Folding Reed Organ
Video Podcast Transcript
Minnesota Historical Society

I’m Matt Anderson for the Minnesota Historical Society. When we acquire new objects, we look for items that are both inherently interesting, and have great stories attached to them. A prime example is this folding reed organ recently added to our holdings.

The fully functional, foot-pumped organ is designed to fold into its own carrying case, measuring a compact 20 inches tall, by 30 inches wide, by 12 inches deep. Introduced in the late 1800s, folding organs were used in a variety of settings including remote logging camps in the U.S., overseas religious missions, and – most widely – by chaplains in the U.S. military. The organs were portable, durable, and reliable, with their reeds able to stay in tune in any climate.

This particular organ is a product of the Estey Organ Company of Brattleboro, Vermont, the Army’s largest organ supplier during World War II. The instrument’s serial number indicates that it was manufactured between 1935 and 1940, so it very likely saw service in that conflict.

For our purposes, though, the organ’s story begins after the war. It came into the possession of Margaret Adamson, a 1924 graduate of the University of Minnesota and a Minneapolis social worker. When World War II broke out, Adamson joined the Red Cross, and stayed with the agency even after war’s end. Adamson served as Assistant Field Director of the post hospital at Fort Snelling. There she coordinated the efforts of volunteers as they aided in the recuperation and rehabilitation of wounded veterans. Adamson also coordinated morale-boosting programs for the patients – everything from serving afternoon coffee and doughnuts to distributing Christmas presents. And that brings us back to the organ.

Music was a part of the therapy at Fort Snelling, and Adamson used this organ to supply accompaniment to musical programs. Its easy portability made the instrument ideal for transporting from ward to ward in the hospital.

Margaret Adamson passed away in 1988, and the organ sat disused in a garage. Her family donated it to the Minnesota Historical Society in 2009 and, after a careful cleaning and a few incidental repairs, the instrument sounds as wonderful today as it must have sounded to those recovering G.I.s.