

Winner of the 2004 Simonton Prize, Mr. Barfield's essay is a thought provoking exploration of preservation issues, various options and possibilities, and how they relate to the efforts of ATOS.

The American Theatre Organ: Some Thoughts Of A National Tr

By Gene Barfield

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Some of the material in this article makes reference to laws, customs, practices and circumstances in the United States, where the author resides and advocates on behalf of cultural conservation. The author is happily aware that similar circumstances regarding cultural conservation exist in many other societies, to which U.S. – specific references can also be applied, making allowances for changes in nomenclature and the names of organizations and laws referenced herein. Since the American Theatre Organ Society is international in its outreach and membership, the author is pleased to note that societies other than the United States are sometimes significantly farther along in including the pipe organ and its subset of theatre organs, in the formal and informal recognition such instruments receive within the programs and practices of heritage and cultural conservation.

Can the memory of childhood journeys to the incomparable and inspiring Radio City Music Hall be useful as a component of our nation's effort to conserve our heritage as a people? Maybe. While personal stories do not always fare well in a competition about historic significance with the saga of George Washington's Mount Vernon, for instance, nevertheless personal memories serve to ground one member of our society (or, usually more than one) in a time and place that had a lasting effect. After all, there needs to be a point to preserving things. The memories of a childhood experience are a very good place to begin.

If we accept that childhood memories are a good place to begin, where do we go from there? There are as many good

HERBERT GEHR, LIFE MAGAZINE



Radio City Music Hall interior.

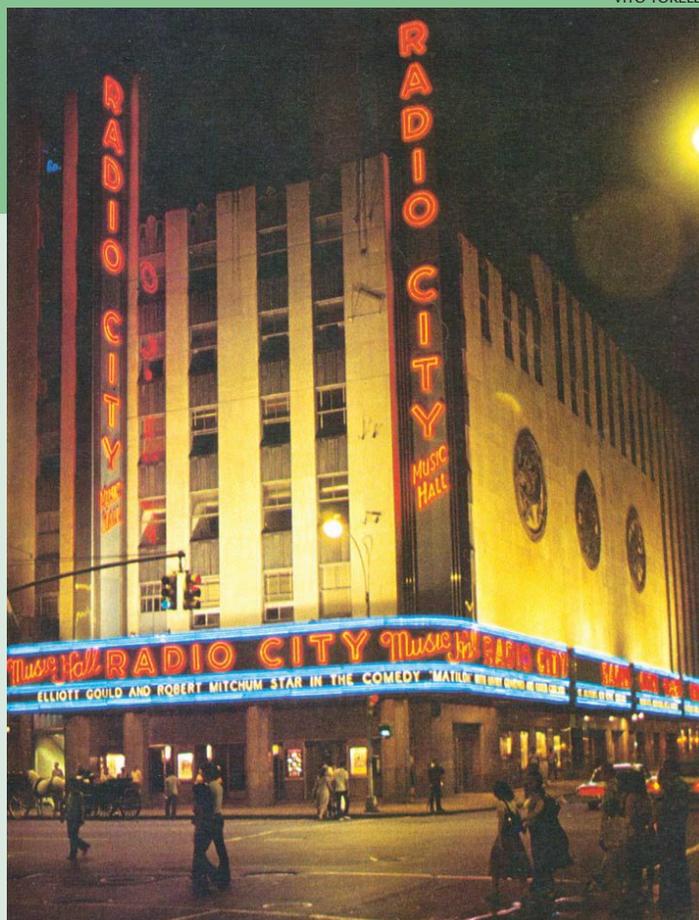
On Historic Preservation Measure

VITO TORELLI

answers as there are people, each with their own memories and sources of inspiration. And why is this important? Perhaps because it is each of our individual memories that, once expressed, ripples down the valleys of time, joining other streams of memory to become a river of memory for a family . . . and then of a neighborhood, then a city and eventually an entire nation. Heritage and cultural conservation is all about memory – memory to provoke thought and feeling, memory as a teaching tool, memory to serve as a beginning, as a yesterday from which we orient ourselves to address the issues and tasks of today and from which to create hopes, dreams, plans and direction as we head off towards tomorrow.

Historic preservation¹ can be, and often is, a deeply personal thing. There's nothing inherently wrong with that. My life-long commitment to historic preservation began in the streets of Manhattan's Rockefeller Center, where as a young boy I clutched my grandmother's hand in a long line of people waiting to enter the awe-inspiring Radio City and wonder at its spectacle. A frequent visitor to my grandparents' New York City home, I was accustomed to the floor rumbling beneath my feet when a subway passed nearby. But I was not prepared for the unexpected rumble of the pedals on the Mighty Wurlitzer, a sound and feeling the thrill of which I have never forgotten.

According to one way of thinking, those of us who have feelings for, or information about, or experience with that 'strange object' once found slumbering in the pit of many a downtown theatre, are dealing with something which is clearly a "Thing Of The Past." It is a



RCMH exterior.

telling moment in time, for theatre organ preservationists to acknowledge the implication that the theatre organ 'died' on the day Al Jolson first announced that we hadn't seen anything yet. But this is also where things personal – like memories – attain a high level of relevance and importance.

¹ The author uses the phrases 'heritage conservation,' 'cultural conservation' and 'historic preservation' interchangeably for the purposes of this essay. Heritage conservation is intended as an all-inclusive term. Historic preservation is often used to refer to the preservation of buildings, but is not – and never has been necessarily limited to the practice of preserving buildings alone. The author specifically points out the appropriateness of the term 'cultural conservation' since the craftsmanship of construction, methods and circumstances of the use of theatre organs, theatre organists and their musical literature, past and present, has been a valued and cherished component of the nation's cultural and artistic patrimony for nearly a century.



Heritage Lost:
Gloria Swanson photographed at the
(Paramount or Roxy) Theatre while
under demolition.

