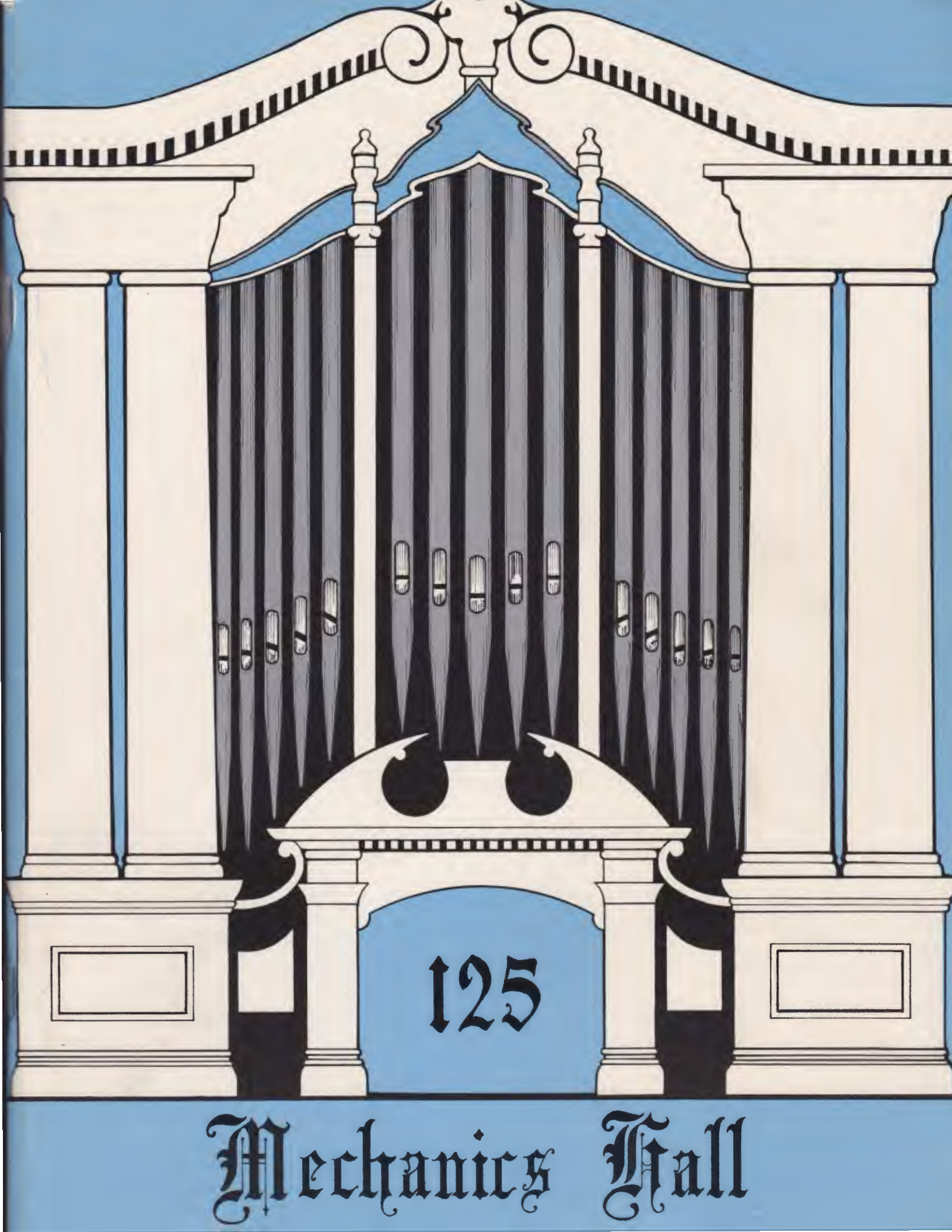
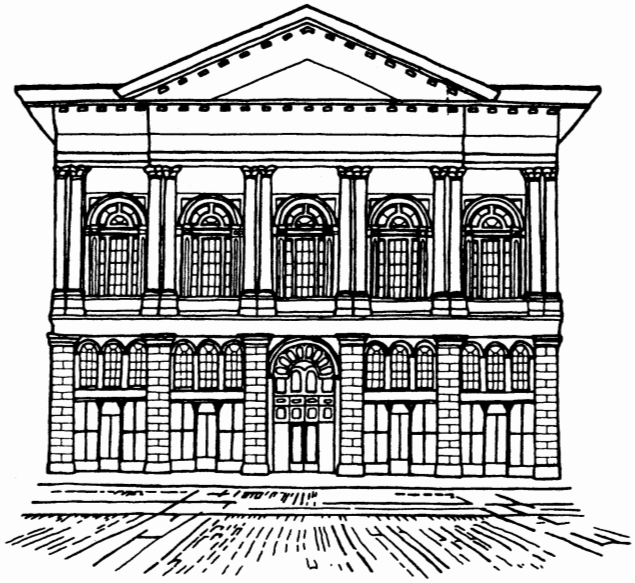


