

From Arts & Architecture: Henry Houseley

In our tour of memorial plaques around the Cathedral, our next story does not begin with a beautifully-worded bronze tablet. Picture instead a small box, resting behind some of the wooden organ pipes below the chancel of the cathedral. It is filled with the ashes of a dedicated musician and prolific composer, who not only served the Cathedral as organist and choir director for thirty-seven years, but was also a prominent figure in the musical world of early Denver.

Henry Houseley was born at Sutton-in-Ashfield, Nottinghamshire, England, on September 28, 1852, the only son of William and Ann Stendahl Houseley. Beginning the study of organ at an early age, he became the organist and choirmaster at St. Luke's Church, Nottingham. He was a Fellow of the London College of Organists, and in 1874 his interest in composition led him to win first prize in the College composition contest. He went on to study with Michael Costa, an important conductor in London, and with E.H. Turpin, respected organist and hymn-writer, at St. George's Bloomsbury. In 1886 a string quartet by Houseley was performed at the annual meeting of the National Society of Professional Musicians. Antonín Dvořák was present at the meeting, and complimented Houseley on his music. His early work in composition was to continue for the rest of his life but it was his reputation as a fine organist and choirmaster that in 1888 prompted an invitation to come to the new Cathedral in Denver, Colorado.

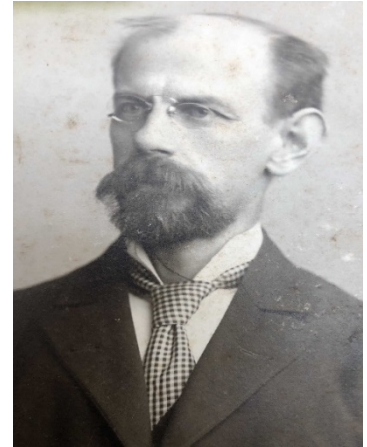


The arrival in Denver of Dean Henry Martyn Hart in 1879 prompted a change in the church music scene in Denver. The very English Dean had declared that he would have nothing but English organists for his brand new Cathedral, and in January of 1880 he sent to England for Arthur W. Marchant, Bachelor of Music, Oxford University, and a member of the Royal College of Organists. After his arrival, Marchant worked on the design for the 1882 Hook and Hastings organ, installed in the cathedral while it was under construction. Despite the pleasure of using this magnificent instrument, Marchant stayed only two years. According to a note in the cathedral record book, he “could not accommodate himself to the peculiarities of western life.”

After Marchant's departure came another Englishman, Walter E. Hall, praised by the *London Times* editor in a Christmas visit: “the organist played an excellent instrument with much taste as well as excellent facility.” Hall was also a fine choir director and popular for giving evening recitals at the cathedral. However, after a few years of service at the cathedral he was lured away by the Methodists, who had just purchased a magnificent Roosevelt organ.

Third in line was John H. Gower, called by Dean Hart “one of the six best organists in the world in his day.” Gower, a descendant of Sir Walter Scott, was also a Fellow of the Royal College of Organists, and one of the youngest ever to receive the Doctor of Music degree at Oxford. An enthusiast of Haydn, Gower claimed that he could play all of his works by memory. Acclaimed as a genius throughout the musical world of Denver, Gower surprised everyone by his growing fascination with the development of mining in Colorado, and, along with his organ duties, he began to spend more and more of his time pursuing mining ventures in Cripple Creek and Central City. It was on his recommendation that Dean Hart called yet another English organist, Henry Houseley, to come to be deputy organist at the cathedral.

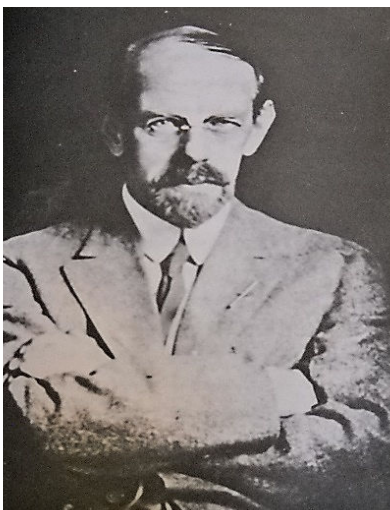
Houseley arrived in Denver in 1888, bringing with him a growing family—his wife, Sarah Francis, daughters Ethel, Helen and Dorothy, and sons Charles and Frederick. According to the City Directories of the time, the Houseley family occupied a series of rental homes during their first several years in Denver. His daughters Helen and Dorothy worked as stenographers and his daughter Ethel worked in a floral shop. It is evident that the position of deputy organist gave him both the need and the opportunity to do other work as well. He was hired to be the organist at Temple Emanuel, a position which continued until his death, and for a brief period he served as organist at St. Mark's and the First Baptist Church. He also was on the faculty at the University of Denver as instructor of advanced students in piano, organ and theory. The DU yearbook said of Houseley: "He inspires in his pupils a love for music, an earnest desire to know, and power to express what it should say to the listener."



