

HILGARTNER STONE COMPANY: COMING FULL CIRCLE

Stone Fabrication Shop Founded in 1863 Discovers Its Heritage In a Baltimore Restoration Project



WHEN BALTIMORE'S HILGARTNER NATURAL STONE CO. BID ON THE RENOVATION PROJECT TO CONVERT THE OLD MARYLAND MASONIC GRAND LODGE INTO THE TREMONT GRAND, THEY HAD NO IDEA THEY WERE STEPPING BACK INTO A CHAPTER OF THEIR OWN LONG HISTORY.

They knew the 143-year-old building on Baltimore's North Charles Street contained exquisite examples of marble work, but they didn't recognize the extent until beginning the renovation in 2004. Shortly after starting, they discovered a room filled with several types of marble in the form of columns, balustrades, book-matched wall panels, carved moldings and intricately patterned flooring.

"It was so strange," said Pam Monroe, Hilgartner's sales and project manager. "Who could have all these different types of marble in one place? It had to have been a stone showroom."

They suspected it might even be the showroom for their own company, which opened in 1863. They knew Hilgartner Marble Co., as it was known then, had a showroom in the area at that time, but they didn't know the address. Soon after, the mystery was solved by the William C. Smith Co. of Washington, D.C. (WCS). WCS was the company developing the Tremont Grand, a conference and banquet facility connected to the historic Tremont Plaza Hotel. After purchasing the building, a representative of WCS found a typewritten document on site giving a detailed history of the Masonic Lodge. On one page it said this about part of the building:

"In later years it was used for a time by the Hilgartner Marble Company, who decorated its walls with samples of different marble slabs and two beautifully carved marble columns."

This information was corroborated by Hilgartner's recent cataloging of its archives, including two brochures from the early 1900s. One has a photograph of the exterior of the building located at 223 North Charles Street, and one has a photograph of the showroom, featuring the ornate columns, balustrades and flooring.



The restored former showroom of Hilgartner Stone Company is now a showplace for the Tremont Grand in Baltimore, Maryland, featuring several types of marble inlay, book-matched wall panels, columns and balustrades chosen to exemplify the consummate skill of their turn-of-the-century carvers.

The challenge over the next several months was to preserve as much of the original craftsmanship as possible and to recreate matching pieces. And who better to do the work than the company that originally created it—a company that is perhaps the oldest continuous running fabricator in the United States?

The company was started as Schimpf and Hilgartner in 1863 by Gottfried Schimpf and Ludwig Hilgartner and quickly became a Baltimore success. In 1873 Hilgartner bought out Schimpf and the business continued to prosper. During the first half of the 1900s—the "golden years" for marble in the United States—Hilgartner had offices in Chicago and Los Angeles and was supplying marble for all types of buildings throughout the United States and Cuba. It was one of two companies to start the National Association of Marble Dealers in 1907, the predecessor of the Marble Institute of America. It was during this time that the company created the Charles Street space to showcase the skills of the more than twenty carvers it employed.

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By Liz McGeachy

Photos Courtesy Hilgartner Stone Co.



BRAXTON-BRAGG ANNOUNCES LAUNCH OF NEW WEBSITE



BRAXTON-BRAGG HAS ANNOUNCED A MAJOR DESIGN AND FUNCTION UPGRADE TO ITS WEBSITE. THE NEW WEBSITE WAS DEVELOPED BY AVERRA MEDIA, OF KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE AND PROVIDES MANY NEW AND IMPROVED FEATURES.

According to Bill Hickey, Braxton-Bragg Sales Director, "The new site is designed to make it faster for customers to find what they need and complete their transaction. Our goal was to allow an established customer to complete their weekly order within three or four minutes. The website allows for customer-specific contract prices for commonly used items, and also handles COD as well as on-account orders for established customers."

Mr. Hickey continued, "Most of our customers call us with their order and many will

probably continue to find this convenient, but we wanted to make ordering on the web as easy as calling, so that customers preferring to use that method would find it fast and easy. To get started buying from the website, a customer can either go to the website and sign up—we will match you to your current orders and call you to setup contract pricing on the items that you buy frequently—or just give us a call and we can walk you through the process. We want our customers to know that they'll receive the same great pricing and excellent service, no matter how they order."

