Register of the

Chickering & Sons Collection, 1823-1985

by Robert W. Ageton

ARCHIVES CENTER
NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN HISTORY
AUGUST 1989
(Revised February 1992)

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History

Chickering & Sons pianos are an old line that came into being in April 1823 in Boston. Jonas Chickering, the founder, was a youthful cabinet maker. He learned piano making from John Osborn, a true master of the trade. The division of labor in Osborn's shop was not very extensive and Chickering was compelled to study every part of the instrument and to make himself acquainted with all the details. This exposure to the full range of tasks would served him well when he became a master in his own right. During his four years with Osborn, he became acquainted with Osborn's partner, James Stewart, who was awarded a patent for a "detached" soundingboard that was incorporated in the partners' pianos.

When Osborn and Stewart severed their business relationship, Stewart and his new partner, Chickering, opened a small shop on Tremont Street near King's Chapel on February 15, 1823. The partnership lasted three years until Stewart withdrew and left for London. At the age of 28, Chickering became the sole owner of the small but prosperous manufactory. The firm's annual output climbed over the next three years and reached 47 instruments in 1829.

In early 1830, Chickering made Captain John McKay, an experienced, aggressive, and successful merchantiser a partner in Chickering & Company. Captain Mackay made frequent trips to South American ports with ships laden with pianos. Returning home, the hold was filled with fragrant rosewood and richly grained mahogany. Chickering's first invention was patented in 1837 -- the first practical casting of a modern iron frame built to sustain the great tension of the strings of the piano so that it would stay in tune for a considerable period. In 1845, another important patent was secured, representing the first practical method of overstringing for square pianos, and in 1849 he applied the same principle to uprights. These contributions and others have become standard with all piano manufacturers.

The Chickering firm made pianos in a new way, employing production strategies that paralleled developments in other trades undergoing industrialization. "When he first commenced business for himself about 15 instruments a year were turned out while in the later years Mr. Chickering's business finished between fifteen and sixteen hundred instruments a year and at least one grand piano--worth about a thousand dollars--every week." (Richard G. Parker, A Tribute To The Life and Character of Jonas Chickering "By one who knew him well" (Boston: William P. Tewksbury, 1854.)

He was a long-time President of the Handel & Hayden Society of Boston, this Country's oldest oratorio, founded in 1815.

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On December 1, 1853, a fire swept through the Washington Street factory. Rather than rebuild on Washington Street, plans were made to erect a new factory on Tremont Street in the South End of Boston. Chickering, however, never saw the new plant in operation as he suffered a stroke and died December 8, 1853. The large Chickering factory built in 1853 was described at that time as the largest building in the United States outside the U.S. Capitol, and as "... the most perfect and extensive pianoforte establishment in the world."

Chickering's death in 1853 left the business in the hands of his sons. In 1867, Emperor Napoleon III of France bestowed the Imperial Cross of the Legion of Honor on Frank Chickering at the Paris World's Fair that year.

With the passing of C. Frank Chickering in 1891, the company lost headway; and it was purchased by the American Piano Company in 1908 (Chickering Brothers pianos, which were made for several years following 1892 were in no way related to Chickering & Sons, though this family of boys was trained in the Chickering & Sons Boston factory).

From 1905 to 111, the firm alone among American builders supported the revival of early instruments by hiring the English musician and craftsman Arnold Dolmetsch to build harpsichords, clavichords, and violas.

Chickering & Sons continued manufacturing pianos in Boston until 1927, when the plant and its personnel were relocated to East Rochester, New York. The Chickering was the foremost piano of the time -- Longfellow had one and there was one on the stage at Ford's Theater in Washington, D.C. the night Lincoln was assassinated. In 1932 the Company became part of the Aeolian American Corporation.

William Knabe of Kreutzburg, Germany, trained as a piano manufacturer, established his business in Baltimore, Maryland in 1837, and controlled the market in the Southern states by 1860. The Civil War and economic pressures may have contributed to the death of Knabe in 1864. The Company was eventually purchased by the American Piano Company in 1908, shortly after Chickering became a part of the organization.

The Wurlitzer Company, a major musical instrument manufacturer, acquired the Chickering firm in 1985 and continued to produce instruments with the Chickering name. The Wurlitzer Company was later purchased by the Baldwin Piano Company; Baldwin was subsequently purchased by Wurltech, Inc., of Houston, Texas.

