



MASSACHUSETTS CULTURAL COUNCIL
FOLK & TRADITIONAL ARTS PROGRAM

AUDIO TAPE LOG

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Fieldworker(s): Kate Kruckemeyer

Interviewee(s): Allen Williams

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Recorded in: mono Tape Brand and Format: Cassette, 60 minutes

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Brief summary of tape contents: history of Chester Granite; his family's involvement; how he learned; evolution of the granite business (from primarily memorials to primarily architectural work); his work in restoration using materials from this and other sites;

Counter/ABS	Contents
	see attached

003 tape introduction 6/28/2007

004 KK: The quarry has been here how long?

AW: The best we can date it, it was opened in the 1870s, and it was opened by a group of Finns who came here from Quincy, Mass. They were granite cutters from Quincy. And in traveling out to the western part of the state on Route 20, they noticed there were some grey ledges along 20 where there were rock cliffs, and they knew it was very high quality granite. So they came up into these hills, and opened two quarries, two large quarries. One is referred to historically as the Hudson Quarry, and this was referred to as the Bowe Quarry. The dating would be in the 1870s, and in the 1890s a private railroad was constructed to serve the quarries, to bring the granite from these quarries down into the village of Chester, where the finishing plants were.

014 KK: [clarifying spelling]

AW: B-O-W-E. It's referred to in geological books as the Finn Quarry or the Bowe Quarry.

KK: Do you know what the name Bowe came from?

AW: It was probably a family name, of the property, perhaps the farm that preceded the quarry.

KK: And when did your family become involved with the quarry?

AW: My father worked in both of the quarries as a young man, and his first job was in maintenance, and then he ran what's called a shot saw, for the Hudson Chester Quarry. That was in the village of Chester, he ran and operated a shot saw. And when that company went out of business, he came to this quarry, and designed and built a shot saw, steel shot saw, as a subcontractor, for the owners of the quarry. And he contracted with the Chester Granite Company to saw all the stone they quarried up here on the premises. And then that only lasted until 1952, and the company burnt to the ground, the whole quarry operation burnt to the ground. The following year my father bought the remaining—what was left of the quarry, the remaining stock of the corporation, and that's when we came into the picture.

028 KK: Can—just to back up, a shot saw does what part of the process?

AW: That was the means of—sawing the stone has been an evolutionary process, and in the '30s and '40s, the stone was sawed with chilled-steel shot, and the blade of the saw was a circular blade, and the stone was processed through a stationary circular blade. It's an evolutionary process: later on, the stone was sawed with carborundum and then, more recently, with diamonds. But in the era of the heyday of these quarries, the most common way of sawing granite was with chilled-steel shot. The need for sawing continues through all these periods, but the abrasive changes with technology.

KK: And so now you're using diamonds?

AW: All of our sawing work now is done with manufactured diamonds.

040 KK: So your father took over the quarry in '53?

AW: '53.

KK: And at that point what sort of—what were they [known for?]

AW: All these quarries, their main product was monuments, and the reason for that is, it's a very highly desirable stone because of its fine grain. It has a fine, dense, blue grain. And the hand lettering of these old stones was very visible, because of the light/dark contrast. It's a darker, finer granite than the best-known granite, which is Barre granite. So it was very much in demand, and this was an era when people were spending a lot of

money on family memorials, so it was—all these quarries produced monuments. Later on, we started producing granite curbing and other landscape products.

KK: In those years, in producing the monuments, was the quarry also doing the lettering, or simply producing the blocks?

AW: Everything. It was a very advanced—this was not just a hardscrabble quarry where stone was split. It was cut, polished, lettered, and very, very elaborate memorials came out of these two quarries. And that was also a sign of the times. People stayed in one area for generation after generation, so a family plot was usually a very elaborate stone. In some cases there was iron fencing around the plot. So, the work was very elaborate work; they would do all the lettering and polishing.

058 KK: Did people come here to place the order as well, what they wanted for designs?

AW: No. All this work that was being done, was being done for small dealerships throughout the northeast. The market area for this granite was from Maine to Wisconsin. It was shipped by rail out of Chester to dealers—a lot of dealers in Ohio and Pennsylvania, and from my records a fair number of dealers in Michigan and Wisconsin.

KK: So the order would come in...

AW: Right, this was wholesale work which was being done for dealerships.

KK: Did that part of the business go into decline at a certain period?

AW: Most quarries in this country experienced changes in the late '40s, early '50s. There were changes in memorialization, and the market has been actually fairly stable since then. It has not expanded. But other uses of granite have expanded tremendously.

