

Brethren Historical Library and Archives

Special Feature: The Kurtz Organ Turns 300

As of September 23, 1998, the Kurtz organ is 300 years old. This is known for certain because the organ maker left this inscription on the wind chest:

In the forenoon of September 23, 1698, I Johan Christoph Harttman, organ maker of Nürtingen, firmly closed this small wind chest. May God grant that many beautiful and spiritual psalms and songs be played and struck on this work to His name's honor.



Nothing more is known about the history of the organ until it came into the possession of Henry Kurtz, the 19th century Brethren leader who is remember as a publisher, editor, printer, Annual Meeting clerk, and minister. Kurtz was born in Germany in 1796, but immigrated to the United States in 1817 where he became a Lutheran minister in Pittsburgh. His emphasis on Christian commitment and discipline did not find favor in the congregation and he resigned. After moving to Ohio he came in contact with the Brethren and became a member in 1828. Kurtz was put in charge of the Mill Creek congregation and moved to Poland, Ohio, where he purchased a printing press and began publishing. His involvement with the Brethren intensified when he was chosen Annual Meeting clerk in 1837.

Over the years Kurtz came to the conclusion that the Brethren needed a periodical to keep them unified as they spread West across the continent. In 1851 he began publication of *The Gospel Visitor*, the first periodical published for the Brethren.

While Annual Meeting was not willing to approve the new publication, it decided not to interfere. There is a direct line from *The Gospel Visitor* to the *Messenger* of today. Kurtz also published other materials for the Brethren, including hymn books, writings by Alexander Mack, and *The Brethren's Encyclopedia* (1867).

It is not known if Kurtz brought the organ with him from Germany or if he acquired it after arriving in the states. He rarely used the organ after joining the Brethren because they did not approve of the use of musical instruments. After his death in 1874, the organ was passed on to his descendants.

In 1957 the organ was placed in the care of the Brethren Historical Committee. Alvin Brightbill and Paul Beiber began the work of restoring the organ in their spare time. In 1975 the General Board hired John Brombaugh to complete the restoration. The organ was on display at the 1976 Annual Conference in Wichita, Kansas. Today it is part of the Brethren Historical Library and Archives collection.