

News

Stoneworks

Editor's note: This article first appeared in the January 15, 2015, edition of the newspaper. It is reprinted here following the recent death of the local stonecutter. Middlemas's full obituary will be printed as it becomes available.

by Clarke Davis

Keith Middlemas is a stoneworker, a broad term that defines the most detailed precision artistry with a dentist's diamond-tipped drill one day and the use of a 16-pound hammer to break rock the next.

He recently used a 250-pound piece of Italian marble to fashion an exact replica of an 1853 Enfield musket. The replica's finished weight was 70 pounds and went to Brookville, Missouri, to be clasped in a soldier's grip, a Civil War statue that had gotten damaged.

It took a 38,000-pound boulder out of west Texas to create a seven-ton arrowhead for the Kansas City Chiefs' training center.

Big and little, Middlemas's works are sprinkled throughout Jefferson County, Lawrence, and the Kansas City suburbs. He's been at it since 1976.

Limestone rock carvings welcome people to Oskaloosa and to the Jefferson County fairgrounds and his mark is on the entrance posts to the cemeteries north of Perry. Some of his finest artistry can be found on a memorial in the Pleasant View Cemetery at Oskaloosa.

For the memorial he used Indiana limestone sandwiched between granite. This particular limestone will wear away at the rate of one-sixteenth of an inch every 100 years. The wearing away of the granite will be imperceptible, he said.

The Kansas City native and Turner High School graduate was first introduced to mason work in New Mexico.

His family had always vacationed in the North and East and he wanted to experience the desert and Dixieland. With a stint in the Army Medical Corps behind him, he left the University of Kansas and headed for New Mexico for the summer.

"The reason being I thought I was only qualified to shovel behind a cow," he said.

A Hispanic man, Albert Avila, taught him the finer points of making wood-fired bread ovens and adobe fireplaces and the summer stretched into two years.

Instead of renting an apartment, he bought an acreage

and built a cabin on a mountain while learning masonry work.

Avila sold him a 1948 Ford pickup for \$125 so he could get up and down the mountain. "It had a flat tire and needed a tune-up," he said.

"I did that instead of hanging out with the hippie girls. I sold the cabin and paid off my student loans so I didn't have that debt following me around," he said. "I had enough left over to buy a cheeseburger."

Dixieland would be next. He returned to KU for an intensive course in Spanish and to complete his degree and then in midwinter headed for Atlanta, Georgia, at a speed of 45 mph in that old truck. Here he got work with a ceramics company where he was given a company car and promises of riches. But he yearned to be his own boss and within a couple of years he returned to Kansas in that old Ford and found land he wanted in Jefferson County.

In 1976, he launched his own stoneworks business — Bluestem Stoneworks — with the confidence that he could do anything.

"I knew I could do anything except sing and dance. I just knew I didn't want to be employed by somebody else," he said.

"When people ask me if I can do something, I always say 'yes' and then figure it out," he said.

Settled into the rural backwoods of Jefferson County, it's here he would eventually raise a family and confront the challenges imposed by saying "yes, I can" to everything.

Starting out he did a lot of stonework on suburban houses such as fireplaces and stone veneer but he grew weary of that.

"It's all boring," he said. "White guys make everything square or rectangle and want it to be beige," he said. "I want to do curved walls, flights of steps, and arches."

From there he began doing water features that included pools, water falls, and fountains, commercial signs, and historic carvings for building preservation.

An award-winning fountain he designed and created for KU features a 12,000-pound boulder transported from the Flint Hills that rests in a university park. The interior of the rock was hollowed out for the installation of stainless steel piping that provides a trickle of water seeping from the rock.



A 2015 file photo of Keith Middlemas by Clarke Davis.

"It's practically all been done with a handshake. I've only had to sign three contracts since I started," he said. "I always do more than I say I will and I always undercharge. Those are my two specialties and part of the reason the phone keeps ringing."

His degree is in anthropology, although, he said, he had fewer hours of that than anything else. His 150 college hours had consumed Shakespeare, Western Civilization, Eastern studies, Spanish, and only an introduction to geology. Geology, it turned out, was the most important for his profession.

After 40 years of carving rock he knows more than the average person about geology and how to find rock.

He knows where certain quarries are that have special kinds of rock, but he also goes in search on his own. It is not unusual — with permission and a paycheck — to have a bulldozer in someone's pasture digging down for what he needs.

Middlemas uses the U.S. Geological Survey to point him in the right direction.

"A strata of rock runs pretty level from north to south but as one goes west and the elevation rises, the rock continues to be buried deeper — four feet for every mile," he said.

