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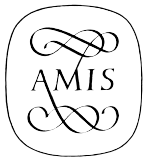

Thomas and William Robjohn: A Study of Innovative Organ Building

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Acclaimed for their mechanical ingenuity, Thomas and William Robjohn were among the more celebrated innovators of the New York organ-building profession in the mid-nineteenth century. Edward Hodges (1796–1867), organist of Trinity Church and a man of great intellect, historical importance, and perspicacity, wrote, "Mr. [Thomas] Robjohn . . . is an admirable mechanician, not a mere *mechanic*, but a man of *mechanical genius*. . . ."[1] Fifty years later, Charles A. Radzinsky, (1858–1927), a New York organ builder and personal friend of Thomas Robjohn, called him "the most accomplished mechanic [he] ever knew. . . ."[2] The Robjohn brothers invented a number of devices which made their instruments noteworthy, and, although the total number of organs they built was small when compared to Erben, Ferris, or Jardine, they left a marked impression on the organists and music critics of their day.

Some Robjohn innovations still influence performers and composers today, yet few of us know their names. How many organists, for instance, are cognizant of the fact that Thomas Robjohn was awarded the American patent for the concave-radiating pedal keyboard,[3] or that

1. Edward Hodges, "Memoranda Concerning a Proposed Organ for Trinity Chapel, New York, 1852" (Library of Congress, Washington, DC), 68.

2. Charles A. Radzinsky, "Organ Building and Organ Builders of New York City," *Dictionary of Organs and Organists* (Bournemouth, England: H. Logan & Company, 1912), 106. Radzinsky was born in New York City. At thirteen he entered the employment of J. H. & C. S. Odell, where his specialty became the construction of wind-chests. It was as an Odell employee that Radzinsky made the acquaintance of the Robjohns. After fifty years of service, he retired about 1920. According to F. R. Webber (1887–1963), Radzinsky intended to write a book on the history of New York City organ building, but that dream was apparently never realized. However, he wrote at least one article for the *New Music Review* and, at the time of his death, had accumulated a large gathering of information on the organ builders of New York. Radzinsky was the first modern writer on New York City organ builders.

3. U.S. Patent Office, "Pedal For Organs," Thomas Robjohn of New York, Specification of Letters, Patent no. 19,312, 9 February 1858. Robjohn, of course, did not invent the concave-radiating pedal keyboard; that is credited to Wesley and Hill, but he probably did make improvements on it. Thomas Robjohn's creativity was not limited to the organ; he also invented a sewing machine, for which he received a patent.

FIGURE 1. The 1844 Robjohn (Firth & Hall) organ in Holy Cross Episcopal Church, Troy, New York. Courtesy Rensselaer County Historical Society Museum, Troy, New York.

William Robjohn was awarded the English and American patents for perhaps the first completely adjustable combination action used in organ building?[4] The Robjohns also claimed to have invented a number of

4. *Patents For Inventions. Abridgements of Specifications Relating to Music and Musical Instruments. A.D. 1694–1866*, 2d ed. (London: George E. Eyre and William Spottiswoode, 1871), 275–76; and U.S. Patent Office, "Pipe Organ," Specification of Letters, Patent no. 54,603, 8 May 1866, to William Robjohn of New York.

unique organ stops, including the Psaltery,[5] the Flute à Pavillon,[6] and the Clarionet Flute,[7] but those assertions are difficult to confirm.

Of course, not all of their "inventions" were as momentous as the concave-radiating pedal keyboard. An 1859 article published in *Dwight's Journal of Music* describes a Robjohn contraption of more debatable merit. It was installed in an E. & G. G. Hook organ, opus 36 (1839), built for the Unitarian Church of the Messiah in New York City:

> When the instrument is used, a jet of gas is kept burning inside of the swell box, the object of which is to keep the swell organ in tune with the great; it is under the control of the organist, and, by the use of this simple arrangement, the pitch can be changed one half tone when it is effected by changes in the temperature. It is the only arrangement of the kind in the country. . . .[8]

At least one of their innovations was a disaster. Regarding the Robjohn organ at the South Dutch Reformed Church in New York, an 1861 music critic commented politely:

> Of the merits of the organ we cannot say much at present, as it is . . . incomplete. . . . It is in the hands of Thomas Robjohn, to whom the contract was given some four years ago. At present not more than one half its intended

5. This stop does not appear in any standard dictionary of organ stops and is not further identified. The traditional Psaltery was presumed similar to an ancient lyre, although it seems unlikely that an organ stop, blown with wind, could have sounded anything like the actual instrument. Harp stops did become common on American organs during the early twentieth century, especially on theater organs, but these pipes operated on very high wind pressure.

6. George Ashdown Audsley (1838–1925) credits the invention of the Flute à Pavillon to the French builders Ducroquet & Cie, a firm which exhibited an organ during 1851 at the Great Exhibition in London. William Robjohn was active in England at the time and was surely familiar with this instrument, which won a Council Medal and the Croix de la Légion d'honneur. See George Ashdown Audsley, *Organ Stops and Their Artistic Registration: Names, Forms, Construction, Tonalities, and Offices in Scientific Combination* (New York: The H. W. Gray Co., [1905]), 132–33.

7. According to James Ingall Wedgwood, *A Comprehensive Dictionary of Organ Stops, English and Foreign, Ancient and Modern* (London: Winthrop Rogers, Ltd., 1905), 25–26, the Clarionet flute was indeed invented and perfected by Gray & Davison, the firm for which William Robjohn worked, first as an apprentice and later as foreman. However, Wedgwood does not credit the stop to Robjohn. George Ashdown Audsley also discusses the stop in *Organ-Stops and Their Artistic Registration*, 58–59, but he provides even less information about the genesis of the stop. In a letter from F. R. Webber to Barbara Owen, dated 25 March 1957, Webber wrote, "[The] Odells specialized in the Clarionet flute, a wood Chimney flute, almost from their start in 1859, and the fact that the two Robjohns were Odell voicers suggests something, for the Robjohns were trained by Gray & Davison, who claimed invention of the Clarionet flute."

8. "Church Music in New York," *Dwight's Journal of Music* 19, no. 2 (13 April 1861): 11.

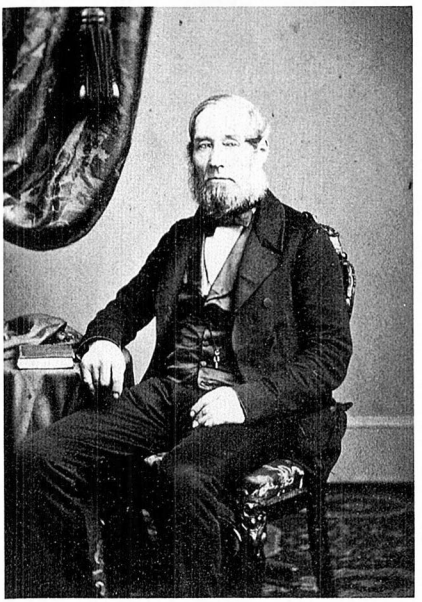

FIGURE 2. William Robjohn (1803–77) about 1865. Courtesy William J. Robjohn Collection, New York Public Library.

FIGURE 3. Harriet Robjohn, wife of William Robjohn and mother of William James Robjohn, about 1865. Courtesy William J. Robjohn Collection, New York Public Library.

FIGURE 4. The New York composer William James Robjohn (1843–1920), also known by the name Caryl Florio. Courtesy William J. Robjohn Collection, New York Public Library.

> complement of pipes and stops have been put in. The pneumatic action was tried upon this organ for the first time in this country, but it has proved defective and troublesome. . . .[9]

By December of 1861 the organ was still not functioning,[10] and ultimately, on 7 April 1862, the consistory of the church signed a contract with Hall & Labagh, one of Robjohn's competitors, to complete the project.[11]

Although prominent in their day, the Robjohn brothers are practically unknown in ours, and references to their work in recent literature are plagued with errors. One reason may have been due to the fact that, because they moved so frequently, tracing them and their activities a century later has been difficult. Furthermore, both men were adept at several professions; besides organ building, they were engaged in other, nonrelated enterprises in jewelry, brass founding, clock and watch repairing, as well as the making of adding machines, sewing machines, and chronometers. The varying occupational references to them in census, municipal, and other archival records can be confusing. The objective of this paper is to document the basic facts of their lives and careers, to place them in a historical context, to list and describe their instruments, and to correct the misconceptions perpetuated since Charles Radzinsky's personal memoir was written just after the turn of the century.

* * *

Like many of their organ-building colleagues in nineteenth-century New York, the Robjohns were English. William and Thomas were born respectively on 14 February 1803 and 24 September 1809. They were the eldest and the youngest of four children born to Thomas and Ann Robjohns of Tavistock, Devon.[12] The surname, originally spelled with a

9. "Church Music in New York," *Dwight's Journal of Music* 19, no. 1 (6 April 1861): 4.

10. South Dutch Reformed Church, New York, Consistory Minutes, Archives of the Dutch Reformed Church, Sage Library, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 2 December 1861.

