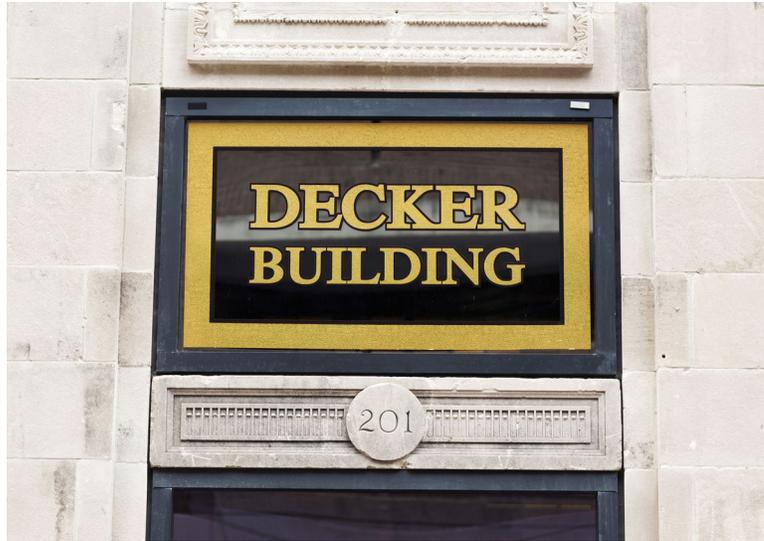


"The most difficult job I've ever done": How a 71-year-old stone mason rebuilt the historic Decker facade

By Katherine Hafner
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L. Todd Spencer | The Virginian-Pilot
Photos of the historic Decker facade, restored at The Main Hotel and Conference Center downtown Norfolk, Jan. 29, 2017.



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NORFOLK

Ron Crum, who's worked in stonemasonry since he was 6, likes puzzles.

So when the 71-year-old was tasked with piecing together more than 500 pieces of limestone from the historic Decker Building facade, he gladly took it on.

"When it comes to hand-chip work, I'm the go-to guy," he said.

But he didn't know quite what he was up against – his "most complicated" puzzle yet. The 538 pieces weigh an average of 300 pounds each, the smallest about 20 and the largest, a slab of granite at the bottom, 2 tons.

"There was constant pressure to get it done," Crum said. "But there's no way to speed up a process that has been slow for thousands of years. ... I laid every stone."

City and community leaders gathered at Granby and Main streets last week to unveil the restored facade that fronts a portion of The Main hotel and conference center, a joint project between the city and Virginia Beach-based Gold Key | PHR Hotels & Resorts.

The former Decker Building was built in 1919 for Guaranty Title & Trust Co. and bought in the 1980s by Peter Decker for his law practice. About a decade ago, locals protested its demolition to make way for The Main project, and the city agreed to preserve the facade.

The very modern hotel is set to open within months, and the facade will lead visitors into new restaurants.

Few will know that Crum spent more than a year on what he called "the most difficult job I've ever done in my life."

The project began a decade ago, when Norfolk hired a Maryland-based company to remove the facade for \$140,000, according to Pilot archives.

Crum was called in by W.M. Jordan Co. to put it back together.

He was told the limestone pieces were lying in wooden crates at a city-owned parking lot on Goff Street off Tidewater Drive, marked with numbers that corresponded to a binder with details.

All he had to do was match them up and put the large-scale jigsaw puzzle back together, right?

Not quite. Time had worn away the labels. He and fellow stonemason Kirsten Williams spent months measuring each stone and matching the sizes to determine where they should go. The address number sign itself was in seven pieces. An additional 60 new stones were brought in for the project.

Crum, Williams and his team of two others used old photos of the historic building to piece together the limestone blocks. That's "largely all I had," he said.

Storage also gave the stone a certain sheen. Darker spots show where dust from the railroad behind the storage lot coated the crates.

Crum used a solution of epoxy glue and stone dust to piece the blocks together, driving five or six at a time to his workshop in Toano in James City County and back.

When it came time to lay the stone, the crew faced another big problem. The depths of the stones did not always match, so they had to saw off some parts to align them properly with what's now a concrete wall for the hotel. In the early 1900s, they had been adhered to brick.

A third problem emerged: After Crum would lay a row, he'd come back the next day and see that vibrations from the building and slowly setting mortar allowed it to tilt slightly. His crew ended up manufacturing stainless steel anchors to hold the stone to the wall behind.

All of this pushed back the original six-month deadline set by developer Bruce Thompson, and cost upward of \$200,000.

Crum said he was amazed by the support from passersby. People would hand him their cards and say they were friends with Pete, the Decker building's namesake.

Crum trained as an apprentice at night at Maury High School many decades ago, which makes this project in this city come full circle, he said.

“It was an emotional experience,” he said. “I’m glad I was a part of restoring some faith in the people along the street there.”

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