Mechanics Hall

MECHANICS HALL

1857~1982



Organ Rededication Weekend
September 25th September 26th

This Souvenir Book commemorates the 125th Anniversary of Mechanics Hall

Mechanics Hall • 321 Main Street • Worcester, Massachusetts 01608
(617) 752-5608

Table of Contents

MECHANICS HALL
1857 to 1982

Mechanics Hall is a tribute to Worcester's early industrialists who, true to their entrepreneurial spirit, thought and planned in a grandiose way. Not for them an intermediate dwelling on a modest scale. When they were ready to build a structure to house their association, they went from rented space to the Mechanics Hall we see today.

It all began with the Worcester County Mechanics Association. Although the charter speaks of the lofty moral and educational goals of the organization, there is no question that the industrialists of Worcester were equally dedicated to fostering trade. As exhibitions of the mechanical arts were popular at agricultural fairs, the association decided in 1848 to have its own fair displaying the products of local mechanics and manufacturers. Space for such a fair was rented at the depot of the Worcester and Nashua railroad at Lincoln Square. The exhibit was a smashing success and was repeated in 1849 and 1851 in halls rented from the Merrifield buildings.

Encouraged by public response to the exhibits and unhappy with rental space available, the idea of building a hall for the Mechanics Association took root. A great part of the credit for seeing this idea to fruition must go to Ichabod Washburn who headed the Committee for Construction. Washburn, a brilliant mechanic who had made a fortune in the wire-drawing industry, appears to have been a man of unusual character—a generous benefactor, public-spirited, gentle, and persuasive. It was his guiding hand that led to the crucial decisions which resulted in the construction of the hall in its present form and on its present site. He arranged for the purchase of the land, interceded for the architect, Elbridge Boyden, when the committee interfered too much, and supported the project with contributions totaling in the thousands of dollars.

In July, 1855, ground was broken, and by September 3, the cornerstone was laid. Eighteen months later the building was ready for use. That this handsome, beautifully decorated structure could have been finished in so short a time is amazing, especially as the ornamentation, true to Victorian taste, is profuse.

The building was dedicated on March 19, 1857; the weather, cold and rainy. Two days of festivities began in the afternoon, with a procession, followed by speeches. That evening featured a band concert. On the next night there was a ball—$3.50 a couple.

Fifty years later, in 1907, there was another anniversary dedication. (Again the weather was bad. If there is one factor that has remained constant in the changing fortunes of the hall, it is that on March 19, through the years, there has been stormy weather.) A special program booklet for 1907 lists a concert and dance. Refreshments were available in Washburn Hall for 25¢.