11. Ibid., 7 April 1862.

12. William James Robjohn (Caryl Florio), Old Family Book, William James Robjohn Collection, New York Public Library, containing the following names and dates: W^{m} Robjohns, the son of Tho^{s} and Ann Robjohns, born 14 February 1803; Mary Robjohns born 14? July 1805; Ann Robjohns, born 12 October 1807; and Thomas Robjohns, 24 September 1809. The surname is spelled here as it appears in that document. The exact date of William Robjohn's birth is confirmed by his death certificate, which gives his exact age in years, months, and days. Thomas's year of birth is confirmed by the date found on his burial monument in Greenwood Cemetery, Brooklyn, lot 13,463, section 179.

concluding 's,' took the form known to us at some point between 1809 and 1834.[13] The two brothers received their formal training as organ builders in London with the Grays (later Gray & Davison), although both men worked for the firm at different times. Thomas completed his apprenticeship before 1834; William served the firm from 1847 until 1857.[14]

By 1834 Thomas had emigrated to America and established a piano and organ building shop in Troy, New York. His first directory listing there reads "Robjohn Thomas, organ builder, 60 Congress [street],"[15] and he was listed annually at a variety of addresses through 1838.[16] Although nothing specific is known of his work in Troy, an 1837 newspaper advertisement announced the availability of a chamber organ during the years he was listed as an organ builder:

> ORGAN FOR SALE.—A Beautiful Chamber-Organ of a sweet and brilliant tone and first rate workmanship will be sold very low if called for soon. Enquire at 132 Second-street.[17]

Thomas could have been the maker, but the address does not match any of his known addresses. Of course, it is equally possible that the organ was made by another maker and was simply being offered for sale by a local resident. One hopes that some specific information about Robjohn's work in Troy will eventually surface. However, one benefit of residing in the area was that Robjohn made some contacts which later resulted in several significant commissions from the local churches. Within three decades, the area would boast three Robjohn organs, all of which had three manuals and pedal.

13. Thomas Robjohn is listed without the final 's' in the 1834 Troy Directory.

14. William James Robjohn (Caryl Florio), Autobiography, William James Robjohn Collection, New York Public Library, 5.

15. *The Troy Directory for the Year 1834–35: Containing the Names of Residents Within the First Four Wards of the City, Their Professions and Occupations, and a List of City Officers* (Troy, NY: N. Tuttle, 1834), 58.

16. *The Troy Directory for the Year 1838–39: Containing the Names of Residents, With their Professions and Occupations; and a List of City Officers* (Troy, NY: Tuttle, Belcher & Burton, 1838), 87. During the intervening years, Thomas Robjohn is listed at the following addresses: 1835: "pianofortemaker, cor. ferry and river, h. 150 fourth"; 1836: same; 1837: "organ builder, 125, h. 80 river"; 1838: "organ builder, 125, upstairs, h. 80 riv."

17. "Organ For Sale," *Troy Budget*, 14 April 1837.

Sometime in 1838 Thomas moved to New York City. In the following year he appears in the New York directory as "Robjohn Thomas, organ builder 30 Attorney [street]," the address of the Firth & Hall organ shop.[18] John Firth (1789–1864) and William Hall (1796–1874) were the proprietors of a well-established music publishing business; moreover, they handled a variety of musical instruments and accessories.[19] In 1837 they began taking orders for church organs and employed Henry Crabb (1793–1872), another Englishman, to operate the shop and superintend construction of the instruments.[20] However, all did not go as planned; Crabb became discontented and resigned, and Messrs. Firth and Hall were left with a number of unfilled contracts.[21] A few of those commissions included two three-manual organs ordered by the congregations of St. John's Chapel (Trinity Church) in New York and St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Albany, and a two-manual instrument ordered by the consistory of the Evangelical Reformed Church in Frederick, Maryland. Whether Thomas arrived in the city at just the opportune time or he was enticed there by Firth & Hall is a matter for conjecture. About 1838 Crabb moved to Flatbush, where he established a shop under his own name, and Robjohn became the foreman of the Firth & Hall organ shop.[22]

18. *Longworth's American Almanac, New-York Register, and City Directory for the Sixty-Fourth Year of American Independence* (New York: Thomas Longworth, 1839), 560.

19. Robert Eliason, "Firth, Hall & Pond," *New Grove Dictionary of American Music* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 2:130–31.

20. While employed by Firth & Hall, one of Henry Crabb's first instruments was completed in July of 1838 for New York University. A notice of the instrument appeared in the *Musical Review, and Record of Musical Science, Literature, and Intelligence* 1 (27 June 1838): 96; it reads, "An Organ is nearly completed in the University. By Mr. Crabb, late from England. From a specimen of his skill which we have already heard, we congratulate those in anticipation for whom this instrument is built."

A second instrument was ordered by the consistory of the New South Dutch Reformed Church on Washington Square; except for the case, it was completed about 1839. (Cameron has suggested, with some evidence, that this instrument and the one above are in fact the same.) Following his departure from the Firth & Hall shop, Crabb was employed independently by the church to complete the case in 1841. For more detailed information see the present author's "The Organ in Washington Square Dutch Reformed Church: Another Look," *Keraulophon* 19 (October 1987): 1–4. These are the only two instruments now known to have been built by Crabb while he worked for Firth & Hall.

21. As related in [Clare W. Beames], "The Organ of St. John's Chapel," *New York Weekly Review* 21 (29 January 1870): 4; and Peter T. Cameron, "A Chronology of the Organ Builders Working in New York City," *Bicentennial Tracker* (1976): 84.

22. See Lawrence Trupiano, "Henry Crabb: Organ Builder," *Keraulophon* 17 (January 1986): 1.

Robjohn's probable first undertaking was the installation of an organ in the Evangelical Reformed Church, Frederick, Maryland, in August 1839.[23] The new instrument replaced one built in 1770 by David Tannenberg (1728–1804), a noted Moravian organ builder. Next was the installation of a three-manual organ in St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Albany. It had been ordered during May of 1839, cost $2,374.00,[24] and was installed during August 1840.[25] Regrettably, no description of this organ has yet been found. The price of the Frederick organ—$1,200 for sixteen stops[26]—infers that the Albany instrument was quite large. Indeed, the *American Musical Directory* states that it had three manuals and thirty-two stops,[27] but that information is not corroborated by the opus list of Johnson & Son, a Westfield, Massachusetts, firm, which rebuilt the instrument in 1857. However, research indicates conclusively that the instrument must have had three manuals.[28]

23. [Engelbrecht, Jacob], *The Diary of Jacob Engelbrecht*, vol. 2: *1832–1858,* edited by William R. Quynn (Frederick, MD: Historical Society of Frederick County, Inc., 1976), 26 August 1839.

24. *Semi-Centennial Services of St. Paul's Church, Albany, N.Y., 1877* (Albany: Argus Company, 1877), 12.

25. "St. Paul's Church," *Daily Albany Argus*, 4 September 1840, relates, "The above splendid edifice . . . has been closed for several weeks past. . . . The recent recess has been occasioned by the erection of a new and magnificent Organ, from the manufactory of Messrs. Firth & Hall, of New York City. This noble instrument has been subject to the critical inspection of several qualified professors, and pronounced a 'chef d'oeuvre' in the mechanical art. . . ."

26. James B. and Dorothy S. Ranck, *A History of the Evangelical Reformed Church, Frederick, Maryland* ([Frederick: Published by the Church], 1964), 99, 121–22; Thomas S. Hall, Business Correspondence, vol. 1: 203, American Organ Archives, Organ Historical Society, Princeton, New Jersey; and Daniel Zacharias, *A Centenary Sermon, Preached on Whit-Monday, 1847: On the Occasion of the Centennial Festival of the German Reformed Congregation of Frederick, Md.* (Frederick: Turner and Young, 1847), 9–10.

27. Thomas Hutchinson, *The American Musical Directory: 1861* (New York: Thomas Hutchinson, 1861), 243.

28. See John Van Varick Elsworth, *The Johnson Organs: The Story of One of Our Famous American Organbuilders*, edited by Donald R. M. Paterson (Harrisville, NH: Boston Organ Club Chapter of the Organ Historical Society, 1984), 93, where this instrument is listed as a two-manual organ with thirty-five stops. E. A. Boadway, the compiler of the opus list in Elsworth's book, had no way of knowing that St. Paul's Church bought an organ between the 1829 Erben instrument and the Johnson rebuild of 1857; hence he mistakenly suggested on page 93 that the 1829 Erben organ was the instrument that William Johnson rebuilt.

The 1840 organ built for St. Paul's Church, Albany, was installed the same year as the instrument in St. John's Chapel, New York. The latter instrument, known for its large size, had thirty-five stops (including couplers and mechanical registers), only three more than the Albany instrument, which had thirty-two stops. Thus, it seems likely that the Albany instrument also had three manuals and that the entry in the Johnson opus list is an error.