**Scope and Content**

This collection consists of 51 volumes of Chickering & Sons piano registers, documenting piano production (May 1823 - September 1985); correspondence related to the hundredth anniversary of Jonas Chickering's presidency of the Handel and Hayden Society; publications on the history of the Company and sales literature (1854 - 1984); newspapers articles about the company (1847 - 1876); photographs (1926 - 1966); advertising and management forms (1938 - 1968); and a copy of a letter by Jonas Chickering to his father dated January 27, 1838. There are also ten documents related to the construction, mortgaging and insurance of Chickering Hall in New York City (1876-1886). Chickering Hall opened with great acclaim in 1875 and was an
important musical center in New York City in the last quarter of the 19th Century.

Provenance

These records were deposited in the Archives Center of The National Museum of American History in 1987, loaned by the Wurlitzer Company in recognition of the museum's interest in the history of musical instruments in the United States and its outstanding collecton of American pianos, including five (5) Chickering instruments. Under the terms of the loan agreement, the piano registers were to be microfilmed. Microfilming was completed in 1988 and volumes 1 and 3 were subsequently returned to Wurltech Industries in August 1988. Volume 2 was never located among the company's records and is therefore missing from both this collection and the microfilm. In November 1991, Wurltech Industries very graciously agreed to donate these records to the NMAH.

The ten (10) documents related to Chickering Hall were purchased from The Center For Musical Antiquities, New York in June 1989. They have been inserted into Series 3: Company History and Records in Box 2, Folders 7 & 8.

The 1857 catalog of Chickering and Sons Piano-Fortes at the Exhibitions of 1856 was donated to the National Museum of American History in March 1994, by Edwin Good.

[1080]
Container List

CHICKERING & SONS COLLECTION, 1823 - 1985
[16 cubic feet; 33 F/O, 1 DB, 1 (.5)DB, 1 FB, 1(.5)FLTB]

BOX FOLDER

Series 1: CORRESPONDENCE, 1950

1 Letter from F. Otis Drayton, President, Handel and Hayden Society, dated September 18, 1950, marking the hundredth anniversary of Jonas Chickering's presidency of the society.

Series 2: PUBLICATIONS, 1854 – 1984

1 Print of Jonas Chickering, Supplement To The Musical Age, Vol. LXXXI, No. 13, April 19, 1913

Parker, Richard G., A Tribute To The Life And Character of Jonas Chickering, "By one who knew him well." Wm. P. Tewksbury, Boston - 1854.


3 "1823 - 1923, Jonas Chickering Centennial Celebration To Honor the Memory and Achievement of one of Boston's Most Distinguished Citizens and one of the World's Greatest Inventors"

"1823 - 1923, The Nationwide Celebration of the Jonas Chickering Centennial"

Dinner Menu: "Dinner to Honor the Memory and Achievement of Jonas Chickering ... " The Copley - Plaza Hotel, Boston, April Twenty-first 1923.

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"Why Jonas Chickering is regarded as one of the World's Great Inventors", Reprinted from the Music Trade Indicator, Chicago, January 27, 1923.

"A Thousand Years of Service,--a part of the Centennial Celebration"--three small pamphlets.

"Our First Upright - 1830"

"Chickering and Sons Piano- Fortes at the Exhibitions of 1856"

"A Hundred Years Old"


The Jonas Chickering Centennial Celebration, Printed in the Year 1924, by Cheltenham for Chickering and Sons of Boston, Massachusetts

"The Chickering Halo", possible editorial clipped from Piano Trade Magazine, February, 1923, ND.


Retail Prices, March 15, 1958 and September 20, 1956.


Chickering and Sons Pianoforte Makers --one bound copy.

"Chickering Pianos 'In Grand and Vertical Styling'" n.d.-5 copies.

"Chickering Americas Oldest and Most Distinguished Piano"--n.d. 3 copies.

"Chickering Style H"- n.d. 3 copies.

