and opened their business in Louisville, Kentucky. The firm built over 1,800 organs for churches, concert halls, and universities across the country. In 1944 the factory closed and the assets were sold to the M. P. Möller Organ Company of Hagerstown, Maryland.
(Source: Encyclopedia of Keyboard Instruments: The Organ Edited by Douglas E. Bush and Richard Kassel)

Photographic Archives, Ekstrom Library, University of Louisville

William E. Pilcher, President of Henry Pilcher's Sons, 1929.

Henry Pilcher's Sons Pipe Organ Factory, Louisville, Kentucky
(Source: Royal Photo Company Collection, University of Louisville Photographic Archives.)

The $6,000.00 organ was dedicated on June 28, 1926. The Organist at the dedication was Dr. Hubert M. Poteat of Wake Forest College, North Carolina (where Rev. Frank Hughes went to school, and where his son Joe, attended seminary). At that time, it was the largest pipe organ installed in any church outside of the Norfolk area. Built to AGO (American Guild of Organists) standards, it has 15 stops with 2 manuals, full pedal board, with toe stud, electro-pneumatic combination setters. The congregation met in the local Grand Theater while installation was completed.

The pipes range in material from polished zinc, bronze, tin, lead, and other metals as well as a variety of wood families. The large display pipes (Open Diapason Stop) are made of approximately 70% tin, which allows good stability, attractiveness, and long-lasting appearance. They have only need to have been re-painted once in approximately 40 years. The Tremolo is handmade with delicate lambskin, and is installed near the blower turbine.

Because the Swell Division is enclosed in a wooden case with shutters that open and close for sound volume, a kind of "tone cabinet" is created, not just to keep the dust out, but to add warmth and resonance to the sound. The roof of the casework constructed as tightly round the pipes as reasonable access for tuning through a trap door on top; the result is to throw all the sound forward so that less sound is wasted in the raters of the church and the pipes need less wind pressure by the turbine, thus giving forth a warmer sound.

The turbine blower motor, supplying wind for the Pilcher organ, sits in the church basement, and was built by the Spencer Turbine Company, of Hartford, Connecticut, a privately held, U.S. owned and operated company since 1892; and founded there by **Ira Hobart Spencer.**

Spencer. Blowers & Vacuum Systems with an Engineering Edge

One of America's legendary inventors and entrepreneurs, **Ira Hobart Spencer** started a corporate dynasty by solving a tedious problem: *manually pumping the pipe organ in his church every Sunday.* Figuring there must be a better way, he invented a water-powered hydraulic engine to pump air. Soon, he had a flourishing business installing water motors for church organs. When electricity arrived, he switched to electric motors. His products were called Orgoblos, coined from "organ blowers." To this day, they continue to furnish spare parts for some of the early Orgoblos that are still in service. (Source: Spencer Turbine Company website).

Each pipe in the Pilcher Organ at South Norfolk has its own unique sound, from the bright, full sounds of the Open Diapason, to the mellow quality of soft stopped flutes. The overall tonal quality is termed "romantic," and the organ has a rich sound frequently missed in other organs of comparable size.

Unlike many modern day electronic instruments which typically are used for 15 years or less, this pipe organ, with routine care, should last hundreds of years, as have many of the great organs of Europe. At 86 years of age, in 2012, the Henry Pilcher's Sons Pipe Organ in South Norfolk Baptist Church should last another 86 years with routine maintenance.

Dr. Hubert McNeill Poteat played the organ dedication recital for the new Henry Pilcher's Sons Pipe Organ at South Norfolk Baptist Church, June 28, 1926. Dr. Poteat was an alumnus of Wake Forest College (Class of 1906). He earned an M.A. from there and a Ph.D. from Columbia University. At Wake Forest College, he taught Latin and chaired the department of Classical Languages for 44 years, retiring in 1956. He served the Wake Forest Baptist Church as organist for more than 40 years, playing there from the age of 14, and in college chapel services from the age of 10. He directed the church choir from the console, led the college glee club, and composed a small number of pieces. Rev. Frank Hughes, Jr. attended college there and joined the Wake Forest Baptist Church while Dr. Poteat was organist. Rev. Joe Hughes also attended the Wake Forest Baptist Church while in seminary on the campus, in Wake Forest.