KK: So that's when the curbstones came more into play?

AW: Well, it was a means also of fully utilizing the quarry. The quarrying process is very expensive. So the less desirable stone was still qualified as curbing grade—building grade is the term used in the trade. And then the most select stuff is used for monuments.

076 KK: What sort of changes have you seen in the time that you've been involved in terms of what is produced by the quarry, or what the demand is?

AW: Well, what's produced by the quarry has a little bit to do with my skills and interests, rather than what the market is. I've focused on one-of-a-kind, handmade work, because that's where my interest lies. In the trade in general, the use of granite is expanding, and granite is very popular in residential construction and commercial building. In markets other than memorial markets, the big sea changes were when we no longer built buildings that were *structural* masonry buildings. Early on in this country, all public buildings were—they didn't have a framework of steel, they were load-bearing masonry walls, and that produced a huge demand for granite. And that—a big change took place right around 1900 when structural steel was being used in commercial buildings, and the use of concrete.

KK: So now you're getting granite facings instead.

AW: It went from load-bearing walls to more of a cladding, skin.

093 KK: So when did you get involved in the operation here?

AW: Well, it was a small family business, so growing up my brother and I were here at the quarry, just like, historically, [was] traditional in a family farm. We were here all the time when we weren't in school. So we learned, hands-on, from the old cutters who were still here, the Finns that were still carving. And then my interest ran more toward sculpture and craft, and so when I started my own business, which would have been 1970, I focused more on handwork.

KK: And was that a business that you did in conjunction with the quarry here, or was that somewhere else?

AW: That was my own resurrection of the Chester Granite Company, continuing the history of the company by doing hand-work.

KK: What year were you born?

AW: '47.

KK: So you were quite young when your dad took over the quarry.

AW: Yes, we grew up [here], and it was literally a very small business. A few of the old Finn carvers were still working here, and my father, and we worked right alongside him, running the saws, splitting the stone out down in the quarry, working with the old wooden derricks.

KK: So you saw all parts of the process from the beginning...

AW: It was a very fortunate thing, to have seen the early methods of carving and quarrying—I didn't think it was fortunate at the time.

KK: But you came around later. At what point did your view on that shift?

AW: It shifted slowly. But to go on in a trade that you grew up in, you have to reinvent it, you have to put your own...

116 KK: And so who—were there people who helped you form your new idea of how to go forward with the more—

AW: Absolutely, my association with—one of the early things that happened that influenced me very strongly was my association with the Hancock Shaker Village in Hancock, Mass, because they were just becoming an established museum, and the director, John Ott, at the time, decided that he wanted active demonstrations of the early crafts, and established a twice-a-year craft festival. That began in 1976, and for 20 years I participated there as a stonemason, demonstrating lettering, and hand-splitting and dressing stone. And that influenced me a lot, seeing the way—studying the way—the Shakers cut stone, and their approach to craft, has been very important. Not how many things they made, but how well they were made.

KK: Besides the stonemasons, the Finns, who were here, and your father, were there other teachers who were particularly important in your learning process? I think I saw somewhere that you had gone to Europe, or to Ireland...

AW: One of the things that I needed to learn, when I started doing restoration work on a lot of public buildings, was: I knew all the tools and techniques of granite-carving, but the earlier buildings we were working on had limestone and brownstone. And the tools are slightly different, and the finishes are slightly different. And through traveling in England and Ireland, at the time when they were doing a lot of major restoration of their public buildings, I was able to fill in some of the blank spots there, in terms of tools and techniques. And through the Early American Industries Association, I was able to track down some of these obscure dressing tools. So now we have all—to the best of my knowledge—about every type of bush-hammer, crandall, and hand tool, droves and bolsters, that were used in the trade, in the soft-stone trade as well as the granite trade. [NOTE: I don't know if I am interpreting all the names of these tools correctly from the tape] So when we do restoration work, we work the same stone with the same tools, by hand.

KK: So you figure out what would have been used on that building at that time.

AW: Right. I was a little unfamiliar, early on, with how brownstone and limestone would have been dressed, and what produced the finishes that were still visible on the building.

151 KK: So there are times when you're doing restoration work on other materials, that aren't quarried here, and then there are times that you are doing work on your own quarried stone.

AW: Correct. In some cases, a lot of these restoration projects involve going to an abandoned quarry site, because the stone is not quarried *at all*, the original stone that was used. But we've had some successes in tracking down where the stone came from and getting permission to bring out stone from old quarry sites to do restoration work.

