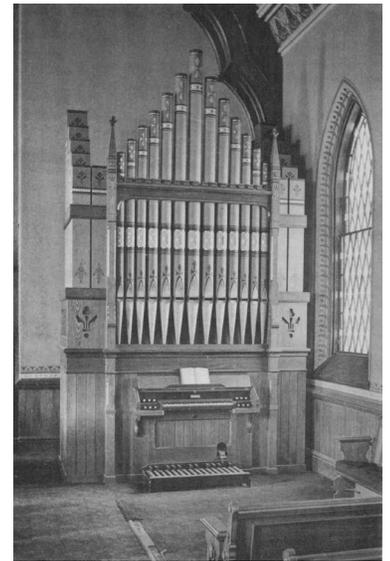


A History of the Hook & Hastings Organ Company and the Golden Age of the early 1890s

by Scot L. Huntington, curator and restorer of the St. John's Hook & Hastings Organ

From modest beginnings in 1827, **Elias and George Hook** steadily built an organbuilding empire. With many rivals but few peers up to the point of the Civil War, the brothers built an enviable reputation for excellence—both tonal and mechanical. However, with the westward expansion of the country, the industrial boom which followed the War, and the aging of their pre-War rivals, the Hook firm immediately assumed market supremacy which lasted with little challenge, until the end of the century. An engineer who showed particular promise joined the firm in 1855, slowly working his way up the ladder. After serving as a Union soldier, **Frank Hastings** returned to his former employer, and was almost immediately made chief draughtsman. The Hook brothers must have identified some quality of promise (or perhaps a small family fortune), as he quietly began the steps towards becoming a partner in 1868. His in-shop rival, George Hutchings, who followed a similar path through the firm and assumed the post of shop superintendent after the War, likely assumed himself on the path to succession, and immediately quit at the same moment as Frank's accession, to join a rival firm, J.H. Willcox & Co., forming Hutchings, Plaisted & Co. in 1872, and finally Geo. Hutchings & Co. in 1884 (at which point he became Hastings's chief rival in all except the wealthiest markets).

After a series of quiet financial transactions with Hastings buying privately-held shares in the firm, he was publicly made a full partner with nameplate status in 1871 (E. & G.G. Hook & Hastings). Hastings immediately made his mark, building three of the country's most famous instruments in close succession. Hastings made immediate changes once he had partner authority: he **introduced the concept of the catalog or stock model instrument, and with his blending of English, French, and German tonal ideals, created a uniquely American melting-pot tonal design.** The stock-model organs shared mass-produced parts, common design aspects. With the design of a custom instrument taking as much as 30% of the overall cost, the cost savings of stock designs made them very competitive in the market place. Customers could customize the exterior elements visible to the eye, while the inside of a particular model was identical with every other sibling of the same design. During the 1870s, Hastings was seen as a great innovator, taking H&H from one trophy organ to another. After the death of the original partners and the move to Weston, Hastings became more immersed in the business side of the company, continually finding ways to cut costs and increase profit. The organs became increasingly formulaic, and with that lack of innovative spark, the company began to grow a little long in the tooth in the perception of the market-place. The 1870s innovator Hastings became steady the course Hastings in the 1880s, and after a moment of glory in the 1890s, from the turn of the century onwards he became conservative old-guard Hastings.



Large one-manual stock model

With the death of the Hook brothers in 1880 and 1881 respectively, Hastings assumed sole ownership of the company (Hook & Hastings). In 1884, he began construction of a **new factory** outside the city limits of Boston, on the grounds of the extensive family farm in Weston. Between 1884 and 1889 the firm operated out of both factories as departments were slowly moved from one location to another. After 1889, the firm operated solely out of Weston, where Hastings had established a utopian model of a mill community, with himself as benevolent overlord. The company erected a school, churches, community center, owned the company store, rented mill housing, made mortgage loans to workmen, company recreation park, and even wangled its own railroad station (Hastings Crossing). The late 1880s saw H&H losing some of its market supremacy to rival Hutchings, but both were being **eclipsed by New York's Roosevelt family.**