This photograph is interesting and, in some respects even amusing. Like all original photographs it is also a historical document. There is an aspect of mainstream historic preservation, as represented by the National Register nomination process that is often unappreciated. The rigorous documentation required for typical historic designation provides a body of information in text and images that perpetuates the existence of a historical site, structure or object in those sad instances where the object being documented is itself lost or badly compromised. Historic designation at the national, and usually at statewide and local levels, depends in part on successful completion of such documentation with appropriate bibliographic references and discussion of sources for information. It may sound like a lot of less-than-necessary work, but each well-written historic designation report becomes a permanent part of the record, with a multitude of potential future uses. In cases where designated historic resources were illegally damaged or inadvertently destroyed, the completeness of a good historic record has supplied the information necessary for restoration or reconstruction. This photograph is, among other things, a symbol of the continued existence of a much beloved and admired historic theatre in the form of comprehensive records of its structure, appearance and use. While this may not be as good as having the real thing still with us, it is the next best – and now the only available option.

We know that all of our best efforts to preserve theatre organs by presenting revivals of silent movie accompaniment are not going to resuscitate the silent movie era. Nor are those efforts going to revive the industry that first constructed these venerable denizens of the darkened theatres. Time has shown us that even the best efforts of well known, even beloved theatre organ performers to change, or improve, or guarantee a useful future for these instruments only bought time, time for maybe someone else to come up with another reason or another means of keeping these instruments going and available for our . . . our . . . well, our enjoyment, our learning, our making and sustaining links with people and times past – and as part of the foundation for our hopes, plans and dreams for a happy future.

How much justification do we really need to know intuitively that these instruments *deserve* our thoughts, our hopes and our efforts? This may be where getting personal about historic preservation has its greatest potential for a positive effect.

We like them, these odd instruments. We even say so. We know other people who didn't start out with the same exposure to theatre organs that we have. We exposed some of them to theatre organs. Then they liked them too. We should be in no hurry to apologize for this. Because if this – the fact that we enjoy these theatre organs, or we remember enjoying them in times past – serves as motivation for preserving them with hopes for more of the same in the future then we need no other explanation for doing so. But there is a larger story to tell. Telling it well will help make new – and new *kinds* of friends for preserving theatre organs. The act of saving them is a gift of heritage remembered, as long as it *is* remembered, presented to a society that has written into its very laws, that remembering is an important thing to do.

The memory of a childhood experience of a theatre organ may not be an accurate depiction of the event recalled, but if it carried forward in life then the memory has a point. The memory might only represent the recollection of a simple pleasure. Or it may have been a starting point for greater, more mature interest. If the memory remained alive,

perhaps later in life the child found other ways, better ways of understanding the strange thing hiding behind the curtain at Radio City. It had its own **history**, and an important part of that history is that many people share personal memories of it as a common experience. It also had – and continues to have today, its own literature, of song, of technique, of the manner in which the greater and lesser organists of then and now have used this marvelous music machine to delight audiences the world over. Widespread, shared experience conveyed a special historical meaning on this theatre organ – probably all theatre organs, in fact. They were a significant and happy part of the lives and experiences of communities across this and other countries. Millions of people have shared the same role as participants in the life of the theatre organ.

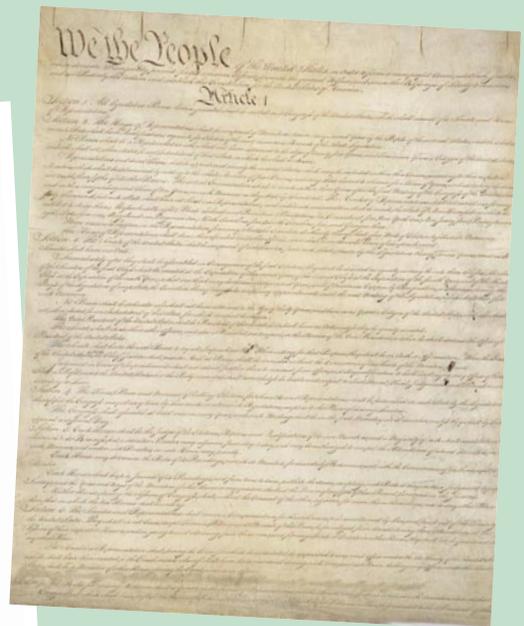
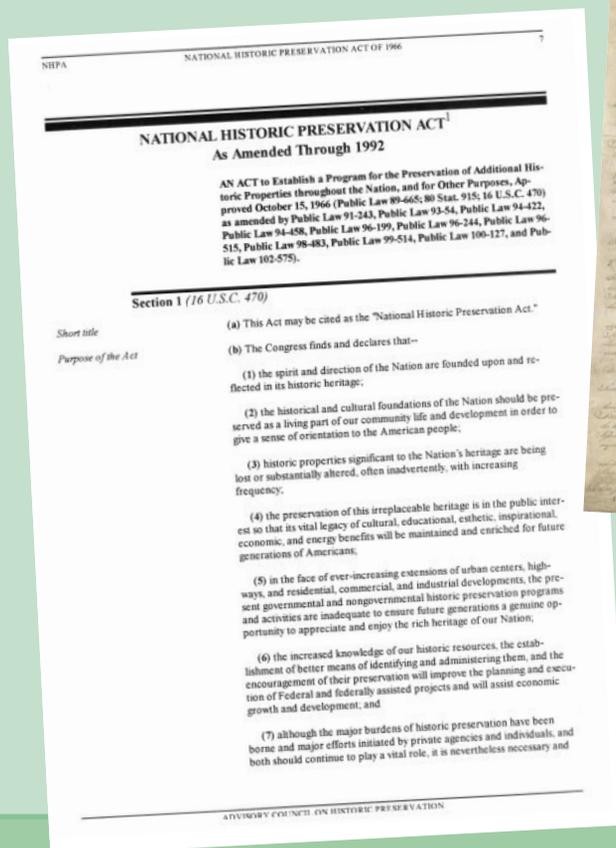
Every so often there comes a time when it is useful to say aloud, that things smaller groups of people understand or love because of personal experience can and do have significance for larger groups who may not share a personal experience, or who may have forgotten it. In fact, isn't that a good reason for preserving things and presenting them anew to the

larger public? We know we love these theatre organs. Some of us understand them as pieces of technology, or as musical instruments, or as things that hold a special place in many lives. There are many among us who excel at recounting the theatre organ story and explaining to newcomers why these instruments remain an important part of our collective story, our nation's (*many* nations, in fact!) memory, if you will.

