

## FROM THE MILL TO THE PARLOR – KEYBOARD INSTRUMENTS

By Ellen Knight<sup>1</sup>

Before the invention of the radio and phonograph, music in the home was produced in the home. The most popular home instrument in the nineteenth century, a standard feature in the American home, was the piano. (In 1850, in fact, there were more pianos than bathtubs in the United States.<sup>2</sup>)

Because of the immense popularity of this instrument and also, to a lesser extent, the parlor organ, keyboard manufacturing was one of the most important businesses in the music industry a century ago. In 1860, one-fifth of the nation's piano manufacturing establishments were in Massachusetts, producing thirty percent of the annual total of pianos. Massachusetts also had about one-quarter of the nation's melodeon and pipe organ establishments and produced seventeen percent of the melodeons and almost fifty percent of the pipe organs manufactured in the country.<sup>3</sup>



Winchester was, itself, involved in piano and organ manufacturing. The first piano company was set up in 1847 when Cephas Church and Joshua Lane bought the site of the old Belknap mill, near the foot of Canal Street. They established there a manufactory of pianoforte cases in mahogany and other expensive woods. Among their products was the Congregational Church's first vestry piano, presented to the church by the firm. In October 1865, the mill was conveyed to another firm of piano case manufacturers, Cowdery, Cobb, Nichols & Co. Church was then able, in 1870, to furnish the capital for the new partnership of Guild, Church & Co., pianoforte manufacturers in Boston.

The new firm on Canal Street was managed by Robert Cowdery, John R. Cobb, and John and Stillman Nichols. Arthur Nichols later joined the firm, replacing Cobb who died in 1890. The company was successful, so much so it impacted the growth of the neighborhood and the educational system.

"Msrs. Cowdery, Cobb, Nichols & Co., at their piano case factory, are doing a thriving business," Edwin A Wadleigh wrote in 1871. "We understand they are turning out 120 piano forte cases a month and in this branch of business have achieved an enviable reputation. Quite a village has sprung up about their shops, the houses principally occupied by men employed in their works, and appearances favor the belief that it will become an important portion of the rapidly growing town of Winchester. The Rumford schoolhouses, which is situated here, is being enlarged to more than double its former size, in order to accommodate the present and prospective intellectual necessities of the juvenile population of this village."<sup>4</sup>

The company, which converted the mill from water power to steam, continued in business until 1894. They then sold the site to the Eastern Felt Co.

In another section of town, in Whitney's Mill at the corner of Main and Walnut Streets, were two other keyboard firms. Sylvanus Elliott was in business as a piano action maker, changing about 1887 to organ action manufacturing, which he continued until sometime between 1895 and 1901.

In the same building, Henry W. Symmes and other members of the Symmes family also engaged in the piano and organ action business. H. W. Symmes continued as a piano action maker longer than Elliott, until about 1893, when he also changed to organ action.<sup>5</sup> Other Symmes—Jefferson, Horatio, Lucius, Samuel J., and William—also worked in the piano case or action business. Another Symmes, Theodore, worked as an organ finisher in Cambridge. In Winchester, Horatio Symmes continued in piano action until about 1900. Samuel turned to organs about 1889 and took over as head of Henry's company about the turn of the century. The Symmes organ action manufacturing company ceased business about 1912.

As a consequence of these companies being in Winchester, many of the laboring class who lived or boarded in Winchester were professional piano makers. Some were also music-makers in the community. For example, Isaac Kendall, who worked for forty-seven years for Church & Lane and Cowdery, Cobb, Nichols and was sexton of the Congregational Church, sang bass and played flute with the church choir. He was at least the second in his family engaged in keyboard making. His father, Eli Kendall (died 1860), who also occasionally sang in the choir and played cello, was, a manufacturer of melodeons and other musical instruments.<sup>6</sup>

Others engaged in the keyboard industry in Winchester worked at making piano keys. Zebadiah Abbott cut ivory for piano keys in a shop at Winchester Place from about 1870 to the mid-1880s.