Robjohn was also working simultaneously on the large organ for St. John's Chapel in New York. Judging from the surviving correspondence and drawings in the archives of the church—all in Robjohn's hand—he, rather than Henry Crabb, as some scholars have speculated, appears to have been responsible for the entire project.[29] By 5 May 1840 the organ was erected in the church, and George Frederick Handel Hodges (1822–42), son of the aforementioned organist of Trinity Church, wrote to his sister in England, "Our new organ at St. John's Church is almost finished, and the people are much pleased, delighted, charmed, and edified with it."[30]

The public exhibition was held on Friday evening, 27 November 1840,[31] and was hailed by the press as an event of great splendor. The *New York Herald* reported:

A comparison of the number of stops on this and other contemporary two- and three-manual instruments built by Johnson makes it difficult to come to a conclusion. Johnson built at least one three-manual organ with only thirty stops, opus 45 (1855), for the Payson Congregational Church, Easthampton, Massachusetts, and many of his two- manual organs had thirty stops or more. However, throughout the nineteenth century, organs were built with increasingly more and more stops. Hence, an organ built in 1840 with three manuals and thirty-two stops was quite a large organ in comparison with other instruments from the same period. The 1837 organ by Henry Erben, for instance, built for Christ Church, New Orleans, had twenty-seven stops on three manuals and pedal (James Reynolds, "Famous Organ of the Past," *Diapason* 11 [September 1920]: 10). The 1839 organ built by Henry Erben for Grace Church, Episcopal, New York, had thirty-two stops ("Splendid Organ," *New-York Commercial Advertiser*, 10 January 1839). The 1839 organ which Henry Erben built for St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church, Philadelphia, was then said to be the "largest organ in the United States"; it had thirty-seven stops ("The Great Organ of St. Mary's Church," *Musical Review, and Record of Musical Science, Literature, and Intelligence* 2 [15 June 1839]: 53–55). On all three organs the tally of stops included mechanical registers. Perhaps the most conclusive evidence is the 1844 three-manual instrument that Robjohn built for Holy Cross Church in Troy. This instrument definitely had thirty stops on three manuals, two stops less than the Albany instrument. See *Musical Pioneer* 11 (October 1865): 3, where this instrument is identified as having been built by Robjohn.

Therefore, judging from the relative size of other contemporaneous instruments, I think it is possible to conclude that the 1840 organ built by Thomas Robjohn for St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Albany, had thirty-two stops on three manuals and pedal and that the information in Elsworth's *Johnson Organs* is erroneous.

29. Although the contract for this organ is not extant in the archives of the church, a detailed description and stoplist were published by Frederick Archer in his "Organs and Organists in Trinity Parish, N.Y.," *Keynote* 4 (30 August 1884): 7.

30. Faustina H. Hodges, *Edward Hodges, Doctor of Music in Sydney Sussex College* (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1896), 116.

31. Some lengthy press coverage of the exhibition appeared in an article titled "New Organ at St. John's Chapel," *New York Herald*, 1 December 1840.

> The church was crowded to its utmost extent; long before the doors were open, crowds presented themselves for admission, and an hour before the performance commenced the building was literally crammed.
>
> Precisely as the clock struck 7, the first tones of this magnificent instrument burst upon the ear in a voluntary by Dr. Hodges, in which he introduced quite a novel feature; we allude to the striking and close resemblance to a storm, in which the roaring of the thunder, the howling of the wind, were exactly and beautifully portrayed. This so completely and unexpectedly convulsed the audience that it was some time before they could convince themselves that it proceeded from the organ. . . .[32]

George Templeton Strong (1820–75), the New York lawyer and father of the composer of the same name, attended and wrote some equivocal comments in his diary:

> Its merits are, I think, first, an excellent Swell—the Dulciana with the Swell open is all but inaudible, and this gives the greatest range to the Swell of any I ever heard. . . . Then the Sub-Bass is grand. . . . Of the stops, the flute I like best—it's the fullest and richest I ever heard. The Clarionet is good, but all the reed stops sound wiry and angular; there's no sort of mellowness or sweetness about any of them. . . .[33]

And in Orpha Ochse's history of American organ building, some additional details are found:

> Every division on St. John's organ had a different compass. The Great was GG to f^3 (omitting GG♯); the Choir was CC to f^3; the Swell, tenor f to f^3; and the Pedal, CCC to C, twenty-five notes. Probably the most interesting detail of construction was the placement of the Choir division in a separate case that was "perched upon the front of the gallery."[34]

Tonally, the organ had some unusual features. The separation of the Great Mixture into three independent stops—a seventeenth, nineteenth, and twenty-second—was a rarity in American organ building of the time, and the placement of the choir division on the gallery railing, rather than in the main case, was possibly the first use of an English, on-the-gallery "chair" division in the city of New York. Frederick Archer (1838–1901), a noted organist, author, conductor, and music critic,

32. "New Organ at St. John's Chapel"; a similar report was published as "Exhibition of the New Organ in St. John's Chapel," *Churchman* 10 (12 December 1840): 158.

33. Vera Brodsky Lawrence, *Strong on Music: Resonances 1836–1850* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 89.

34. Orpha Ochse, *The History of the Organ in the United States* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1975), 150.

stated that "the organ of St. John's Chapel marked a new era in the progress of organ building in this country."[35] Indeed, until the 1846 instrument built by Henry Erben's firm was installed in Trinity Church on Wall Street, the Robjohn organ at St. John's Chapel was considered the finest church organ in the city.

Working under the auspices of Firth & Hall, Robjohn built at least one or two organs annually for the next six years. Although the following list is probably incomplete, it is all that can be reconstructed from the documents currently available. Among the known clients, all in New York State, were St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Brooklyn (1841), two manuals; Stanton Street Baptist Church, New York (1842?), two manuals; Trinity Church, Episcopal, Buffalo (1843), two manuals; Holy Cross Episcopal Church, Troy (1844), three manuals (fig. 1); Rutgers Street Presbyterian Church, New York (1845), three manuals; and St. Columba's Catholic Church, New York (1846), two manuals.

The organ built in 1845 for the Rutgers Street Presbyterian Church was the most important of these commissions. Its case, frame, chests, and pedal pipes are still in the building, which now houses the congregation of St. Theresa's Catholic Church, and, fortunately, a number of ephemeral documents regarding the installation survive. From them it is clear that Firth & Hall was awarded the contract over Thomas Hall (1794–1874).[36] Hall was then newly in business under his own name following a disagreement over finances with Henry Erben in what became the unfortunate end of their working relationship. A letter among Hall's correspondence related:

[Undated, but about 1 January 1845]

Grad Hawley, Esq.

Sir, Herewith I beg leave to hand you my estimate for building an organ for the Rutgers St. Church. You will perceive I have varied from [the] scheme you left me in two particulars, viz., by the addition of the Bassoon stop in the choir organ—and substituting the double stop diapason for the clarabella in the swell. These I consider desirable alterations and submit them accordingly. . . .

35. Archer, *Organs and Organists*, 7.

36. The most up-to-date information about the career of Thomas Hall can be found in the present author's articles "Thomas S. Hall: Founder of the Nineteenth-Century New York School of Organbuilders," *de Mixtuur* 65 (1990): 246–63; and "Thomas S. Hall: Nineteenth-Century New York Organbuilder," *Diapason* 80 (February 1990): 14–16.

> Description of an organ with three sets of keys and pedals in an elegant Gothic case to be built in conformity to a design furnished by M. [Minard] La Fever [1798–1854],[37] painted in imitation of oak with gilt front pipes. . . . Price: $3,200.
>
> [Unsigned, but T. Hall.][38]

Hall's proposal seems not to have had an impact on the committee, for Firth & Hall was awarded the contract.

After nearly a year in building, the organ was completed in December of 1845, and a newspaper notice announced:

> CONCERT OF SACRED MUSIC to be given in Rutgers-st. Church . . . THIS EVENING, Monday, Dec. 29. On which occasion the splendid Organ, just completed by Mr. Robjohn, will be used. . . .[39]

Robjohn himself played a demonstration piece entitled "The Thunder Storm,"[40] which was perhaps an attempt to recreate the triumphal Hodges performance at the opening of the St. John's Chapel organ. The effect was apparently not comparable, for no account of the event could be found in any of the city's newspapers.

Upon completion the organ in the Rutgers Street Church took its place as one of the leading church instruments in New York. As specified, it had three manuals: a Great and Choir division each with fifty-nine notes (including GG♯), a short-compass Swell with thirty-seven notes (F—f^3), and the Pedal with one stop: a sixteen-foot Double Open Diapason of wood, CCC—C, twenty-five notes. Examination of the wind-chests in the gallery of the church makes it possible to reconstruct the stop list, which incidentally matches the scheme proposed by Hall in January of 1845.

In 1847 Firth, Hall & Pond, the successors of Firth & Hall, were dissolved,[41] and Robjohn temporarily retired from organ building. There is no question of the simultaneity of those events. Later recalling the circumstances, John Labagh (1827–91), by then Thomas Hall's partner, wrote in 1849:

37. Minard Lafever was a prominent New York architect, who designed, in addition to the Rutgers Street Church, the Church of the Holy Trinity, the Church of the Holy Apostles, the Washington Monument, and in Brooklyn, the Strong Place Baptist Church and the Church of the Saviour. For more information, see Jacob Landy, *The Architecture of Minard Lafever* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1970).

38. Hall, Correspondence, vol. 1, 32–33.

39. "Concert of Sacred Music," *New York Daily Tribune*, 29 December 1845.

40. "Concert," *New York Daily Tribune*, 26 December 1845.

