Set in Stone: Masons' Skills Shine in Paul College Wall

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Granite Wall Shows Attention to Detail in Construction

JERAMY VOISINE WITH STONEAGE STONE WORKS OF BERWICK, MAINE, LINES UP THE STONE PUZZLE PIECES THAT FORM AN INTRICATE STONE WALL AROUND THE PERIMETER OF THE NEW PETER T. PAUL COLLEGE OF BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS ON MONDAY, JULY 16, 2012.

You won't see the newest UNH art exhibit in a gallery or private collection. But take a stroll down Garrison Avenue, round the corner onto Rosemary Lane, and the stunning granite sculpture just might stop you in your tracks.

On quick glance, it is just a simple stone wall at the foot of the new Peter T. Paul College of Business and Economics.

Linger though, and you'll notice hundreds of stones of every shape, from mere pebbles to 600-pound blocks, artfully pieced together in intricate jigsaw. Bold, square-jawed slabs sit atop delicate rock slivers sparkling with flecks of mica. An occasional chunk of gem-like quartz breaks up the pattern. And rugged hunks of granite embrace their neighbors with chiseled arms.

The illusion is that the stones, somehow, conspired to fit together so perfectly.

"When it's done right, it's a real thing of beauty," says Horace Aikman, director of construction at Carol A. Johnson Associates, a landscape architecture firm in Boston that worked on the college. "And the credit goes to the masons who are doing it. They take real pride in their work, and it shows."

The project is the result of painstaking work by Stoneage Stoneworks of Berwick, Me., and it is one of the first finished exterior aspects of the new business school now under construction. The stone wall serves as a veneer that covers drab concrete retaining walls, but it also draws the eyes of passersby to the building's upper stories -- while looking very much like the sturdy foundation of an old New Hampshire mill or barn.

"It's not something you see a lot of these days," says Tony Roy, a foreman for Stoneage Stoneworks. "It's definitely a trade that takes some real skill."

Roy and the Stoneworks masons will tell you they are merely tradesmen who know how to work in stone. But take a look at the wall, and it's clear there's artistry mixed in with all the stone dust and sweaty brawn of their work.

"There's not one stone in there that's the same," Roy says. "Each one has its own face and a unique shape…And you're getting a much more unique look, way more artistic than something that's pre-fab."

Working with just the simplest of hand tools – hammers, chisels and trowels – about a half dozen stone masons labor in the hot sun to fit each of the hundreds of stone into place. For their raw materials, they sift through a huge pile of New Hampshire granite, looking for just the right piece to fill each spot. Often, a stone needs to be chiseled to get the right shape – and the masons are expert at reading the grain in each granite piece, which helps them figure out exactly where to strike it with hammer and chisel so that the rock breaks perfectly.

"The wall really stands out now because it's one of the first finished pieces of the building that you see," says Rich Rouleau, UNH project manager of the Paul College. "It

really is beautiful, and we think the entire building project will be equally beautiful when it's completed."

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