

Hall, Labagh & Co., New York City, 1870

Privately owned church building, 600 Frederick Rd, Catonsville, MD

Current Specification

GREAT 58 notes

16 Teneroon [sic] 12 stopped wood bass pipes NOTE TO EDITOR: Teneroon is thus spelled on the stopface

8 Open Diapason (1-10 in center façade towers)

8 Melodia

8 Gamba (bell gamba)

4 Principal

4 Flute Harmonic (wood, inverted mouths, single screw in caps)

2 2/3 Octave Quint

2 Super Octave

Mixture 3 Rks (now one rank of pipes, empty toe holes are covered)

Sw. to Gr. Coupler

SWELL 58 notes, enc.

16 Bourdon

8 Open Diapason

8 Clarabella

8 Salicional

4 Violina

2 Piccolo

Cornet 3 Rks

8 Oboe

4 Trumpet (drawknob engraved "Sw. Tremolo")

PEDAL 27 notes, flat

16 Open Diapason (draws 16' stopped wood rank, 16' open wood rank missing)
8 Violoncello (diapason pipes, 3-13 in façade)
Gr. to Ped. Coupler
Sw. to Ped. Coupler
balanced Swell Pedal
mechanical action

First gathering in 1879 at the vacant Paradise Hotel in Catonsville, a new Presbyterian congregation acquired the land at 600 Frederick Road in 1880 and constructed during that decade the current building, named at the time Paradise Presbyterian Church. Renamed Catonsville Presbyterian Church in 1896, the congregation relocated in 1921 to a new building a mile west at 1400 Frederick Road, where it flourishes today. When the congregation moved, they left behind the 1870 Hall, Labagh & Co. pipe organ acquired second-hand from Brown Memorial Presbyterian Church, Baltimore in 1889¹, thus it remains in the 1880s building. The building was used by a Christadelphian congregation ca. 1944-2021.

Before the 1870 Hall, Labagh & Co. organ was sold by Brown Memorial to the Catonsville Presbyterians in 1889², it had been moved within Brown Memorial from the back to the front in 1880 and “rebuilt,”³ according to the verb used in a report published by *The [Baltimore] Sun* of April 10, 1880. The identity of the organbuilders who moved and rebuilt it is unknown, nor is the identity of the parties who moved it to Catonsville, though all of the work is of professional caliber.

The organ was probably altered visually, mechanically, and tonally when it was moved within Brown Memorial in 1880. Visually, the 1870 organ case of black walnut is now altered from its original state. It was originally constructed so

¹ “Life at Catonsville. . . .,” *The Sun* (Baltimore) vol. 107, no. 18 (Fri., June 6, 1890): 3 [Supplement]

² “Church Organ for Sale,” *The Sun* (Baltimore) vol. 104, no. 99 (Tue., March 12, 1889): 2 and vol. 105, no. 22, p. 3

³ “Improving a Church Interior” *The Sun* (Baltimore) vol. 86, no. 126 (Sat., April 10, 1880): 4

as to wrap a window in the rear gallery of Brown, following drawings of architect John Murdoch (1836-1923)⁴. Such cases are low in the middle and tall on the sides. As there was no window in the front of the church⁵ (the present, deep chancel and its large window having been added in 1931, along with the four-manual Skinner Organ Co. Op. 839), the case was probably modified to more logically fit its situation on the pulpit platform centered at the front by sawing the case in half vertically and moving the left half to become the right half, and vice-versa. This resulted in the tall, outside end parts of the case meeting in the center of the transfigured case. The lower, rounded, parts that formerly wrapped the gallery window swooped to the outside ends of the case as installed on the pulpit platform, which had been modified for the purpose.⁶ This circumstance would account for the appearance of the case as it is now installed in Catonsville. Earlier speculation has held that the modification occurred to fit the organ in Catonsville (which would have been necessary if the case were not already altered), but that theory was drawn because the 1880 move within Brown Memorial was unknown to the theorists.

Mechanically, the organ was almost certainly modified in some ways when it moved to the front, and possibly modified tonally as well. The current keydesk replaces the original, but research has yet to determine whether that occurred in 1880 at Brown or in 1889 when it moved to Catonsville. One bit of evidence of a replacement keydesk is the oblique drawknobs: such knobs had not been available before their invention and patent in 1869⁷ – thus 1870 was too early for their use in the new organ. The manual keys may be the originals from the 1870 construction.