41. Eliason, "Firth, Hall & Pond," 130–31.

> Messrs Firth & Hall have dissolved [their] partnership and each member of the firm is now doing busins as music & musical instruments sellers separately, but neither of them do any thing in the way of organ building. . . . Mr Robjohn likewise has left off organ building and turned his attention to machinery connected with chronometers, [and] magnetic telegraph apparatus. . . .[42]

Radzinsky notes that Robjohn was unable to pursue organ building because of inadequate financial backing. Some scholars, including Barbara Owen and John Ogasapian, have suggested that Robjohn suffered from a lack of good business sense, a supposition supported by his myriad problems with the South Dutch Reformed Church. In any case, the 1846–47 business directory noted his new occupation: "Robjohn Thos. chronmt's, 222 Water [street], h. Attorney [street]." In the twelve years that followed, he was listed in a variety of professions, including brass founding, jewelry, and as a maker of chronometers.[43]

* * *

Meanwhile, Thomas's brother William Robjohn (1803–78) in England was enjoying some organ-building successes of his own. In his autobiography, his eldest son William James Robjohn (1843–1920) (fig. 4), a renowned New York composer known often by the pseudonym Caryl Florio, explained the circumstances of his father's employment with Gray & Davison:

> When I was only a trifle over three years old, Mr. [John] Gray [d. 1849], the senior partner in the well known organ building firm of Gray & Davison in London, having by some means heard of my father's high reputation as a

42. Hall, Correspondence, John Labagh to Revd Dr Zacharias, vol. 1, 203.

43. There is one reference which suggests that Robjohn may have moved the 1838 Henry Erben organ from the Murray Street Dutch Reformed Church in New York to the Second (Brick) Presbyterian Church in Rochester during 1853. A newspaper (*Rochester Daily Advertiser*, 12 March 1853) noted that "Thomas Upjohn" was the builder of a new organ for the Rochester church. However, we learn from the diary of Edwin Scrantom (entry of 10 November 1852) at the Rochester Public Library, that he (Scrantom) "returned last night from New York wither I had been sent to buy an Organ for the Brick Church. Purchased the one of the Murray Street Church, N.Y., for $1,500. A fine instrument. . . ." That instrument was built by Erben's firm in 1838 and sold second-hand to the Rochester congregation before the building in New York was turned over to the congregation of the First Universalist Society. The history of the Murray Street Dutch Reformed Church is detailed in Jonathan Greenleaf, *A History of the Churches of All Denominations in the City of New York: From the First Settlement to the Year 1850*, 2d ed. (New York: E. French, 1850), 381.

> mechanical expert, came to Tavistock to see him, and finally engaged him . . . in his organ factory. Our removal to London followed soon after. . . .[44]

Eventually promoted to shop foreman,[45] William was in part responsible for a number of sizable instruments, including those in Glasgow City Hall (1853); Magdalen College, Oxford (1855); Sherbourne Abbey (1856); and the Birmingham Music Hall (1856). According to Thistlethwaithe, the firm "reached its peak during the 1850s,"[46] and part of that success was probably due to William's acute ability with mechanical devices.

In 1857 William completed his most important project for the firm. He served as the installation superintendent for the huge four-manual organ built for the Great Handel Exhibition at the Crystal Palace.[47] Because some of the mechanical features of this instrument later appeared in his American work, the following description of the instrument from the *Musical Times* is of interest:

> The organ, constructed by Messrs. Gray and Davison, will be of great power, and on an appropriately gigantic scale. The instrument being nearly in a state of completion, the swell and great organs were recently tried in the manufactory; but, as there was not space enough, even in the very extensive premises of the makers, to put up the pedal organ, it could not be heard on that occasion. What was tested, however, was unanimously approved by the connoisseurs present. The organ will occupy a platform in the Crystal Palace of 40 feet wide by 24 deep, which will afford ample passage between each division of pipes, so that any department of the immense harmonious structure can be approved without difficulty, and at an instant's notice.
>
> The employment of a "pneumatic" action will insure immediate response to the touch, and thus materially assist the exertions of the performer. The erection of the organ at the Crystal Palace began on the 15th ult. The weight of the new instrument will be somewhere about 20 tons, which, as it is to remain a fixture, will demand a platform of the most solid and durable nature.[48]

44. William James Robjohn, Autobiography, 9.

45. As stated in "Musical," *Troy Daily Arena*, 15 December 1859, as well as other sources.

46. Nicholas Thistlethwaite, "Gray & Davison," *New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1984), 2: 74–75.

47. The "Exhibition" referred to was the Great Handel Exhibition of 1857, not the Exhibition of 1851. See "Second Presbyterian Church," *Elmira Daily Advertiser*, 19 June 1862; "Musical," *Troy Daily Arena*, 15 December 1859; and Edward J. Hopkins and Edward F. Rimbault, *The Organ, Its History and Construction: A Comprehensive Treatise*, 2d ed. (London: Robert Cocks & Co., 1870), 470–71, for a description of this instrument with its stoplist.

48. "Handel Festival—Crystal Palace," *Musical Times* 8 (1 May 1857): 41.

Despite William's contributions to the advancement of the firm, his personal relationship with Frederick Davison (1814?–89) became strained in 1857, when Davison insisted on taking personal credit for all of Robjohn's inventions. Again, William James Robjohn noted:

> Mr. Davison insisted upon patenting all my father's valuable inventions in his own (Davison's) name, and had refused to pay my father anything for them, claiming that he had a right to any work which was done by any of his "hands," and this piece of injustice was more than my father could stand. . . . Shortly after this my father gave up his position in the factory.[49]

Acting quickly, William patented his adjustable combination action with the London Commissioner of Patents on 25 March 1858.[50] He described the mechanism himself as:

> a means of actuating the whole of the stops of an organ by depressing one pedal instead of the many now used, and of an arrangement of an index and pointer connected by mechanism, by which any composition may be previously set by the organist, so as to come into play at the part of the music where it is wanted without any other effort than that of depressing the one pedal. . . .[51]

This combination action became a standard feature on the American organs of the Robjohns and occasionally appeared on the instruments of the firm of J. H. & C. S. Odell, for whom the Robjohn brothers later worked.[52]

There has been confusion in recent literature regarding the year that William Robjohn and his family emigrated to New York.[53] Once and for all, the autobiography of William James Robjohn would seem to have clarified the confusion:

> We left London by the Yorktown on Saturday, August the 14th, 1858, and arrived at New York on Sunday the 19th of September, dropped anchor in

49. William James Robjohn, Autobiography, 9.

50. William Robjohn, *A. D. 1858, 25th March, No. 635: Specification of William Robjohn: Organs* (London: George E. Eyre and William Spottiswoode, 1858).

51. Ibid., 275–76.

52. *J. H. & C. S. Odell, Manufacturers of Improved Church Organs of all Sizes* (New York: Styles & Cash, 1874?), 8.

53. John Ogasapian, *Organ Building in New York City: 1700–1900* (Braintree, MA: Organ Literature Foundation, [1977]), 145, and Barton Cantrell, H. Wiley Hitchcock, and David Kelleher, "Caryl Florio," *New Grove Dictionary of American Music* 2: 144.

> the afternoon and remained on board . . . Sunday night. On Monday morning the 20th [we] landed at the Castle Garden, where we found my uncle [Thomas] waiting for us.[54]

William had visited New York City on one other occasion during the early 1840s, shortly after Thomas began to work for Firth & Hall. William James Robjohn explained that it was during this sojourn that his parents William and Harriet were married in New York before the couple returned to England.[55]

* * *

William's unfortunate misunderstandings in London with Mr. Davison and his impending immigration in 1858 may have been the catalysts which encouraged Thomas Robjohn to re-enter the organ business after a lapse of twelve years. The 1858–59 city directory announced "Robjohn Thomas, organs, 69 E. 22nd & Jewelry, 166 Bowery, h. 166 Bowery," while the companion commercial register noted:

> THOMAS ROBJOHN, Organ Builder, 71, 73 & 75 East 22nd St., near Fourth av. / Organs of every description made to order, with all the latest improvements. / Organ Pipes for sale. / Apply as Above. / William Pye.[56]

Sometime in 1857 Thomas Robjohn and William Pye had rented shop space on Twenty-second Street in New York. Here I contradict another of Radzinsky's erroneous assertions; the twentieth-century author noted that Robjohn was "accustomed to do work in churches where he could, putting up a work bench or benches as he needed."[57] In Radzinsky's defense, however, Thomas probably did not retain the space long after William's removal to Elmira one year later; indeed, no such enterprise was indexed by the Industrial Census of July 1860, suggesting that Thomas hired the space for less than two years.

The newly organized firm's first project was the commission to build a large, three-manual organ for the First Presbyterian Church of Troy, New York. Almost immediately after the contract was signed in December of 1857, some members of the church's Board of Trustees questioned Thomas Robjohn's financial stability. The minutes record:

54. William James Robjohn, Autobiography, 9.
55. Ibid., 5.
56. New York Directory, 1858–59.
57. Radzinsky, "Organ Building and Organ Builders," 11.

> Mr. Flood asked if Organ Contract had been signed—Chairman of Music Com^e reported that Contract had been sent down & signed, but Mr. Robjohn had refused to give security for the fulfillment of it—The Chairman was requested to correspond with Mr. Robjohn on the subject.[58]

Ostensibly, the problem was solved, for no further discussion about the matter appears in the records.