For the rock entry posts at the Oak Ridge and Mt. Calvary cemeteries, Middlemas spent extra for the sand to make mortar. The post consists of Sioux quartzite, a South Dakota rock that is common locally — "These are the purple ones farmers sharpen their plows on," he said. So he purchased a fine sand made by a company that grinds these rocks.

"In 30 years when the masonry cement has washed away, the cap and the joints will all be the same color as the stone," he said. "This is how I entertain myself."

Most of the stoneworker's projects are done on site, although he does have an unheated shop at his rural Oskaloosa home.

For the first time since he began his profession, he's going to carve a stone that has not been commissioned.

"I've had little time to do things I want to do. I don't have things lying around for sale," he said.

But he's about to embark on a 6-foot, 4-inch cowboy carved onto a 9-foot tall stone.

"It'll have a base where a family name can be imprinted," he said.

Helping Middlemas with some of his projects is Kreg Pemberton, Winchester.

"His specialty is steel fabrication," he said.

They work together on projects such as an outdoor patio kitchen made of stone with a stone roof. These contain a wood-fired oven and pull out stainless steel kitchen.

Architectural and landscape design are also included in his stone work for the creation of small swimming pools, patios, and garden archways.

For something more pricey, he's made two Japanese tea houses.

Here he leaves stone to tackle the hardest wood.

"They are made out of Osage orange, a wonderful wood," he said.

"The tea houses measured 11 feet by 11 feet."

Middlemas, 67, is a divorced father of two children. His daughter, Marita, is a lawyer living in New Mexico and his son, Avi, is a cinematographer residing in Los Angeles. They attended Oskaloosa schools and graduated from Free State High School in Lawrence.

For his next project, Middlemas plans to travel through the Flint Hills towns from Alma to Wichita looking for stone features that were popular in the 1880s. These include such things as hitching posts and mounting blocks (used to mount a horse or climb into a carriage).

He plans to measure and sketch these items and then create replicas, which he will name after the town where he found them.

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front porch of the Ninceheler House spans a distance of 133 feet and is parallel to Walnut Street (i.e., US-59/K-16/K-92).

According to Garret's letter, \$25,000 will cover the cost of his labor and all of the materials he will need to fashion the monument from marble within the next couple of years. But if he is able to secure an additional \$50,000 in funding (\$75,000 altogether), he would be in a position where he could more fully devote his time and attention to the project and finish the monument by the Fourth of July next year when the United States will turn 250.

And depending on how much money comes in through contributions, Garret could conceivably hire someone to assist him with the work.

Anyone wishing to make a donation or with questions about the project is encouraged to call Garret at 785-231-9903.

Contributions in support of the project are tax deductible through the Jefferson County Historical Society, which owns and operates Old Jefferson Town and is a 501(c)(3) organization.

Contributions can be sent to the historical society at this address: 703 Walnut St., Oskaloosa, KS 66066. After a contribution has been made, JCHS Treasurer Clifford Burk can furnish the donor with a tax-deductible receipt.

To reach Clifford by phone, call 913-240-1995.

Garret encourages anyone thinking about making a contribution to increase that contribution by five to 10% to boost the historical society's General Fund, which can be tapped as needed to provide for the maintenance of the buildings and grounds at Old Jefferson Town.

The historical society is partnering with Garret on the project.

Any contribution above \$10,000 will qualify the donor for a bronze plaque with a short dedication of his or her choice on it, according to Garret's letter. The plaque will be attached to the monument once Garret has completed his work.

At the very least the statue Garret plans to carve out of a 31,350-pound block of marble will include two figures, a man and a woman, dressed in clothing typical of the attire worn by the Midwestern pioneers of the mid-1800s. This married couple will be similar in age to other settlers of the period and may have a baby or a young child with them. Headed west, they will appear to be emerging out from under an arch generally reminiscent of the Gateway Arch in St. Louis, Missouri.

According to Garret, the figures will be life-size if not slightly larger, "historically accurate" and "representative" of the virtuous men and women who so embodied the American spirit as they endured "tremendous hardship and struggle" to achieve success through the building of the homesteads, farms, ranches, towns, and cities that persist yet today roughly 175 years later.

Those figures also will be a picture in stone of "motion, emotion, strength, resilience, and faith," quoting further from Garret's letter.