Winchester was also home to some who worked in the keyboard industry in Boston. The most notable of these were Emmons Hamlin of the Mason & Hamlin Organ Company and Hamlin Pond of Ivers & Pond Piano Co.

### **EMMONS HAMLIN**

Hamlin (1821-1885), a native of Rome, New York, worked for a melodeon factory in Buffalo previous to coming to Boston. In 1854 he met Lowell Mason at the Oliver Ditson store in Boston.<sup>7</sup> Mason suggested to his son Henry, newly returned from study in Europe, that they start business together, and so they did, with capital lent by Ditson and the elder Mason. Mason and Hamlin's first product, the Organ-Harmonium, (1855) won a gold medal at the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanic Association Exhibition in 1856 where their melodeons also won a silver medal.





*Ad for Mason & Hamlin organs on the back of the World's Peace Jubilee program, 1872*

The business so prospered that, before 1880, it was one of the largest (if not the largest) organ businesses in the United States, making cabinet, chapel, Liszt, drawing room, and portable reed organs. Hamlin himself developed a number of valuable and revolutionizing improvements in reed organs.

About 1882 the company began also making pianos. First they produced uprights, then baby parlor and concert grands. In 1895 a Mason and Hamlin concert grand was first used with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. The roster of artists who used Mason and Hamlin pianos included Harold Bauer, Ossip Gabrilowitsch, Maurice Ravel, and Dame Nellie Melba who chose the Mason and Hamlin to accompany her on a transcontinental tour of fifty American concerts.

Hamlin resided in Winchester on Main Street. According to his obituary, "he was a man of fine tastes, and a lover of art. His galleries of paintings and works of art make one of the finest private collections in the vicinity. Toward musical students he showed great generosity, and in a quiet way he was a liberal benefactor of such, educating abroad, at his own expense, several who have become well known in the musical world."<sup>8</sup>

## HANDEL POND

Belying great success to come, the first notice of Handel Pond (1852-1908) in the Winchester directories was as an organ tuner. In 1880, ten years after William H. Ivers had begun manufacturing pianos in Dedham under his own name, Pond became a partner in the Ivers & Pond piano manufacturing company in Boston. Upon Ivers' resignation as president in 1897, Pond succeeded him in that office. The company produced square, upright, grand and player pianos of first quality for home and school use. At one time they received an order for 100 pianos from the New England Conservatory and were endorsed by over 600 leading musical and educational institutions.



*An Ivers & Pond ad from an 1892 Calumet Club program*



*The Pond Family*

Pond was interested in the musical life of Winchester and sponsored a number of local club and charity concerts. He also performed at these meetings, once playing a three-movement Suite for Piano of his own composition (1875).<sup>9</sup> With his wife Amelia and three sons he resided on Main Street, later moving into a house at 102 Cambridge Street, in which he installed a pipe organ (a feature unusual enough to be mentioned in family obituaries). After Pond's death, the company was headed by his sons

Clarence (president) and Shepard (treasurer). (Son Dana did not enter the family business but rather became an artist).



*Pond house after a fire, 1964*

## PIANISTS

Caroline Pond: Among the numerous pianists who must have lived in the town, Handel Pond's sister Caroline was accounted one of Winchester's leading piano teachers for many years. She was an accomplished pianist who performed at B. J. Lang's third pianoforte concert at Chickering Hall in April 1888, but, though she played quite frequently in Winchester, evidently did not pursue a concert career in Boston. According to Joshua Phippen, "Had she wished, she could, doubtless, have become widely known."<sup>10</sup>

Joshua Phippen: During the years he lived in Winchester, Joshua Phippen (1857-1955) was the town's leading musical light. "Mr. Phippen's life was music," *The Winchester Star* declared at his death.<sup>11</sup>

Born on Oct. 22, 1857 in Salem, he moved to Winchester in 1891 at the time of his marriage. Phippen studied music with B. J. Lang and played piano and organ professionally for 64 years, from age 14 to 78. He taught music, and he composed. According to his obituary, he "was highly esteemed, both as a musician and a courtly gentleman whose cultural background made him a delightful companion."

