

The Baxter University of Music: The First Non-Military Band Academy

West of the Appalachian Mountains Speech

By Brian Standfest

(Slide 1) General Hello, thank the audience for attending and introduce the presentation.

(Slide 2) This research began in Spring 2021 when my faculty sponsor, Dr. James Latten, was reading this article by Phillip M. Hash and saw the name, the *Baxter University of Music*, Friendship, New York, for the first time. This struck a chord in Dr. Latten's mind as he grew up in Wellsville, NY which is only half an hour away from Friendship, and he had never heard of this music university. As he began to dig deeper into this mysterious Baxter University, Dr. Latten brought me on, to help with this research during the Summer of 2021. We began examining different documents and the biography of Dr. Baxter and learned a great deal. We then spent a day doing field research in Friendship, where we saw the remains of the Baxter university and handled surviving documents. We also met local historians Mark Voorheis and Ron Taylor, who have been helping to preserve this material.

(Slide 3) It is important to start with the man himself, Dr. James Baxter. Born in the city of Palatine, NY in 1819, James Baxter was one of four siblings. His father, James Baxter, was in the logging business, and in 1820, he packed the family up and moved to Friendship NY. It was the frontier at the time but had a slowly growing town and a ripening logging industry.

At a young age, James showed a love of music, and his family loved music and participated in the local Friendship church choir. As James became older, he tried to craft a flute for himself, and then a fiddle, which he accomplished. His father, however, disapproved of the instruments and threw them into the fireplace. Later though, the family acquired a real fiddle for James and other simple string instruments for the rest of the family to practice and perform with.

Once James became a young man, he gained an internship as a Millwright apprentice, and then at the age of twenty-one, he threw himself into his music and was determined to make a career out of it.

(Slide 4) In the 1840s, Baxter started a series of local choirs and bands within about a 30-mile radius of Friendship, NY. He was very passionate about music and would be on the road constantly to conduct his bands and choirs. There are records that people would hear Baxter practicing on instruments in his wagon as he traveled by. He had no formal training in music besides his youth in a church choir, but he was able to teach himself rudiments and the proper blowing and fingering techniques for different brass and wind instruments.

(Slide 5) In 1853, Baxter opened a one-room rehearsal studio on the main road of Friendship, aptly named *Baxter's Music Room*. This small single-room studio would soon expand as Baxter took on more students to instruct. Then in 1860 or so, Baxter had expanded his meager space into a larger building better able to handle the number of students. The studio was renamed the *Allegheny Academy of Music* to reflect this expansion. Things were going well for Baxter during the 1860s and the 1870s, and the school saw another expansion and was renamed the *Baxter University of Music*. This was the first music conservatory of its kind beyond the Appalachian Mountains.

(Slide 6) The university was divided into four different departments: Sacred, Secular, Orchestra, and Band. Baxter hired additional teachers to help in instruction and along with music theory, the university offered courses in History, English, and Public Speaking. The curriculum was considered very rigorous not only in music theory but also in performance as each student had to show proficiency to graduate. There are reports that residents in Friendship would hear students practicing every day between 6 am and 10 pm. A normal program would be 3 years

long, with three terms throughout the year, and before the semester began each student had to pay \$100 in tuition and fees. Each of these classes would be in classroom settings, much like today, and there would be concerts and recitals throughout the semesters for both students, faculty, and townspeople to attend.

(Slide 7) It seemed the *Baxter University of Music* was the best music conservatory in the United States. There are surviving records from local newspapers that praise it and James Baxter, but it is unclear whether these were true accounts or had been paid for as a form of advertisement. The newspaper accounts also mention how the school was innovative and the first of its kind, for the classroom setting it offered, and the different classes and recitals required for students. We have to make our own judgments, and I think these accounts lie somewhere in between. It would make sense to pay for testimonies like this to promote a school, and many universities still do this today, but with 150ish students each term, and this number sustained until the late 1870s, it seems likely students genuinely loved the university and praised it and James Baxter.

(Slide 8) The university also had a national publishing company, which provided music and rehearsal scores to students in the university, but also for students across the United States. Baxter ran the publishing company with the university's principal A.N. Johnson and the university treasurer J.C. Crandall. During our fieldwork, we had the opportunity to see some of the surviving books sold by the publishing company.

(Slide 9) We cannot talk about the *Baxter University of Music*, without mentioning A.N. Johnson. Artemus Nixon Johnson was born in Vermont in 1817, and like Baxter showed an early love of music, and as a teenager, he became the organist of a church in Boston. At the age of twenty-one, Johnson began to devote his life to music and became the assistant of Lowell

Mason, who was prominent in 19th-century American Church music. As Johnson's career developed, he became the music director of several Boston churches, and by 1838 he took on George F. Root, who would later go on to write Civil War songs, as a student. This partnership allowed Johnson to study abroad, and he became one of the first European-trained musicians in America. Johnson then ended his partnership with Root and from 1850 on, Johnson began to look westward.

Then, in the mid-1860s Johnson moved to the town of Friendship, where he would work with James Baxter and become the principal of the *Allegheny Academy of Music*. Johnson's prestige on the east coast, and abroad, helped bring more students to the school, and he helped advertise the school as "the oldest, the largest, and most successful music school in the United States." Again, our research suggests that they were not the first in the United States, but west of the Appalachian Mountains. Johnson helped Baxter establish and run the publishing company for the school, and through the 1860s the school underwent massive growth.

Although in 1870 Johnson left Friendship for unexplained reasons. The most plausible reason is that Johnson wanted to look for a new challenge after having succeeded with Baxter in Friendship. He traveled to Miami, established another music conservatory, and continued teaching until his death in 1892. Johnson's self-isolation and competition with Root and Mason caused him to fade into obscurity in the subject of American music.

(Slide 10) Despite the university's high popularity across the United States, sometime in 1883, the university closed. There are a variety of theories behind the closure of the school, but our research has been inconclusive. One theory is that after A.N. Johnson left the university in 1870, the school began to decline in attendance. Another theory is that Baxter had borrowed money, and was unable to pay his creditors back, forcing him to close. I think the most plausible

reason the university closed was due to a decline in students, because of the university's price, and the amount of work needed to graduate. After the university closed in 1883, Baxter continued to give private lessons and conduct music until he died in 1897.

(Slide 11) Not much remains today of the *Baxter University of Music*. The building originally built as "Baxter's Music Room" still stands where it had in 1853. The archives of the Friendship Historical Society contain a variety of published and unpublished photographic material and written materials from the university. Some of the items include photos I have used throughout this presentation, along with books, brochures, and even a few stereographic images of the school. The Friendship library also has one of James Baxter's original pianos and some brass and percussion instruments also owned by the school. Despite the general lack of public knowledge about James Baxter, the Friendship Town Historian Mark Voorheis, and others have helped to preserve this material. Currently, Dr. Latten, local historians Mark Voorheis, Ron Taylor, and I are in the process of having the remains of the *Baxter University of Music* acknowledged by the State of New York as a Historical Landmark.

(Slide 12) The End, does anyone have any questions (either here or on Zoom)?