



HONORING THEIR OWN

THE STONECUTTERS OF BARRE

BY KEVIN M. WALSH

Visit Barre, Vermont, and you will be welcomed at the edge of downtown on North Main Street by a 23-foot high, 43-ton granite statue of a stonecutter. The text on the statue's base proclaims the importance of Italian immigrants in Barre. It reads, "In honor of all Italian Americans whose achievements have enriched the social, cultural and civic vitality of this city, region and state."

Barre, located in north central Vermont, has long been referred to as the "Granite Capital of the World." Barre granite, famous for its unique gray color, is a very hard stone that is impervious to weather, making it a favorite choice for buildings, memorials—and gravestones.

In the late 1800s, expert Italian stonecutters started to follow in the footsteps of Scottish stoneworkers by immigrating to Barre to escape a shrinking job market at home. They hoped to obtain one of Barre's many stonecutting jobs, which paid more money in a town that also offered an opportunity to start one's own business.

The "padrone system" (in Italian, padrone means the boss or manager) relied upon labor brokers to find talented stonecutters in Italy and match them with jobs in Barre. Many of the stonecutters who came to Barre were single, but even those who were married would come by themselves for the opportunity to get established. They saved the money they earned, and when they had enough, they sent for their families. Meanwhile, the single men relied upon the padrones or their family connections to find Italian women willing to travel to America to develop relationships with eligible bachelors.

Italians, especially from Italy's northern areas, came to Barre by the thousands. From 1890 to 1900, Barre's

The 23-foot high, 43-ton granite statue of an Italian stonecutter pays homage to the Italian immigrants of Barre, Vermont.

population increased substantially. By 1910, a significant percentage of this immigrant melting pot community was Italian. Recruiting efforts were aided by the fact that many of the newly arrived Italian immigrants felt comfortable in Barre, an area reminiscent of their home towns in Italy.

According to Todd Paton, Director of Visitor Services for the Rock of Ages Quarry, Italian culture flourished in Barre, especially in the city's north end. Paton states that the local Italian community developed its own social clubs, opened its own stores, and started its own Italian language newspapers. Some immigrants formed an independent opera company, while others formed an Italian baseball team that went on to win the state championship in 1909.

The Italian stonecutters were good workers and quite skilled in their craft. They were also socially active, and a lot of them became very involved in political and labor union issues. Many Italian workers split into opposing factions of socialists and anarchists, which sometimes caused tensions to flare in Barre. These tensions heightened in 1903 at a labor gathering where both warring factions were present. A man suddenly pulled out a gun and shot into the crowd, killing a well-known and respected stonecutter named Elia Corti.

The Italian immigrants worked hard at a dangerous job. In 1900, quarrying involved hard manual labor combined with the use of explosives. Once the cut granite reached the mill, machines processed the stone, producing a dust

that caused the deaths of many stonecutters. By 1920, the average life expectancy of a Barre granite stonecutter was less than that of the national average for men.

Many Italian stonecutters suffered and died from a lung disease called silicosis, nicknamed "the stone cutters tuberculosis." Silicosis was caused by inhaling large amounts of silica found in the granite dust that filled the air of the enclosed factories. In her book *Man Against Granite*, author and historical researcher Mari Tomasi wrote that stonecutters' wives recalled how "sometimes the smell of granite dust on their husband's clothes would make them want to cry." Italian stonecutters had avoided this dust problem in their homeland, where factories in the milder climate there could operate with open sides, permitting air flow and allowing most of the stone dust to filter outside.

Stonecutters' deaths became so common that Saturday evening social events were regularly held to raise funds for needy families. In 1906, Italians formed the Societa di Mutuo Soccorso (the Society of Mutual Relief), a mutual aid society and fraternal community support group which helped provide affordable medical care and death benefits for families of those who succumbed to silicosis. Initially, membership in this group included only Italian men, or men who spoke Italian.

To honor their fellow Italian craftsmen, Barre stonecutters—and sometimes the ill men themselves—created large, elaborate gravestones to serve as permanent memorials



One of Barre's granite quarries that helped make the town known as "The Granite Capital of the World."

THE GRAVESTONES OF HOPE CEMETERY (BARRE, VERMONT)







Giuseppe Donati's evocative gravestone.

downtown, several thousand gravestones, many of which are works of art, are spread out over Hope Cemetery's 65 acres of winding roads and rolling hills. Thousands of tourists visit this cemetery each year to admire unique memorials, including carvings of airplanes, human figures and faces, a life size couple in bed (in their pajamas, or course), a huge soccer ball, chairs, angels, a race car, a book, and a bass violin. Other stones display intricate etchings of scenes such as a covered bridge, the canals of Venice, a tractor-trailer truck, a baseball player, and a country home.

One prominent stone is for Louis Brusa, an Italian stonecutter and labor activist. Brusa's life-sized memorial, which he helped carve himself, shows him exhausted and

to the skills, artistry, and dedicated work of those who died too young. Barre's cemeteries became outdoor granite art galleries, filled with wonderfully detailed and intricate gravestones honoring the Italian stonecutters.

Most notable among these cemeteries is one called Hope Cemetery. On Maple Avenue a few miles north of Barre's



Elia Corti, the Italian stonecutter who was shot and killed at the 1903 labor rally.

slumped in the arms of a comforting woman. Another frequently visited gravestone is for Elia Corti, the stonecutter shot at the labor rally in 1903. His stone is a three-dimensional, life-sized carving of Corti's entire body sitting on a large granite block, the tools of his trade surrounding him. And not to be missed is the stone for Giuseppe Donati, which shows a man smoking and a woman's face taking form in the smoke drifting up from the cigarette.

The life of an Italian stonecutter is summarized nicely in another novel by Mari Tomasi called *Like Lesser Gods*. In the story, a stonecutter dying of silicosis explains to his doctor why he worked with the granite. Granite, he says, "is hard stone. Beautiful. Lasting. Always when I carve a name on a memorial, I feel, well, important. I carve the name and I say to myself, 'from up there in heaven the Dio creates new life, and when he sees fit to take it away, then we stone cutters on earth take up where He left off. We take up the chisel, we carve the name, we make a memory of that life.'"

In taking up their chisels, Barre's Italian stonecutters carved memorials that all but touch immortality.

Kevin Walsh is a civil trial attorney from the Boston, Massachusetts area. In his free time, he enjoys writing about and photographing New England history and travel topics.

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Labor activist Louis Brusa.

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