We do not use theatre organs as we once did. It is unlikely we ever will again, at least to the extent we used to. The once thousands of playable instruments are now reduced to hundreds, many in sad disrepair. Those facts are irrelevant to the appropriateness of remembering how large and widespread the role theatre organs once played in communities of people across an entire nation.

The American People Said . . .

Nearly 40-years-ago the entire people of the United States wisely declared, through their elected



representatives in Congress, that certain statements have enduring truth. We said that:

“. . . the spirit and direction of the Nation are founded upon and reflected in its historic heritage; the historical and cultural foundations of the Nation should be preserved as a living part of our community life and development in order to give orientation to the American people; the preservation of this irreplaceable heritage is in the public interest so that its vital legacy of cultural, educational, aesthetic, inspirational, economic, and energy benefits will be maintained and enriched for future generations of Americans; in the face of ever-increasing extensions of urban centers, highways, and residential, commercial, and industrial developments, the present governmental and non-governmental historic preservation programs and activities are inadequate to insure future generations a genuine opportunity to appreciate and enjoy the rich heritage of our Nation.”

Soon after we said those words and caused them to be written on paper, the person we had chosen to represent us all as President signed that paper and those words became the opening paragraphs of the United States' **National Historic Preservation Act of 1966**. Our entire Nation declared that saving our memories is an important means of preparing for our future. We said that the spirit of the Nation is reflected in our heritage – our *national memory*. We said that the American spirit, insofar as we take pains to preserve it, should be preserved as a *living thing*. We acknowledged that our heritage is irreplaceable, and so therefore we stated that together we should work hard to save it for ourselves and for those who come after us. We acknowledged proudly that all these things are important because our heritage – the collected memory of *We, the people of America* – is truly so rich.

If all that is true, it isn't much of a leap to arrive at the conclusion that a vast number of

pieces of our heritage each have their own unique and irreplaceable place in the panoply of America. A thousand-piece puzzle with only 999 pieces is, well, incomplete no matter how small or off to the margin the missing piece may be.

Mr. Webster tells us that **panoply** can mean something magnificent which shelters and protects us. Did we not put in our very laws that the understanding of – even the *celebration* of our magnificent heritage is the source of orientation for our future? In contentious (or any other kinds of) times, such assurance is comforting.

A child grows, and learns that their individual memories mean something. They learn that hardly anyone gets to have a memory that someone else doesn't have a memory similar to. Eventually, it occurs to the child that there are many other people who would likely remember the Mighty Wurlitzer and other organs like it, and how much they enjoyed it, even if they did not remember it *exactly* the same way the child does. Imagine this: many, *many* memories centered on the same object! **Surely this object must be a fertile and worthy source of inspiration!**

Children (in many societies and of any age!) can learn from history that there was a time when *millions of people* spent their Friday nights or Saturday afternoons in a place where, however it was being presented, or whether it was unleashed at all, *there was a theatre organ!* This historical fact takes on personal significance because the child learns that their parents and grandparents were among those happy millions.

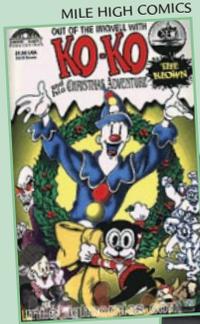
History tells us all that Mitch Miller, Arthur Fiedler and countless others kept people singing



Mitch Miller

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Some Thoughts On Historic Preservation Of A National Treasure



Koko the Clown



Arthur Fiedler

the old songs long years after Koko the Clown stopped bouncing his “follow-the-bouncing-ball.” A child can realize that even though it is possible millions of those same people forgot how many evenings or matinees they spent singing-along, it does not change the fact that *they did once do it* – in astonishing numbers, time and time again, with friends and family, in the big cities and the cow-towns, to such an extent that there were places where local merchants routinely closed up shop when a special event or a new movie was scheduled at the theatre downtown. With the great respect he is due, we recall that only Boston had an Arthur Fiedler. **Lots** of towns in lots of countries had a theatre organ to sing along with!

The child that remains in every happy adult can find all the same realizations, learn the same historical facts, and arrive at the same kind of appreciation of the evolving *but still joyous role* the theatre organ plays in the American story.

Pieces of History

The American Theatre Organ Society acknowledges that there’s something historic about theatre organs – a no-brainer. But what is it that we mean when we say that? How do we describe it? As with most things historic, there are many possible answers (not all of which we’ll discuss here).

AGE: The mainstream historic preservation movement in the United States has established a 50-year criterion, meaning that sites, structures and objects 50-years-old or older are presumed to have a capacity for historic significance that newer things might not yet embody (although exceptions can be made with adequate justification). Considering this fact, it is appropriate to conclude that nearly every theatre pipe organ

ever built in the ‘Golden Age’ is a likely and potentially important candidate to be considered an historic object. While questions about originality and integrity of a specific instrument as constructed, compared to how it exists in the present, will affect the evaluation of its historic significance, since the Golden Age of the theatre organ is long over (at least, the First Golden Age is!) a general conclusion that these are historic objects is correct.

