

# CENTENNIAL GAZETTE

St. James Cathedral, Seattle

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## DR. F. S. PALMER AND THE BUILDING OF THE ORGAN

Bishop O'Dea hired the best architects around to design the new St. James Cathedral—Messrs. Heins and LaFarge, who had also been engaged to build the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. And when J. A. Baillargeon—a local entrepreneur and member of the Cathedral Building Committee—stepped forward with a generous gift for a new organ, O'Dea was determined to have the best organist as well.

No one in Seattle had credentials like Dr. Franklin Sawyer Palmer. This Harvard-trained medical doctor was a gifted musician, who had studied in Paris under Eugène Gigout and Charles-Marie Widor. Little wonder that Bishop O'Dea hired him at once.

Throughout 1907, Palmer worked with George Hutchings of the Boston firm of Hutchings-Votey on the specifications for Opus 1623, the new organ being installed in the west gallery of St. James Cathedral. The resulting instrument was ideally suited, according to the performance practice of the time, to the liturgical accompaniment of choral singing as well as to the performance of organ masterpieces.

On December 15, 1907, one week before the Cathedral's dedication, the doors of the new building were thrown open for the first time. The occasion was an organ recital—a chance for the city to experience its new Cathedral and its new Cathedral organist. As the *Seattle Times* reported (with more enthusiasm than expertise), "Today will be the last time that the great cathedral will be used for any but purposes of worship. Dr. Franklin S. Palmer will manipulate the great organ, which is said to be a marvel. Its mechanical construction is such as to make it possible for the organist, by merely touching an electric button, to get from it the melody of a violin, a cornet or any other stringed or wind instrument."

The first piece performed on the new organ was one of Bach's masterpieces: the *Grand Fantasia and Fugue in G minor*, which Palmer followed with two pieces by Handel. But he also performed newer pieces by some of the greatest living composers for the organ, including Guilmant, Saint-Saëns, and Palmer's own teacher, Widor.

Palmer's first recital made it clear that the Cathedral's music program would draw on the best of both old and new in its repertory. A week later, at the dedication of the Cathedral, Palmer's musical choices show a similar range and imagination, with works ranging from Gregorian chant to the 16th-century



composer Arcadelt to Gounod—to Palmer! He composed a choral piece especially for the occasion.

Dr. Palmer would remain at St. James Cathedral for nearly thirty years, until his death in 1935. He had a lasting impact on music in Seattle, as the national organ journal *Diapason* reported: "Dr. Palmer has been the source of much inspiration to the younger organists, of whom many now holding church positions have been trained under his guiding hand. His strong influence for the best in music is felt throughout the Pacific Northwest. Ever ready to help a needy organist and ever ready to be at the side of a visiting concert organist, Dr. Palmer may be classed as the patron saint of organists."

—Corinna Laughlin

*This is the sixth in the series. Read more about Dr. Palmer and the early years of Cathedral music at [www.stjames-cathedral.org/centennial](http://www.stjames-cathedral.org/centennial). Follow the links to "history" and "music."*

## MY CATHEDRAL

I began working here at St. James Cathedral in January of 1979, so I am in my 29th year. In that time, I've seen and heard lots. I have been fortunate in being able to take part in lots of things.

My favorite (thanks to Father Ryan) is working with the Sunday School families, the Youth Servers and Youth Readers.

Two Christmas Vigils ago, the Youth Readers needed a stool to be seen and heard at the ambo. When the time came for the blessing of the crèche figures and the Intercessions, the young readers and myself were horrified to see that the stool had disappeared. There was no time to look for it and I had to do something; so, while the children were gathering around the altar for the blessing, I calmly placed the gold Gospel Book on the floor and the Lectionary on top and told the readers to stand on them to read. That got them really big-eyed, but they followed my directions and read the Intercessions beautifully and only a few really knew what happened. Returning to our seats, they were still a bit shaken but smiling, one of them turned to me and said, "Well, we are supposed to *stand upon the Word*, aren't we?"

—Marianne Coté

*You're part of Cathedral history, too! Do you have a favorite Cathedral story to share?*

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