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Press release

“Lost Illinois” program

Illinois State Historical Society

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The Organ Benefactions of Andrew Carnegie in Central Illinois

A program and recital at First Christian Church, Petersburg on May 23

From 1895 until his death in 1919, philanthropist Andrew Carnegie made a tremendous contribution to community culture and musical heritage throughout central Illinois. Known for his matching gifts to create public libraries across the country, Carnegie also helped churches and community centers purchase pipe organs as instruments of cultural enrichment, celebrating his love of music and his belief that musical expression uplifted the soul. Carnegie’s Foundation in New York called these pipe-organ matching gifts “benefactions,” and more than 8,000 were manufactured and distributed worldwide, 207 in Illinois alone. Carnegie’s pipe organ gifts outnumbered his libraries by more than 3-1, yet these musical endowments are almost unknown. Until now.

On Thursday, May 23 at 7 p.m., the First Christian Church of Petersburg, one of those 207 Illinois churches to receive a Carnegie “benefaction,” will host a program/concert with Paula Pugh Romanaux, Ph.D., D.M.A., for the Menard County Historical Society in the church sanctuary. The program is free and open to the public.

Dr. Romanaux, a concert organist, teacher, and early music scholar for more than 45 years, will discuss the Carnegie Benefactions, identify other Carnegie pipe organs in the state, and perform a short recital on the church’s historic instrument.

"I learned to play on a Carnegie organ gift instrument at the Christian Church in Virginia, Illinois," says Romanaux. "It was a hand-pumped instrument that my father pumped when he attended there as a child. But when I was practicing on that organ as a teenager, the bellows had been converted to an electric pumping system."

After more than 100 years, the Carnegie organ in Virginia, built by the Boston-based company Hook and Hastings, is still in excellent shape, although it doesn't get played much, says Romanaux, who inspected and played it recently. The organ at First Christian Church in Petersburg was built by the Hinners Organ Company of Pekin, Illinois, and installed during the first decade of the last century. Romanaux says that it’s a still beautiful instrument with many outstanding features.

At the same time Andrew Carnegie was funding the construction of libraries across the nation (1890s until his death in 1919), matching dollar-for-dollar the efforts of civic organizations, women's clubs, and patrons of the humanities to build public spaces, he was also quietly donating portions of his wealth to build pipe organs, mostly for churches but not always.

Carnegie is reported to have said, "I can't control what is spoken from the pulpits, but I can influence the music heard in our communities." The pipe organ, lovingly called "the king of instruments" by players, composers, and aficionados, is still the principle liturgical voice of churches around the world, although finding qualified musicians who know the complexities of the instrument is becoming a challenge.

Romanau studied the organ and its vast European repertoire in Vienna and supervised the construction of six pipe organs in the Midwest.

The program is sponsored by the Menard County Historical Society, with support from Illinois Humanities and the Illinois State Historical Society as part of their "Forgotten Illinois" grant series, which seeks to engage audiences with unknown or lost history of the Prairie State. The series, now in its second season, is part of an Illinois Bicentennial initiative that will continue throughout the year.

After the program, light refreshments will be served. For more information about the concert, call 217-525-2518.

Captions:

The Andrew Carnegie "Benefaction" organ at First Christian Church in Petersburg, is the subject of a "Forgotten Illinois" program/concert on Thursday, May 23 at 7 p.m.

Dr. Paula Pugh Romanau will present a program on historic Carnegie pipe organs in central Illinois for the Menard County Historical Society.