

South Church, New Britain

South Congregational and First Baptist Church, New Britain, CT

The Cooper Memorial Organ

Gress-Miles Company (1972)

Three manuals – 87 ranks

History of the Organ at South Church

The idea of commissioning a new organ came into being in the late 1960s when the church determined that their Skinner Organ was in bad repair and needed to be replaced. A five-year search resulted in the selection of the Gress-Miles Organ Company of Princeton, New Jersey to create the new South Church organ. The consultant on the design was Professor John Holtz of the Hartt School of Music.

An instrument of sixty-one ranks was ordered in 1972, and a new hard, reflective ceiling was put in the nave in order to provide warm and ambient acoustics not only for the instrument but also for singing and speech. The organ, with three manuals and pedals, had 3461 pipes at the time and was first played in August, 1972, by the newly appointed Organist and Choirmaster, Richard Coffey.

In 1974, two more stops were added, bringing the total number of pipes to 3579.

The instrument, known as the Cooper Memorial Organ, is in memory of Elisha and Margaret Cooper. Mr. Cooper was a founder of the Fafnir Bearing Company in 1910, and the son of James W. Cooper, the pastor of South Church from 1878 until the end of the century. The instrument was dedicated on October 15, 1972, with over 800 people attending. Guest organist and speaker was Dr. Alec Wyton, Director of Music of New York's Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Referring to the organ's design, the concert bulletin states, *"It incorporates unusual versatility, but without unwieldy size and with the object of enabling interpretation of baroque, romantic, and modern works of the important national styles to be given real stylistic integrity. The builder has intentionally tried to capture the spirit and excitement, as well as the specific details, of the great organs of Germany, Holland and France. In addition, liberal provision has been made for service playing in the English manner as well as for music of contemporary composers."*

The instrument, the largest in the city, quickly invigorated the life of the congregation, who soon chose to establish a music concert series in order to make the organ accessible to the greater community. Since that time, scores of organists from all over the world have performed on the instrument.

The Gress-Miles Organ proved so reliable and exciting, that in 1979, when the church faced the obligation of replacing an electronic organ in the Erwin Chapel, the decision was made to commission the Gress-Miles firm to build a "junior" version of the large chancel organ. Through the generosity of Esther Stanley and other members of the church, the Stanley Memorial Gress-Miles Organ was installed and dedicated in the fall of 1979 and continues to serve the liturgical and artistic requirements of the chapel.

The Cooper Memorial Organ was rededicated in a service on September 28, 1997. Since then, several additions have enhanced the versatility of the organ. In 1998, new Wurlitzer shades were installed in the swell; in 2001, two digital 32' stops were added; and in 2003, the console was upgraded with a new multi-level combination action system and a playback system.



[Link to the complete specifications of South Church's chancel and chapel organs.](#)
(Word document)