

BUILT FROM STONE

THE WESTERLY GRANITE STORY

VOLUME
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LABOR UNREST

The men who labored in Westerly's granite quarries and work sheds benefited greatly from the high demand for the stone in the latter half of the nineteenth century. During the industry's heyday, both skilled and unskilled workers typically received a wage considerably higher than most workers in other industries. Despite the prosperity enjoyed by its workforce, the industry was not always spared from labor unrest. In fact, when workers did organize to protest, it usually had to do with a working condition that they considered more important than with any wage-related issue.

The famous "Striker's Case" of 1871 involved the stone cutters' protest of a breach in their agreement with the Rhode Island Granite Works. They walked off the job because the company had taken on too many apprentices without hiring the contractually-agreed-upon, additional journeymen to train them. The stone cutters were certain that by withholding their invaluable skills and talents, orders would go unfilled, profits would be lost, and eventually management would be compelled to honor their original agreement.

Unfortunately, company profits were not the only casualties of the strike. Once the stone cutters walked out, the quarrymen were locked out, as the company had no need to continue extracting stone that would go unfinished. These unskilled workers had to find employment elsewhere.

Fortunately, the work stoppage did not last too long and it did not cripple the industry in Westerly. Instead it led to the creation of the Westerly Granite Company, a cooperative purchased and operated by the striking stone cutters. Westerly granite was in such high demand

during this time that both companies were able to thrive despite this significant disruption in business.

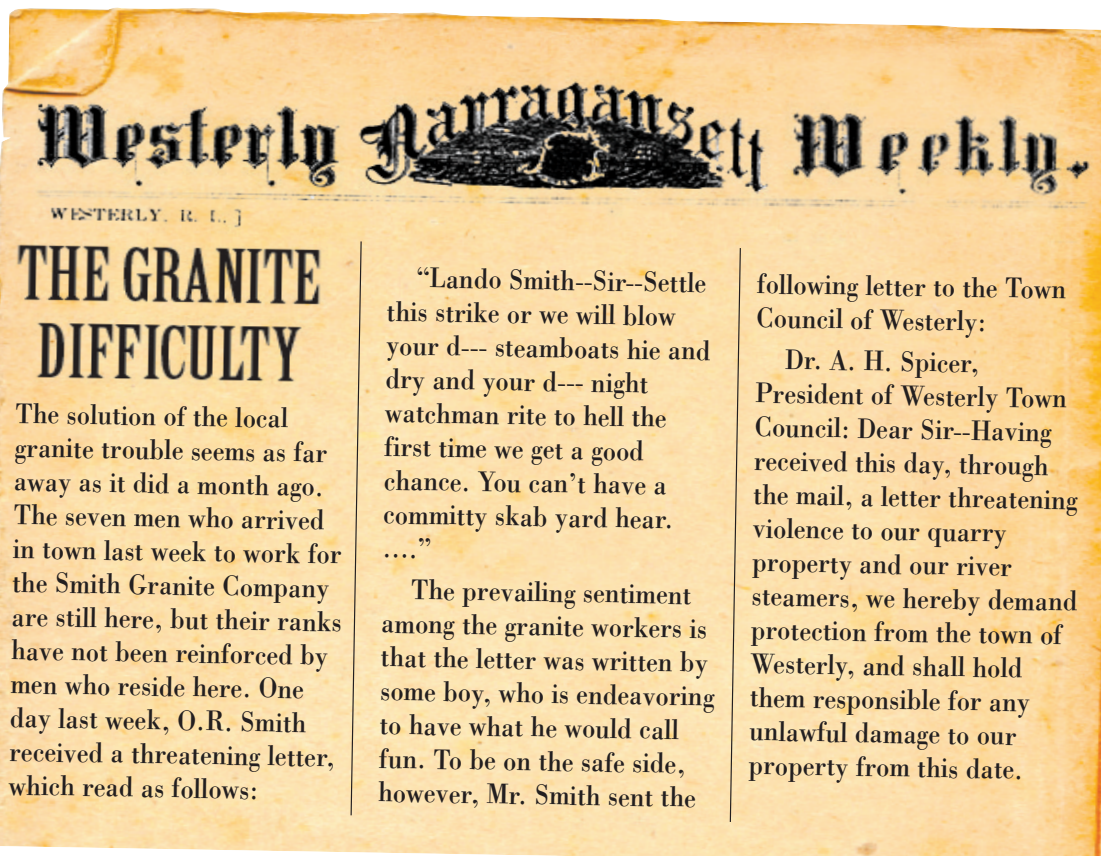
The 1890's saw at least two more strikes in the Westerly quarries. It was during these protests that labor truly tested its limits. The most aggressive attempt for concessions occurred in 1890 as workers demanded the shortening of the workday from ten to nine hours while retaining a ten hour wage. They held out for forty days, relying on their own personal savings and a modest strike fund established by their union. In the end, the

workers settled for a nine hour day with nine hours pay, believing that they had achieved their underlying goal of establishing a shorter work day.

