

Grenci, Ellis and the Mellow Golden Granite of Mohegan Lake

North County News, March 4-10, 1981

Charles Morrill

40 years ago, the last remaining workers of Grenci and Ellis put down their tools, stopped the huge stonecutting saws, and left the quarry east of Hog Lane for good. Some may have gone off to join the war as soldiers, others may have built Liberty Ships on Long Island, but none ever came back to quarry and carve granite in Yorktown.

The granite business had also nearly died by 1940, except for the occasional grave stone or memorial. Granite had become an expensive and time-consuming liability when compared to the newer construction materials of glass, steel, and aluminum.

Grenci and Ellis had stayed open through the depression, but when the war began, Yorktown's largest industry until then died quietly in the trees off Route 202 and Lexington Avenue, formerly Hog Lane.

Small trees and undergrowth now obscure the site of an industry that once employed hundreds of people. The cutting sheds and office buildings have all nearly fallen to the ground. Someone has scrapped the rails of the narrow gauge cable railway that used to run up the hill to the quarries. The derricks have rotted and fallen where they stood. Miles of thick steel cable are stilled in the sheaves. Other lengths of cable travel overhead through the branches, leading off to stone anchors buried in the woods.

The yellow granite remains, however, some of its half-carved as if the workers had simply paused and decided to walk away. A piece of arch, some decorated crenelations for the cathedral in New York, and perhaps the beginnings of another memorial lie silently in the woods: gravestones to some forgotten industrial past.

Even today, a visitor can see the enormous scope of the operation that supplied the stone for the outside walls of the still-unfinished St. John the Divine Cathedral in New York City. During the heyday of Grenci and Ellis in the late 20s, Italian artisans and stone masons cut thousands of tons of stone out of a hill in Yorktown between Lexington Avenue and Stoney Street. The workers then shaped the granite blocks into fluid shapes of arches and monuments before trucking them to New York.

Builders and architects sought the stone from Yorktown because of its unique honey color, instead of the usual gray. A Grenci and Ellis catalogue from the 30s states, "Near the crest of the hill to the north and east of Peekskill New York, is situated the Mohegan Granite Quarry from which is obtained a beautiful mellow granite in two shades, one light, and the other dark. The lighter commends itself for trim, while the darker is admirably suited for main surfaces. An outcrop of this 'Golden Granite' was discovered about 1895."

Although Grenci and Ellis apparently took pride in all their firm's accomplishments, the St. John the Divine contract apparently became the most important. The contract generated several million dollars for the company, and provided proof to the two owners that Mohegan Granite had become the finest building material in the country. The Grenci and Ellis catalogue of the 30s proudly states: "The choice of Mohegan Granite for the Cathedral of St. John the Divine and other churches bespeaks the inherent worshipful atmosphere in the quality of the stone."

The secret of the firm's success lay in the unique partnership of Bruno M. Grenci and Thomas H. Ellis, the former a good manager, the latter a financial wizard. When Grenci and Ellis bought the quarry in 1925, the pair decided to modernize the entire operation. They bought the latest stone cutting equipment and grinding machines. Diesel-electric generators began to drive the machinery more cheaply, quickly, and dependably than steam engines. Grenci and Ellis also bought the latest stone

polishing equipment and even build a narrow-gauge cable railway to the top of the hill, eliminating the need for oxen.

Greater success shortly followed the cathedral contract. Greci and Ellis supplied the stone for the Senate Office Building wing in Washington D.C; the Health Building for New York City; the granite approach to the George Washington Bridge; and the approach for the Bronx-Whitestone Bridge.

The firm could also supply skilled artisan for special carvings at construction sites. The large carved eagles of Arlington Memorial Bridge across the Potomac are examples of the firm's expertise. Greci and Ellis always took special pride in their stone carving work, and in the men who made it possible. According to William Ellis, treasurer of the firm and son of Thomas[:] "However much the development of the machines aided in the production work, there was always the art of fine hand carving required in most architectural building jobs. The artists who executed this fine work at Mohegan quarries were largely Italian-born skilled artisans who brought from their native land the knowledge and accumulated talents of generation of their forbear[er]s."

William Ellis died four years ago, and with him[,] most knowledge of the quarry's operations ended. In later years he served as an officer of the Peekskill Savings Bank in Peekskill (also constructed of Mohegan Granite).

Fortunately, Yorktown historian, Arthur Lee knew Ellis for many years, and Lee obtained a written history of the quarry's operations for the Yorktown Museum. It is the only record of a multi-million dollar industry that provided jobs for hundreds of people in the area.

Apparently the firm's remaining principals sold the property several years ago to Norman VanKirk, of Red Bank, New Jersey. VanKirk would not be reached for comment, but his daughter Meredith speculated that he does not have any immediate plans for the property.

The massive approach to the George Washington Bridge still towers over the Hendrick Hudson Parkway and probably will for many years to come, the subtle yellow color of the blocks a signature that each came from Yorktown.

Side note: Intrigued with the quarry near where I lived, I saved this 1981 newspaper article. Later when doing research for Walkable Westchester, I found it in my files about Westchester County. The property was purchased by the Town of Yorktown later in 1981 and opened as a park when additional adjacent properties were acquired. The features mentioned in the fourth paragraph are gone.
Jane Daniels, transcribed for the web, December 2009