TYPES: This means of establishing categories can be considered in a couple of ways. Theatre organs, as a unique subset of all pipe organs, are a clearly identified group possibly holding historic significance *as organs* because they represent one or more important developments applicable to all pipe organs as a class of musical instruments. This might be represented in such technology as “second touch,” which, while occasionally found in other kinds of organs, became an expected available (if optional) component of theatre organs and an

(b) The Congress finds and declares that--

- (1) the spirit and direction of the Nation are founded upon and reflected in its historic heritage;
- (2) the historical and cultural foundations of the Nation should be preserved as a living part of our community life and development in order to give a sense of orientation to the American people;
- (3) historic properties significant to the Nation’s heritage are being lost or substantially altered, often inadvertently, with increasing frequency;



Justus D. Barnes in *The Great Train Robbery*, 1903

important influence in the techniques and history of theatre organ performance. Theatre organs' significance as a unique subset of all pipe

organs is easy to establish because of the many characteristics that are so well known within the community of theatre organ enthusiasts.

USE: This is an easy one. Theatre organs were derived from the more general category of pipe organs for quite specific and well-documented uses: accompaniment for silent movies. After all, how many of us really enjoy a silent, silent movie? That this original purpose is historically significant is demonstrated simply by the historical record of thousands of theatre organs constructed, installed and played for millions of listener/viewers. The fact that other uses have evolved since the heyday of their original use passed, or even that no other significant use might have evolved, has no negative impact on the historic significance of the theatre organ. In their own time, these organs were a large presence, an ordinary part of American life. Some people contend that as *pipe organs* they're not very significant. But as *theatre organs*, there is nothing else they can be compared to except each other. In that sense, and perhaps others, the uniqueness of their significance – and the significance of their uniqueness – is quite beyond question.

Funny thing about history: honest history remembers the bad with the good, at least to the extent necessary to tell a story with accuracy. Preservationists sometimes find themselves in a position where honesty requires the preservation of unpleasant memories and the telling of sad stories. For example, an honest recollection of the American antebellum South must include preservation of the slave quarters



Plantation "Shadows on Teche," 1831-34 in southern Louisiana.

and the importance of the stories they represent as much, if not more so than the stories told by the Plantation House.

Does a need to ensure balance and accuracy affect the preservation of theatre organs? Likely so. We often make qualitative judgments, especially about tasks on which we have to prioritize the deployment of scarce resources. We rule this in, this out. People with the best possible intentions may make choices to preserve examples of things believing, sometimes correctly, that good looking or pleasant sounding examples tell the best stories. Such stories may still be incomplete. For example, posit the existence of a theatre organ that sounds unpleasant, or is in desperately poor condition, or is disassembled and stored in such haphazard ways that Hope-Jones himself would scratch his brow in consternation. But this organ was some kind of a "first." Something about this old pile of junk represented, *in its time*, a change that made a difference in how every theatre organ since then was built or used.

Maybe this pile of junk isn't so 'junky' after all. Maybe, with good resources of documentation, skill and a careful and respectful approach to untangling the heaps of parts and what they mean, *maybe* this is the *one* instrument that can tell an important story better, more appropriately than any other, even than the most handsome or melodious of its siblings! If the mere possibility of such an opportunity exists, then even a casual acknowledgment of the value of heritage preservation should cause us to be careful and deliberate in framing our thoughts as we approach the opportunity this 'junk' represents.

Potential historical significance might even accrue to 'orphaned' parts of older instruments, although as with some other aspects of historic preservation this may become a subject of heated debate. For example, it is believed that the console of the turn-of-the-century pipe organ for Park Church, Elmira, New York, may still exist although it was separated from the remainder of its instrument many years ago. This console may be historically

www.nps.gov

For about a century, the U.S. Department of the Interior's National Park Service (NPS) has acted as a trusted custodian of the physical, historic and cultural riches of America. NPS staff and programs administer and protect our rich bounty of sites, structures and objects that have been found to embody special meaning in the story of America and its people. NPS staff also protects and administers a variety of sites now recognized as significant resources for the entire human population, such as the globally unique Everglades and the Grand Canyon. When you'd like to take a vacation to see the marvelous collection of America's treasures but you can't leave home, the best way to go is by way of the National Park Service website at www.nps.gov. From that gateway you can explore all of the National Parks and National Historic Sites, with links to fascinating text and images about each one. You can also visit and explore the National Register, the Historic American Building Survey and the Historic American Engineering Record, and read or download a wealth of information about the sites, or about historic preservation topics ranging from how to repair historic masonry walls to marketing a historic bed-and-breakfast more effectively. There are teaching tools for educators, sign-ups for several outstanding (and often free) periodicals and other publications. Make this collection of web pages a must see on your next web journey.

significant in that some believe it to be the first horseshoe console built in the United States.² While this console may be of historical value by itself, preservation philosophers will need to address the question of what to do with such major parts of an organ isolated from any other components.

In the world of the theatre organ the above example is played out over and over again. Large numbers of 'homeless' instruments are broken up for parts, combined and re-combined into new incarnations for new uses and purposes. The result is likely to be that the historic identity and importance of huge numbers of potentially significant original components is blurred or lost. Recent writing in *THEATRE ORGAN* discusses what one author believes to be the imminent loss of an entire type, the original two-manual organ once found in so many smaller venues.³ Does this possibility represent a present-day intentional response to an apparent need to 'preserve' theatre organs by combining parts of smaller historic instruments in ways answering to an alleged need for larger, more versatile instruments to satisfy changes in audience demand? Or is it perhaps not so intended, not so planned a response, resulting from a lack of a workable philosophy on which some preservation activity could be based with a concern for the integrity of an entire class of organs? What happens to the 'orphaned' two-manual consoles . . . redundant or undesired ranks and accessories? Is there a plan based on a philosophy, or is everything left to chance and whim?

