

First cousins to future president Theodore, socially connected through the 400, the Manhattan-borne Roosevelt brothers Hilborne and Frank had taken the organ world by storm in the 1880s with their technological advancements, especially the early use of electricity in organ action, importation of European tonal concepts, exquisite construction and quality—and all at a king’s ransom. So great was their impact on the marketplace, that competitor builders quickly began imitating aspects of [Roosevelt instruments](#): a highly polished “cigars and brandy” tonal palette, more elegant woodworking with shellacked surfaces, and Hutchings embraced electricity much earlier than the conservative Hastings. With the sudden death of Roosevelt’s youthful guiding light (Hilborne) **in 1889**, his brother Frank carried on for two more years before deciding his heart wasn’t in it. With Hilborne’s death, **the market shifted seismically. Hastings gave his German-born head voicer, Moritz Baumgarten Jr. total control over the tonal direction of the company.**



Amherst, Mass., College Chapel.

Overnight, both Hastings and Hutchings saw their market share increase. During the first half of the 1890s, Hook & Hastings was building more three-manual organs than ever, no doubt assuming a share of the market that would surely have gone to Roosevelt under different circumstances. Always known for high-quality instruments, during this same period H&H was building instruments of the highest quality they had ever produced. Freed of the Roosevelt over-polished tonal concept that had driven the market, and with a free hand, Baumgarten immediately imbued Hook organs with a new-found brightness and power in the plenum, and unexpected color and delicacy in the soft voices, especially in the string voicing. **For a period of about six years, Hook was building true German romantic organs, tempered with an English polish and elegance, and combined with the signature sound of legendary Hook reeds. Weston had entered a period of truly eclectic organ-building. During this Golden Age, the St. John’s organ was constructed.**

An incurable alcoholic, Baumgarten’s problem exhausted Hastings’s patience and he was finally fired. Immediately after his departure around 1896, the sound of Hook organs lost their fire and verve, becoming slightly reserved.

It was about this time that Hastings brought his son into management. After the turn of the century, Hook quality took a noticeable decline. The quality which distinguished the 1890s period gave way to cheap construction. Now ultra-conservative in outlook, mechanically left in the dust by their competitors, and tonally dull and backward looking, the Hook & Hastings company entered the 20th-century looking tired and frayed around the edges. As the century wore on, and especially **after the death of Hastings Sr. in 1916, the company was firmly on the list of “B” builders**, building a solid if cheap and undistinguished instrument. From 1900 onwards, the firm had a knack of missing every innovation boat that sailed by them in the organ world. Perceived as conservative and old-fashioned, the company remained busy building mediocre organs for clients wanting an unpretentious, middle-of-the-road, work-a-day instrument at a good price. Due to their conservative outlook, they never embraced the symphonic organ fad of the 1920s, and their clients no doubt appreciated instruments that looked backward to a more classical period of organbuilding.

The [market crash of 1929](#) sparked the beginning of their demise. The period 1930-1935 represents a death throe of sorts for the venerable old firm: a handful of employees rattling around in a large and deteriorating factory, an absentee owner disinterested in the product and only concerned with the profit margin, quality so poor it is embarrassing to see today, and a business financially hanging on by its fingernails. This was the situation when St. John’s had their venerable H&H organ rebuilt and electrified in 1934—one of the final projects before the company (already on life-support) finally expired. With the bankruptcy of the company in 1935, the widow of the last owner had the factory torn down and the records burned. There is nothing left to see except the remains of the railroad siding overgrown with trees and a young forest where the factory once stood.