

The great brownstone obelisk: Part II

In the spring of 1892 the Wisconsin Board of Fair Managers accepted a proposal from Frederick Prentice that he donate a brownstone monolith in the form of an obelisk for display at the Columbian Exposition, in Chicago in 1893.

At the bottom of the Prentice quarry the obelisk was hewn and shaped from bedrock on three sides, while the underlying fourth side was broken loose by systematically driving 100 wedges under it until it was free. This extremely risky operation took place in mid-November, observed by a large audience of local dignitaries. Fortunately, the obelisk did not crack and these men of substance made the expected congratulatory speeches. The obelisk was huge, 115 feet long, ten feet square at the base tapering to four feet square at the top, weighing 400 tons. It was larger than any existing solid obelisk, the Washington Monument being composed of individual blocks of stone.

Although the project was over two months behind schedule, the board accepted

the obelisk and endeavored to find a way to transport it to the site of the exposition at Jackson Park on the Chicago lake front. Finally, the board decided to enclose the obelisk in a water-tight iron cylinder

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and float it down the lakes to the site of the exposition, then roll the cylinder on shore to the Arts Building, where it was to be erected. But the legislature refused to appropriate funds for what was probably considered to be a hare-brained scheme. The following year a proposal was made to raise money from private sources for transporting the obelisk to the exposition on a special barge, but nothing came of this idea.

Prentice then donated it to the City of Milwaukee, but this idea also gathered no support. In 1897 a Milwaukee

newspaper suggested that it be transported to that city where it would be erected on the lake shore as a monument to Wisconsin's semi-centennial in 1898. The paper offered to donate \$1,000 as part of the estimated \$5,000 needed to carry out this project, but this idea also quickly died, so the obelisk remained at the bottom of the quarry. By this time it had been badly damaged by water and ice, so it was cut up for building stone. What Prentice and others had ignored, or at least minimized, was the problem of lifting a huge 400-ton block of stone from the bottom of the quarry 30 feet to the surface. Many years later a quarry owner stated that all of the quarrymen knew that the obelisk was too large to raise by the machinery available at the time, but that they thought it was a good publicity stunt.

But publicity, no matter how clever, could not stop the rapid decline of the Chequamegon Bay brownstone quarrying industry, for the markets for brownstone — railroad and building construction — had all but disappeared. The decline in the demand for brownstone by

the railroads was due to the end of the railroad expansion boom in the 1890s, along with the increasing use of concrete in place of cut stone for construction. Demand for large building construction declined because of the advent of the iron frame building with curtain walls, and a change in preferences away from the somber tones of brownstone to lighter colored stones. Meanwhile, Prentice had declared bankruptcy, and in September 1902 the Prentice quarries were sold at an auction.

He moved his business affairs to New York City, where he continued his involvement with the brownstone business. He died in March 1913 at Cornwall-on-Hudson, New York. His legacy to Chequamegon Bay was Prentice Park in Ashland and the change of the name of Prospect Point to Houghton Point. In 1903, 2,400 tons of broken stone were taken from the Prentice quarry for the Ashland breakwater, an ignominious end to what had once been a large and prosperous industry on Chequamegon Bay.