To be sure, some sort of preservation-minded ideal is served when an instrument is parted out rather than destroyed. But in the absence of a plan, with an underlying philosophy advocated with clarity and consistency by people who understand the value of retaining original examples of type and use, will we be able to present to a larger public the entire story of why and how these magnificent instruments

² The organ in question is variously known as an Ernest Skinner instrument, or as Opus 1 of the Robert Hope-Jones organ factory newly opened in Elmira, New York, in 1906.

³ Letter to the Editor from Terry Lloyd; *THEATRE ORGAN*, May/June, 2004, page 12.

became – and remain today – a significant part of Americana?

The flourishing mainstream preservation movement resulting from the 1966 Preservation Act acknowledges ample room for, and often the need for discussion about how to approach sensitive issues in preservation practice. How might such a discussion take place in the theatre organ preservation community?

Thankfully this conversation has been going on for many years. The American Theatre Organ Society is a large part of the proof. The 50th Anniversary of ATOS is, among other things, the golden anniversary of this important discussion. It should continue; better still, it should grow. There are many subjects to productively discuss.

The United States’ National Register of Historic Places

Since the Preservation Act became United States law in 1966 perhaps the most important part of the American nation’s historic preservation movement has been the on-going, widespread use of the National Register. Administered by the U.S. Department of the Interior’s National Park Service, the National Register is the American nation’s official list of *sites, structures and objects* having cultural and historical significance for the American people. As of this writing there are approximately 77,000 individual or group entries on the National Register. **Not a single one of them is a historic pipe organ.**

The National Register serves a multitude of purposes, among which are:

“Nominated sites, structures and objects pass through a rigorous process of reviews for thoroughness and appropriateness of documentation. All nominations require illustration (always including photographs and often technical drawings as well), and a thorough discussion of the importance of the nominated object within several established criteria for historic significance. Detailed, often painstaking descriptions are required.

Discussion of importance because the nominated object may represent the work of a master crafts-person, or it represents a technological advance, or holds significance because of other characteristics that illustrate the cultural impact of the nominated object in local, statewide or nationally broad patterns.

Although not part of the National Register process itself, nomination to the Register is often a high priority and a huge advantage in competing for government and private funds for restoration, rehabilitation and to support programming for continued use of historic objects.”

The National Register process ought to be applied to historic pipe organs, because it provides some critically important advantages to preservation advocates. As mentioned above, it opens doors to potential funding streams not now available to theatre organ preservationists. It documents the story and the value of these instruments. And so, the stories and the descriptions remain with us even if the historic object itself is lost. The proven *cachet* of National Register nomination often brings organized, strong support for preservation efforts. It **means something**, to be able to say this or that is on the official list of what’s important in the story of America. And the cultural and historic record of America will remain incomplete without including these and other important objects.

Then why is there not one organ among the



Mount Vernon





Steeplechase Park's Eldorado Carousel.



FEC Engine #153, a 1922 ALCO locomotive.



USS NAUTILUS (SSN571) underway on nuclear power for the first time.

77,000 things listed on the National Register thus far? Part of the answer lies in the bias in favor of architecture in the mainstream preservation movement, even in the language of the forms, regulations and written materials supporting the National Register process itself. But the Register has never been limited to only cataloguing buildings, not according to the laws that created it and guide its operation. Although most of its listings are buildings there are also carousels, canal locks, steam locomotives, sailing ships, nuclear submarines and many other kinds of 'sites, structures and objects' (even Miami's original 'Coppertone' sign!) on the Register.

In the past, efforts to nominate historic organs have been met with a tepid response on the part of nomination reviewing officials. Their response was invariably that the building housing an important organ should be the subject of the nomination, and that the organ itself could be 'mentioned' as a part of the building. But doing it this way fails to explain and perhaps even obscures the significance of historic instruments. In fact, it relegates them to the same level of importance as other features – accessories, almost – of the building like doorknobs, stair rails, floor coverings and light fixtures.

In recent months the American Theatre Organ Society has considered a proposal to support joint preservation efforts among five nationally significant groups.⁴ The proposal seeks to address the importance of nominating organs to the National Register

in the United States on the basis of the significance of the instruments themselves, not dependent on the significance of any building they may be housed within. While this effort is likely to require several years of preparation and discussion before progress is ensured, it represents a groundbreaking effort to guarantee the correct evaluation of theatre (and other) organs as important parts of the American culture and history. When successful it will make available to theatre organ preservation the entire, broad range of resources now in use in the mainstream preservation movement. This is, in part, because National Register nomination is best used as a means to support further activities, not as an end in itself.

Before this effort can succeed there are some philosophical issues that should be discussed, understood and, if possible, resolved within the organ preservation community before approaching the mainstream preservation community for their active support. Some of these issues may even be contentious, but an honest effort among well-intended individuals is always worth the effort. And the past record of inspiring writings in THEATRE ORGAN alone proves beyond dispute that there is sufficient knowledge and imagination among us to guarantee eventual success. When one considers the

⁴Including the American Guild of Organists, American Institute of Organbuilders, ATOS, Associated Pipe Organ Builders of America and the Organ Historical Society.



USS MISSOURI (BB63) today, off Ford Island, Pearl Harbor with the wreckage of Battleship Row.



USS MISSOURI (BB63) Japanese surrender ceremony, 1945.

proven record of accomplishment among members of the five participating organizations there is little room for doubt.

Cannibalizing – now there’s an ugly word! It brings to mind horrific images of a subject on which, thank goodness, time has wrought its inevitable changing effect. Nowadays, in the field of historic preservation, cannibalizing refers to taking parts of one historic object as a means of, appropriately or otherwise, repairing or rebuilding another.

There’s an inherent problem in discussing cannibalizing, because sensible, intelligent and experienced people sometimes find good reason to ‘transplant’ parts of one thing to another, or even to transplant an entire object from one place to another, perhaps even less than ideal new home. A good act of preservation *can* be a result, but rarely, if ever, without a lot of thought and a struggle of conscience. “Our intent was to preserve its integrity and significance in all respects. What did we *really* accomplish?”

