

# SLIPPERY ROCK

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## VERMONT STONE ART LIVES UP TO ITS NAME

# IT

IS ALL ABOUT FINDING THE RIGHT FIT.

PRECISION, PERSISTENCE, AND TECHNICAL KNOW-HOW ARE THE HALLMARKS OF VERMONT STONE ART, AN ARCHITECTURAL STONE SUPPLIER AND MANUFACTURER BASED IN BARRE, VT. JAMES T. SULLIVAN, VSA DRAFTSMAN AND PROJECT MANAGER, ENJOYS THE PAINSTAKING PROCESS OF FITTING THOUSANDS OF CUT STONE PIECES TOGETHER INTO A HARMONIOUS WHOLE — A SCENARIO THAT HAS CHARACTERIZED SEVERAL OF THE COMPANY'S MAJOR PROJECTS.

During one of its recent contracts, VSA supplied thousands of square feet of cut stone for the award-winning renovation of the Axinn Center at Starr Library at Middlebury College in Vermont.

"The college is known for its stone buildings," Sullivan said. "For this particular project, they were demolishing part of (the library) and building additions—large wings— onto it. There was a historic restoration part of our scope that we did with a mason here, but the new construction was a much larger portion of the project."

As described by the college's news office, the 82,400 square foot project preserved the



Front entrance to the Shepley Pavillion Reading Room features Danby-Marble-clad pillars and "split-face Middlebury College blend." Middlebury College in Vermont is noted for its stone buildings and use of stone native to the granite and marble-rich Barre area.

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original neoclassical Starr Library and the modernist Shepley Pavilion Reading Room and added 50,000 square feet of new space.

Alan Barr, VSA managing director, called the Axinn Center work a "beautiful, landmark project" that involved historical restoration and adaptive reuse. Previous additions to the original library were demolished, and VSA supplied 700 tons of rubble stone that Sullivan called the "split face Middlebury College blend, three local quartzitic sandstones blended together to match the character and color of the surrounding historic buildings." The company managed the cut stone elements used in the renovation.

"The mason that was awarded the job hired us to do all the shop drawings and manage all the stone," Sullivan said. "That's my job. I was actually involved in the take off, estimating, and quoting. I was the project manager."

The Axinn Center project used three differ-

ent varieties of stone: Castle Hill limestone (dolomite), Indiana buff limestone, and Vermont Danby marble.

"The existing stone on the historic building was from a quarry that was closed, so we had to pull in a lot of different samples and have the architect pick a stone that best matched," Sullivan said. "It was challenge. We were able to get really close with that even though the historic building is over 150 years old."

The exteriors of the two wings of faculty offices built during the renovation were designed to complement the architecture and materials of adjacent buildings on the college's historic Old Stone Row quad. VSA's part in the project took about two years from quote to finish, Sullivan said.

Thomas McGinn, project manager for the Middlebury College Campus Design, Planning, and Construction Division, praised the quality of VSA's work. "They did all of the

**by Joel Davis**

PHOTOS SUPPLIED COURTESY  
VERMONT STONE ART

stone on the library—Danby Imperial marble and lots of individual pieces. Some of it actually had to be cut as a radius, so it was pretty detailed. They did a nice job. It all fit together just perfectly."

VSA rose to the challenge of matching the style of the surrounding historic buildings, he said. "It's hard to do to a modern building that sort of mirrors the 1800s-era buildings that are closest to it. The shapes are evocative. Certainly, the stone is evocative of the other buildings especially the Danby Imperial marble."

In 2009, Middlebury College received a Sustainable Design Award from the Boston

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Society of Architects (BSA) and an Excellence in Architecture award from the Society for College and University Planning (SCUP) for the Axinn Center.

It's this kind of intricate work that Sullivan has found most satisfying during his career. "I really like anything to do with numbers and dimensions and, particularly, drafting. I do a lot of drafting here, and I've always liked that. I appreciate the finished product, going to see the job when it is complete."

There is a definite satisfaction in translating an immaterial idea into solid stone. "It feels really good when things fit and they go up like you envisioned," he said. "You have to envision it three-dimensionally in your mind. There is a lot of guessing that goes into that. To see it installed and see that it works is a nice reward. It's very satisfying to see something go into the wall and fit and not have to be cut or sent back or rejected."