"This is a project that, I feel, would greatly benefit the public, beautify further an already amazing place, and memorialize



Photo courtesy of Garret Tufte
This bust, which has been dubbed "Archibald," was made by Garret Tufte from cottonwood limestone in 2022 and 2023 using what he described as "a throwaway sketch stone" he had obtained from a friend who ended up with some "leftover pieces" while working on renovations to the Kansas State Capitol in Topeka. Garret tackled the project when he was still living in Kansas City, Missouri.

the grit and determination of the first settlers of Kansas during the great and trying times of 1850s Western expansion, that honors the ancestors who risked life and limb to settle these vast expanses, and build the civilization that we so enjoy today."

Once it has been lowered into place, Garret will be taking a hammer, chisels, files and rasps, and possibly even a circular saw and a power drill at times, to a block of marble measuring 10 feet, 3 inches high, 4 feet, 7 inches wide, and 3 feet, 8 inches deep to form the youngish man and woman and perhaps a little one, too. The figures will appear above a pedestal somewhere between 2 feet and 2 feet, 6 inches tall.

The big rock was excavated and cut by Colorado Stone Quarries, which operates near the Centennial State town of Marble and has a stoneyard in the town of Delta.

"I have seen the stone itself, in person, and it is good: milky white, with some black and gold veining. It will provide an excellent medium for this sculpture."

Garret said in his letter that he would be striving to make the monument "as realistic as possible, as detailed as the stone can handle," but "within reason" given the fact that it will be constantly exposed to the weather.

He also said he is likely to add "a flair of art deco" with a slight surreal element reminiscent of Jefferson County's own John Stuart Curry to achieve "an enhanced magnanimity" visually suggestive of the old so-called "tall tales" closely connected with Western myths.

"It will be life-affirming, honorable, strong, beautiful, and unique," he promised.

According to Garret, he will be relying heavily on the photographs, newspaper articles, journals, and other items at the research library inside the Kilgour-Plum Grove Building "to inform the style and character" of the figures the stone will be yielding as it gradually submits to the tools in his hands.

Garret said in his letter that once the block of marble, No. 8352, has been delivered to OJT, he can start the time-consuming task of turning the heroic image that exists now only in his mind and on paper into a reality. He also said people are welcome to drop by and watch him as he works, and indicated that he is even willing to teach them the basic techniques of sculpting.

"I have no intention but to create a masterpiece that will stand for a century, and draw people from all across the country for as long as it lasts," Garret wrote. "This is a project that will provide a serious economic, spiritual and historical boost to the pride and strength of the people of Oskaloosa, Jefferson County, northeast Kansas, and towns and cities all across the Midwest."

Garret is a co-owner of American Surveying, rural Oskaloosa, and has been working for the business either full time or part time for the past 25 years. He has been performing crew chief duties for close to 15 years.

In 2007 Garret graduated from the University of Kansas with a degree in English.

After receiving his initial training in Italy, Garret has been producing marble and limestone statues for the past 12 years. To view some of his creations, visit www.tuftesvariations.com and click on the Sculpture link.

A 2003 graduate of Oskaloosa High School, where he was the valedictorian of his class, Garret is the son of Steve Tufte, the other co-owner of American Surveying, and the late LeeAnn (Volkman) Tufte.

MAETA...

of MAETA since 2008 when her father, Carl Merrill Lovendahl, convinced her to join the organization. Together the pair spent many years working to preserve local farming history until his death in 2022.

"He was proud I was a part of this with him," she said. "We are always looking for new members to carry the torch."

Those interested in joining may sign up at meridenthreshers.org or at the General Store during the organization's three major events throughout the year — the truck and car show in June, the summer show in July, and the fall show in September.

Last year, the tractor pull during the summer show was moved to the fall show due to inclement weather. This year, the group is attempting to have a tractor pull at both events, due to its popularity.

"We will see how it goes, and hope for the best," Bauerly said. "Hopefully the weather will cooperate for us this time around."

The antique tractor pull contributes toward making Saturday the biggest day of the event. The best year the organization has ever seen was directly post-COVID in 2021, when around 4,000 people passed through the gates over the weekend.

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Photo by Holly Allen

MAETA treasurer Kerri Bauerly stands outside the Bloomfield Church. Raised seven miles north of Meriden, Bauerly recalls the dilapidated state the church was in prior to being moved to Cottonwood Station. The church will provide a peaceful place for revelers to worship come Sunday morning, when the Meriden United Methodist Church's Troy Bowers ministers to the congregation as this year's guest pastor.

"That show will always be the high-water mark, so far as attendance," Bauerly recalls.

"We hope everybody will come on out, and bring the family to try to make this year's show

bigger than ever. There's lots of things for everybody to do and enjoy."