In some such instances the transplanted parts were always intended to be ‘transplantable’. This realization leads to the conclusion that the original expectation of a need for a compromise is incorrect. But when more complex questions arise, and straightforward responses aren’t so clearly available, a need for imagination and compromise does arise. And compromise, at least as far as the integrity of a historic site, structure or object is concerned, can be

a vexing problem. *How much* compromise? *Which* compromise do we acquiesce in? An honest preservationist, even one who believes their own principles and practice represent the highest ideal, must admit the existence of sad situations where a refusal to tolerate compromise resulted in the irrevocable loss of the entire historic object.

It is, perhaps, an unexpected observation that time, most often thought of as a preservationist’s worst enemy, is sometimes a good if unpredictable friend. For example, there are some people in Michigan who have *three* pipe organs stashed, disassembled, in a barn. They accepted the gift of these instruments because nobody else would. They desire their preservation and they had storage space available, at least for the time being. Not long ago they admitted to having no specific idea what to do with these instruments. They were buying time, time for a better idea maybe, or time for a donor generous enough to answer a need in an otherwise unanticipated way, to appear out of nowhere. Time enough to allow the present owners of these instruments to beat the bushes and see if generosity or ingenuity were hiding nearby. Time is often a luxury, though, one that may run out before they notice.

Time brings another advantage. In time, new technology will very often come to the rescue of old technology. Where it was once believed that deteriorated wooden parts of historic structures must be removed and replaced, new techniques and



Chicago Stadium Barton console, now in Las Vegas home of Phil Maloof.

While significant portions of some historic ‘theatre’ organs have been lost, individuals and groups of people have made often-heroic efforts to save notable portions of a broad range of famous instruments. Doing so has often raised questions of compromise. All you have to do is look at the glittering splendor of this surviving Barton console to become impressed with the importance of addressing issues of compromise head-on, with openness and honesty. There’s little room for debate in the thought that it would be best if this and other instruments could have been saved intact, in their original locations. But when that is virtually impossible – and there are many reasons for that – our best intentions and our efforts to support the good intentions of others can support and supply workable possibilities to minimize loss. Such discussions will probably serve the future well.

compounds allow for ‘consolidation’ of deteriorated wooden members. Original wooden parts can continue to serve their original function in their original place, just as the designer and builder intended. Deteriorating metal parts can sometimes be cleaned and revived non-destructively. Have you ever wondered how the Navy keeps its ships from rusting away in the hostile environment of sea air and salt water? The same techniques, once you know what they are, can keep your car from rusting away in the not-so-hostile environment of your driveway. Can this same possibility help preserve worn contacts, a raggedy-looking set of relays, or refurbish badly oxidized metal pipes?

What about the occasional effort on the part of some people to “improve” historical objects? This is not a new subject for discussion, and it has a lot to do with compromise. It also has a lot to do with education – meaning prompting our communities to remember and think about what we already know, and discussion of new concepts that they may benefit from hearing of. It is always a good idea to explore new opportunities and new means of doing an important job, meaning preserving these instruments. Broaden the conversation, and chances are that more than one useful, new idea will result.

Consider this familiar scenario: A very lucky person is able to acquire an intact, original installation theatre organ from a facility in which it is, sadly, no longer welcome. Unfortunately, nobody was able to avoid this change in circumstances. This person chooses to install it in their home and, oh, by the way, adds three ranks, some more toys and tosses the old wind chests. Where once, cumbersome old relays took up a huge volume of space, now solid state electronics provide the same service in a small fraction of the space and with perhaps more versatility than the old system ever could. If we allow our disappointment over the loss of integrity of the original installation, which is indeed disappointing, to

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Some Thoughts On Historic Preservation Of A National Treasure



Roaring '20s – Ellenton, Florida, one of the organ pizza palaces.

overshadow our sense of relief that so much does, in fact, still remain of the organ, we risk shortchanging the opportunity to have a better idea tomorrow. It didn't show up today when we needed it, that better idea, but let us not forget how much still remains and the fact that opportunity – and a good deal of the original instrument – still exists. Of course, thorough documentation of all the above circumstances will become the key component of any future plan for conservation or restoration.

How often have we seen a beloved theatre organ rescued at the last moment, only to find that the 'rescuer' has plans for it which we do not appreciate, not one bit, not at all, not today or tomorrow or any other day! It happens. We should put our best foot forward, be brave and honest and candid and understanding. And respectful of the other person's point of view, no matter how it may disappoint us or try our patience. Sometimes, we can be happy with the final result. It isn't always bad. Complete loss is always worse.

First of all, they saved a theatre organ nobody else was able to save. Saving something, anything, in parts or newly configured or changed in any number of ways still affords an opportunity in the future for interpretation of its historic value. Compromise and partial loss are often

unfortunate realities, but are always a lot better than foreclosing any possibility for positive future action. Those who evince an apparent need or desire to change historic organs should also be encouraged and supported in an effort to thoroughly document the original configuration to the greatest extent possible before originality is compromised.

Did anyone actually build a classic American theatre organ for original installation in a pizza parlor? If people who now patronize such places because they like pizza come away from that experience enjoying a theatre organ as well, everybody wins something.

Second, have we (meaning those of us who believe in theatre organ preservation) done our best to work with others and to share with them the information and resources we know about, but which may be unknown to them? For example, did we make sure they knew that a restored theatre that remained the happy home for its original installation theatre organ might be able to pay its own way because of historic preservation tax breaks?⁵

⁵ There are historic preservation tax and funding support opportunities at the federal, many state and some municipal levels of government. Your local historic preservation advocacy groups, historical societies and government offices should have information available on these subjects.

