

STEWARDS OF TRADITION

By MICHAEL DIORIO

This summer I took on a project which compelled me to read all of the Vestry Minutes from 1851 through the 1970's. These important and well-preserved documents reveal the people and initiatives that have enabled our parish to thrive since its incorporation. From the very first service our parish held in Temperance Hall above the Old Buck Tavern on August 3, 1851, to meetings in the two subsequent church buildings that followed, this parish has been the beneficiary of those whose vision, knowledge and experience has cultivated and preserved a culture of standard and expectation. This was (and still is) only possible through the efforts of stewards of specialty.

Merriam-Webster defines stewardship as “the careful management of something entrusted to one's care.” The earliest minutes reveal how the first

several Vestrymen (to be sure, at that time, they were all men) were keenly aware of their responsibility to establish means and measures by which the community could experience worship and exercise their faith, and even grow more fully into that faith. The musicians that were brought in, too, drew upon their unique skill-sets to establish the foundations of musical tradition that we still enjoy today.

For our benefit, the earliest Vestry members, musicians and clergy became stewards of tradition. They were all engaged in the work so perfectly defined by Merriam-Webster. Over the next few editions of *The Voice* I would like to provide small portraits of those musicians whose names aren't well known today, but whose work was deeply valued and important in their times.

Between 1882 and 1912, The Redeemer

went through seven different organists, each holding less than a four-year tenure. The golden age of music at The Redeemer began in 1913 with S. Tudor Strang (1855-1921).



Orchestra during 1910–11. Having studied with David Wood, noted blind organist and professor at University of Pennsylvania, Strang went on to study in Paris with famed composer and concert organist Alexander Guilmant.

Strang was a Philadelphia organist of great renown and pedigree. He founded the Philadelphia chapter of the American Guild of Organists and served as sub-warden in 1900.

He sat as organist for the Philadelphia

Strang oversaw the renovation of the original 1897 organ. He brought a new standard of organ performance and heightened musicianship to The Redeemer and its liturgies unlike any previously experienced. He fostered a greater attention to choir rehearsals, vocal training, and choral repertoire. Strang served The Redeemer until April 29, 1921 when, following choir rehearsal, he and his wife were awaiting their train at the Bryn Mawr station and he suddenly slumped onto her shoulder, dying of a heart attack on the spot. Strang is buried behind the Chapel portion of The Redeemer, along the walkway heading toward the Rectory.

Strang's work paved the way for the next famed organist: one from another notable Philadelphia family, Uselma Clarke Smith.

STEWARDS OF TRADITION *continued*

In last month's edition of *The Voice*, I gave a preview of an upcoming article that will be published in *The Tracker*, an international publication of the Organ Historical Society. This organization enriches public knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of the pipe organ, particularly its place in history and culture. Interestingly enough, the Organ Historical Society is housed in the Stoneleigh mansion in Villanova.

Last month I examined one of Redeemer's musicians, S. Tudor Strang. In 1921 Strang's tenure was followed by organist Uselma Clarke Smith (1879-1939). Smith was the son of noted Philadelphia attorney of the same name, and also a descendant of Robert Stockton, a signatory of the Declaration of Independence. Just like Strang, Smith studied with noted blind organist David Wood at the University of Pennsylvania. And as Strang did, Smith studied in Paris, but with Charles-Marie Widor. He also was a pupil in the piano studio of Katharine

Goodson in London.

Under Smith's direction, the choir and music program at The Redeemer thrived.

He was instrumental in having the choir music broadcast, and was scrupulous in his maintenance of the church's instrument, regularly submitting communiques to the Vestry referencing the deficiencies of the organ and ways in which they could be addressed. Smith was in constant demand as a concert organist, having had several thrilling reviews of his performances appear in The Diapason(1). Smith served The Redeemer until departing for Calvary Episcopal Church, Philadelphia, in 1936.

Smith's obituary in The Diapason



describes him as having “a kindly disposition, a genial personality and a keen sense of humor, which endeared him to his many friends. [Smith] carried through life a constant devotion to music, always practicing, studying, writing, never resting on achievement, but, striving always to make progress, unlike the far too many who, having once attained, after a spurt of effort, to a certain degree of success are content to take in their oars and drift along with the current forever after.”(2)

After Smith's death, The Redeemer posted the open position to be filled immediately. Out of 40 applicants for organist & choirmaster, the list was narrowed down to three:

- Ernest Willoughby, then at Good Shepherd and Bryn Mawr College(3)
- Ernest White at St. James

- Mr. Ruppel of Wayne, PA.

If the golden age of music at The Redeemer began with Strang, it was certainly continued by Smith and further developed by the next selected musician, Ernest Willoughby.

(1) THE DIAPASON is an international journal devoted to the organ, harpsichord, carillon and church music. It has been in circulation for more than 100 years, providing consistent coverage on instrument specifications, recent news, international event calendars, and both scholarly and technical articles, as well as those of more general interest.

(2) (Photo: The Diapason, November 1, 1926 pg. 18. Obituary: The Diapason, May 1, 1939, pg. 2)

(3) Willoughby was right next door at Bryn Mawr College, so no interim period was needed.

STEWARDS OF TRADITION *conclusion*

In last month's edition of The Voice, I gave a preview of an upcoming article on Redeemer's musicians that will be published in April by the Organ Historical Society. Last month I discussed one of Redeemer's organists, Uselma Clarke Smith (1879-1939).