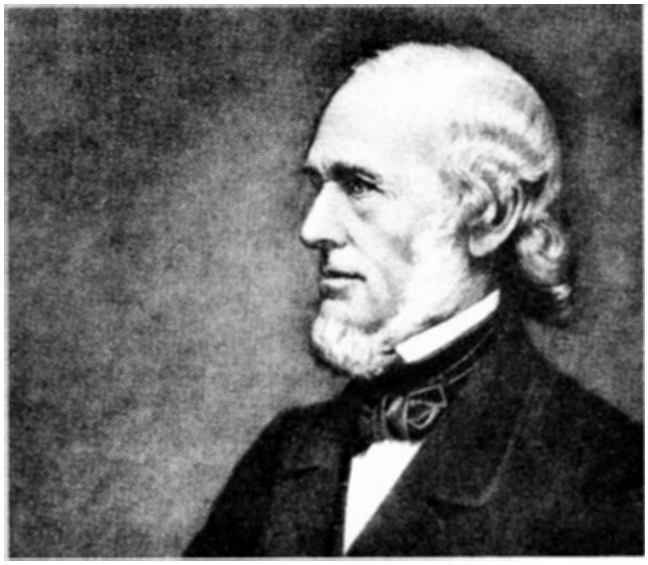
The celebration in 1907 was to be the only anniversary party held until present times. In that year the hall and the association were at the height of their significance in the community. In 1908, however, the Boys Trade School came into being, taking over the education of young mechanics. From that date on, interest in the Mechanics Association began to decline. And by 1931, with the opening of the Municipal Auditorium, Mechanics Hall lost its position as the center for concerts and social

A large wooden signboard advertised an early fair. The beehive probably symbolizes Worcester's humming industries, a hive of activity.

So in 1932, seventy-five years after the original dedication, there was no celebration. On the night of March 19, Frank Duffy, promoter, was holding a public dance—admission 50¢. The situation in 1957, the 100th anniversary, was even more dismal—the hall was dark on March 19. The trustees, who had been trying to sell the hall since 1948, regretfully recorded in their annual report of 1957 that their sole prospect had failed to show up for the final sale.

Their misfortune was our good fortune, for had they sold the hall, there would be nothing more to tell. But since 1957 much has happened. We have already experienced the great rededication week which took place on the reopening of the restored hall in 1977. Since then, the hopes of the preservationists have been realized, and their foresight proved accurate. Once more Mechanics Hall is the cultural center of the community, approaching its 125th year with a glorious building, an active membership, and an exciting range of programs. On March 19, 1982, in the spirit of 1907, we can truly celebrate again.

Florence Zuckerman



Ichabod Washburn's guiding hand brought Mechanics Hall into being, and his generosity and skill saved it from financial disaster shortly after it opened.

The Mechanical and Electrical Exposition in 1909.

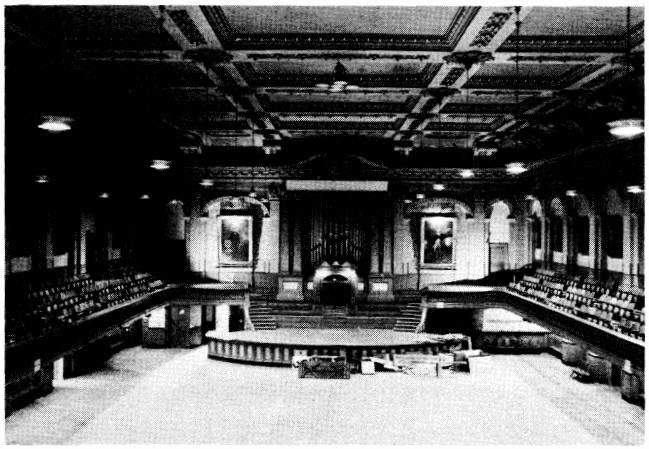
THE RESTORATION

Earliest acknowledgement for the thought of possible restoration of Mechanics Hall must go to the Worcester Heritage Preservation Society who, in 1971, decided to assess the significance of the building. The Society had a study made by a national authority, Denys Peter Myers, who reported that Mechanics Hall was "the finest hall, as distinct from theatre, remaining in the United States from the pre-Civil War decade." Encouraged by this statement, the Society took steps to have the Hall listed in the National Registry of Historic Places, a task which was accomplished in 1972.