The American Guild of Organists (www.agohq.org), Organ Historical Society (www.organsociety.org), Associated Pipe Organ Builders of America (www.apoba.com) and the American Institute of Organbuilders (www.pipeorgan.org), along with the League of Historic American Theatres (www.lhat.org) are but some of the ‘natural allies’ for theatre organ preservationists. Visit their websites to learn more about their work.

Lets not forget that the opportunity tomorrow represents may include an array of new tools that will astonish us.

Saving original historic materials in their original historic setting is always the best preservation. But the best is not always possible, and both the mainstream preservation movement and the National Register process take this fact into account. Room for thoughtful compromise exists, because it must. People who honestly acknowledge the problem of compromise, people who make room in their own spaces for things they have no idea what they’ll ever be able to do with, people who become preservation explorers, always on the lookout for a new tool or a new way of using an old tool deserve our respect and our thanks. They are the purveyors of opportunity. They bring tomorrow with them when they come. Like Scarlett O’Hara said, “Tomorrow is another day.”

Stops and Couplers

In the end, will there be room in the theatre organ preservation community for only one philosophy, one point of view, or one voice? Perhaps the instruments themselves provide the answer.

When a passer-by hears a couple of theatre organ enthusiasts talking about their ‘dream’ instrument, they hear words like ‘ensemble’ and ‘voice’ and technical talk about the hard work of ‘voicing’ many ranks so that different voices speak well together. What those lucky passers-by really hear is a conversation among people who have an understanding of differences complementing each other and not clashing. An experienced organ technician knows that this is the result of careful listening and painstaking work not left to chance.

Preservationists and heritage conservationists as a diverse community will never arrive at only one way of doing business. We should accept this and get on with the important business of understanding each other’s purpose and point of view, supporting each other where possible, and tending to the business of preserving what we are able to preserve, in ways we hope will ensure a good future. While there are few absolute guarantees, serious discussion, shared knowledge and experience, and sensible planning can go a long way towards making durable success. Such efforts will draw us closer together, and will reveal friends in other places who, although they may focus on preserving different things, will understand and support our work. This will result in generosity among us as we make room in our thoughts for ways in which we can help the other guy. We will find many more points of common interest than we may have anticipated.

Organists and organ enthusiasts understand that couplers are devices that allow one division of the organ to supplement its power and range of voices with the voices and strengths of other divisions. The American Theatre Organ Society constantly deploys a huge and mellifluous range of voices around the world, singing the praises of theatre organ preservation and about the joys of the organs themselves. But does the ATOS instrument have a set of couplers available, means of borrowing other voices and strengths, and of offering to others the knowledge, power and enthusiasm of its own ranks?

As we celebrate our Golden Anniversary, it might be especially appropriate to activate the couplers

that link our ranks to others.' There are, within the American community of preservation advocates, at least four other organizations we should think of as our 'first cousins' in preserving our cultural heritage. Imagine the power and joy resulting from the recognition during the 50th Anniversary year of official relationships developed with the cinema preservation advocates, many of which are headquartered in Los Angeles (site of our 50th Anniversary ATOS Convention), and with the Organ Historical Society, the American Guild of Organists and the League of Historic American Theatres! Each of these organizations has counterparts abroad, in the many nations some of our ATOS colleagues call home. It would be a serious oversight if we fail to solidify relationships between ATOS and our friends in the ranks of those who build and maintain organs – especially our friends from the Associated Pipe Organ Builders of America and the American Institute of Organbuilders, and in their counterpart organizations beyond US shores. Although many ATOS members hold memberships in these other organizations, a Golden Anniversary might merit special acknowledgement of our 'first cousins' in allied organizations. Such gestures of respect and recognition of common purpose can send an important message.

Should we go further and extend an invitation to the President of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the only Congressionally chartered organization charged with providing resources of preservation leadership and education to the entire nation, to work with us as well? Letters of collegiality might also be dispatched to each of the fifty State Historic Preservation Officers, and to the Preservation Officers of the Trust Territories and the

The National Trust for Historic Preservation in the United States is the Congressionally chartered non-profit organization dedicated to providing leadership and advocacy for all forms of historic preservation in the United States. Visit their informative website at www.nthp.org.

The League of Historic American Theatres is a regular advertiser in the pages of this Journal. They are very likely one of our best 'natural allies' in that their mission is the preservation and continued use of many of the same venues in which members and friends of ATOS seek to preserve, rehabilitate or restore theatre organ instruments. Visit them on the web at www.lhat.org.

federally recognized Indian Tribes. Shall we 'couple' our strengths and abilities, and invite delegations of all our natural friends to join us in celebrating our common goals? And shall we, in turn, remind them that they may call on us to join in support of their efforts, and in their celebrations?

We should. Because all of the above people spoke too, when the entire American people declared that what we do, and what we wish to do more of, is worth doing.

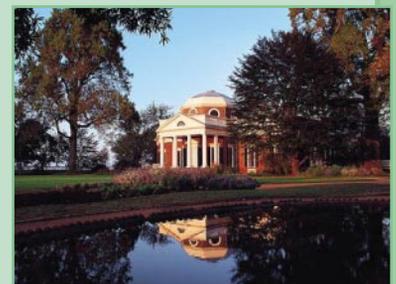
Mr. Jefferson Is Not At Home Today

You may be aware that Thomas Jefferson no longer resides at Monticello. Although it is right and proper that many people still travel to the Virginia hills to visit his home, they will be disappointed if they expect to meet the original host.

It remains an exciting possibility for people to ride gloriously, if only on rare occasions, behind the thundering giant, the "Challenger," Union Pacific's 4-6-6-4 steam locomotive, across the wide open



*Union Pacific #3979,
Challenger.*



Monticello

reaches of the American West. But if you call AMTRAK to purchase such a ticket they will try to sell you some other trip, because this mighty locomotive is preserved to offer increasingly rare special excursions (not available from AMTRAK, by the way) that do not much resemble the normal experience such travel once represented.