⁴ Peter T. Cameron, "Business Records of Hall, Labagh & Co.," Letter to Louis E. Smith, Sept. 20, 1870, *The Tracker* Vol. 15, No. 4 (Summer, 1971): 18.

⁵ Photograph (unknown photographer), Alan M. Laufman, ed., *Organ Handbook 1991*, The Organ Historical Society, Inc., Richmond, VA, 1991: 76 [The photograph credited to "Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore" ca. 1890, shows that there was no window in the front of Brown Memorial Presbyterian Church. It also shows the 1889 Steere & Turner organ, Op. 286, of three manuals that replaced the two-manual Hall, Labagh & Co. organ.]

⁶ "Improving a Church Interior" previously cited

⁷ William Boyrer, U. S. Patent 96,543, "Organ-Stop Handle," Nov. 9, 1869

Organbuilder David Storey notes that, as the organ is now deployed in Catonsville, the Great windchest has twelve sliders but the keydesk has only ten stopknobs for that division, one of which is engraved “Electric Blower,” though it is connected to a slider which has no pipes on its associated toeboard. The Swell has eleven sliders but only eight stopknobs, one engraved “Sw. Tremolo” which draws a 4' trumpet. The Pedal windchests are divided on each side of the organ, with 13 notes on the C-sharp side and 14 notes on the C side. They accommodated three ranks of pipes, of which the 16' open wood pipes are absent.

The circumstances of the organ's creation in 1870 possibly relate to some anomalies: a contract for construction and delivery of the new organ by October 1, 1870, was executed shortly before July 1, 1870. Could Hall, Labagh & Co. make a 30-stop, two-manual organ and its case in just three months? With 25 workers (as established by the 1870 Federal census of “Products of Industry”⁸), the firm proved it was almost possible, as the organ was shipped in the week before Monday, October 31, fewer than 30 days after the promised date, with expectation of its arrival on November 1. George S. Brown (1834-1890), son of the donor, threatened a lawsuit for “breach of contract” in a letter of October 4, only three days after the promised date. Hall, Labagh & Co. organbuilder Peter Bagstrom was sent from New York to install the organ in Baltimore.⁹

Under the very tight construction schedule, might Hall & Labagh have used parts on-hand (possibly constructed for a different organ with a less stringent delivery schedule)? Having used some such parts could account for roller boards in the organ being made of differing materials (one has rollers of wood, another has iron rollers, as observed and photographed by David Storey). Even windchests, pipes, and other parts on-hand may have been used. Or, the anomalies observed in Catonsville, such as empty sliders, suggests that a windchest (and a roller board) may have been replaced, either in 1880 within Brown or in 1889 in

⁸ Stephen Pinel, “A Comparator of American Organ Manufacturing,” *The Tracker*, vol. 30, no. 4, 1986: 30

⁹ Cameron, letters to George S. Brown, October 10 and 31, 1870: 18

the move to Catonsville, or even that windchests on-hand in 1870 were used in building the organ on a tight schedule.

Louis E. Smith (1806-1875¹⁰) was the organist and choir director of the new Brown Memorial Church. He made initial contact with Hall & Labagh in a letter dated June 3, 1870, citing an organ the firm had built in 1867 for Immaculate Conception Church in Baltimore for what he believed to be a very low cost of \$2,500. Smith had played it at its opening on Sunday, February 3, 1867.¹¹ The firm wrote back on June 6 with thanks for the recommendation to build the organ for Brown Memorial, but corrected Smith's misconception of the Immaculate Conception price, stating that they could not build the same organ in 1870 for what was paid for it in 1867. The firm wrote,

“... as you seem to think that [\$4,000] would be the highest figure Mr. Brown would be willing to give, we send herewith a scheme for an organ we would build & put up in the church for \$4,000, it being put into a Blk Walnut Case – and hav_g the front pipes illuminated . . .”