"One Sixty-nine Tremont Street, Boston"

"The Imperial Cross of the Legion of Honor Awarded to Chickering"


"Some of the Hundreds of First Medals and Awards Received by the

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Chickering Including the Imperial Cross of the Legion of Honor" (Brochure Awards n.d. -- two copies)


"Chickering & Sons, 1929 Models"

**BOX FOLDER**

1 7 "The Exquisite Acrosonic by Baldwin"

"Knabe Vertical Pianos"

"Pianos by Baldwin"--Styles, Sizes, Finishes, and Prices n.d.

**Series 3: COMPANY HISTORY & RECORDS**

2 1 Pamphlet: Jonas Chickering, 1789 - 1853

"The Cabinet Maker's Apprentice and the Piano of the Princess"

"The Cabinet Maker's Apprentice and the Piano of the Princess"
Three Copies each with a different color. Copyright, 1938. Looseleaf models in the back of the cover of one.

"The Cabinet Maker's Apprentice and the Piano of the Princess"
Two copies--large size Looseleaf models in the back of one.

Copy of letter by Jonas Chickering to his Father from Boston, dated January 27, 1838.

2 "The Romance of the Chickering--The Story of the Cabinetmaker's Apprentice" Two pamphlets.

"Chickering---America's Oldest and Best Loved Piano" N.D. Three copies one with "Chickering Pianos In Grand and Vertical Styling." in the back of the cover.


Clipping showing a Chickering (?) piano with a photograph of President Lincoln at the piano.

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Clippings showing various Chickering pianos.

Folder: "Chickering--America's Oldest and Best Loved Piano"
Text and photographs of Craftsmanship.

3 "Jenny Lind and the Chickering"---Two booklets and two folders.
"Liszt and the Chickering"---Two copies.
"The Pianos Used by the Immortal Liszt" Folder.

BOX FOLDER

2 "The Chickering Hall Music Studios De Luxe" 27 & 29 West 57th Street.

4 "Blood Lines of Aeolian American Corporation, East Rochester, New York 14445."
Portrait of Jonas Chickering, Frontpiece, and "The Pianos of Jonas Chickering (eight illustrations)" by Vera Gamet.

"A Thousand Years of Service" Pamphlet. Text and picture of men whose total years of service approximate 1000 years.
Three examples of the name "Chickering" on stencils.

6 "The Chickering Tone-Free Construction"--Text and drawings Two pages and four exhibits.
"Chickering & Sons, Manufacturers Certificate and Warranty" for Piano Forte No. 63743, November 13, 1887.

Lecture in Grand Action Regulating by E.S. Werolin, Issued by The Service Dept. of THE AMPICO CORP., New York, U.S.A.

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Order of Perpetual Injunction against Chickering Bros., Entered April 15, 1913, As amended by U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals by opinion 2:5 Fed. 490.

Abstract of the Title of Charles F. Chickering & George H. Chickering to the Leasehold Premises known as Chickering Hall. Mortgaged to Hon. Henry Hilton for $50,000.

From Charles F. Chickering and George H. Chickering to George Fox (of England) for $50,000 on site of Chichering Hall.


Oct. 25, 1880 - Letter as above stating taxes and interest for 1878.

Nov. 8, 1879 - Insurance Policy from Phoenix Assurance Co. of London for $10,000. Premium $40.00.

Nov. 8, 1880 - Insurance Policy from Phoneix Assurance Co. of London for $10,000 for one year.

Nov. 8, 1881 - Phoenix Policy No. 2,064,168.

June 24, 1882 - Letter from Chickering & Sons to the Lawyers regarding mortgage conditions.

Dec. 29, 1886 - Notice of Summons served on the Chickerings by Henry Hilton

Oct. 25, 1883 - Assignment of lease to Garofelia O. Chickering (Wife of Charles Chickering) for property in New York City.

Series 4: NEWSPAPERS, 1947 - 1876


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Manufacturers and Farmers Journal and Providence and Pawtucket Advertiser, Vol. XXVII, No. 41, Providence Thursday, Monday, May 22, 1848. (Page 1 under pencil mark "What's In A Name?"—reference to Chickering & Sons.)


The Citizen, Vol. 1, No. 23, New York, January 21, 1865, P. 7, ad: Chickering & Sons


The Salem Sunbeam, Vol. XXII, No. 1181, January 26, 1866, p.3 ad: Wm. Knabe & Cos.