By June of 1858 the instrument was under way, and the Trustees advanced Robjohn a thousand dollars, with the expectation that the organ would be completed and erected in the church the following September.[59] In retrospect Thomas must have known that the schedule was impractical, for he was awaiting the arrival of his brother from England before the instrument's design could be codified. Later accounts affirm that William was significantly involved in its construction. That participation could only have been realized after his arrival in New York on 20 September 1858.

During February 1859—already six months behind schedule—Robjohn persuaded the trustees that the organ should be equipped with his newfangled "gas jet" invention:

> The secretary then by request read the Organ Contract made with Tho^s Robjohn—The subject of new Gas Burner was introduced by Mr. Flood which created some discussion [!]—and there being a difference of opinion as to the excellence of the Burner which it was proposed to put in the Church, . . . the matter was referred to the Committee on Building . . . with power to act.[60]

Later singled out by John S. Dwight (1813–93), Robjohn's appeal for the contrivance must have been successful.[61]

Finally on 15 December 1859, after another ten months—and by then fifteen months off schedule—a public notice proclaimed:

> MUSICAL.—The new organ in Dr. Beman's Church, which has attracted so much attention and received such high econiums from the most distinguished musical celebrities, is to be used in full for the first time at the concert this evening. . . .
>
> Description of Organ:—The Organ, recently erected by Mr. Thomas Robjohn of New York, is one of the largest in the United States, and may safely be considered unequalled in points of finish, exquisite tone, and faultless mechanism.—Several new Registers, viz: the Bell Open, in the Great Organ;

58. First Presbyterian Church, Troy, New York, Trustee Minutes, 29 December 1857.
59. Ibid., 10 June 1858.
60. Ibid., 14 February 1859.
61. "Church Music in New York," *Dwight's Journal of Music* 19 (13 April 1861): 11.

> the Flute De Pavillon [*sic*], Psaltery, and Cornopean in the Swell; and the Vienna Flute in the Choir, are the invention of Mr. R., and his brother, . . . and this Organ is jointly the product of their skill. . . .[62]

Tonally the organ made quite a splash. Not only were several of the solo voices unique, but the Great principal chorus stretched from a substratum of sixteen-foot tone through two Mixtures, capped by a Trumpet and Clarion, and the second Mixture was a Sharp of four ranks. This was a sound unfamiliar to the ears of organists in the tri-cities area, and the startling brilliance must have been a revelation to those musicians accustomed to the Tierce Mixtures found on their other local organs. With eight independent registers, the Pedal Division was the largest ever built by the firm and was far larger than the corresponding divisions on most other organs of the time. Keyboard compasses were fifty-eight notes (CC to a^3) on the manuals and twenty-nine notes (CCC to E) on the pedals, when fifty-six and twenty-five notes were standard. Both tonally and mechanically it was an instrument ahead of its time, and many of the organ's "modern" attributes were undoubtedly the result of William's recent work in London. The simple fact that the organ was acknowledged by John S. Dwight suggests that it must have made a considerable impression.

For unknown reasons William Robjohn and his family moved to Elmira, New York, in the fall of 1859, just before the Troy organ was completed.[63] In the words of William James Robjohn:

> My parents took me out of the [Trinity Church, New York] choir after I had been in it a little over a year and sent me to Elmira, N. Y., where I was to live with a cousin of my mother's and learn the jewelry trade. I spent some very unhappy months there. But not long after my own arrival in Elmira something (I never knew what) sent my parents out to Elmira also.[64]

The Robjohn family appears in the Elmira Census (July 1860),[65] and William appears in the local city directory, initially as a piano maker, and in subsequent years as an organ builder.[66] His premature departure

62. "Musical," *Troy Daily Arena*, 15 December 1859.

63. A. H. Messiter, *A History of the Choir and Music of Trinity Church, New York: From Its Organization to the Year 1897* (New York: Edwin S. Gorham, 1906), 79.

64. William James Robjohn, Autobiography, 15.

65. U.S. Bureau of the Census, National Archives, Bayonne, New Jersey, Records of New York, Chemung County, and Elmira, 1. 41 and 2. 405.

66. *Boyd's Elmira Directory: Containing the Names of the Citizens* (Elmira, NY: Hall Brothers, 1860), 106.

from New York before the Troy organ was complete may be another reason why it was late.[67]

While residing "upstate," William completed one important organ project, this one in July of 1862 for the Lake Street Presbyterian Church of Elmira. The congregation was erecting a large edifice and wanted an organ of the most modern design. After scrutinizing proposals from George Stevens (1808–96), of East Cambridge,[68] and William A. Johnson (1816–1901), of Westfield, both from Massachusetts, and those of other builders in New York and Boston, the Trustees awarded the contract to Messrs. Eliason, Greiner & Co., with the understanding that they would be "assisted by W^m^ Robjohn as [their] foreman."[69] An Elmira newspaper provides the details of the arrangement:

> THE SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, in addition to their beautiful and chaste Church edifice just completed, may congratulate themselves upon the new Organ now in the process of erection. The Contractors, Eliason, Greiner & Co. have placed the immediate supervision of the construction in the hands of the Robjohn Brothers, one residing in New York and superintending the construction of such portions as can be more conveniently made there, [such] as the metal pipes, sounding boards, &c., and Mr. William Robjohn, a resident of Elmira, supervising the building of the wooden pipes, the action of the instrument, putting the various parts together and setting up the whole in its proper place, and the voicing and tuning of the Organ.[70]

The article extols their "recent" training under "Davison & Co.," and then notes:

67. Initially, William Robjohn's departure from New York to Elmira seems strange. William emigrated from England to accept a professional appointment awaiting him with his brother's firm in New York. Why would he leave after such a short time? Is it possible that a disagreement ensued between the two organ builders? William, after all, was used to a large and modern factory in London, and the instruments turned out there were of a very modern design. The London firm would have adopted the most up-to-date production methods, including steam machinery. It must have been a shock for William to arrive at the conservative New York shop of his brother, in business after a lapse of twelve years, still building organs totally by hand and undoubtedly of a comparatively archaic design. It is easy to imagine that this was a situation ripe for misunderstandings and disagreement. The tone of William James Robjohn's statement that he never knew why his family relocated to Elmira suggests that it might have been something unpleasant.

68. For more information on George Stevens see Barbara Owen, *The Organ in New England: An Account of Its Use and Manufacture to the End of the Nineteenth Century* (Raleigh: Sunbury Press, 1979), 133–40.

69. Lake Street (Second) Presbyterian Church, Elmira, New York, Trustee Minutes, 25 March 1862.

70. "Second Presbyterian Church," *Elmira Daily Advertiser*, 19 June 1862.

> Certain novelties will be introduced . . . , [such] as the composition knobs placed beneath the keyboard of the choir organ, by touching which, with the thumb, the organist can introduce some of the best combinations of the various stops, his hands not leaving the keyboard. . . . Another is the graduated swell pedal stopping at any point the performer may desire. The number and style of couplers is also quite unusual, as playing the whole organ with the pedals or playing the whole with either keyboard. Pedals may also be played from the keyboard, by a peculiar construction of the pallets, by which the immense resistance of the bellows is overcome. Some rare and unusual stops will be introduced beside the usual ones. . . .[71]

A follow-up article describes a few of the individual voices:

> Some of the rare and *recherché* stops of the swell organ are the Flute à pavillon, a full, rich, melodious stop heard delightfully at a distance; the Clarionet flute with a more subdued and feeling tone, made a little more fiery, piquant and spicy in combination with the previous; the Dulciana, one of the common foundation stops, possessing a peculiar, dulcet sweetness, and blending harmony. The Cornopean, a reed stop, gives out the striking tones of the instrument by that name, producing dashy, brilliant and thrilling effects. . . .
>
> The Keraulophon speaks a decided full tone tempered with sweetness; but apart from all, the Krumhorn [*sic*], in purity, penetration, and controlling pervadence of sound, approaches almost our conceived theories of the wafting music of the angels. This is the stop, *par-excellence*, of the whole instrument.[72]

What is alarming about the tonal design of the instrument is Robjohn's blatant departure away from Classic organ principles toward an instrument comprised of special effects, rather than choruses of related stops. Traditionally, the primary division on any organ was the Great, and its fundamental stop was the Open Diapason; both of these elements were missing from this design. But the instrument was not without its novelties: the use of pneumatic key action; thumb pistons, which became standard equipment on the organs built by J. H. & C. S. Odell, the Roosevelt Organ Works, Geo. Jardine & Son, and Müller & Abel; and the peculiar "pedal to manual coupler," a mechanism probably devised to provide the effect of playing the pedals for an organist unaccustomed to using the pedal keyboard.

71. Ibid.

72. "The New Organ in the Second Presbyterian Church," *Elmira Weekly Advertiser*, 16 August 1862.

Of the unusual stops only the Krummhorn had not appeared on a Robjohn instrument previously. It is a small scale reed stop with half-length resonators in imitation of the Renaissance consort instrument. While it was common on Baroque and Renaissance European organs, it was a rarity here.

