

The Waterloo Organ Company

The manufacture of Waterloo Cabinet Organs began in 1861, with a very small plant that developed into one of the largest and best equipped organ factories in the United States. It is still very easy to purchase a Waterloo Pump Organ on eBay or



Craigslist.

A disastrous fire on May 27, 1881, destroyed the manufacturing plant on the east side of Virginia Street.¹ Then Alexander C. Reed and Malcolm Love, his nephew, purchased the Waterloo Organ Manufacturing Company and renamed it as Malcolm Love and Co. In 1888, the company was incorporated as the Waterloo Organ Company, with Alexander C. Reed serving as president.²

The Waterloo Organ Company decided in 1889 to manufacture pianos as well as organs. They engaged a skilled piano builder by the name of Seebald Mennig, who drew up the scale (the interior plan of the piano, including the length of the strings, the method of putting in the sounding board, etc.) for the Malcolm Love Piano. Benjamin B. Knight had purchased the first piano that was manufactured. Knight's son William D. Knight later donated this piano to the Waterloo Library and Historical Society where it is still on display in its Terwilliger Museum.³



At the World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago in 1893, the Waterloo Organ Company had a booth where it displayed its Malcolm Love Piano. This piano received an award for its fine quality of tone and good workmanship, equal to the award of any piano exhibited. An official ribbon was given, a copy of which was attached to the back of each Malcolm Love Piano as long as they were thereafter manufactured in Waterloo. The company also received a bronze medal.⁴



[Shown at left is the first Malcolm Love piano made. It is on public display at the Terwilliger Museum in Waterloo.]

Tragedy struck on Saturday evening, March 13, 1897, when the piano finishing factory building burned. This was the old Waterloo Yeast Co. building that was rented by the Waterloo Organ Company from Adolf Semtner. It was located on the east side of Church Street, the second door north of Main Street. The patterns, tools and machinery of the piano company were destroyed at a loss of over \$15,000, in addition to the large loss of stock and materials.⁵

The Waterloo Organ Company then purchased the old William W. Wood mill site, just south of the Organ Company's woodworking plant on the west side of Washington Street. On the former mill site, the Organ Company built a

new three story frame piano building. (This building is currently Moore's Furniture With a Future at 38 Washington Street.)⁶

The Waterloo Organ Company became "involuntary bankrupt" in 1902, with some alleged fraud involving Francis Bacon of the First National Bank of Waterloo and Alexander C. Reed, president and largest stockholder of the Waterloo Organ Company.⁷ Francis Bacon, Leonard Story, and other businessmen of the village had made large investments in both the Waterloo Wagon Company, Ltd. and the Waterloo Organ Co., and had signed bonds guaranteeing payment of large sums for both companies. During the litigation over the settlement of the Organ Company's affairs, the signers of the bonds had to stand large losses by reason of having so obligated themselves.⁸

The Vough Piano Company was organized in May, 1903, by John Becker, Chauncey L. Becker and William C. Vough, with a capital stock of \$50,000. The new



company purchased the business and plant of the Waterloo Organ Company and continued the manufacture of Malcolm Love and Alexander Pianos, but not organs. The Vough Changeable Pitch Piano, invented by Mr. Vough, was featured and widely advertised.⁹ This changeable pitch piano was described as "a magnificent, high-grade

first-class instrument in all respects, and can be changed instantly by the performer from Standard Pitch to Concert Pitch, and vice versa, simply by ‘pushing the button,’ thus making this piano suitable for vocal and orchestra work.”¹⁰ As many as 700 pianos a year were made and sold throughout the eastern United States. In 1913, this business was sold to Wegman Piano Company. In the next decade, the sale of pianos almost ceased.¹¹

The large brick building on Washington Street that was used by the Waterloo Organ Company and later the Vough Piano Company for its woodworking plant was later occupied by the Waterloo Rug Co. and the Sussman dress manufactory. On June 23, 1927, there was a fire in the attic near the belfry but the fire was extinguished by the fire department. On June 22, 1928, in a spectacular fire, the building was burned to the ground, completely destroyed and was not rebuilt.¹² Gone was the making of pianos and organs in Waterloo.

¹ “General History of the Music Trades of America,” a manuscript in the Terwilliger Museum of the Waterloo Library and Historical Society

² “General History”

³ John E. Becker, *A History of the Village of Waterloo, New York and Thesaurus of Related Facts*, Waterloo: Waterloo Library and Historical Society, 1949, p 284.

⁴ Becker, p 298

⁵ Becker, p 312

⁶ “General History”

⁷ see <http://bulk.resource.org/courts/cF1/0134/001/00000357.txt> and <http://bulk.resource.org/courts.gov/c/F1/0134/001/00000354.txt>

⁸ “General History”

⁹ Becker, p 331

¹⁰ *Grip’s Historical Souvenir of Waterloo*, p. 80

¹¹ Becker, p 331

¹² Becker, p 403