As an organist he played and was familiar with 57 organs in Boston, Salem, and Winchester. His first church organist position was at the First Congregational Church; his last was at the Christian Scientist Church. He also substituted at the Unitarian and Episcopal churches.

As a pianist, he was widely known, often playing as a solo recitalist and with ensembles. Referring to Phippen, William Miller Bartlett in the *Salem Evening News* wrote in 1924 that "One of the greatest living pianoforte artists sat at the piano in Academy Hall last evening."<sup>12</sup> He was also

known to play cello and violin, though not professionally.

Wherever there was a musical activity in Winchester, Phippen seemed to be involved. He conducted the Choral Society (resigned 1902). He directed the YMCA chorus. He was at the organization meeting of the Winchester Orchestral Society, served on the committee during its second season, and performed as a soloist. He gave a series of six musicales in homes for the Parish of the Epiphany in 1920. For many years he was a member of and active in the Winchester Music Garden, founded in 1920. Just a few months before his death, he played at one of its meetings.

Several of his compositions were performed locally. Reportedly, "One of the most popular of his performances was his playing of his own transcription for left hand alone of a simple old French tune, which despite its extreme difficulty he was able to do through the years, even playing it for guests on his 95<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1952."<sup>13</sup>

Among his works receiving notice locally were *Spanish Nocturne* for piano, violin, and cello, performed on the Music Garden's May 29, 1925, program and two pieces on Winchester Orchestral Society programs—A Capriccio, performed in March 1910 and a concerto whose third movement he played in 1912. This last work, his Piano Concerto in C Minor, composed in 1890s, won first prize in a national competition held by National Conservatory of Music in New York, where the judges were Antonín Dvořák and Rafael Joseffy.

Phippen taught others to play almost as soon as he had learned himself. "At the peak of his teaching career, Mr. Phippen taught as many as 60 pupils per week, often 10 a day. He gave lessons right up to the day he retired from teaching, at the age of 80. 'Some of the walking was easy,' he recalls. 'For example, I once had five students who lived on the same street. But I also walked from Winchester to Arlington and back to give a lesson.'"<sup>14</sup>

Phippen also served as curator of music at the Essex Institute and at time of his death was honorary curator. Up to a month before his death, he was reportedly still playing piano. From 1952 until his death in 1955 he was the holder in Winchester of the Boston Post Cane, presented to oldest male resident of communities served by that newspaper.

## PIANO SALES

By the second decade of the 20th century Winchester's active involvement with the piano and organ industries had ended. The companies all dissolved; the mills themselves have all since disappeared. However, there may still be instruments extant, scattered about the Commonwealth, their cases, works, keys, or designs created by Winchester craftsmen. Pianos were also sold by Winchester men, such as J. Stearns Wyman, who moved to Winchester in 1910 and was a piano dealer in Boston for many years. He stamped the backs of his pianos not only with the firm address in Boston but also the name of his own residence, Winchester.

## WINCHESTER'S GRAND

On June 1, 1988, six heralding trumpets called guests to a special event, the presentation to the town of Winchester's Grand, a Steinway concert piano, and the first concert with the piano.

Winchester needed a good concert piano. Not in the schools, Town Hall, nor Jenks Center was there a concert-quality piano. The piano which had been in Town Hall was junked when the building was renovated. During an ABC (A Better Chance) concert in 1986, the old piano being used suddenly went out of tune. Upon receiving an estimate, WHS Director of Music Lynne Rahmeier said, "It would have cost \$15,000 for the piano to be repaired and restored." Further, problems that arose during the tuning of a piano at the Lincoln School, to be used in the spring of 1987 for a benefit concert in which Richard and Lucy Stoltzman played, necessitated the piano's being sent out for \$2,000 worth of repairs.