Despite its unusual design the organ in the Lake Street Presbyterian Church seems to have exerted little influence on the work of other builders. Indeed, after a flurry of introductory newspapers articles, nothing more was heard about it. This may have been due to the fact that the city of Elmira was located far outside typical traveling routes between major commercial centers.

Ultimately, William's desire to remove from Elmira may have been caused in part by the single tragedy which every parent dreads. On 7 April 1862 the local newspaper reported:

> THOMAS ROBJOHN, a little boy aged ten years, son of Wm. Robjohn, organ builder, was drowned in the river near Bowman's tannery, Water street, Saturday afternoon. The little fellow was playing on the bank of the river with other boys when he slipped in and sunk before help could reach him. His body floated down stream and has not been recovered. . . .[73]

The weeks dragged on, and it was not until 22 May 1862 that the body was found. In a letter to his brother in New York, William described the anguish of what it was like for a parent to recover the body of his beloved child:

> [Dear Thomas:]
>
> You will see the reason that I have not been able to reply to your & Mr. Odell's letters sooner. Just as I rec[d] the one Thursday evening, I received intelligence that my dear Tom had been found by some men who were fishing at a place in the river called the Chemung pool . . . & yesterday morning I went in company with Mr. Gibson & Wm. King to bring him home. We took with us a coffin and everything we thought necessary & as soon as the inquest was over, he was wrapped in a sheet & put into his coffin & when screwed up, the coffin was put into another more strong coffin, the inner one being bedded in soulphate [*sic*] of lime. . . . He was found caught in the branch of a tree that had fallen into the river, but had he gone on a few more yards . . . , he would have gone over another dam, & considering that he had gone over a great many in his course down the river, he was in [a] much better state of preservation than could have been expected & when we consider how high the river has been almost ever since he fell, the wonder is that he was not

73. "Drowned," *Elmira Daily Advertiser*, 7 April 1862.

> further off . . . , but the eye which sees the fall of a sparrow has been over him. He had lain nearly seven weeks in the water but his overcoat was buttoned close about him & he had on thick pants and boots which greatly preserved him. All his little trinkets which he usually carried except his knife were found in his pockets. We carried him to his last resting spot this morning. . . . It is a source of great comfort to us that we now know where his dear remains are to be found. . . .
>
> Your greatly relieved Brother.[74]

And so ended seven of perhaps the most painful weeks in William Robjohn's life.

William and his family remained in Elmira until February of 1863, when they returned to New York. Concomitantly, William James Robjohn became the assistant organist at Trinity Church on Wall Street.[75]

* * *

Meanwhile, after closing up shop in New York, Thomas Robjohn moved to the city of Morrisania (which later became part of the Bronx); this must have occurred just before June 1860.[76] His final directory listing in Manhattan was found in Trow's 1859–60 directory as 207 East Broadway. The same year was also the final listing for the organ business. Pye was subsequently listed as a pipe maker and ultimately as a delivery man in 1864–65.[77] Although the business was apparently dissolved when William left the firm in 1859, Thomas attempted to complete the outstanding contracts on his own.

One instrument, built for the First Baptist Church, Stamford, Connecticut, was subcontracted to Thomas Robjohn by J. H. & C. S. Odell, a firm established in 1859.[78] Advertised in the firm's promotional material, the Odells considered the organ to be their opus 1. If Weber and Ogasapian questioned the identity of the maker, then the local newspaper clarifies the confusion; an 1860 issue of the *Stamford Advocate* reports:

74. William Robjohn to Thomas Robjohn, Correspondence Book, 24 May 1862, 163–64.

75. Messiter, *A History of the Choir and Music*, 99.

76. U.S. Bureau of the Census, National Archives, Bayonne, New Jersey, Records of New York, County of Westchester, and City of Morrisania, 1. 2136 and 2. 2413.

77. New York City directories, 1860–65.

78. J. H. & C. S. Odell established their organ business after working for Richard M. Ferris (1818–58). According to Ogasapian, the Odells lacked sufficient shop space to execute their earliest commissions and were thus forced to subcontract the work to other builders. See Ogasapian, *Organ Building*, 148.

> ORGAN EXHIBITION.—On Thursday of last week a company of about two hundred ladies and gentlemen, comprising a large proportion of the musical connoisseurs of this village, assembled at the new Baptist Church for the purpose of listening to prof. G. W. Morgan [1822–92] upon the new organ just built for the Church by Thomas Robjohn, Esq.
>
> The instrument is decidedly superior, both in form and quality of tone, to any other in this place. It has twenty- six stops, including couplers, tremulant and bellows signal; two octaves of pedals connected with Open Diapason and Bourdon, each sixteen feet scale. Among the stops, there are several of peculiar sweetness and delicacy—the flute, the cornopean and the keraulophon —the latter a modification of the dulciana, itself one of the finest organ stops. . . . The organ cost about $2,200 . . .[79]

Rebuilt by the Roosevelt Organ Works in 1884, the organ served the congregation until 1954, when it was scrapped.[80]

A series of problems accompanied the completion of a three-manual organ commissioned by the consistory of the South Dutch Reformed Church, Corner of Fifth Avenue and West Twenty-first Street, in New York.[81] The contract was signed early in 1859, and the organ was apparently designed before William's departure to Elmira. The plan included an ill-fated pneumatic key action. According to John S. Dwight, it was the first attempt to use such an action in the United States. After the instrument was set up, the mechanism began to malfunction, a situation perhaps due to the extremes of climate, typical here but unknown to William in his native England. The situation was aggravated by the fact that William—the expert with the technology—was in Elmira by the time the action was being constructed and unavailable to assist Thomas in rectifying the problems as they developed. In dealing with the breakdowns, Thomas suspended work on other portions of the project; this resulted in an incomplete instrument, years behind schedule and considerably over budget.

79. "Organ Exhibition," *Stamford Advocate*, 31 August 1860.

80. Frederick R. Webber, Correspondence Files, American Organ Archives, Organ Historical Society, Princeton, New Jersey. In a letter to John Van Varick Elsworth, 5 January 1955, Webber wrote, "Harry Odell dropped in yesterday and he told me that Odell's first organ, in First Baptist, Stamford, was junked lately. He hurried up to Stamford, hoping to get it, but found only two or three pipes left. The organ was a 2–22, built in 1859 and installed in 1860. The Robjohn brothers and the Odells built it in the first Odell shop in Seventh avenue. . . . Last September I was in Stamford and tried to see it, but the big church was locked fore and aft, and nobody seemed to know where I might get a key....The old Baptist church is being demolished, I hear."

81. Hutchinson, *American Musical Directory*, 231.

Moreover, Thomas had drastically underestimated the amount of money needed to complete the instrument in the first place, a miscalculation not uncommon with organ builders inexperienced with the business aspects of constructing large instruments. By December of 1861 Thomas had already been paid "in full" the contracted six thousand dollars, plus an additional allowance over and above that amount.[82] To complicate matters, the pastor, Rev. Dr. John M. Macauley (1813–91), resigned, causing a rupture within the congregation. Robjohn was involved directly, because unknown to the consistory, Macauley had paid him an additional three thousand dollars of his own money over and above the contract. Concomitant to his resignation, Macauley demanded reimbursement, much to the board's amazement, and when Robjohn was confronted, he responded sarcastically to the consistory's allegations. Aware of Macauley's resignation and further fracturing his already strained relationship with the church, he wrote, "I am to finish the organ as rapidly as the work can be done to my satisfaction according to my agreement with Dr. Macauley.[83] It did not take long for a disenchanted consistory to make other arrangements, and the minutes of 7 April 1862 noted:

> The Music Committee reported that Messrs. Hall and Labagh had surveyed the Organ and offered to finish it complete for Five Hundred fifty Dollars. Resolved that the Music Committee be directed to make a contract with Messrs. Hall and Labagh to finish the Organ for Five Hundred and fifty Dollars and twelve months time.[84]

So ended Thomas Robjohn's connection with the South Dutch Reformed Church and also, as it turned out, his career as an independent organ builder in the city of New York.

Now unemployed, Thomas turned in the only direction he could, to J. H. & C. S. Odell, where he accepted a job with the firm as a voicer. One year later, in 1863, William joined the Odell staff, following his family's return from Elmira. William James Robjohn noted but with a few factual inaccuracies:

> They (my parents) had lately returned to New York, my father having had a very good offer from two brothers, Odell by name, who had been very successful as carpenters and who now wanted to take up organ-building; the

82. South Dutch Reformed Church, New York, Consistory Minutes, 2 December 1861.
83. Ibid.
84. Ibid., 7 April 1862.

> idea being that with their experience in all kinds of carpentering, aided by my father's thorough knowledge of everything connected with the organ, they could soon take a high place among organ-building firms. That they did so is well known; the Odells' organs were soon recognized as excellent instruments and the firm flourished.[85]

The firm did flourish, and the Robjohns remained active employees of the Odells for the remainder of their lives. Their voicing stamps are often found on the pipes of Odell organs built between 1863 and 1877. One such stamp was recently located on the bass CC of the Great Open Diapason in the 1872 J. H. & C. S. Odell organ at the Congregational Church of Sunderland, Massachusetts.[86]

Although the Robjohns were no longer independent, they continued their inventive tendencies. On 8 May 1866 William received the American patent for his adjustable combination action, and on 3 August 1869 he was awarded a second patent for a further development of the same mechanism.[87] Both Thomas and William undoubtedly assisted in the evolution of the Odell Vaco-Exhaust System (pneumatic) action, which was patented by J. H. Odell in 1872.[88]

Thomas died in New York on 22 July 1874 and was buried in Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn.[89] William died on 29 April 1878 and was buried in Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx.[90] While photographs of William Robjohn and his wife Harriet (figs. 2 and 3) are extant in the William James Robjohn Collection in the New York Public Library, an

85. William James Robjohn, Autobiography, 30. In fact, the Odell brothers had already been in business as independent builders for three years when William Robjohn joined their staff.