Another VSA project of note was the Park Place condominiums in Saratoga Springs, NY. The company provided and installed 1,800 Indiana limestone cut stone elements for the high-end project, Sullivan said.

VSA employs between 10-13 employees seasonally. Its corporate office is located in Colchester, VT. The company is about a year-and-a-half old and came into existence in 2010 when Trowel Trades Supply, Inc., which has been involved in the masonry materials business since 1966, set it up as an affiliated, inde-

pendently operating company.

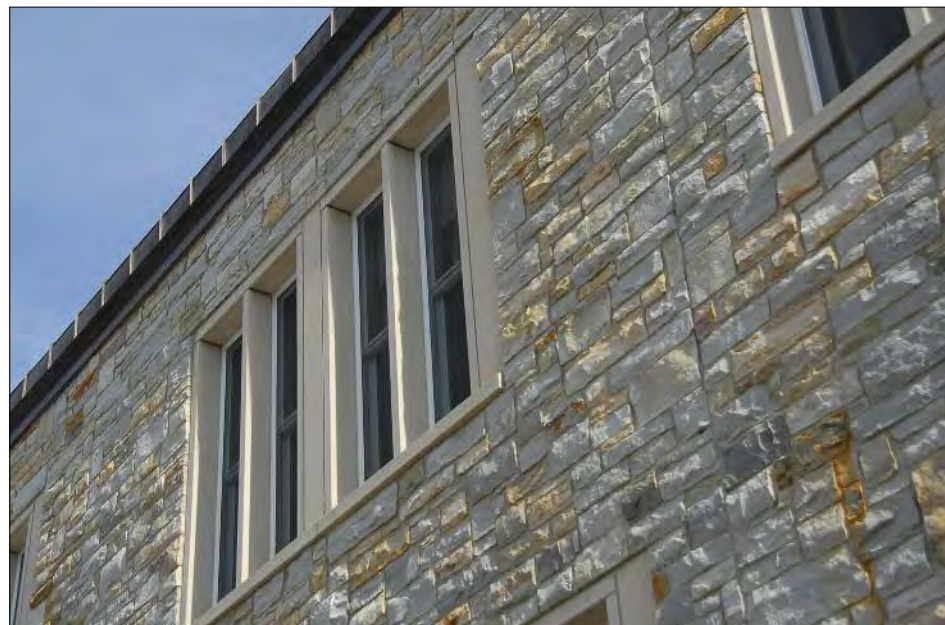
"VSA is a new offshoot of a company that has been in business for 45 years," Barr said. "The parent company is...the largest masonry stone supplier in the state of Vermont. What has happened is the custom stone division, which I ran, has been branched off through its own business."

Prior to working for Trowel Trades Supply, Barr was president of Towne House Restorations, Inc./THR Group of Brooklyn, NY, for 20 years. He moved to Vermont in 2007 for "the opportunity to get into the natural stone business. The company I ran was really in a niche in terms of historical restoration work that was booming in the 80s and 90s."

"We really only specialized in restoration work. Once you restore some of these landmarks, you don't do it again for another 100 years. The market was kind of changing, and I had the opportunity to get involved with Trowel Trades."

Barr said that VSA's strength lies in the breadth of its technical knowledge and experience in the industry. "We're familiar with so many different types of materials. The years of experience that people have here helps out in terms material selection and also technical assistance."

Through a sister company, VSA provides interested architects access to technical specifications for various materials. It also offers an American Institute of Architects accredited class on the physical properties of dimensional



*Above: Split-face blocks and Indiana Limestone masonry sills were chosen to complement the modern design of the Starr Axinn Center project amidst the traditional stone buildings of the Middlebury College campus. The "Middlebury College Blend" combined three local quarzitic sandstones.*

stone. "Architects love it," Barr said. "Gene Pawlikowski of Trowel Trades Supply is our key technical resource. He was instrumental in the successful implementation of the Starr-Axinn job."

VSA is experienced in all aspects of the project management process, Sullivan said. "We deliver to the job site, and we do what is called a 'stone setting drawing' for the mason and then handle any problems that might arrive during the installation process—basically taking it from the start all the way to the finish," he said.

