



The Smith Parlor Pump Organ

By Judy Haynes

An exquisite piece of Victorian furniture is on display at Boylston Historical Society Museum. This gem of a musical instrument, a lovely antique walnut parlor organ was popular in the 19th century and graced many a fine home between 1850 to 1920. This pump organ was made by S.D. & H.W. Smith American Organ in Boston, Massachusetts. The company built high end parlor organs and melodeons. In the 1880's the company expanded to include pianos, so became Smith American Organ and Piano Company.

The organ on display is one of the earlier models made by the Smith company as several sources indicate that company was established ca. 1852; however, sitting in a small frame on the organ is the receipt stating it was purchased in 1848 so this concludes the company was in existence prior to 1852.

*Mr. Henry H. Brigham bought of Henry W. Poole
One Parlor Organ for \$325.00
Recd. By
Worcester June 10th 1848. Henry W. Poole*

*I warrant the above instrument to be kept in good order and tune for six mos.
From date free of expense
H. W. Poole*

This parlor pump organ is a free-reed style that generates sound as air flows past a vibrating piece of thin metal (known as the reed) in the frame. The bellow system that creates the air needed to flow over the reeds is generated by pumping one's feet back and forth on the two-foot pedals for this purpose. The pedals are covered in a soft, now faded flowered design carpet. Above the 36 keys of the single keyboard with the fold back keyboard cover, are three stops: 'tremolo' in the center to produce a tremulous effect, 'bourdon' on the left front position, and 'principal' to the right. The front panel has carved decorative leaf motif on both sides of the keyboard which are complemented by the detailed exquisite scrollwork of the music stand as well as the scrollwork below the keyboard. The front and center wood panel is decorated with a set of carved reeds within a curved leaf pattern. This organ measuring 42 ½" tall from base to top of the instrument, its depth is 23", and the diameter is 40" across the front, was the typical size organ used for a small church or in a fine home parlor.



S.D. & H.W. Smith Antique Parlor Organ
BHSM Collection



Henrietta Brigham Andrews
*First played the Smith parlor organ,
later become a piano teacher &
church organist
BHSM Photograph Collection*

This pump organ, sometimes called a harmonium or melodeon, was donated by the French family. Virginia “Ginnie” French Helton, had musical talent and was often noted as the pianist in the programs of Boylston’s stage plays and Revues. The pump organ came to us from Virginia, but it first arrived in her family in 1848 with her great-great grandfather Henry Harding Brigham who was born in Boylston, Massachusetts in 1814 and married Rebeckah Whitcomb Houghton in 1837.

Their eldest daughter, Henrietta Brigham who became the wife of John T. Andrews is known to have played the organ, not only at home, but elsewhere as well, and gave piano lessons in the local area. Ginnie recalls her grandmother, Mary E. French (nee Andrews), telling stories of how she would fall asleep when she was supposed to be pumping the organ for her mother.

When Ginnie moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, her father put the parlor organ in the back of his car and drove it all the way to Ohio. Wherever they moved, the instrument went with them. Ginnie recalls:

“We had some very dear friends who were celebrating their wedding anniversary, so we decided to have a wedding ceremony for them.”

Their children were bridesmaids, Ginnie’s husband was best man, and the ceremony was held for their friends.

“This was the only time that I played the pump organ...except for my benefit.”

After a move to New York and eventually back East, Ginnie decided it was time to donate it to the museum in Boylston, in the town where it began for her family.

“This is where it belonged,” she said, and so the Boylston Historical Society & Museum became the recipient of this special gift.

We welcome you to see this fine antique musical instrument on display in the museum. Check our website www.boylstonhistory.org for opening hours and make your appointment to visit soon.

Acknowledgements:

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Photography, Nancy Filgate, Boylston, Massachusetts