Spurred by this national recognition, the Worcester County Mechanics Association with its first woman president, Mrs. Julie Chase Fuller, began to talk about the restoration of the Hall. A decision had to be made in 1974 when the old Barnard Store building was torn down, and it was discovered that the exposed south wall was so porous that a pencil could be inserted in the brick. It was obvious that something would have to be done to avoid the damage that moisture and water would do to the building. The Board of Trustees also came to grips with another problem—the safety of the fire support system of the building (which was by then being used as a roller skating arena). Fire Pro of Wellesley conducted a fire safety study, and upon their recommendation, the building was closed.

It was evident that a major decision concerning the future of the building would have to be made. After much discussion, and even without any funds for restoration or improvement, the decision was made to "save" the building. The immediate problem of replacing the porous south wall was solved with a $30,000 matching grant from the Massachusetts Historical Commission. (The Association had to borrow the other $30,000.) The next step was to form a building restoration committee with someone with community believability and leadership as the chairman. The person asked to perform this vital role was Richard C. Steele, publisher of the *Worcester Telegram and Evening Gazette*. After the usual feasibility study, it was felt that funds could be raised to restore the building.

A nationwide search was conducted to find an architect who would be sympathetic to the historic restoration of a building in need of major renovation and who would conform to the guidelines of the National Historic Registry of Historic Places. A committee interviewed many such architects and finally selected Anderson, Notter, Finegold of Boston as the restoration architects. The same procedure was followed in the local community by asking for competitive bids for the contractural side of the work. The R. L. Whipple Company was selected to be the contractor.



Before Restoration

Then, in 1976, the fund-raising procedure began. Under the leadership of Richard C. Steele, a community-wide structure of committees, covering both metropolitan and county towns, was organized and began its work in earnest. All segments of the community were approached. Private foundations, corporations and local businesses ultimately accounted for 80% of the total raised. Julie Fuller, on her part, organized a series of promotional events that furthered the public awareness of the Hall's potential and kept interest strong. The fact that the fund-raising began in 1976 and coincided with the National Bicentennial Year was an excellent happenstance, for across the entire country attention was being focused on the past and the importance of preserving our heritage. It was at this time that the Mechanics Association submitted a proposal to the Office of Planning and Development of the City of Worcester for consideration for a block grant in the HUD Program, earmarked for historic preservation, one of the categories of the grant. This grant application was successful, and $200,000 was given for specific facets of the restoration work.

It was deemed necessary to have someone on the site to oversee the details of restoration and operation of the building. After a search for such a person, Julie Fuller

was selected. At this point, H. Waite Hurlburt became President of the Association while Julie became the first Executive Director.

One of the high points of the Bicentennial year was the participation of the Worcester Public Schools in the restoration of Mechanics Hall. The Worcester school children gathered pennies, and over $9,000 was collected as their part in the project. Among some of the fund-raising "gimmicks" dreamed up by Julie were "come and see tours" (often led by Bob Blair, now the Building Manager), the sale of bottled "organic dust" collected from the bottom of the organ case, a "hard-hat party" where guests were issued hard hats and served lunch in workmen's lunch pails, and a Christmas party with a tree made out of construction materials.

Funds for the restoration of Mechanics Hall were coming in successfully when the idea of building a Civic Center obtruded on the scene. It was felt that the city needed a Civic Center in order to attract large sporting events, trade shows and conventions. So, community leaders were asked to furnish the "seed money." This diverted funds from the Restoration Fund drive to the Civic Center so that it was necessary to plan the restoration work of Mechanics Hall in phases, instead of completing the work all at once.

Phase I of the restoration was completed in 1977. On November 26, 1977, the Hall was reopened to the public with a week-long series of gala events with wide community participation. But, unfortunately, work had not been completed. It was still necessary to meet the architectural barriers regulations and provide the handicapped access to the building.