86. A letter from William F. Czelusniak of the firm Messrs. Czelusniak et Dugal, organ builders in Western Massachusetts, to the present author, 17 August 1989, states that Thomas Robjohn's name appears on the pipework in J. H. & C. S. Odell, opus 109 (1871), a one-manual organ in the Congregational Church, Sunderland, Massachusetts.

87. U.S. Patent Office, "Pipe Organ," William Robjohn, New York, Specification of Letters, patent no. 54,603, 8 May 1866; and U.S. Patent Office, "Pipe Organ," Thomas Robjohn, New York, Specification of Letters, patent no. 93,349, 3 August 1869. See David H. Fox, "A Survey of American Patents in Organ Building," *Tracker* 28 (1984): 10–20. William Robjohn's inventions were not limited solely to the organ. He also received an American patent—no. 130,244 (6 August 1872)—for a calculating machine.

88. Fox, "A Survey of American Patents," 10–20.

89. Thomas Robjohn, Death Certificate (1874), no. 181905, Probate Office, Municipal Archives, New York. He was buried in lot 13463, section 179.

90. William Robjohn, Death Certificate (1878), no. 290111, Probate Office, Municipal Archives, New York. Woodlawn Cemetery is located at 233rd Street and Webster Avenue, Bronx.

oil portrait of Thomas Robjohn, bequeathed to his daughter Emma C. Wooster, wife of George Wooster, through the will of Thomas's wife, Susan Ann Robjohn, has yet to surface.[91]

* * *

While Thomas worked for Firth & Hall, the owners of the firm negotiated the contracts, set the work schedule, and took care of the business and financial affairs. Thus, while Thomas concentrated on building the organs, he missed out on the experiences and lessons of managing a business. Nor did William as an employee of Gray & Davison have any business experience. With so little commercial experience, the fiscal and scheduling problems they later encountered are not surprising.

Following Thomas's return to the organ business in 1857, the firm he then founded straightaway acquired a surprising number of sizable commissions from the churches of New York and elsewhere. While most builders initiated their businesses by making small instruments and gradually worked their way up to larger and larger endeavors, not so with the Robjohns. Perhaps it was the appeal of their English pedigree which swayed church committees to their favor. Or, more logically, was it that they underbid their competition to secure the most prominent contracts? By demonstrating their ability, they might enjoy successes that would lead to other projects and thus subsidize their losses. While much is left to conjecture, one thing is certain: the Robjohns were terrible businessmen. Many of their instruments were demonstrably years behind schedule and considerably underbudgeted. Perhaps this is the reason they failed to develop a stable, long-lasting organ business in New York.

Unknowingly, Radzinsky may have pinpointed another problem when he described Thomas Robjohn as a "dabbler." Thomas appears to have been absorbed by too many pursuits. And William—as brilliant a mechanic as he may have been—likewise seems to have been involved in a multitude of unconnected activities. How could they at once be competent organ builders, brass founders, jewelers, clock and watch repairmen, and makers of chronometers, calculating machines, telegraph apparatus, and sewing machines? Their professional lives lacked the

91. Susan Ann Robjohn, Last Will and Testament, Probate Office, Municipal Archives, New York, Book 476, 348–49.

single-minded focus which was characteristic of Henry Erben, Richard M. Ferris, Thomas S. Hall, or any other successful instrument maker in the city.

Ultimately, the significance of the Robjohns was not their instruments, although they built some important ones, but the influence they exerted on the work of their contemporaries. Many of their inventions became standard features on the instruments of J. H. & C. S. Odell, Geo. Jardine & Son, and the Roosevelts. By 1880, pneumatic key action, which they pioneered in this country, was used in some form on most of the larger organs built here. Similarly, by the turn of the twentieth century, the concave-radiating pedal keyboard and the adjustable combination action were adopted universally.

It was precisely these technological "advances" in organ building which enabled the florid and variable orchestral style of playing to flourish here under the hands of Edward Lemaire (1865–1934) and others during the opening four decades of the twentieth century. Likewise, continuous registrational changes, so much a part of Lynwood Farnum's style, would not have been possible without a completely adjustable combination action. And such a work as the *Pageant* (1931) by Leo Sowerby (1895–1968) would not be playable on a straight, flat pedal keyboard. The synthesis of these brilliant console techniques would hardly be possible without the inventions of the Robjohns. Ironically, many of the conveniences that today's organists take for granted are a result of the Robjohns' innovations a century or more ago. Few musicians, if any, realize their debt of gratitude to two brothers known by their contemporaries as "the very best Organ artists in the country."[92]

East Windsor, New Jersey

92. "New Organ," *Elmira Weekly Advertiser*, 16 August 1862.

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APPENDIX

American Church and Residence Organs by Thomas and William Robjohn: An Annotated Catalogue of Known Instruments

STEPHEN L. PINEL

ORGANIZED GEOGRAPHICALLY, the annotated list of organs built by Thomas and William Robjohn spans the years 1837 through 1862. The entries are arranged alphabetically, first by state, second by locality, and third chronologically. Each entry furnishes the name of the church or organization which owned the instrument, the date, and the number of manuals. While the number of registers is often found in nineteenth-century sources, the information was reported with such variable criteria that it seemed unwise to include it here.

The annotations include historical information about the congregation, the date of exhibition, the name of the organist, the price, data concerning additions, rebuilds, relocations, the fate of the instrument, and information about all known instruments which preceded and immediately followed the organ. Some congregations have owned as many as four organs since their Robjohn organ was removed, but that information is beyond the scope of this study.

Each entry is followed by a list of references citing the sources which provided the information in the entry. The list is probably incomplete between the years 1837 and 1846.

CONNECTICUT

STAMFORD First Baptist August, 1860 Two

Presumably this organ was built under subcontract from J. H. & C. S. Odell as their opus 1 (1859). The public exhibition was held on Thursday, 23 August 1860; George W. Morgan was the organist, and the price was $2,200. According to local newspapers, the organ had two manuals, two octaves of pedals, and twenty-six stops, including couplers and mechanical registers. The organ was rebuilt by Hilborne Roosevelt as his opus 141 (1884) and enlarged to thirty-five speaking and mechanical stops.

The organ survived into the twentieth century, when it was examined during the 1940s by F. R. Webber. The demise of the instrument occurred in 1954. Webber wrote, "Harry Odell dropped in yesterday and he told me that Odell's first organ, in First Baptist, Stamford, was junked lately. He hurried up to Stamford, hoping to get it, but found only two or three pipes left."

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F. R. Webber, Correspondence with John Van Varick Elsworth, 5 January 1955, American Organ Archives, Organ Historical Society, Princeton, New Jersey.
———, Stoplist Collection, American Organ Archives.

MARYLAND

FREDERICK Evangelical Reformed August 1839 Two

The Robjohn organ presumably replaced an instrument built in 1770 by David Tannenberg. The diary of Jacob Engelbrecht notes, "New Organ—The Evang. Reformed Church of this City have got a new Organ in their Church. It was put up last week & yesterday was played at Church service for the first time—it was made in New York—by Firth & Hall—T. Rabjohn [*sic*] Builder & putter up & cost about Eleven hundred dollars. Monday August 26, 1839—6 o'ck. a.m."

A church history provides further details. "The Ladies' Sewing Society presented a pipe organ costing $1,200 to the congregation in 1840 [*sic*]. The instrument was manufactured by Firth and Hall of New York. It was renovated and enlarged in 1850 and removed to the new church where it was used until July of 1876." It was probably relocated to the new church by Thomas S. Hall, who corresponded with the pastor, Daniel Zacharias (1805–1877), and added two stops: a Great Trumpet and a Swell Cornet.

The organ was succeeded with an entirely new organ built by Johnson & Son, opus 481 (1876), of Westfield, Massachusetts; it was exhibited to the public on 6 September 1876. The 1839 Firth & Hall (Robjohn) organ was sold second-hand to the Presbyterian Church in Frederick. No further details are available.

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NEW YORK

ALBANY St. Paul's Episcopal August 1840 Three

The Robjohn organ was preceded by an organ built by Henry Erben and installed in August 1829. The congregation relocated to a theatre on Pearl Street in Albany; the new church venue was consecrated on 22 February 1840. A history recounts, "In May 1839, a contract was made with Firth & Hall of New York for an organ costing $2,374." The new organ was installed in August 1840.

