



## SNEC Fall Granite Quarry Tour and Meeting 2001

At the Chester Granite Company quarry, owner Allen Williams explains quarrying methods.

On November 3 the Southern New England Chapter clambered up the Jacob's Ladder Trail in western Massachusetts for a fascinating tour of historic and contemporary quarrying techniques. The neighboring towns of Becket, Blandford and Chester are the source of the famous "Chester blue" granite, a hard, fine-grained, stone favored for memorials and monuments since the 1870s. Our guide for most of the day was Allen Williams, owner and operator of the Chester Granite Company. Allen Williams was the perfect interpreter, able to supplement his own practical knowledge of quarrying with historical knowledge gained from his father's experiences working at the Hudson Chester quarry.

The tour began at the Hudson Chester quarry in Becket, which opened in 1870 and closed in 1947. The quarry is a remarkable IA site. By remaining in operation through World War II, the quarry did not lose its equipment to scrap drives like most of the local quarries and its subsequent abandonment has left an extensive collection of historic equipment in situ.

The approach to this hilltop quarry is marked by towering piles of "grout," the scrap rock that must be cleared away from the working face. The quarry proper is a striking sight, with the high



Allen Williams explains the workings of a fallen derrick used for raising quarried blocks from the Hudson-Chester Quarry floor.





*Giant water-cooled circular saw for cutting granite blocks at the Chester Granite Company cutting shed.*

angular faces of the blue-hued granite forming a bowl around the flooded quarry floor. A single derrick mast with its bull wheel remains upright on the edge of the highest face; another lies toppled nearby. These derricks were capable of hoisting up to forty tons, though the quarrymen would rarely maneuver blocks bigger than eight or nine tons. The winch or draw works that operated the derrick cables are still in place about 30 yards back from the edge. These were originally powered by steam, then compressed air and finally by diesel engines. Compressed air remained a critical component in the drilling and in the maintenance machines found in the extant blacksmith shop. Notable among the surviving equipment are an Ingersoll-Rand air compressor, an Ingersoll-Rand "upsetter" used to sharpen drill bits, a surfacing machine, and a single drill. Fortunately, the rarity and value of this site has been recognized by the Becket Land Trust which has acquired it for preservation.

After an al fresco self-catered lunch, the chapter held the annual business meeting and elected its current officers – Robert Stewart, president; Jonathan Kranz, program chair; Charles Schneider,

secretary; and Rick Greenwood, treasurer.

The next stop was Allen Williams' Chester Granite Company in Blandford. Allen has reintroduced active extraction at an old quarry with architectural stone as his primary product. He explained both his contemporary single-handed quarrying techniques, in which he employs a range of tools from the traditional feathers, wedges and gluts to modern jacks - air bags only 12" square that can hold a block weighing up to twelve tons. The company's shop includes a wire saw and a diamond-tipped rotary saw (both state of the art), which Allen had in operation during our visit. A yard full of a variety of stone and a sculpture garden featuring Allen's works in Chester blue capped this superlative excursion with a most knowledgeable and accommodating guide.

The day concluded with a visit to Chester, where we inspected an early 20th century stone cutting shot saw and then moved on to the Chester railroad station. David Pierce of the Chester Foundation opened up the 1840(!) station for us as well as the rolling stock, including a restored 1919 wooden caboose and a box car with an interpretive exhibit that outlined the many highlights of this stretch of the Boston & Albany and the 1000' climb from Chester to the summit of the Berkshire grade at Washington, MA.

Fading daylight put an end to this chapter meeting, however, we had hardly exhausted the opportunities offered by the Chester environs, which include abrasive emery mines and processing plants, a mid-nineteenth century iron blast furnace site, a small chromite mine site, and numerous Boston & Albany Railroad resources, including the massive 1830s Whistler-designed stone arch bridges in the Westfield River gorge, as well as a roundhouse and coaling tower associated with steam pusher locomotive operations on the Washington Summit grade. If you are interested in visiting these railroad resources, join the Chester Foundation at the Chester Depot for their annual history event, "Chester on Track," Saturday, May 18th. Call the foundation for more information at (413) 354-7752.

Richard Greenwood  
Barrington, RI