One of the challenges of managing complex

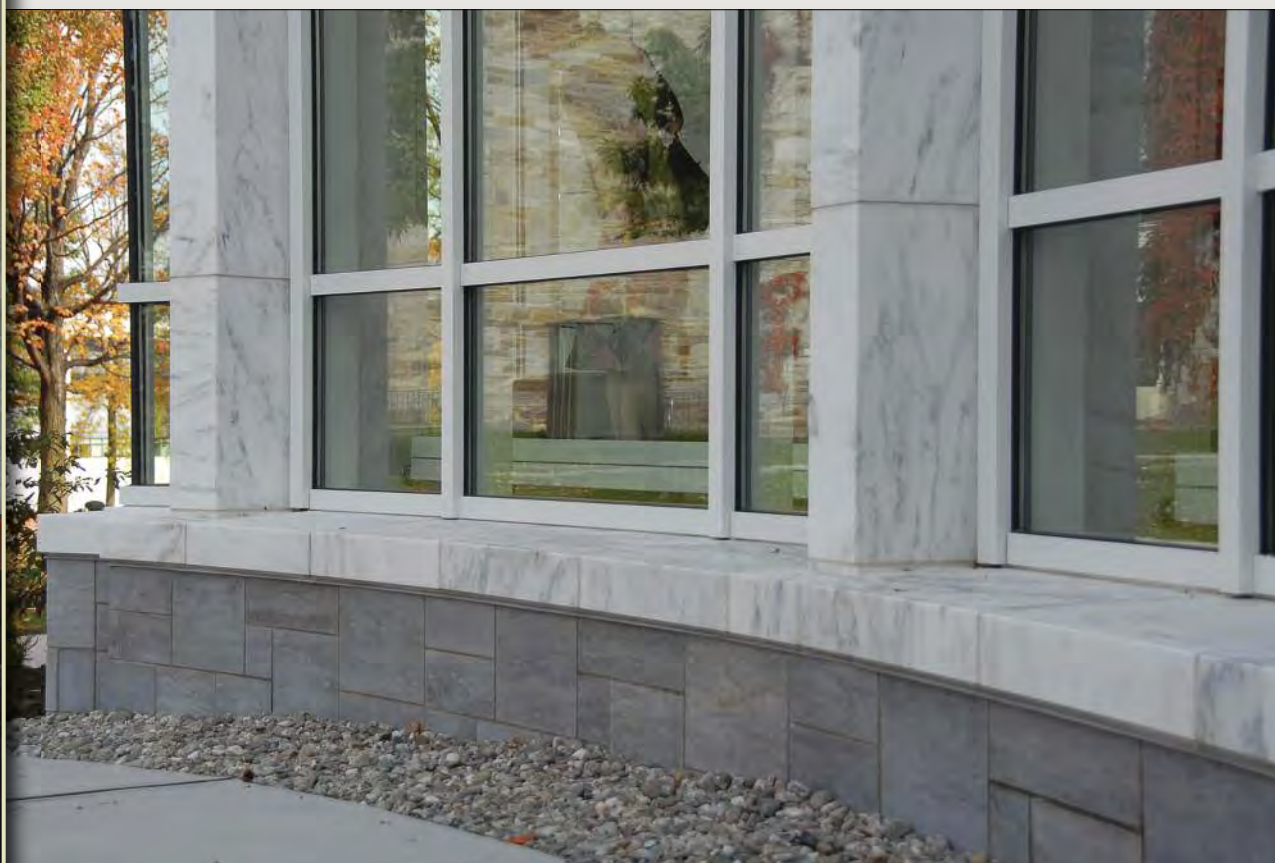
projects is working out the logistics of the supply chain—trying to synch the construction schedule with actual delivery of materials—but the company prides itself on its ability to source hundreds of different stones from around the world to meet the requirements of clients, Sullivan said.

Another challenge is dealing with those cut stone elements whose dimensions don't match up as planned, but these problems do not deter Vermont Stone Art from completing projects to its customers' satisfaction.

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*Left and Below: Radial-cut Danby Imperial marble blocks and structural framing add a beautiful, classical accent to the darker Castle Hill Limestone courses chosen for the front entrance.*



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If a piece doesn't fit, the company thinks nothing of sending a truck to pick it up, taking it back to its fabrication shop in Barre, and customizing it, he said. "Within a day or two, it's back on the job site cut to the size that our customer needs. That kind of service keeps our customers coming back here."

VSA is definitely service-oriented, Sullivan said. "We answer the phone when people call us. If you do leave us a voice mail, we get back to you on the same day."

