

Organs in Colonial New England Puritan Churches

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INTRODUCTION: 200 words

My favorite thing to study is the intersection of music and faith. Most religions use music in some way and many musicians apply their faith to their art, whether that art be sacred or secular. As a French horn player, I find particular interest in the parts of these discussions that relate to instrumental music. In the case of this research, I've gotten the opportunity to learn about something a little uncomfortable. Puritans, often referred to as the founders of America, had strong opinions on why instruments should be outlawed in churches. My own religious tradition shares some roots with Puritanism. As an instrumentalist, this troubled me. Fortunately, it appears that most of these anti-instrumental beliefs among Puritans cleared up within a few generations. In the years leading up to and following the American Revolution, many of the Puritan churches in America began to purchase and use organs. The reintroduction of organs in Puritan churches was caused by both religious and social developments. These developments follow trends of increased tolerance of other faiths. //

BACKGROUND: 200 words

Puritans, who prefer to be called Congregationalists, draw their theology from the Westminster Confession. The Westminster Confession is a document passed by the English parliament in 1647 that professes certain beliefs of John Calvin such as predestination.¹ The most relevant of these confessed beliefs is the insistence on reducing public worship music to the singing of psalms in unison with no harmony.² Congregationalists in England were so adamant about this that they violently destroyed organs all across England.³ While it might seem that this hatred for instruments in church was based in scripture, some evidence points to intolerance of

¹ *The Confession of Faith of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster*, 11.

² John Cotton, *Singing of Psalmes a Gospel-Accordance* (London: Printed by M.S. for Hannah Allen and John Rothwell, 1647), 6.

³ C.H. Firth and R.S. Rait, "May 1644: An Ordinance for the Further Demolishing of Monuments of Idolatry and Superstition," *Acts and Ordinances of the Interregnum, 1642-1660* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1911), 425-426.

other faiths as an important motivator. The Westminster Confession says, and I quote, “Nor can the Pope of Rome, in any sense, be head thereof: but is that Antichrist, that man of sin,” end quote.⁴ John Calvin calls out Catholicism for its supposed, and I quote, “unsuitable imitation of the Jews,” end quote.⁵ This intolerance for other faiths explains their desire to purge England of all remnants of Catholicism. As New England becomes more tolerant, organs return to Congregationalist churches. This increased tolerance comes from America’s unique religious melting pot. So many faiths were in close proximity together, and many of them worked together in their secular life. In a land with no monarch and therefore no religious authority, colonial Americans were forced to get along. Leading to and following the Revolutionary War, tolerance seeped into Puritan churches. Organs would soon follow. //

BRATTLE STREET ORGAN: 500 words

In 1698, a new kind of Congregationalist church was built in Boston. This church would come to be known as Brattle Street Church, Manifesto Church, or the Church in Brattle Square.⁶ The idea for this church sparked from a desire for a more liberal Congregationalist church. In 1697, John Leverett, William Brattle, and Thomas Brattle began work on this new kind of church.⁷ This church’s manifesto was quite controversial. It included “radical” ideas such as reading of Scripture in public.⁸ While not exactly progressive by today’s standards, this manifesto was a step in the right direction. It brought back a number of Anglican beliefs that were stripped from Congregationalist churches. Benjamin Colman, the first minister at Brattle Street Church, came under heavy criticism from his colleagues. A local judge by the name of

⁴ *The Confession of Faith of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster*, 20.

⁵ Candlish, 45.

⁶ Sewall, 1114

⁷ *Records of the Church in Brattle Square* (Boston: The Benevolent Fraternity of Churches, 1902), vii.

⁸ *Records of the Church in Brattle Square*, viii.

Samuel Sewall went as far as to warn Colman that, and I quote, “he was the more in danger, and had need to be more upon his guard,” end quote.

The push towards more tolerant beliefs in the Brattle Street Church is connected to the ideas of Thomas Brattle, one of its founders. Brattle, the namesake of the church, also happened to be the owner of America’s first organ.⁹ It was a small house organ, which he kept and played for his own enjoyment. After Thomas Brattle’s death in 1713, his organ was donated to his church on one condition: within a year, someone in the church must learn to play it in services. Should the congregation fail this task, the organ was to go to King’s Chapel, an Anglican church in Boston. The church declined the organ immediately with a letter to Thomas’s brother William. // This letter stated, “The Church, with all possible respect to the memory of our devoted friend and benefactor, voted, that they did not think it proper to use in the public worship of God.”¹⁰ These gentle words hold great weight. Brattle Street was willing to tell their dead patron’s brother that his dying wish would shame the church. Such a bold statement in kind words shows us the gravity of their convictions.

By 1713, even Boston’s most liberal Puritans still wanted to keep instruments out of worship. Brattle himself, however, was well ahead of his time. He saw beauty in the organ and thought it would be a waste for it to go unused. He was willing to cross denominational lines to ensure his instrument continued to serve the Lord. This is unprecedented for a Puritan in his time. Brattle could have donated his organ to Harvard, where he served as treasurer. Instead, he extended kindness to people he disagreed with.¹¹ The generosity of one kind Puritan allowed for

⁹ Barbara Owen, “Eighteenth-Century Organs and Organ Building in New England,” *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts* vol 54 (1985): 655-714, 656.

¹⁰ *Records of the Church in Brattle Square* (Boston: The Benevolent Fraternity of Churches, 1902), 13.

¹¹ Owen, 659.

America's first church organ to sound in an Anglican church. This serves as a major landmark for instruments in America as well as tolerance between denominations in New England.

