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MASTERS OF GRANITE - ITALIANS IN BARRE, VERMONT

The newly created nation of Italy was not okay during the last quarter of the 19th century. Poor economic growth, added to a vast growing population, ushered in fewer opportunities for workers and artisans. The Italian government went so far as to encourage emigration to America. While the streets may not be paved with gold, there may be jobs. One such area looking for skilled workers was the stone quarries of Vermont.

It was the Vermont Marble Company in Rutland that first wooed Italian stone carvers. Cutting and carving marble was a familiar trade. As the rail lines in Vermont improved, the granite cutting and sculpting business grew new opportunities. Skilled craftsmen from the Carrara area and the northern Italian provinces made



the journey to Barre for a new opportunity mining and sculpting the granite of Vermont. By the early 20th century over 14% of Barre's population was of Italian descent.

These stone carvers were usually single males or married men who left their wives/families back in Italy. They lived in boarding houses and saved as much as they could to bring their families to America. Most were already master sculptors, carvers and stone cutters who often started their trade as young boys and, for those trained as sculptors, they apprenticed for as many as 10 years.

These immigrants included some of Barre's outstanding pre-World War II carvers and sculptors: Carlo Abate, Joseph Calcagni, John Comi, Elia Corti, William Corti, Enrico Mori, Samuel Novelli, Augusto Sanguinetti, and Geno Tosi.

Novelli & Corti was established by Samuel ("Sandro") Novelli and Elia Corti in 1901. It became one of the premier granite carving studios in the world.

Stone cutters from around the east coast and even more from Italy seized the opportunity to make the switch from carving marble to carving granite. It was not a great problem for most carvers who enjoyed carving the finely grained, uniform, and hard but not brittle Barre granite.

usually done in open sided sheds which allowed the silica dust to escape. The Vermont climate dictated that their work was done in closed structures forcing the workers to breathe in the stone dust. Their lungs literally turned to stone. Hope Cemetery in Barre remains as an iconic tribute to these early workers. It is here that many of the workers carved their own tombstones as they suffered through the final stages of the disease.

Many of the cutters and carvers made their offspring promise to reject the granite industry. The post WWII era saw a shortage of skilled granite workers. Offering compensation sometimes over 5 times what was offered in Italy a new wave of Italian stone workers arrived. Some of Barre's outstanding post-World War II carvers and sculptors include Angelo Ambrosini, Angelo Bardelli, Giuliano Cecchinelli, Alcide Fantoni, Flavio Furloni, Frank Gaylord, Ernesto Malnati, Orazio Marselli, Gino Sassi, and Lambruno Scranini.

Today OSHA and Vermont safety rules require proper safety measures throughout the entire industry.

If you're planning a fall drive through Vermont, add this area to your trip. It is amazing. This author thanks the Vermont Granite Museum for their help with this article and their continuing excellence in displaying the contributions of these Italian-Americans who made Barre, Vermont the "Granite Capital of the World." □



Louis Brusa, a Barre stonecutter, died in 1937 at age 50 from silicosis. His monument is one of the most tragic in Hope Cemetery. Brusa is shown exhausted and slumped backward with his wife Mary comforting him. His chest is merged into the granite base symbolic of his lungs filled with granite dust. (Thanks to the Vermont Granite Museum)

However, a hidden danger would soon take its toll on the Italian granite cutters and carvers. Silicosis or the "American Disease" would begin to impact the health of many of the Italian workers. In Italy, carving was