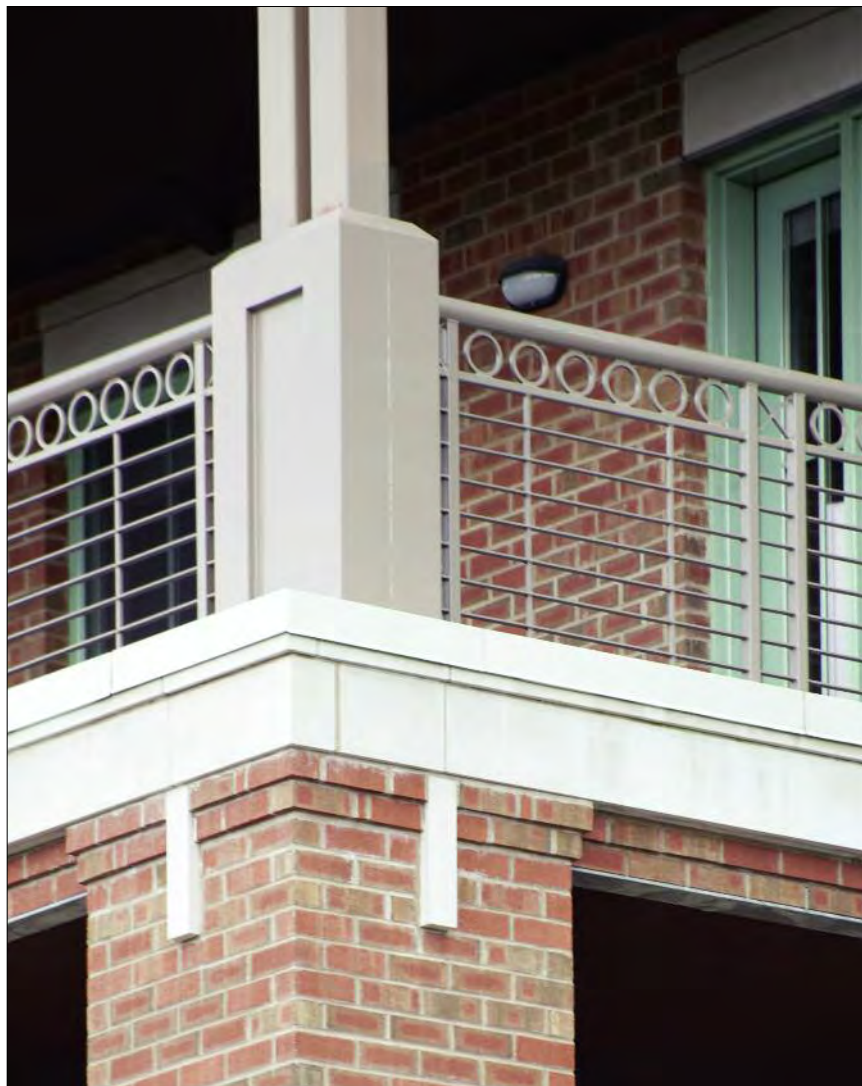
The company also worked on a project to replace the Crown Point Bridge, which spanned Lake Champlain from Crown Point, NY, to Chimney Point, VT. The bridge closed in the fall of 2009 due to structural failures in its concrete piers, which could not withstand the churning water and ice during tough Northeastern winters.

VSA was hired to design and fabricate the two-inch-thick granite veneer and corner panels that would encase and protect the six new concrete piers. The company eventually designed, cut, delivered, and managed the installation of nearly 7,000 square feet of granite —708 pieces in all.

Visit [www.vermontstoneart.com](http://www.vermontstoneart.com) for more information about other recent projects.

*Right: Starr Axinn construction features an elegant color combination: Danby marble-clad pillars, with darker Castle Hill Limestone, below.*

*Far Right: Split-face "Middlebury College Blend" rubble stone and the Indiana Limestone window surrounds were chosen to color-coordinate with the older campus stone construction.*



*Left and Below: High-end condo project in Saratoga Springs, New York included about 1,800 cut Indiana Limestone elements of all different shapes, lengths, and profiles. Vermont Stone Art Project Manager James Sullivan explained, "The installation went well, with minimum challenges. This was a two-year project from estimating to finished project."*

