

A short history of the Savannah Chapter of the American Guild of Organists,
excerpted from a program prepared by Justin L. Addington and James C. Richardson
and presented on September 15, 2014, entitled "Savannah Chapter AGO — the Early Years."
The program consisted of information compiled from the scrapbooks that Elizabeth Buckshaw
meticulously maintained for a quarter of a century, and has now been preserved
in digitalized form so as not to be lost to future generations.

The Savannah Chapter was chartered by the American Guild of Organists on November 10, 1947. Dwight Bruce, who had been instrumental in its formation, was elected its first Dean. Other Deans during the early years included Birdie Fennell, Frank Wilson, Jack Broucek, Elizabeth Buckshaw, Joy Daly Martin, Audrey Harrell, and Miriam Varnedoe.

An article in The Diapason magazine paid homage to "the rich background of church and musical history we have in which to work." Quoting from that article:

There are several edifices of outstanding interest. One is Christ Episcopal Church. The present structure, built about 1880, is on the lot set aside by the founding fathers of Savannah in 1733. John Wesley was one of the first rectors and in this congregation George Whitfield conceived the idea of a Sunday-school. A few blocks away is the Independent Presbyterian Church, a beautiful structure patterned after the Church of St. Martin's in the Fields in London. Lowell Mason was organist here for several years and it was in this church that his "From Greenland's Icy Mountains" was first sung. The largest organ in Savannah is the fine Skinner of the First Baptist Church.

Guild Sundays were important events, and were especially significant since multiple churches would often combine for large organ and choral programs. The service in 1950 featured a 100-voice choir singing the "Gloria" from Mozart's Twelfth Mass. Church choirs represented were from Asbury Methodist, Wesley Monumental Methodist, Trinity Methodist, Christ Episcopal, St. John's Episcopal, St. Paul's Lutheran, Lutheran Church of the Ascension, Independent Presbyterian, Hull Memorial Presbyterian, First Presbyterian, First Christian, Bull Street Baptist, Calvary Baptist, and First Baptist. In 1958 our Chapter brought Austin Lovelace to Savannah to lead a choral clinic. Another innovation was the introduction of handbells to the Guild Sunday program. The Morning News announced that "for the first time in history, a third form of music will be included in the program of the Savannah Chapter of the American Guild of Organists' observance of National Guild Sunday."

Also in 1950, the chapter conducted a 3-day Institute of Church Music. Dr. Clarence Dickinson and Dr. Helen Dickinson were the guest lecturers and performers. In addition to classes, workshops, roundtable discussions, rehearsals, and social events, there was a Hymn Festival one night at St. John's and a Choral Festival another evening at Ascension, in which eleven of Dr. Dickinson's compositions were sung by a select choir.

Among the "big name" performers who performed in Savannah during the early years of our Chapter were Claire Coci, Robert Baker, Carl Heinrich, and in 1955, none other than Virgil Fox! Among those to follow Virgil were Alexander Schreiner, Marilyn Mason, Catherine Crozier, Harold Gleason, E. Power Biggs, and Jean Langlais!