It would be another 77 years before Brattle Street Church would change their mind and purchase an organ. In 1790, the church voted to purchase a different organ to be played in their church. After the vote, one member of the church disapproved so strongly that he offered to donate money equal to its price to have the organ dropped in Boston's harbor.¹² Brattle Street was one of the first churches to bring the organ back. However, as you will soon learn, their hesitation lost their opportunity to be the first Congregationalist church to use an organ. That title belongs to a church in Rhode Island. //

FIRST CONGREGATIONALIST PROVIDENCE: 500 words

While Thomas Brattle is responsible for the first organ to sound in an Anglican church in New England, a pastor in Providence would be the first to bring an organ into a Congregationalist church.¹³ Providence, located in modern-day Rhode Island, was founded by Roger Williams. Williams moved to Providence after being banished from Massachusetts. He formed Providence as a "shelter for persons distressed in conscience."¹⁴ With this mission statement, Providence and the rest of Rhode Island became a haven for the religiously persecuted. Many denominations lived there together in close proximity. The government of Rhode Island was devoted to full religious liberty and civic democracy.¹⁵

In 1768, an offer was made by a mystery gentleman in England. He was willing to pay five hundred sterling to the first Congregationalist church to install an organ.¹⁶ In the late seventeenth century a sterling was worth about five dollars, making this organ worth \$2500.

¹² Lothrop, 148.

¹³ Owen, 681.

¹⁴ Latourette, 953.

¹⁵ Latourette, 954.

¹⁶ Franklin Bowditch Dexter, *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), vol. 1, 58.

Adjusted for inflation, that's about one hundred thousand dollars in today's money. This was multiple years of a pastor's salary, making this quite the deal for a church looking to make some money. David Rowland, the pastor of First Congregationalist in Providence, took the deal.

David Rowland's installation of an organ in his Congregationalist church was revolutionary. However, it was not truly for the sake of progress. One record shows that the organ was installed and played without the congregation's consent. Rowland managed to sneak an organ into his church behind everybody's backs. The worst part is that Rowland didn't ever tell his church about the donation. It appears as though Rowland kept the money for himself.¹⁷

The first Congregationalist organ was by no means purchased with intent to worship God. Its purchase and installation was merely a scheme for the pastor to make some quick money. Because of this, Providence's organ didn't last long. Dr. Ezra Stiles, a president of Yale, wrote about the organ's installation in 1770 and stated it was "now gone" in 1785.¹⁸ While the dates aren't exactly concrete, we can determine from Dr. Stiles that sometime between 1770 and 1785, Providence's organ was removed.

Clearly, Rowland's congregation wanted nothing to do with this organ. His secrecy tells the whole tale. While Providence holds the honor of sounding the first Congregationalist organ in the colonies, it was not the result of increased tolerance. In this case, it was merely deception. Even if the congregation were willing to consider the organ for the money, Rowland's trickery likely squelched any desire for change felt among his people. The first organ installed by vote of a congregation would come 16 years after Providence's unfortunate scandal. //

FIRST CHURCH BOSTON: 500 words

¹⁷ Dexter, vol. 1, 58.

¹⁸ Dexter, vol. 3, 162.

Times were changing after the American Revolution, and Boston's First Church caught onto this quickly. First Church, often called Old Brick Church, was truly Boston's First Church. It was founded in 1629, with a charter written in 1630. This charter wasn't updated until 1786, almost 150 years later. Their updated statement of faith was far more progressive than the original charter. The church unanimously voted to remove every obstacle to worship, to allow all professing believers a seat at the Lord's Supper, and to baptize the children of any believer without any requirements besides faith.¹⁹ Some of these doctrines look a lot like those of Brattle Street. The acceptance of other Christians into the church regardless of their previous denomination proved both First Church and Brattle Street to be beacons of tolerance in Boston. Soon after First Church put this progressive push in writing, they did the unthinkable: they hired an organist.

The vote for a new statement of faith occurred on June 4th, 1786. One month later on July 17th of the same year, the church voted to pay an organist a salary.²⁰ However, First Church's records contain no information about an organ for the organist to play. It appears that the organ was installed before First Church started keeping records. To find the date of the organ's installation, we again turn to Dr. Stiles. In the same passage he speaks of Providence's missing organ, Stiles writes of the First Church's eagerness to purchase an organ. The head pastor wasn't a fan, but it was clear that as he neared his death, the congregation would build an organ "before his head was cold."²¹ While Brattle was the first Puritan to have an organ and Providence had the first Puritan church organ, First Church Boston can proudly say they were the first Puritan congregation to actually want an organ.

¹⁹ Richard D. Pierce, "Records of the First Church in Boston," *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts* vol. 40 (1961), 473.

²⁰ Pierce, 573.

²¹ Dexter, vol. 3, 162.

First Church Boston's organ is a sign of the changing attitudes of Boston. Shortly after their organ was installed, other churches such as Brattle Street and New South Church would install their own organs.²² For First Church, the organ was accompanied by many other changes in the progressive direction. Boston's oldest church with the deepest Puritan roots was the first to upend their worship traditions. It took only 150 years for attitudes to transition from burning organs to bringing them back. Such a stark contrast is likely due to sharing spaces with the Anglicans they so strongly wanted to separate from. The coalition of opposing denominations against the British government during the Revolutionary War was the last push they needed to finally change. //

CONCLUSION: 200 words

Organs in Congregationalist churches follow theological and social progress. Doctrines of unity are almost a prerequisite for instruments in these churches. Perhaps we can learn something from this trend today. After experiencing other faiths and traditions, Puritans were willing to experiment with new ideas. They stopped doing things just because "that's how we've always done it" or to deliberately separate themselves from other Christians. In this sense, any person of any faith can benefit from learning about those with differing views. Musicians especially benefit from sharing musical ideas across faith divides. For the Puritans, engaging with other belief systems saved harmony and instruments in their churches. Perhaps there's something we can save today by learning to listen to others. //

²² Owen, 713.

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