A Century Later, Same Indiana Quarry Again Provides Limestone for Michigan Central Station

As the second phase of the Michigan Central Station restoration continues, work is focusing on cleaning, repairing and replacing eight acres of masonry on the exterior of the building. To support this work, scaffolding now wraps around the west half of the 15-story tower.

Soon, cranes and workers will begin disassembling stone from around the Waiting Room entrance, which faces north toward Michigan Avenue, to allow craftsmen to fix the limestone façade and recreate missing and deteriorated ornate pieces - all part of Ford’s efforts to restore the Beaux-Arts building to its original grandeur.

To retain the historical integrity of the station, which first opened in 1913, the limestone blocks being used to replace the deteriorating stone on the façade will be sourced from the same Indiana quarry that provided the limestone during the original construction. Some of those early blocks of limestone still lie in a field a few feet from where they were first mined more than 100 years ago.

The Dark Hollow Quarry where the unique patterned limestone is found was officially closed in 1988. That grainy pattern fell out of favor with building projects in the 1920s. The remaining blocks of stone are now within a forest of 30-year-old trees. Local trades will construct a new haul road to access the stones and remove trees to get access to the historic material.

“It’s super exciting to use stone that was originally intended for the building,” said Richard Bardelli, Ford’s construction manager for the restoration project, who recently visited the Indiana quarry. “To come back to the same quarry where the first limestone was sourced from allows us not only an exact match in color and texture, but to maintain a strong connection to its storied past.”

In the early 1900s, the limestone was quarried by hand, with men using chisels and hammers; huge blocks of stone were transported by train to customers where it was carved on site. Today, the limestone is extracted and cut by machines, large blocks are moved by truck to regional fabricators and then shipped in its final shapes to the job site.

One Clear Creek Stone Company employee currently mining the limestone from the quarry is the third generation of his family to do so. Jim Hillenburg’s grandfather helped quarry the original Dark Hollow limestone used in the construction of Michigan Central Station. Hillenburg’s father also worked at the quarry.

“It means a whole lot that all three of us have been in the limestone business,” said Hillenburg, who earlier this year found the matching stone with the same grain formations as the original limestone used at the Detroit landmark. “I’m proud that my grandfather and I both played a role in building Michigan Central Station, I’m picking up where he left off.”

“I enjoy my job and I’ve made a real good living,” he said, adding that he tried to get his son to follow the same career path and become the fourth-generation of the family in the business. Instead, his son is a pipe layer.

Michigan Central Station is one of many famous structures that has used Indiana limestone in its construction. Others include the Empire State Building, the National Cathedral, the new Yankee Stadium, the Pentagon and many state capitol buildings across the country.
Ford began the three-phase restoration project last year and plans to make the station the centerpiece of a new innovation hub in Corktown that will bring together new startups, established companies, urbanists, investors, innovators and academic institutions to reimagine the future of transportation and make smarter, sustainable communities.

Before the stone is removed from Dark Hollow Quarry, workers will measure the blocks and look for other stone with the same pattern. Some might have to be extracted from the ground. The last time stone from the woods was used for another restoration project was eight years ago.

Beginning this winter, an estimated 8,000 cubic feet of the stone, approximately 300 blocks, will be shipped from the quarry in southern Indiana to Capital Stoneworks in Bridgeport, Michigan. The company will take the raw stone and fabricate the replacement pieces needed for the train station.

The new stone will arrive in Detroit for installation in the spring 2020.

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