In 1892 organist John Gower finally left the cathedral to follow his mining dreams, and Houseley officially succeeded him as organist and choir director. The cathedral's magnificent Hook and Hastings organ was considered to be "one of the finest organs west of the Mississippi." With an instrument like this to inspire him, Houseley continued the tradition of musical excellence begun by his predecessors. He also continued his work in composition and in 1893 the choir performed the Christmas portion of the *Messiah*, and a *Te Deum and Jubilate* written by Houseley. He also began composing one-act operas, anthems, choral and orchestral pieces, work he continued for the rest of his life. *Native Silver*, an opera based on mining in Colorado, and another entitled *The Juggler* were performed at the Broadway Theater several times in the 1890's.



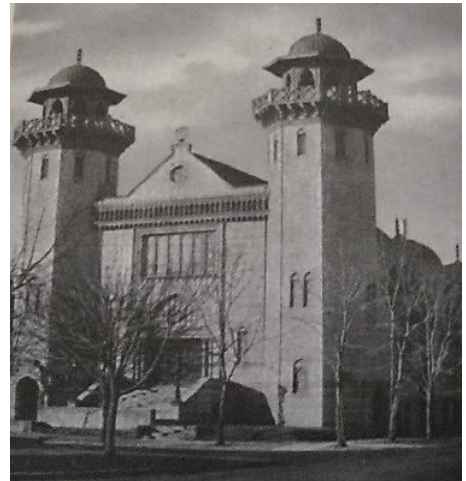
Since the early 1870's, several different choral groups had begun performing in Denver. One of them, the Denver Oratorical Society, had seen a succession of directors with a great deal of professional jealousy evidenced. Finally, early in 1894, Houseley agreed to accept the position of musical director. Soon after, the *Rocky Mountain News* reported "a powerful orchestra and a chorus of over two hundred voices" and the name was changed to The Denver Choral Society. A successful concert season followed, with the final offering in April a performance of the *Messiah* with St. John's Cathedral Canon Charles Winfred Douglas as organist.



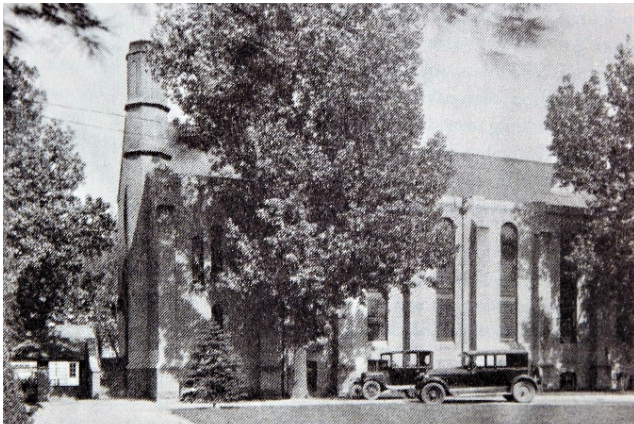
In the following years, Houseley gradually became a leading force in the Denver musical world. He was instrumental in the foundation of the American Guild of Organists in 1896 and was a charter member. In 1900 he organized and directed Denver's first community symphony orchestra, holding rehearsals in the crypt of St. John's Cathedral, and Friday afternoon concerts in the Broadway Theater. In 1904 he took a smaller group from his Choral Society to a competition at the World's Fair in St. Louis and came away with first prize. Encouraged by this accomplishment, a few months later he took over the Apollo Club, a small group of Denver businessmen, bank clerks, and salesmen who were struggling to become a singing group. He built them into a successful chorus, hiring nationally-known guest artists for their performances. An article in the *Rocky Mountain News* reported: "According to Henry Houseley, conductor of the Apollo Club,

that organization of singers is all that can be wished for. He believes that club could take a trip throughout the east and even go into New York City and show that city a few things about singing.”

In the midst of all this community musical activity, Houseley was also dealing with the results of the disastrous event that occurred in May, 1903—the fire at St. John’s Cathedral. It began in the magnificent cathedral organ and resulted in the destruction of the entire building. Houseley must have been struck by the uncanny coincidence of an event which had happened back in 1897 at Temple Emanuel. He had arrived at the temple to conduct a choir rehearsal and was astounded to find the place in flames. The organ was badly damaged and the fire led to the abandonment of the entire building and the construction of a new Temple Emanuel.

