

# Monumental stairway to history preserved

Some died from influenza or pneumonia, accidents took others, and the fate of others is unknown. Most died in action, part of the grim, brutal work of driving invading German armies out of France in 1917 and 1918.

One hundred twenty four of these Soldiers, Sailors and Marines came from a little town in the heart of Connecticut called New Britain\*. They died in the Great War, trying to make the world safe for democracy.

In Frederick Olmsted-designed Walnut Hill Park (1870), the town erected a 90-foot limestone obelisk to remember its lost sons. Monument architect H. Van Buren Magonigle designed the slim stone obelisk in 1930. A year later, he added the graceful, curving Indiana limestone stairway which ascends the 100-foot slope to the monument.

Although the 60-foot-long stairway bore for decades the weight of tens of thousands of visitors to the monument and park, the weight of time, weather and neglect eventually grew too much.

Water from improper drainage gradually undermined the stairway's concrete underpinnings. Atmospheric soiling, biological staining, birds, litter bugs and graffiti vandals attacked its appearance. The city blocked access, for safety, in 1987. For 15 years, the once monumental stairway slowly sank ever more deeply into disrepair.

Despite the deterioration, the stairway still created a focal point in the landscape.

"You have to appreciate the fantastic design," commented Phil Barlow, partner in landscape architectural firm TO Design, Hartford. "The stairway curves 90 degrees top to bottom," he said. "And the walls themselves spiral 45 degrees as they curve along the steps. It's a monumental effect."

In 2002, the city chose TO Design to restore the stairway, as part of a \$4 million project sponsored by the Connecticut

Department of Economic and Community Development. In all, the project covered restoration work in three New Britain parks, and on two miles of the city's streetscapes.

Restoration work on the stairs began with designing corrected drainage. "We regraded the slope to catch water and redirect it away from the stairs," said Mr. Barlow.

For cleaning, Mr. Barlow specified PROSOCO's Sure Klean® 766 Limestone & Masonry Prewash, followed by Sure Klean® Limestone & Masonry Afterwash. He chose Defacer Eraser® Graffiti Wipe to strip years of graffiti from the venerable stone, and sacrificial Defacer Eraser® Graffiti Barrier S to protect the cleaned stones from further attack.

The city enlisted G & L Capasso Restoration, New Haven, to clean and repair the ravaged stairway. The Capasso Restoration crew began with graffiti removal, said project manager Carmine Capasso.

He explained that the workers brushed on the citrus-extract based Graffiti Wipe, scrubbing gently. They used sponges and fresh water to remove the solubilized paint and spent cleaner.

"Performance was excellent," he said, pointing out that decades of graffiti were removed with a half-day's work.

General surface cleaning with the two-step Sure Klean® prewash and afterwash system followed. The crew used pump-up sprayers to apply the 766 Limestone & Masonry Prewash. The alkaline cleaner dissolves atmospheric and biological contaminants for easy rinsing away. Following gentle scrubbing and a five-minute dwell, the crew pressure-washed the exhausted cleaner and dissolved contaminants off the wall. They captured runoff with a 20-gallon shop-vac at the bottom of the stairs, Mr. Capasso said.

Then the crew applied Limestone & Masonry Afterwash. The mildly acidic cleaner neutralized any alkalinity on the stone left after the Prewash cleaning. It also added a further brightening effect. In this case, the secondary brightening was particularly useful.

"Along with dissolving the graffiti, the Graffiti Wipe cleaned the stone more than we expected. We were a little concerned at first that the prewash and afterwash might not match up with the places we had cleaned with Graffiti Wipe," Mr. Capasso said. "But once we finished we saw the surface had brightened uniformly."

In all, the crew cleaned about 1,000 square feet of limestone.

With the stairway cleaned, the stage was set for repairs. Over the next three weeks, the crew repointed the old stairway, and patched damaged areas with a specially blended mortar.

"Matching the color of the patching material to the stone was probably the hardest part of the job," Mr. Capasso said. "We tried five or six different samples before we got it how we liked it."

"In the end, it came out great," he said. "Like new."

\*Information courtesy of Mr. Oneil Cormier, New Britain Public Library



Left: For 15 years, the stairway slowly sank into disrepair. Above: The restored stairway curves up the Walnut Hill Park hillside.

Photos courtesy of TO Design

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