How often have those of us who love the theatre organ sat together and talked about the obvious advantage we have before us? Theatre organs – these “Things Of The Past” – still exist. They live and breathe, some of them even still in their original homes! Okay, so millions no longer spend their Friday nights or Saturday afternoons in places where the Bartons, the Kimballs, the Möllers and, yes, the Mighty Wurlitzers once wept, or rumbled, or led throngs in happy song. The happiest truth is that, as they say, “The story ain’t over yet.”

A talented author once wrote a good book, entitled *The Past Is A Foreign Country*.⁶ That phrase may metaphorically ring true, but for some thought-to-be-closed destinations – like Tom Jefferson’s beautiful home with the host in residence or the Union Pacific’s ‘Challenger’ pulling a half-mile long fast freight – or a theatre organ – when you look in the right places the passport office is still open for business! The “foreign country” that the past might be, *might not be so far away*. People can still pay a visit to foreign places such as Europe and Asia, or 1824 and 1937!

How lucky can a preservationist be to have such a thing as a theatre organ to work with? A theatre organ is music; pretty much everyone likes some kind of music. A theatre organ is craftsmanship: even the so-called standard models were individually crafted instruments, more often than not with uniquely decorated and individually placed visible components that make them, each and all, a separate masterpiece. A theatre organ is, in the nation’s collective memory, joy . . . sometimes *much* joy. It’s

the Marvelous Music Machine. If, outside the community of the American Theatre Organ Society, this memory lies dormant or misunderstood, then what a wonderful memory to awaken and refresh! This possibility, in itself, is – or ought to be – sufficient reason for a group of preservation-minded people to reach out to others with similar goals, to offer and accept sharing of resources, skills and strengths.

Far too many people have been given the mistaken notion that historic preservation is about the past. Consequently, they wonder how history and its trappings are pertinent in the present and will remain so in the future. Preservation isn’t about the past. It’s about the future, and about the question of how those who came before us and we in the present chose to prepare for it. It’s about how we view our responsibilities toward the future – and our pleasure and privilege as custodians of the past and present as building blocks for that future. Those who understand the real worth of preservation as a tool for constructing a positive and informed tomorrow know that we can use such tools to build a future in which we will all be assured of a deeper and more expansive life as a nation because it is built on a solid foundation of knowledge and understanding. A future in which we are comfortable and assured of a benefit from our heritage because, when we charted our course to our common destination as a people, we began with a thorough – maybe even an eloquently stated understanding of where we came from, where we began.

Historic preservation is not supposed to be about stuffing and mounting things as lifeless displays in a niche on the wall. A choice to keep things of the past – for instance, to preserve original electrical relays – is the telling of a story about how things used to work, and a reminder of the appropriateness of respecting modern advantages. A conscious decision to restore a damaged original console instead of replacing it is a gesture of respect for historic craftsmanship that will undoubtedly inspire good craftsmanship in the present and future. It is something we can learn from. A deliberated and well executed

⁶ *The Past Is A Foreign Country*, by David Lowenthal; Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 1985 with subsequent reprints; ISBN 0-521-22415-2 (hard cover) and 0-521-29480-0 (paperback).

plan to improve the prospects for saving a historic instrument by respecting and documenting its originality when adding sufficient ranks to keep people interested in the organ's continued use, can be a reasonable means of making a gift of heritage and orientation to a future that must depend on the record only we in the present can protect and provide for them. The main advantage theatre organ preservationists have lies in the fact that these instruments we so love and respect are best preserved when served up as working instruments, not as static and silent museum displays. None of us will ever visit Monticello and enjoy a conversation with its builder. Few will have the opportunity to ride on or behind the Challenger locomotive, and no one is likely any longer to be rocked to sleep in a Pullman car as this mighty machine pulls its burden from the Mississippi River to the Pacific coast. Millions of people can continue, as once others did, to enjoy the sparkle, the thunder, the quiet song and the joyous ensemble of the theatre organ, as a living thing preserved in the manner we wisely intended when we wrote in 1966, that our national spirit must be kept *alive*.

If each nation's spirit is kept alive as its people and their friends in other places, provide care for and illustrate the many facets of each culture that represent an important part of our national lives at their very best, we truly have much to celebrate. And it is incumbent on us who know the truth of these things to reach far out to others as we work to preserve our cultural heritage. It is a gift of remembrance, of understanding, of happiness and joy for today and tomorrow, for an entire world.



The Author...

Gene F. Barfield holds a B.A. in History from Norwich University (Northfield Vermont) and an M.S. in Historic Preservation from the University of Vermont (Burlington). While studying for his graduate degree he served an internship at Locomotive & Railway Preservation Magazine, becoming one of very few trained preservationists with credentials in industrial and technological preservation. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) recruited Gene in 1992 to create and run their first formal program for disaster recovery at historic sites, in the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew. During that time, among many other projects, he oversaw restoration of the Ferdinand Magellan, private railroad vehicle of the President of the United States, a National Historic Landmark. A ten-year Navy veteran, Gene has also served as Director of the Historic Preservation Division of Miami-Dade County, Florida. He credits his interest in organs and organ music to a great collection of records in the public library where he grew up, and to his first college roommate who became a Fellow of the American Guild of Organists at the age of 21. He loves telling about the midnight concert at Radio City Music Hall he attended with classmates in 1973, when E. Power Biggs played the Mighty Wurlitzer for the first (and only) time. He also claims to be the National Dean of the "American Guild of Page-Turners," a whimsical, two-person organization for which it is his turn to be dean this year. He is a member of ATOS, the Organ Historical Society and numerous other organizations. He lives on Crossbar Farm outside of Boyne City, Michigan. Gene can be contacted at: gene_barfield@hotmail.com