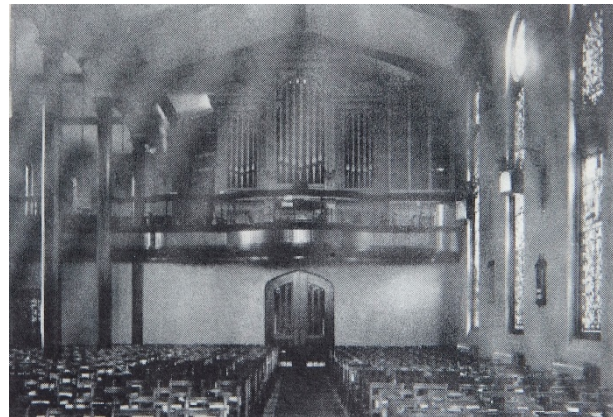


The day after the Cathedral fire on May 3, 1904, the dean reported “the kind loan of the Jewish synagogue wherein to hold our 11:00 service”. The arrangement to meet in the newly-constructed Temple Emanuel synagogue, “an imposing structure primarily Moorish in style, featuring two minarets topped with copper roofs”, lasted for the next two years. Houseley must have been glad to be able to play the same organ from the temple that had been restored after their fire and installed in the new synagogue.



congregation through the next eight years of construction. It was a white brick Romanesque structure, designed to accommodate the eleven rescued stained glass windows and the reredos, and provide rooms for Sunday school and a meeting hall seating space for five hundred chairs. There was also an organ, but it is difficult to find any printed description of the instrument. The bulletin from a service in 1904 reported: “The evening services are fully choral. Professor Houseley’s magnificent choir shows evidence of careful training.”

Dean Hart’s response to the devastating fire at the Cathedral had been “Cast down, but not destroyed”, and plans for a new cathedral began immediately. Land was bought, architects were hired, and in 1904 a temporary Chapter House was built to serve the

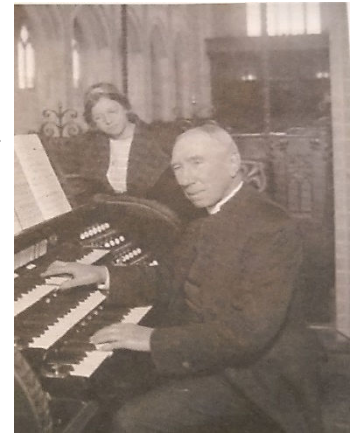


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As the construction of the new cathedral neared completion, Dean Hart wrote: “When we came to consider the building of the organ for the (new) Cathedral, Dr. Gower, Mr. Houseley, who has been our organist for 28 years, Mr. George T. Foot, who is an English organ builder of large experience and myself, brought to bear our common experiences”. Mr. Foot helped to find organ pipes at the Samuel Pierce pipe factory in Reading, Massachusetts, and the console was from M.P. Moeller. The Dean wrote: “the result is a very

satisfactory instrument.” This organ was located on the east side of the chancel, and served the cathedral until 1938 when the Kimball organ was installed.

In the following years, Houseley continued his work in the musical life of Denver as well as at the cathedral. He served on the staff of the Conservatory of Music, begun as part of Denver University and was a member of the Musical Society of Denver which founded the State Music Teachers’ Association. Following the installation of the huge Wurlitzer organ in the Denver Municipal Auditorium in 1917, he joined a group of organists who gave weekly noonday concerts there. He also continued his long work as musical director of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish rite body of Masons—a position he held for twenty-five years. He wrote several more operas, and a dramatic cantata, *Omar Khayyam*, first performed in Denver in 1916 with later performances following in Pennsylvania, Chicago and New England. Librettos for this and several of the operas were written by Houseley’s beloved wife Sarah Francis who died in 1915.



A program from the celebration at the Cathedral for Houseley’s thirty-first anniversary in 1919 stated: “No musician in the United States has produced anything like the quantity of church music which has come from the pen of Mr. Houseley.” Included is a list of two *Te Deums*, five cantatas, and twelve anthems, along with “Secular compositions of a string quartet, six orchestral pieces, three one act Grand operas, two comic operas, twelve organ pieces, and numerous songs, hymns, kyries and chants”. An article in the 1972 issue of *Colorado Magazine* stated: “Houseley recognized the potential of Denver’s musical ability as few others did and his career in Denver until his death in 1925 can be described as a movement from one musical success to another.”

Henry Houseley died of a brief illness on March 14, 1925, having served the cathedral and the city of Denver for thirty-six years. At his funeral Dean Dagwell spoke of a man who was “quiet, modest and unassuming, a true artist, a Christian gentleman” and added that “he will be greatly missed here and throughout the state where his musical genius is recognized.” There is no plaque on the wall to honor the memory of a man of such talent and dedication, but it is good to know that his ashes rest in peace in the Cathedral he served with devotion for so many years.