



MASSACHUSETTS CULTURAL COUNCIL
FOLK & TRADITIONAL ARTS PROGRAM

FIELDNOTES

Fieldworker(s) [(Initials) Name]: (KK) Kate Kruckemeyer, ()

Accession Numbers:

KK-07-05-FNKK-07-05-CKK-07-05-D- - -M

Fieldnotes

Audio recordings

Photographic documentation

Additional materials

Initial Contact: _____ Contact Date: 6/28/2007

Related Accession Numbers: - - - - -

Individual/Group/Event: Allen Williams

Address: _____

City: _____

Zip: _____

County: _____

Phone: Daytime _____

Evening: _____

E-mail: _____

Website: _____

Contact person: _____

Title: _____

Location of Interview: Chester Granite Company

Street Address: _____

City: East OtisZip: 01029County: Berkshire

Special Needs (including translation): _____

Traditions documented on visit (traditional art/skills, occupational experience, ethnic or religious community): stone carving, including hand lettering; traditional granite quarrying methods

Traditions noted for follow-up: _____

Other Possible Contacts: _____

Summary Description: see attached

Allen Williams

Work: Chester Granite Company

East Otis, MA

(413) 269-4287

fax: (413) 269-7738

lives at:



BACKGROUND TO VISIT AND SUMMARY:

Allen Williams was noted in the 1988 SI fieldwork as an exceptional, traditionally trained stone carver. For some time he had been on our list of people to speak with, but I was spurred to contact him in spring 2007 to ascertain whether there was a possibility of showing some of his work, particularly hand-carved lettering, in the 2008 exhibit. It turns out that he does very little lettering these days (see below), and understandably given the utilitarian nature of that aspect of his craft, doesn't have old examples on-site. While the idea for inclusion in the exhibit fell through, it was a pleasure and an education to meet Mr. Williams. He is exceptionally knowledgeable about his craft, both from traditional training and his own life-long pursuit of knowledge on the subject. He is a confident speaker and experienced teacher. I am not certain of how he might be involved in Folk Arts and Heritage Programs as they currently function, but I am certain that he should be considered a master craftsman and a State treasure in a specialized and ancient trade/art.

SUMMARY OF TOPICS DISCUSSED ON TAPE:

We spoke on tape only for a brief period, then moving outside to tour the grounds.

Elements discussed on the tape include:

- the history of the Chester Granite Company, which has been in his family since his father bought it in 1953 (his father was employed there prior to becoming the proprietor).
- the evolution of the major production of the quarry from monuments (including lettering and polishing), to monuments plus curbing and landscape products, to its current focus on architectural work and sculpture.
- some personal history: born in 1947, began working at the quarry as a young boy, learned from the old Finnish carvers there, and started his own business at the quarry in 1970. Describes some of the work and research he has done to learn old methods, particularly in relation to building restoration.
- current work of the quarry, including: His restoration work is not all using stone from this quarry—they often try to bring stone from the site of the original for the building being worked on, or use salvaged stone. The quarry currently employs five people, some of whom have been with him many years and have become quite skilled in their own right.
- opinions about stonework: He describes granite carving as "impossible" in terms of its effects on the body, "and then just the material itself...does not want to be worked."

OTHER ITEMS OF DISCUSSION (NOT ON TAPE):

Mr. Williams's initial description by phone of his work now was to call it "hand cut architectural stonework." Wherever practical, and especially in doing restoration, he and his employees use tools dating back to the 1800s. He is also a collector of old stonework tools and old quarry machinery.

Allen Williams's major foray into letter carving on stone was the production of 24 headstones for the restoration of the Ancient Burying Ground in Hartford, Connecticut in 1989. Stones that were repairable were renovated by another local company that developed a patch that could be used on the stone. Given the extremes of pollution in this urban graveyard, however, many of the stones were not salvageable, and moreover, many that were salvageable were illegible. Allen was commissioned to create new stones for the most compromised graves. Detailed records had been kept at the cemetery of the inscriptions on stones as well as the identity of the carvers. Allen was involved in researching extant examples of work by those carvers in better-preserved cemeteries in the area. Between the known texts and his understanding of the styles preferred by the original carvers, Allen created replicas that were true to the artistic spirit of the originals. He says that the most elaborate of the stones he carved was that for Ebenezer Watson, who founded the Hartford Courant. He has continued to carve the occasional stone for the Ancient Burying Ground as need arises; "a couple years ago" he carved a replica of the monument for Governor William Leete (governor from 1676-1683).