Yet, on September 20, Hall & Labagh wrote to Smith, “The front pipes will be gilt so as to meet the wishes of Mrs. Brown.”¹² Examination of the backs and sides of façade pipes via photographs taken of the organ interior by David Storey show no sign of previous application of gold leaf or painting with gold paint; the “illuminated” decorations appear to be original to 1870. It is unlikely, but possible, that the pipes were thoroughly cleaned of a previous gold coating when it was moved to the front, thus the “illumination” could have occurred in 1880. Tell-tale signs of earlier decoration usually remain on redecorated pipes, out-of-sight from the front of the organ, but apparent on the backs of the pipes. Possibly, the gilded pipes were replaced with new, decorated pipes as part of the 1880 move and “rebuild.”

¹⁰ Death notice, *The Sun* (Baltimore) vol. 77, no. 118 (Thur., Sept. 30, 1875): 2

¹¹ “The New Organ in the Church of the Immaculate Conception,” *The Sun* (Baltimore) vol. 60, no. 65 (Sat., Feb. 2, 1867): 2

¹² Cameron, letters to Louis E. Smith, June 6, 17, 20, 23, Sept. 20, 1870: 17-18

The organ proposed by Hall & Labagh to Smith in the June 6, 1870, letter would have had 56-note manuals and a 25-note Pedal at a time when 27-note Pedal compass had become the norm, and 58-note manuals were frequent: perhaps an economy measure. However, the organ seems to have been built with 58-note manuals and windchests unless they, too, were replaced in 1880. The specification of the proposed Great is similar to the current specification, though it includes an 8' Stopped Diapason and an 8' Trumpet, the 8' open flute is a Clarabella and the 4' flute is a Wald Flute. After exchanges of letters, the Stopped Diapason was omitted, a 16' Tenoroon (a principal) was added, and the 4' flute became harmonic. In Catonsville, the Swell windchest is located above the Great but so low that space is insufficient for an 8' Trumpet, states David Storey.

The proposed Swell included a Dulciana rather than a Salicional, a Stopped Diapason instead of the Clarabella, a 4' Flute Harmonic as well as a 4' Violina, and a divided Oboe with a separate drawknob for the bass (8' Bassoon Bass). The Swell currently has a full-compass Oboe and a 4' Trumpet.

The proposed three-stop Pedal: 16' Double Open Diapason (open wood) 16' Double Stopped Diapason (stopped wood), and 8' Violoncello, was modified in a letter of June 17 to omit the 16' stopped rank in favor of a 16' Violoncello, and the 8' Violoncello becomes an 8' Bell Open Diapason (which would have had bell gamba construction). In Catonsville, the organ has a 16' Double Open drawknob which draws a 16' stopped wood rank and an 8' Violoncello drawknob which draws an 8' diapason.

Further in this correspondence, HL&Co agreed to enlarge the proposed Swell box so as to contain most of the bass pipes of the Swell, which otherwise would have been installed outside the box. For this and the other changes, the letter of June 17 states the price became \$4,150. The final price may have differed, but no further evidence has been found. Also, HL&Co responded to Smith's request for a commission on June 20, ". . . we will allow you \$250 if the order for the organ comes to us — in future we will make it more remunerative to you."

Oddly, organist Smith suggested omission of the 2' rank in the Great in favor of another stop. HL&Co responded on June 17:

“Your antipathy to it [the 2' Fifteenth], you must allow us to say, is not orthodox, the 12th being a succession of 5th may, with propriety, be left out, but if you remove the 15 th the 12 must also be taken out. Otherwise the effect will be very offensive. The two stops (12th & 15th) being taken out will be about room enough for a Clarion 4ft which we would recommend, it being about or rather more than equivalent to the stops removed. We will substitute the Sesq & Cornet (old fashion) for the mixture . . .”¹³

The Fifteenth survived Smith's assault. Smith appears in correspondence with Hall & Labagh beginning in 1846.¹⁴ Of Germanic extraction, he was influential in Baltimore's music culture and as a collector of art, books, and musical instruments, especially violins.¹⁵ His estate, including more than forty stringed instruments, was sold at auction for the city Orphans' Court on May 5, 1876, his death having occurred on September 29, 1875.¹⁶