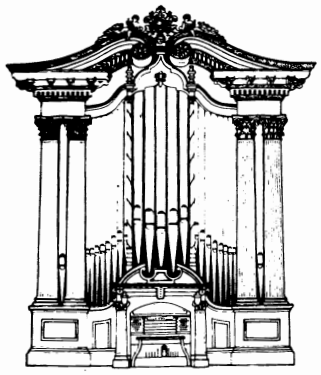
So, Phase II of the restoration began. The goal was the addition of the elevator wing, air-conditioning for the Great Hall, and the restoration of the Hall's famous Hook organ. At this time, application was made for a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts for restoration funds, and a grant of $90,000 was received. Once again, the local foundations, the business sector and private individuals were most generous. The work of restoration continued throughout the summer, and ceremonies to celebrate the opening of the glass-enclosed elevator wing, called the Boyden Salon (after the building's first architect), took place in the fall of 1978. The imaginative use of the glass walled lobby with the original brick wall of the building behind it was nationally acclaimed. In 1979, the American Institute of Architects gave its honor award to Mechanics Hall for its architectural restoration.

Now, however, the Board of Trustees realizes that more work remains to be done to make the total building viable and useful. Thus, in 1982, fund-raising for Phase III is beginning. It is hoped that this phase will allow the completion of the work on the Hook organ so that it can be rededicated in September. This phase will also include renovation of prime office rental space on the second level; completion of the air-conditioning, ventilation and heating systems of the rest of the building; and the housing of the administrative offices on the promenade level. Only then will the restoration as outlined in the original plans of the architects be considered finished, and the entire structure be brought up to the high standards already attained by Phases I and II.

The history of the restoration of Mechanics Hall inspires confidence in the American process. In a conflict between commercial and cultural interests, a community rose to the challenge of preserving part of its heritage. With an unprecedented effort, it raised 4.3 million dollars to restore this national historical landmark. And continued support through membership and use of the facility has made possible the maintenance of the structure. In exchange, Mechanics Hall has sparked a resurgence of cultural activity for the city of Worcester, thus enriching the life of its people. One can truly say that Mechanics Hall, now in its 125th year, is a tangible example of what can be accomplished in a community—a living tribute to American initiative and individualism.

Julie Chase Fuller

After Restoration



THE HOOK ORGAN

When Mechanics Hall was dedicated in 1857, the Great Hall did not have its organ as planned, the finished building having exceeded projected costs. So precarious was the Worcester County Mechanics Association's financial position at that time, further expenditure was unthinkable. The settling of this crisis absorbed all the Association's energies, and it was not until December 1860 that the Association could rest assured the Hall would not pass out of its hands.

With these problems resolved, however, Ichabod Washburn, whose original $10,000 gift had secured the land on which the Hall stands, again took the lead in advancing the Association's interests. In May 1863 he offered $1,000 toward the purchase of an organ "providing the Association would give use of the Hall two evenings a year for the benefit of the Children's Friends Society and the Mozart Society." Sparked by this gesture, a citizens' committee was formed, and the necessary funds were raised.

For a sum of $8170 a contract was made with E. & G. G. Hook of Boston to build an instrument "to be delivered and set up ... on or before September 1864." The final cost of $9020 — the committee ordered additional stops after the work started — was a great bargain, for the Hooks, only a year later, charged double this price for a Brooklyn organ of similar size.

To house the organ, the Association agreed to assume the responsibility of preparing a space, and allocated $3,000 for this task. Both the Hooks and architect Elbridge Boyden submitted plans for the "front", with the Hook design being accepted. Theirs was a most elaborate facade because "they wanted to have their best work represented by artistic and showy fronts since large numbers of people hear with their eyes." In actuality the full design was never used, as the side wings, smaller duplications of the present facade, were omitted to save time and money.

The organ was "opened" in October 1864, to much acclaim. As it was the gift of a group of citizens not of the Association, it was referred to in the acceptance speech as "The Worcester Organ." So pleased was the Worcester County Mechanics Association with the instrument "for its excellence of construction" and "the small expense attendant upon keeping it in perfect condition" that they presented the Hook Organ Company with a silver medal (the highest honor) in their Fifth Exhibit.