While Allen said that he certainly does know how to hand carve letters in stone, he rarely does so anymore. To a certain extent, he says that the work at the Ancient Burying Ground "ruined" it for him—it was too much of a good thing, and he got tired of it. While he is occasionally commissioned to craft a monument with hand lettering for a private client, such work represents very little of his current output.

I asked how people would find him for such commissions, and he cited his longstanding work with Hancock Shaker Village as a primary means. For about twenty years he has been invited to do craft festivals and demonstrations at HSV. Much of the work he has done there is restoration of their buildings and stonework on the grounds. He particularly noted his work re-creating their Fountain Stone, which he accomplished over 10 years of demonstration work in front of the visitors to HSV. The Fountain Stone was an inscribed monument of great religious significance to the Shakers. When the colony disbanded, they destroyed the original Fountain Stone so that it would not be desecrated. The text on the stone as well as the original dimensions were recorded in the works of Mother Ann Lee, and Allen worked from those recorded details in recreating the stone for HSV.

In touring the shop and then the quarry, Allen showed me a number of phases of the process, described briefly below with reference to relevant photos. During my visit, I also had the pleasure of meeting Allen's wife Kathleen, who is a painter and former art teacher. She helps in the business as well.

In the quarry [Photos 11 through 13], Allen showed me portions of the quarry both in use and historic. Historically, this quarry was run with a fixed derrick and open pit. Today he uses fill (rubble from the quarry) to build ramps so that he can move his machinery where

it is needed. This is called a “bench quarry” or “drive-in quarry.” They move about 60 tons of granite per week. Approximately 20 of those tons will be stone that is usable in the shop, and the rest is used as fill. Usable stone will range in quality as well (the aforementioned business in curbstones was one way to utilize usable but not top-quality stone). Water is pumped out of the quarry almost continuously. He says that the natural water table would fill the entire quarry in about 2 years.

Once in the shop, the stone first goes through the “wire saw”; this is a wire embedded with diamonds. The stone is loaded onto an electric railroad car to be passed through this saw, which is 8 feet high. [See photos 01 through 03.] The second cut is done by the “circular saw,” which is also a diamond blade. This saw has smaller clearance (40 inches) but increased accuracy from the wire saw. [Photo 04] Depending on needs, some pieces go directly to the handwork area [Photos 05 through 07] or to the “trim saw,” likewise a diamond blade. [Photo 08] Most pieces eventually end up at the polisher. [Photo 09]

Most of the architectural work done by the quarry is, as befits the business, shipped out and used elsewhere. What work is on-site is primarily Allen’s sculpture. [See photos 14 through 23, 26, and 32] We talked about his process with this work. He says that he starts with an idea and makes a drawing, but that it “never works.” You always have to adjust your vision to the reality of the stone you are working with. His purpose is to “celebrate the stone in its natural state” and “create something but make it look accidental” or natural.

In the quarry yard, Allen Williams has an extensive collection of old quarrying equipment. [See photo 10] In Photo 10 there is a hand-powered wooden derrick that a friend found for him at an auction. The photo also includes an old winch. Allen says that the major competition he has for acquiring these historical piece is the scrap metal market. At the end of our visit, he and his wife Kathleen suggested I might like to take a walk to see the restored wooden derrick at the nearby Chester-Hudson Quarry, which is in the Becket Land Trust land. [See Photos 37-39, and also enclosed materials from the Land Trust site.] I took a walk through the site on my way home. The towering derrick is particularly impressive.

When I told Allen that I lived in Holyoke, he noted that he has done some work there, including the carved benches at the front of City Hall, and a hand-carved city seal which he thinks is on Appleton Street [I am not sure, but I think he might mean the seal at the memorial on Appleton at the S.E. side of Holy Cross church].

OTHER POTENTIAL SOURCES OF DOCUMENTATION ON ALLEN WILLIAMS:

Although he does not have his own website, there are many sites on the web describing Mr. Williams as a teacher and/or select commissions he has done. In particular, I was interested in the information at: <http://www.saxstonecarving.com/williams.html>.

Allen Williams participated as a demonstrator in an exhibition at the Commonwealth Museum about 12 years ago. For this exhibit, the Museum did an oral history with him of the Quarry, which should be available through the Museum.