KK: And so in that case you're bringing in your equipment to take the stone out, or how does that work?

AW: Right. Well, each case is different. Now, in the case of the restoration work we did for Harvard University, the University tracked down salvage material of the same—in that case it was Nova Scotia sandstone. The University was able to track down pieces, large pieces of salvage stones that we worked from. In some cases, the brownstone quarry that was used was no longer operating, but in one case the quarry site was on public land and we were able to get permission to go in and bring out blocks that were already quarried.

167 KK: Your operation now, how many people work here?

AW: Five.

KK: And does everyone know all parts of the process, or do people specialize in certain aspects? How does that work?

AW: There is specialization. The hand-carved lettering I do mostly myself. And the younger fellows do rock pitch work, and molding work. So there is specialization.

KK: Generally how have you found people, or how do people come to be involved with...

AW: They are people who came right from the local community, who weren't specifically seeking out a granite quarry. All these fellows came right from the area, and early on realized how special it was, to work stone, to learn how to master a very difficult material. And they stayed with me. Shaun has been with me 24 years, Rick 19 years. So they stayed on; they saw a little bit of what I saw.

KK: Does it seem like when you are ready to give it over, there are people who might want to continue it?

AW: I don't know, I don't know. There's a lot of interest in stone and stonework. I don't think that anyone who says they're curious and interested realizes how [laughs] impossible a task it is. I don't know. I would like to think, though, that there will always be people carving stone in the traditional way, that there will still be some who have an interest in doing that.

180 KK: You used the word "impossible." What feels—what's impossible about it?

AW: Oh—one of the things is, what working granite does to the human body. The tools you use, what it does to your hands. It's very, very unforgiving in terms of just your physical [being]. The pneumatics, what they do to your hands. The dust is extremely dangerous. And then just the material itself is—does not want to be worked. It's a very difficult craft.

201 KK: What are some of the projects that you've done that have been most interesting for you?

AW: Well, that's evolutionary. The work we've done on public buildings, each building poses a new challenge. In one case it was a granite church, and we had to carve a new rose window and new gothic arches for the church. So when you start in on a restoration job, you learn about that building, who built it and when, where the stone came from, the architecture, you get to study the architecture of that building. So each building is very rewarding; they send you to the history books. One recent project that's just getting underway is a restoration of two of the Whistler arches on the Boston and Albany Railroad. They're dry-laid stone arches 90 feet off the Westfield River. We're doing parapet walls, and spandrel wall replacement stone for those. That's quite a story, because they were constructed in the 1840s, prior to air power, all handwork, and very dramatic structures. So each job has its rewards, and each one's different.

KK: So that's 90 feet up that you're replacing things?

AW: Right. It's a barrel arch that carried two tracks of the Boston and Albany Railroad built around 1840.

KK: Is it still in use?

AW: There are seven arches, two of them are still in use.

KK: You're working on ones that are—

AW: The ones that are out of use are now being made into a hiking trail, the State is bringing back the—stabilizing the arches as a destination for hikers.

KK: Interesting. And are you working with engineers who will help place them, or are you also doing placement?

AW: The actual on-site work will be done by a general contractor. Because of the scale of the operation there will be channel wall construction—the river will literally have to be de-watered to stabilize the arches.

KK: Oh, wow. That's pretty amazing. Is that something that can be seen from a vantage point?

AW: Yes, oh yes, the trail is open, the historic Chester Arches.

KK: It's over the Westfield River in Chester?

AW: It's between Chester and Middlefield.

241 KK: And so that's one of the major projects you're working on now. What other things are in the pipeline?

AW: Well, a lot of our projects are residential projects. There are a number of people who are building granite mansions. There's a real demand now for extraordinary homes built in the tradition of the Newport mansions, and this is actually happening in real time right now, new homes, brand new homes being built in stone. The "ultimate home" is a stone home. So, some of our most challenging work right now is actually private residential homes.

KK: Because they're structurally stone as well, although they're not as big as a municipal building.

AW: Um-hmm.

KK: And are those all over? Is this mostly in the northeast?

AW: One we did recently was in California, and we are working on two in Connecticut.

KK: Tell me a little bit about the process [in the quarry]. Or, actually, would you mind just kind of walking me through it out there? Is it safe to do that? I'll take my pad and paper rather than this [recorder]. But I would love to see it. END OF TAPE at about 261