Over the years the organ underwent various adjustments and retunings, a major one being in 1889 when George Hutchings of Boston brought the pitch down to the then popular A-435. (It was originally tuned to about A-455, almost a half tone sharp.) At the same time Hutchings installed hydraulic motors operating off the city's water supply to pump the bellows which until then had been worked by hand.

The most drastic and detrimental change, though, occurred between 1923 and 1927 when attempts were made to "modernize" the organ. In work begun by Reed & Sons of West Boylston and completed by Mr. Charles F. Chadwick of Springfield, this renovation included the introduction of electro-pneumatic action, replacing the large bellows and wooden wind trunks with a wind system of small reservoirs and sheet metal ducts, and enclosing the Choir division in a swell box. The musical substance of the organ suffered as a result.

As the use of the Hall declined, so did the use of the organ. By 1976, moldering behind its facade, and filling up with the "organic dust" (later to be sold as a promotion gimmick), the once acclaimed Hook organ was almost defunct when the restoration of Mechanics Hall was being planned. Spurred on by Tom Murray, Barbara Owen, and other champions of early American organs, the Worcester Chapter of the American Guild of Organists formed a committee to save and restore this heirloom. After seeking advice and proposals from qualified organ builders, the committee selected The Noack Company of Georgetown, Massachusetts to do the work.

Fritz Noack's recommendation to replace all parts installed in the two previous rebuildings with the original type of construction involved much research. To insure authenticity of construction, Noack purchased an 1865 Hook organ which could yield some genuine parts and models of replacement parts. But work which began in April 1977 proceeded in fits and starts as funding dried up. Thus at the rededication of Mechanics Hall in November of 1977 (as in 1857) there was no organ behind the beautiful facade. In September of 1980, however, work commenced again and went on until its completion in 1982.

Almost all the 3500 pipes were taken to the Noack Organ Co. to be washed, repaired, and tuned to the modern pitch of A-440. Missing pipes were replaced. A new 2⅔′ and a Clarinet 8′ stop were obtained from salvage of the 1865 Hook organ. The original sound was easy to reconstruct because changes by Hutchings, Reed, and Chadwick were obvious and crudely done. The bellows and wind systems were essentially rebuilt on the same principles used by Hook, one bellows being from the 1865 organ, the other being a reconstruction. The bellows are about 100 square feet in area and lead to a total of 160 feet of solid wooden ducts. The rebuilding of the action keydesk (including four bone covered manuals) proved most time-consuming, taking 1½ years.

With its new console set on a new platform (based on the old design) the organ is ready to be played once more. Great credit must go to the many people who gave so generously of their time: to members of the Worcester Chapter AGO, to Worcester County Mechanics Association members, and finally, to Fritz Noack who accepted the challenge to reconstruct faithfully the "most important recital organ of its period in the United States."

The greatest praise, however, should be reserved for the people of Worcester who rallied to support this venture with their contributions, just as did their forebears in 1863. Now, in September 1982, as in October 1864, the Mechanics Hall's organ can be considered a gift of the citizens of the community and rightly maintain its name of "The Worcester Organ".

Florence Zuckerman

DESCRIPTION OF THE GRAND ORGAN

BUILT BY

E. & G. G. HOOK, OF BOSTON,

FOR MECHANICS' HALL, WORCESTER, MASS.

In comparing this instrument with the largest Organs built in America, superiority over *all* others is claimed by its extensive selection of effective and beautiful stops, its improved and artistic voicing, and by the facility with which all is brought under the control of the performer; —the three essential characteristics which correctly determine the size and rank of an Organ.

LIST OF STOPS, &c.

Great Manual.