In 1936 Smith's tenure was followed by organist Ernest Willoughby.

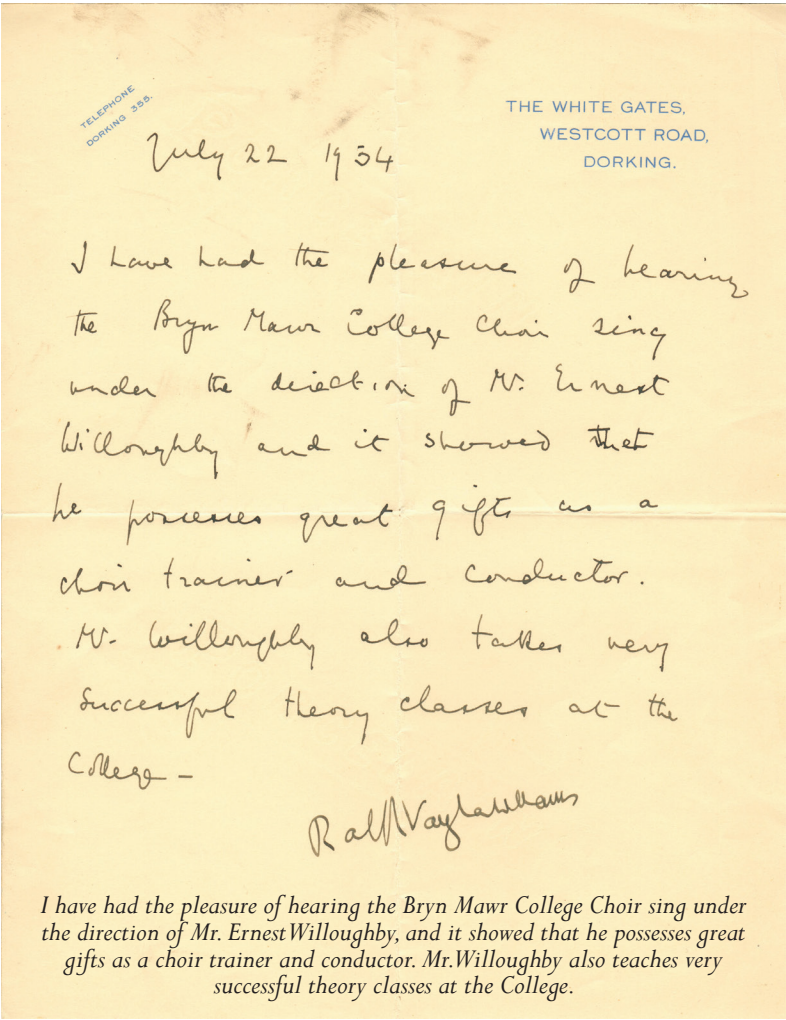
Willoughby came to the United States from England in 1921, after leaving his post as assistant organist of Hereford Cathedral. Willoughby also served as assistant director of the famed Three Choirs Festival, where he was accompanist for The Apostles under the baton of Sir Edward Elgar himself.

Upon moving to the United States, Willoughby settled in Bryn Mawr, taking up the position of assistant professor of music at Bryn Mawr College and later serving as director of music at the Baldwin School. At the same time, he served as organist choirmaster at the Church of the Good Shepherd in neighboring Rosemont.

In 1936 Willoughby came to The Redeemer and, as one might expect from his British heritage and musicianship, further developed the program into one of polish and precision. Willoughby was a prolific composer and arranger, having had several of his works published, and he performed frequently as a solo recitalist, concertizing throughout the country.

Willoughby was friendly with famed British composer Ralph Vaughan Williams, who, by Willoughby's invitation, came to the U.S. to give a series of lectures at Bryn Mawr College in 1932. Willoughby and Vaughn Williams maintained a correspondence over the years, and in 1934 Vaughan Williams wrote this note in testimony to Willoughby's musicianship.

Though seemingly ensconced in the Main Line music scene, Willoughby pursued other professional opportunities. In 1944, much to the disappointment of The Redeemer, Willoughby took a position at Christ Church Cathedral in Victoria, British Columbia. He held that position for barely a year, however, before taking another position as organist and choirmaster



Vaughan Williams' handwritten note from the files of Michael Diorio.

at St. Marks, Locust Street, in Philadelphia: all of this before ultimately returning to The Redeemer in September of 1948.

In his time at The Redeemer, Willoughby oversaw the contract and installation of the 53-rank Aeolian-Skinner organ, dedicated on November 27, 1949. Ernest Willoughby remained at the Church of The Redeemer until retiring in 1970. His was the longest—albeit not unbroken—tenure in The Redeemer's history.

Following Dr. William H. Reese (organist and choirmaster from 1970-1976) was Norman Mackenzie, the brother of our staff singer Laurie MacKenzie. Norman was a child prodigy who made his debut as a pianist with the Philadelphia Orchestra at age 12, and as an organist at age 20. Norman is a multiple Grammy award-winning director of the Atlanta Symphony Chorus, where he succeeded his mentor, Robert Shaw. Norman's move to Atlanta marked the beginning, in 1983, of the long tenure of Michael Stairs.



Michael Stairs & Michael Diorio