Steve Bussell, Product Manager for Braxton-Bragg, continued that one of his goals was to have a "living website where we can share important information for our customers. We expect that in time, this will become the primary reference site for the industry."

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HILGARTNER STONE CO.

Coming Full Circle

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Marble sales plummeted during the second half of the century, and the Hilgartner operation decreased its operation, like most marble companies in the United States. But it continued to be an innovator in marble processing and fabrication and today has a highly successful if smaller operation, working on a wide range of new and historical residential and commercial projects. It also provides Maryland's only accredited apprenticeship program, a rigorous program of study and hands-on learning to teach a new generation of stoneworkers.

The company put the exceptional skills of its craftsmen to work in the development of the Tremont Grand. The job required renovating the showroom into a formal ladies' lounge while preserving the original marble work. It also meant recreating the six-inch polished Carrara marble molding around one of the doors as mirror frames for the two new vanities in the lounge. The work was done much the same as it was in the early 1900s, except for the addition



lem since we do this type of work a lot.”

Hilgartner employees also were involved in restoring other rooms in the large building, many of which are named after different architectural styles like the Corinthian Room, the Doric Room and the Roman Room.

The project was completed in 2005, and the results speak for themselves. The ladies' lounge features the marble columns and patterned floor, plus beaded wallpaper, a chandelier and slipper chairs, and it's gained notoriety. Many



Above: A Hilgartner stonecarver uses a hydraulic chisel to prepare molding to match the door frames at the Tremont Grand. Little has changed in how such architectural stone pieces are prepared by hand, except the addition of power tools. Hilgartner is one of the few stone companies to still use an apprenticeship program to train a new generation of stone carvers.

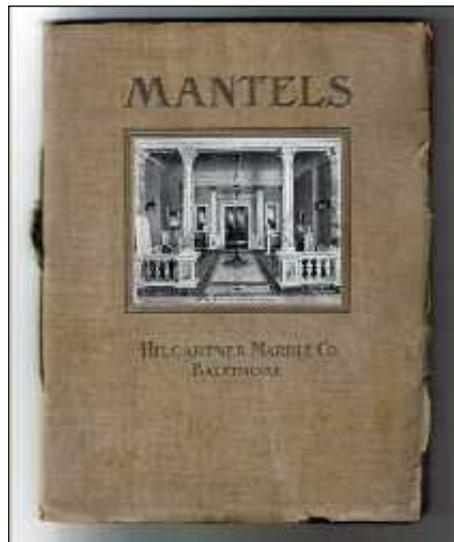


After cleaning and restoration, the entranceway again gleams like a Greek temple.

of electricity. First it was comb-cut on a bridge saw, then carved using a pneumatic chisel.

“Basically we still do everything by hand,” said Shop Foreman Steve Browne. “It takes a bit of artistic oversight. You have to make sure the dimensions are correct, but that wasn't a prob-

people may not realize there's a national restroom competition, but there is – and this lounge was voted one of the top 10 in the country this year. The America's Best Restroom contest is sponsored by Cintas Corp. of Cincinnati, a uniform and bathroom supply company, and voters



Above, Left: Turn-of-the-20th century brochure from Hilgartner features their former showroom – now the Tremont Grand Ladies Lounge.



Above, Right: The book-matched sample panels have been preserved and repurposed as a purely decorative wall feature, a lasting testament to the carver's art from a bygone era in the industry.

can post their ballots on line at www.bestrestroom.com.

The William C. Smith Co. also appreciated the historical significance and craftsmanship of the building, which contained beautiful examples of book-matched marble wall panels. Because these panels were traditionally set with wire anchors and plaster (a practice Hilgartner continues today), they could be removed with little damage. WCS thought they were striking enough to be refinished and trimmed for display. Today they hang in the connecting area

between the Tremont Plaza Hotel and the Tremont Grand.

Monroe said she's still excited about the project when she visits the Tremont Grand, which has won several architectural awards since it opened in early 2006. The five floors and 45,000 square feet of space are used for receptions, meetings and conferences and combine modern technology with its original 19th century elegance. Hilgartner's contribution to that elegance has come full circle.