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# Set in Stone:

## *The Art of Stonework and Wall Building in Westchester County*

BY TOM VAN BUREN

Stonework must surely rank as one of the oldest of folk arts, if only for the longevity of the material used—hence its presence in the historical record. While an immense but finite supply of wood drew Europeans to the shores of North America, once they had exhausted local forest stands through clearing, burning, ship building, and construction, stone became the material of choice. The ensuing works in stone have been the longest lasting remnants of vernacular architecture. In few places is this story more apparent than in the southeastern corner of New York State, where the Dutch first settled some four centuries ago and the English soon followed. Like most of the coastal regions close to urban and industrial development, the pace of forest depletion was accelerated, leading to increased use of stone.

As any visitor to that part of New York can tell you, Westchester is covered not only with geological formations of excellent building stone, but also with glacial stones. Since the earliest Dutch settlements in the region, generations of wall builders and masons made immediate use of the readily available resource and left their mark on the landscape. A tour around the county reveals a patchwork of projects, from colonial-era buildings and farm

stone walls (often referred to as “stone fences” in contemporary accounts), to the nineteenth-century mansions of robber barons, to the twentieth-century reservoirs and Robert Moses’s parkways with their famous bridges. This nearly four-century orgy of stone building drew professional as well as accidental masons from every corner of the world, from the days of slavery, to the waves of Irish and Italian immigrants who built the dams and bridges of the county, to the current Guatemalan and Ecuadorian masons who now uphold the trade.

The purposes to which stone is put, the techniques masons have used, and the builders themselves have all changed over the years. This evolution reflects changes in the availability of materials; technologies of quarrying, stone splitting, chipping, and carving; and the use of stone structures. Just as significant have been the evolving immigrant populations and ethnicities of stone masons themselves and the cultures of stonework that they have brought with them.

In the winter of 2008, the Folk Arts Program of ArtsWestchester (formerly the Westchester Arts Council) presented a mixed media exhibit on stonework as an occupational folk art. Mounted in the

council’s gallery in downtown White Plains, the exhibit—featuring images and examples of stone carving and setting and stone wall building—was titled “Set in Stone.” The project began in 1996, when folklorist Amanda Dargan began research for the Westchester Arts Council. At that time, second and third generations of Italian stoneworkers were still active. Their fathers and grandfathers had come to Westchester from Italy to build New Croton Dam, the Kensico Dam, and the many arched bridges of the parkways. Hundreds of institutional buildings, from churches to the county courthouse, benefited from this pool of skilled labor. The postwar period also saw a massive housing boom in towns like Eastchester, Yonkers, and Tuckahoe, with many new homes built with veneer stone and massive chimneys.

More recently, a fashionable revival of the farm wall—which Katonah-based journalist and author Susan Allport calls “walls of affluence” in her 1990 book *Sermons in Stone*—has drawn hundreds of Latin American stoneworkers, who can often trace their ancestry to epic wall builders of the Andes. The housing boom of the past decade has prompted a renewal of the trade, with a major influx of masons from Ecuador and Guatemala.





New old-style dry stone wall in Salem, New York, built by Kevin Towle. All photos: Tom van Buren





Everett Cantamessa (left) with a student in the BOCES stone shop.

The “Set in Stone” exhibit was divided spatially according to three distinct themes. Around the gallery’s perimeter, the historical context of stone building—from the regional geology, to the quarries, to the generations of projects and styles—were presented in text panels and documentary photographs. In the center, text and photographs recording the lives and work of six masons were exhibited, with actual stone structures erected in the gallery. Finally, on another floor of the gallery, members of the Westchester Photographic Society presented stunning photographs of stone structures great and small from around the county.

Featured master mason Everett Cantamesa is a living exemplar of this occupational legacy. Born in Mount Vernon to a family of quarrymen and masons from Bergamo, Italy, he grew up in the trade, working through the postwar housing boom and on major institutional projects, such as the buildings of West Point. He taught his son Eric, who is now



Tools of the trade, including pitching tools, pin and feathers, and dressing chisels.



Old farm stone fence snaking into the Kensico Reservoir.





Mason Manuel Inga Lazo standing in an archway he built in Mahopac, New York.

the head teacher at the BOCES stone shop in Yorktown Heights. The family's history and documentation about the shop formed a central part of the exhibit.

Another key mason featured in the exhibit is Manuel Inga Lazo, born outside the colonial-era city of Cuenca, Ecuador. Part of the original research, he has since expanded his contracting company to include four brothers and has built projects all over Westchester County. Since immigrating to the United States in the 1980s, he has returned to Ecuador many times to document archeological sites where the ancestors of his culture built massive structures of stone without any mortar. Other featured masons included Brazilian Dulio Prado and his mostly Guatemalan crew, who have the

distinction of being some of the fastest dry-wall builders in the region, and Kevin Towle, who designs and builds spectacular landscaping projects in the Salem area of Westchester.

These are but a few of the masons whose lives and works were featured in the exhibit. The photographs that accompany this essay are a small part of the exhibit. More images and information about the project are available online at [www.ArtsWestchester.com](http://www.ArtsWestchester.com). ▼

Tom van Buren directs ArtsWestchester's folk arts programs and serves as music consultant to the New York Folklore Society.

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—Libby Tucker,  
Associate Professor of English,  
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