Despite the short time available to build the organ, correspondence was sluggish with Smith, leading to direct correspondence by Hall, Labagh & Co. with George S. Brown. Having had no response from Smith following their proposal of June 6, 1870, the firm wrote to Brown on June 13, repeating their proposal and referring him to “. . . Mr. J. C. Brown of this city [New York] who has an organ of ours purchased by him in the church he attends at Wehaken [*sic, Weehawken*], N.J.”¹⁷

To execute the contract, the firm's partner, James L. Kemp, “will leave N.Y. on Monday [June 27, 1870] in the 9:20 P.M. train which arrives in Baltimore at 4:45 A.M. on Tuesday. He will go to the Mansion House as directed

¹³ Cameron, letter to Louis E. Smith, June 17, 1870: 17

¹⁴ Stephen L. Pinel, Archivist's Report “Hall & Labagh Correspondence, Volume One, 1843-1849,” *The Tracker*, vol. 30, no. 1, 1986: 13

¹⁵ “Herr Louis E. Smith ist nicht mehr!” *Der Deutsche Correspondent* (Baltimore newspaper), Oct. 8, 1875: 4

¹⁶ Death notice, *The Sun* (Baltimore) vol. 77, no. 118 (Thur., Sept. 30, 1875): 2

¹⁷ Cameron, letter to George S. Brown, Esqr., June 13: 17

...” to meet “early in the morning,” wrote the firm to Smith, including “. . . I fully calculate upon seeing you more than once while the organ is progressing we shall then have opportunities of reviving the days of auld lang syne to which I revert with much pleasure.”¹⁸

Subsequently, the firm reported to Smith on September 20, “. . . The work of the organ has gone on as fast compatable [*sic*] with a faithful execution of the work and in about 2 or 3 Wks we shall have it put up in our factory. . . . With respect to Mr. Pomplitz and his organ for St. Peter’s Church, we can only say that we do not fear any loss of reputation by comparing notes with him.”

The completed Brown Memorial Presbyterian Church and its organ were dedicated on December 4, 1870, with Louis E. Smith playing the organ and directing a choir composed of singers from several other churches.¹⁹

The principals of Hall, Labagh & Co. of New York City include Thomas S. Hall (1791-1874) who began organbuiding on his own in 1813 in his native Philadelphia after his employer, John Lowe, died in that year, leaving Hall to complete the organ built for St. John’s Church in New York. Henry Erben (1800-1884) subsequently became Hall’s apprentice and Hall married Erben’s sister. Hall moved his business to New York and became a partner with Erben in 1824.²⁰ The partnership dissolved in 1827 and Hall became Erben’s employee for 16 years. In 1843, Hall left Erben and worked alone until he entered partnership with John Labagh (1810-1891), naming the firm Hall & Labagh. When James L. Kemp (1827-1891) became a partner in 1868, the firm became Hall, Labagh & Co. Hall retired in 1872 when the firm became Labagh & Kemp, continuing until its acquisition in 1891 by George A. Chapman and Frank Symmes.²¹

Mrs. Isabella Brown, née McLanahan (1798-1885), donated Brown Memorial Presbyterian Church and all of its furnishings in memory of her husband, George (1787-1859). She was a native of Greencastle, Pennsylvania,

¹⁸ Cameron, letter to Louis E. Smith, June 23, 1870: 18

¹⁹ “The Brown Memorial Church – Opening Ceremonies” *The Sun (Baltimore)* vol. 68, no. 16 (Mon., Dec. 5, 1870): 4

²⁰ John K. Ogasapian *Organ Building in New York City 1700-1900*, 1977, The Organ Literature Foundation, Braintree, MA: 37

²¹ Pinel, Archivist’s Report *The Tracker*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1986: 15

where they married in 1818. George was a son of Alexander Brown of Baltimore, who founded the family's extensive businesses, including investment bankers, Alex. Brown & Sons, which grew under George's succeeding leadership. George was the first treasurer of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad in 1828 and developed the investment banking business. At his death in 1859, his fortune was estimated at five million dollars²² which one website calculates as worth about \$185 million in 2024.

²² "Death of George Brown, Esq. *The Sun (Baltimore)* vol. 45, no. 88 (Sat., Aug. 27, 1859): 1