1. OPEN DIAPASON,	16 feet.	58 pipes.	8. TWELFTH,	2⅔ feet.	58 pipes.
2. OPEN DIAPASON,	8 "	58 "	9. FIFTEENTH,	2 "	58 "
3. VIOLA DA GAMBA,	8 "	58 "	10. MIXTURE,	3 ranks,	174 "
4. STOPPED DIAPASON,	8 "	58 "	11. MIXTURE,	5 "	290 "
5. CLARIBELLA,	8 "	58 "	12. TRUMPET.	16 feet.	58 "
6. PRINCIPAL,	4 "	58 "	13. TRUMPET,	8 "	58 "
7. FLUTE HARMONIQUE.	4 "	58 "	14. CLARION,	4 "	58 "

Swell Manual.

15. BOURDON,	16 feet.	58 pipes.	23. FIFTEENTH,	2 feet.	58 pipes.
16. OPEN DIAPASON,	8 "	58 "	24. MIXTURE,	5 ranks.	290 "
17. STOPPED DIAPASON,	8 "	58 "	25. TRUMPET,	16 feet.	46 "
18. VIOL d'AMOUR,	8 "	58 "	26. CORNOPEAN,	8 "	58 "
19. PRINCIPAL,	4 "	58 "	27. OBOE,	8 "	58 "
20. FLUTE OCTAVIANTE,	4 "	58 "	28. CLARION,	4 "	58 "
21. VIOLIN,	4 "	58 "	29. VOX HUMANA,	8 "	58 "
22. TWELFTH,	2⅔ "	58 "			

Choir Manual.

30. ÆOLINA & BOURDON,	16 feet.	58 pipes.	35. FLAUTO TRAVERSO,	4 feet.	58 pipes.
31. OPEN DIAPASON,	8 "	58 "	36. VIOLIN,	4 "	58 "
32. MELODIA,	8 "	57 "	37. PICOLO,	2 "	58 "
33. DULCIANA,	8 "	58 "	38. MIXTURE,	3 ranks.	174 "
34. KERAULOPHON,	8 "	58 "	39. CLARINET,	8 feet.	58 "

Solo Manual.

40. PHILOMELA,	8 feet.	58 pipes.	43. PICOLO,	2 feet.	58 pipes.
41. SALICIONAL,	8 "	58 "	44. TUBA,	8 "	58 "
42. HOHL PFEIFE,	4 "	58 "	45. CORNO INGLESE,	8 "	58 "

Pedale.

46. OPEN DIAPASON,	16 feet.	30 pipes.	50. QUINTE,	10⅔ feet.	30 pipes.
47. VIOLONE,	16 "	30 "	51. FLUTE,	8 "	30 "
48. BOURDON,	16 "	30 "	52. POSAUNE,	16 "	30 "
49. VIOLONCELLO,	8 "	30 "			

Mechanical Registers.

53. SWELL TO GREAT Coupler.
54. SWELL TO CHOIR "
55. CHOIR TO GREAT "
56. SOLO TO GREAT "
57. CHOIR TO SOLO "
58. GREAT TO PEDALE "
59. CHOIR TO PEDALE "
60. CHOIR TO PEDALE " (super octaves)
61. SWELL TO PEDALE Coupler.
62. SOLO TO PEDALE "
63. TREMULANT ("Swell").
64. BELLOWS SIGNAL.
65. PEDALE CHECK.
66. VENTIL (for No. 46).
67. VENTIL (for Nos. 50, 51, and 52.)

Combination Pedals.

No. 1. } Great Manual. } Forte.
" 2. } Great Manual. } Piano.
" 3. } Swell Manual. } Forte.
" 4. } Swell Manual. } Piano.
" 5. } Choir Manual. } Forte.
" 6. } Choir Manual. } Piano.

No. 7. (Pedale) operates on Nos. 46, 50, 51, and 52, and, with the aid of Ventils (Nos. 66 & 67), allows of various combinations.
" 8. } Couplers. } Forte.
" 9. } Couplers. } Piano.
" 10. Operates on "Great Pedale" Coupler.

BALANCED SWELL PEDAL, with double action.