BOX  FOLDER

3

Boston Post, Vol. LXIX, No. 78, September 29, 1866, P. 2 (?), ad: Chickering & Sons

New York Tribune, Vol. XXVI, No. 8,028, December 31, 1866, pencil note page 8, Column 2 (History of the Company)


Chicago Daily Tribune, Vol. XXXI, October 30, 1876, p.3, column 3, Special Correspondence, Philadelphia, Oct. 26, "Affairs in the Musical Department at the Centennial - The Judges and the commission Award Knabe & Co. the Leading Position."

Series 5: PHOTOGRAPHS, 1926 - 1966

4

1   Chickering Grand owned and used by the immortal Franz Liszt during the period of his career when his most famous compositions were written. Now located in the Liszt Museum of Budapest, Hungary.

      Chickering - 305 - Grand Conventional picture and sketch, and other styles of grand pianos.

2   Chickering Upright - Consoles and Roll Player

3   1924 Photograph of Employees in front of factory with an

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identifying list of the names, date of employment, and years of Service, with a pencil total of 1312 years.

1926 Photograph of "The Fabulous Chickering Team of Northern California"

Series 6: MANAGEMENT FORMS AND MATERIAL, 1938 - 1968

**BOX FOLDER**

5  1  Blue print of Organizational Chart (n.d.)

   Key Sentences to Be Memorized for Use While Demonstrating the Chickering. (1938)


**BOX FOLDER**


   Page from unknown publication advertising Chickering Pianos.


Series 7: PIANO REGISTERS, 1823-1985,
(51 vols.: 27 Reels Microfilm)

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35  109,000 - 114,979  02/12/07-02/10  29  22  
36  114,980 - 120,867  01/31/10-01/25/13  30  22  
37  120,868 - 126,755  04/16/13-02/09/17  30  22  
38  126,756 - 132,643  02/19/17-07/17/20  31  23  
39  132,644 - 138,485  10/30/20-04/18/24  31  23  
40  138,846 - 144,511  04/18/24-06/08/27  32  23  
41  144,512 - 150,583  05/25/27-04/29/33  33  23  
42  150,923 - 192,679  04/29/33-02/28/49  34  24  
43  167,511 - 203,999  01/16/39-10/29/54  34  24  
44  168,073 - 180,880  03/22/39-04/17/42  35  24  
45  180,882 - 192,649  04/17/42-02/24/49  35  25  
46  204,000 - 215,880  12/29/54-10/04/61  36  25  

Vol.  Piano Nos.  Microfilm  Shipment Dates  Box #  Reel #  
47  215,881 - 227,648  08/31/61-05/14/68  36  26  
48  227,649 - 238,979  07/26/68-10/29/75  37  26  
49  238,980 - 245,352  10/20/75-07/31/79  37  27  
50  245,353 - 251,187  07/31/79-09/09/85  38  27  
1A  1 - 3,200  02/16/07-10/16/12  38  27

(1) Volumes record the number of the instrument, the model, the name of 
the purchaser, the date of the shipment, and related information 
(Volume 1A reports the original cost). Some volumes have pages 
stuck together; possible water damage.

(2) Shipment dates with the last two digits underlined indicate that the 
century is 1800 instead of 1900.

(3) Some pages missing. One loose page in the front of this volume has 
been put in mylar for conservation purposes. Volumes 1 and 3 
returned to donor.

(4) Volume is missing but has been requested.

(5) This volume has listed numbers that are not filled out and in this

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case the information is partially duplicated in a different format than the previous volume.

(6) Pages missing.

(7) Reference to Bench AC Motor 110 Volt-60 cycle, some 50 cycle, and others 30, and 25 cycle. Number 139354 was presented to the President of the Argentine Republic. Number 139379 was the Chickering Centennial Prize Piano. Number 144512 has Bench AC Motor 110 Volt-60 cycle while 144533 has 220 Volt system.

(8) Starts at 150951.

(9) Pages removable—(Full length is 16.5 inches).

(10) Instruments such as Clavichord, Virginal, Harpsichord, Octavina, Spinet, Theorbo Lute, Aeolian Harp, Psaltery, Lute, and Viola da Gamba. Personal Recollections of Arnold Dolmetsch by Mabel Dolmetsch, 1957, is in the collection and has a pencil note: "See Chickering register of serial numbers 1 - 3200."