Labor would never win a settlement greater than this, for it was during this period that Westerly began to experience changes in the industry that would lead to its decline during the first half of the coming century. The quarry owners were eventually forced to lower the price of granite as demand dropped off with the introduction of

alternative building materials and as competition from other granite centers around the country increased. The workers experienced this downturn in real time as wages dropped steadily during the 1920's. Labor actions taken to block decreases in wages in the 1920's failed, and may have further compromised an already weakened industry. Westerly granite workers would never be able to effectively bargain for their pay or conditions of employment as they once could.

*Anthony M. Lementowicz, Jr.
Social Studies Department Head
Westerly High School*



Narragansett Weekly, June 30, 1892

TODAY IN GRANITE



HISTORY

Difficult Decision

Following are excerpts from a letter sent on May 9, 1922 to Ernest Dinwoodie, Box 99, Bradford, RI. regarding his participation in a union strike.

Dear Sir:

No doubt you realize by this time that you went out on a foolish strike — a strike that it is impossible to win.

... If our former employees want their jobs back and if you and our other men signify your intentions of coming back within a reasonable time we will hold your jobs for you. Otherwise we will replace all men needed with new men and if they prove satisfactory we will guarantee them steady jobs so far as we have work for them to do.

You have worked for us several times, had good positions, and for one reason or another left our employ. In spite of this we gave you a position of trust and responsibility with us, you being in charge of a valuable piece of machinery. We believe that you owe more to this Company who put you in charge of this piece of machinery and more to yourself and family than you owe to any outside influence. We believe that you acted unwisely when you betrayed this trust. You have nothing to gain by sticking to a Union who has not one single advantage to offer any of its members and cannot assist or help you in any way.

... The position you held with us was a desirable one and naturally will not be left vacant long and we consider that you have already had enough time to give this matter careful thought and consideration.

Under these circumstances you can not expect to stay away indefinitely and still get your old job back, and if you are not back to work within the next few days do not blame this Company for the mistake you yourself have made.

Very truly yours,
SULLIVAN GRANITE COMPANY
Frank A. Sullivan, Pres.



Seal of the Granite Cutters International Association of America, part of the AF of L. The quarrymen's union in Westerly was part of the CIO.

STONE CHIPS

"I remember my father talking about they had a stonemason's strike here. They had a lot of scabs come in from different places. There used to be some wicked brawls and fights. Then when the strike got settled — some of the scabs were working — they didn't last too long. They used ... the wrap around the stone when they pick the chain, you know, regular fire hose. But it gets saturated with that stone dust and water and is just like a block of cement. They used to throw those at those guys. They get hit on the side of the head, they end up in a hospital. They didn't last too long. Stonemasons were a rugged bunch."

Carl Myllymaki (b.1918) interviewed in 1984 about his father a stonemason.

YOUR PART IN HISTORY

Share your stories, photos and artifacts. Earlier volumes of "Built From Stone" are now on the museum's website; www.babcocksmithhouse.org.

Please call us at 401-377-8490 or 401-322-0452 or e-mail us at builtfromstone@gmail.com.

COMING NEXT WEEK

Batterson: The Man Behind The New England Granite Works

PEOPLE WHO BUILT WESTERLY DOCUMENTED GRANITE WORKERS

Thom, Alexander	Tonelli, J.
Thom, Maxwell	Toole, Joseph O.
Thomas, W. J.	Toon, George
Thompson, Alexander	Torani, John
Thompson, Frank	Torsea, Maurice
Thompson, John S.	Tough, James
Thompson, Joseph	Tranina, Wellington
Thurber, Calvin	Trant, John
Tillinghast, Everett	Travena, Henry
Toesca, Maurice	Travena, W.
Tolfa, Victor	Trevena, John



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