Thanks to Rahmeier, a fund-raising effort for a concert grand piano was launched. A contribution from Bruce Stevens, president of Steinway and Sons, and his wife Terri kicked off the drive. \$30,000 was needed to purchase the piano and establish a maintenance fund. The committee, including Rahmeier, Bruce Alexander, Susan Barrett, Joyce Cummings, Thelma Dakubu, Martin Hitchcock, Richard Kingsbury, Esther Seferian, Constance Skahan, and Pamela Walsh, set themselves to the task.

The community rose to the challenge. More than 200 contributors responded. In addition various individuals, organizations, and businesses volunteered services, such as G. R. Nowell's offer to move the piano twice yearly for ten years, Paul Calantropo's engraving, and Bonnell Motors' use of a van for a trip to New York City.



That trip to New York, to tour the Steinway factory and showroom, had been planned as a premium for contributors of \$3,000 or more. There being no contributors at that level, members of the committee took the trip. At the factory they were able to try out the five finished pianos from which the final selection was made for Winchester by Emmanuel Ax.

On June 1, 1988, the piano made its debut at the Jenks Senior Center. The occasion was part of the town's year-long celebration of the 350th anniversary of the area's settlement. "I see the 350th" said Rahmeier at the time, "not only as a way to celebrate the past, but also as a way to look to the future. This is a symbol of the sharing that can go on in a town." Presenting the piano's deed to Robert Deering, chairman of the Board of Selectmen, she said, "It is my honor to give this piano to the town."

The first to perform on the piano was Anne Franciose Perrault, accompanying soprano Eileen Moreman. Perrault was then a resident of and piano teacher in Winchester, as well as a concert artist. Moreman was a teacher at the Winchester Community Music School, which also had a share in the Campaign for Winchester's Grand. Eric Fieleke, WHS class of 1984 and a graduate from the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, also performed on the piano at that concert and at the piano's next appearance, a gala concert at the high school that same month.

The piano traveled to Town Hall in December for a Festival Chamber Concert. Fourteen musicians, including Yo-Yo Ma who was then a resident of the town, performed for the final 350th Anniversary celebration event.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, which was coincidentally the 100th anniversary of George Gershwin's birth, the Winchester Concert Series held a concert to celebrate both occasions in Town Hall on March 29, 1998. The Grand's banner was once again unfurled and the piano was played again by the first to play it in concert. Perrault reprised Gershwin's Prelude No.1, performed at the December 1988 concert, and joined by contralto Marion Dry and violinist Bayla Keyes, performed music written by Gershwin and friends.

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<sup>1</sup> This article © 2018 is a revision of earlier articles by the author, Ellen Knight, published in *The Winchester Star*, Aug. 3, 1989 and the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Feb, 17 1993, and of material used in her article, "Music in Winchester, Massachusetts: A Community Portrait, 1830-1925," *American Music*, II:3 (Fall 1994) . This revision supersedes all previous articles.

<sup>2</sup> Borroff, Edith and Marjory Irvin, *Music in Perspective*, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1976, p. 205.

<sup>3</sup> Christine M. Ayars, *Contributions to the Art of Music in America by the Music Industries of Boston: 1640-1936*, New York, H.W. Wilson Co., 1937, pp. 99-100.

<sup>4</sup> Excelsior [Edwin A. Wadleigh], *The Middlesex Journal*, Aug. 12, 1871.

<sup>5</sup> This has been determined from the Winchester Directories.

<sup>6</sup> David Youngman, *The Winchester Record*, p. 300

<sup>7</sup> James Johnson, a noted musician in Winchester, later worked at Ditson's.

<sup>8</sup> *The Winchester Star*, April 10, 1885.

<sup>9</sup> Adelphian Club minutes, which do not reveal any other original compositions by Pond.

<sup>10</sup> *The Winchester Star*, Dec. 7, 1917.

<sup>11</sup> *The Winchester Star*, Aug. 5, 1955.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in *The Winchester Star*, Feb. 29, 1924

<sup>13</sup> *The Winchester Star*, Oct 3, 1952.

<sup>14</sup> John Hanlon, "Dean of State's Musicians, 91 Today, Practices Violin or Piano Daily, *The Boston Globe*, Oct. 22, 1948.