The organ was rebuilt by William A. Johnson as his opus 71 (1857) and was inaugurated on Christmas Day of the same year. It is listed as a two-manual organ in Elsworth's *Johnson Organs*. In 1863 the parish dedicated a new edifice, and William Johnson was paid $250 to relocate the organ to the new building. The organ was probably later refurbished by William J. Stuart & Bro. of Albany, New York, and the nameplate is extant in the collection of Alan M. Laufman, Harrisville, New Hampshire. The 1840 organ was used continuously until 1914, when it was replaced with an entirely new organ built by the Hutchings—Votey Organ Co. of Boston.

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BROOKLYN St. Mark's Episcopal April 1841 Two

St. Mark's Church, founded in 1837, was located on Fourth Street, corner of South Fifth Street, and was the oldest Episcopal church in the city of Williamsburgh. The first building was completed and dedicated in May 1841. The *Churchman* noted that "a brilliant Voluntary was performed on the organ, by Mr. Samuel F. Taylor. . . . The instrument upon which he performed, is one built expressly for this church by Messrs. Firth & Hall, of this city, and is in all respects just such an instrument as might be expected to have been produced by these gentlemen, who so recently achieved such signal triumph in the construction of the great organ in St. John's Chapel." The Robjohn organ was presumably succeeded by an entirely new organ built by Hook & Hastings, opus 1414 (1889), a two-manual organ with twenty-seven registers.

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BUFFALO Trinity, Episcopal January, 1843 Two

The public exhibition was held on Friday, 13 January 1843. The organ was eventually replaced by an entirely new organ built by Johnson & Son, opus 448 (1875), a two-manual instrument with twenty-seven registers.

References

Buffalo Commercial Advertiser, 14 January 1843.

Elsworth, *Johnson Organs*, 123.

Mary E. Mixer, *History of Trinity Church* (Buffalo: Peter Paul Book Company, 1897), 9–10.

ELMIRA Lake St. Presbyterian June-August 1862 Two

The organ was built under subcontract from Messrs. Eliason, Greiner & Co. Both Thomas Robjohn in New York and William Robjohn in Elmira took part in the construction of the instrument. It was installed in a chamber at the left front of the church.

References

Elmira Weekly Advertiser, 16 August 1862.

Elmira Daily Advertiser, 19 June 1862.

Lake Street Presbyterian Church, Elmira, New York, Trustee Minutes for 23 May 1861, 27 December 1861, and 25 March 1861.

NEW YORK CITY Unknown Residence 1859 Two

This instrument was built for a presumably unknown New York owner in 1859. It was relocated to the Presbyterian Church, Bedford, New York, in 1872, probably by Dietrich Valentine, whose signature and the date 17 May 1872 were found on the underside of the Swell bungboard by Peter T. Cameron. In 1963 the organ was again relocated to the Banksville Baptist Church, Greenwich, Connecticut, where it was subsequently vandalized. It was then moved to a private residence in Des Moines, Iowa; in the words of John Ogasapian, "For all practical purposes, the last example of Robjohn's work is no longer extant."

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John Ogasapian, *Organ Building in New York City: 1700–1900* (Braintree, MA: Organ Literature Foundation, [1977]), 146.

NEW YORK CITY Rutgers Presbyterian Three November–December 1845

The Rutgers Street Presbyterian Church was founded in 1809, and shortly thereafter a small frame church was erected on Rutgers Street at Henry Street. On 21 April 1842 a second stone building was dedicated at the same location.

The opening concert on the new Robjohn three-manual organ was held on Monday, 29 December 1845; the organists were Thomas Robjohn and Henry Christian Timm (1811–92). The organ was said to have been rebuilt in 1858 by Robjohn, and an examination of the extant chassis suggests the possible addition of a larger pedal division with sixteen-foot Bell Gamba pipes at the sides of the case.

By 1870 the congregation had relocated uptown with the flow of the population and erected a new building at the corner of Madison Avenue and Twentieth Street. A new organ was ordered from L. U. Stuart (1827–1904) and was installed in 1870. The old building, sold to the congregation of St. Theresa's Church, still houses the Robjohn chassis, but the keydesk has been removed, the action is smashed, and nearly all the pipework is gone.

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F. R. Webber, Stoplist Collection.

NEW YORK CITY St. Columba's Roman Catholic 1846 Two?

St. Columba's was founded in 1845, and an edifice was built during that year at West Twenty-fifth Street near Ninth Avenue. According to Hutchinson's *Directory* the organ was revoiced by Richard M. Ferris in 1856. Because Robjohn left the organbuilding profession between 1846 and 1858, the organ must have been one of the last he built under subcontract from Firth & Hall, and the 1846 date for the dedication of the building supports this supposition.

References

Greenleaf, *History*, 342.
Thomas Hutchinson, *The American Musical Directory: 1861* (New York: Thomas Hutchinson, 1861), 217.

NEW YORK CITY St. John's Chapel November 1840 Three

This organ replaced an 1813 instrument built by John Lowe (1760?–1813) of Philadelphia. The Robjohn organ was originally intended for Trinity Church, New York, but when the building was discovered to be structurally unsafe, the vestry decided to have the organ installed in St. John's Chapel. The public exhibition was held on Friday, 27 November 1840; Edward Hodges was the organist. The organ was one of the larger organs in the city at the time, and the opening recital was well- documented by city and denominational newspapers.

The organ was rebuilt and enlarged in 1874 by Henry Erben & Co. and relocated to the chancel of the church. At some point the key compass was shortened to fifty-four notes, perhaps during this renovation or at an earlier time. The organ had a English "chair" choir division mounted on the gallery rail, and the three ranks of the Great Mixture were divided into independent stops: a seventeenth, nineteenth, and twenty-second. Later this organ was said to have been moved to Holy Rood Church, where it was electrified by Reuben Midmer & Son. It was permanently discarded about 1955.

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"St. John's Chancel Organ," *American Art Journal* 24 (15 April 1876): 152.

NEW YORK CITY South Dutch Reformed 1859–62 Three

The South Dutch Reformed Church was originally located on Garden Street and had an 1824 organ built by Henry Erben. That instrument was destroyed in the Great New York Fire on 16 December 1835. A new site was chosen on Murray Street, and a building was dedicated toward the close of 1837. Henry Erben installed a second organ in September 1838. In 1847 the congregation sold the building to the congregation of the First Universalist Society, and the 1838 Erben organ was sold second-hand in 1853 to the Second (Brick) Presbyterian Church in Rochester. Thomas Robjohn probably moved the instrument himself to Rochester; he was listed in Rochester newspapers as Thomas "Upjohn."

The congregation of the Dutch Reformed Church relocated temporarily to the chapel of General Theological Seminary, and a new building, known as the South Dutch Reformed Church, was dedicated in 1849 at Fifth Avenue and Twenty-first Street. Initially the parish rented an organ from Hall & Labagh. "The Music Committee were authorized to settle with Hall & Labagh for the use of the organ belonging to them now in the use of the church. . . ."

By 5 January 1857 the desire for a new organ was evident in the minutes, where it was noted that the benefits of a concert should "be given for the purpose of obtaining a new organ." A contract was signed with the Robjohns sometime during the middle of 1859; the design included pneumatic action. William moved midstream to Elmira, and Thomas began to have difficulty with the action after his departure. The project got behind schedule and over budget. Then, to complicate matters further, it was discovered that the pastor, Rev. John M. Macauley, was paying Robjohn money directly without permission of the consistory. Misunderstandings among the parties ensued, and Macauley resigned. The organ remained in an uncompleted state until the consistory signed a contract on 7 April 1862 and directed Hall & Labagh to finish the job.

The organ had barker-lever playing action and was apparently prone to malfunction. According to the minutes, the organ was revoiced by James Mandeville in 1871 and was eventually totally rebuilt by Hilborne Roosevelt as his opus 300 (1886), a three-manual instrument with seventy speaking and mechanical registers.

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NEW YORK CITY Stanton St. Baptist 1842? Two

The church was founded in 1823 and located at Stanton Street at Forsyth Street. No further information is available.

References

Greenleaf, *History*, 247.

Hutchinson, *American*, 216.

TROY First Presbyterian 1859 Three

The Robjohn organ was preceded by an 1837 instrument built by Thomas Appleton; the Appleton organ was sold in 1857 to E. F. Carter in Saratoga Springs,

New York. The church he represented has not been identified. The contract with Robjohn was signed by 29 December 1857, but he was unable to provide any security for its fulfillment. The opening concert was held on Thursday, 15 December 1859.

The instrument was presumably replaced with an entirely new three-manual organ with sixty registers and built by the Austin Organ Co., opus 628 (1916), of Hartford, Connecticut.

References

Thomas Appleton, Reading, Massachusetts, Account Book, p. 98, American Organ Archives.

First Presbyterian Church of Troy, New York: A Historical Résumé of One Hundred Seventy-Five Progressive Years, 1871–1966 [No publisher given], 36.

First Presbyterian Church, Troy, New York, Trustee Minutes for 28 May 1857, 15 July 1857, [no date], 29 December 1857, 10 June 1858, 2 November 1858, 14 February 1859, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia.

List of Organs Installed and under Construction by Austin Organ Company [Published by the Firm, 1919?].

Troy Daily Arena, 15 December 1859.

TROY Holy Cross, Episcopal 1844 Three

Referred to in a letter from the Thomas Hall correspondence.

References

Hall, Correspondence, vol. 1, 23 December 1843.

Musical Pioneer 11 (October 1865): 3.