

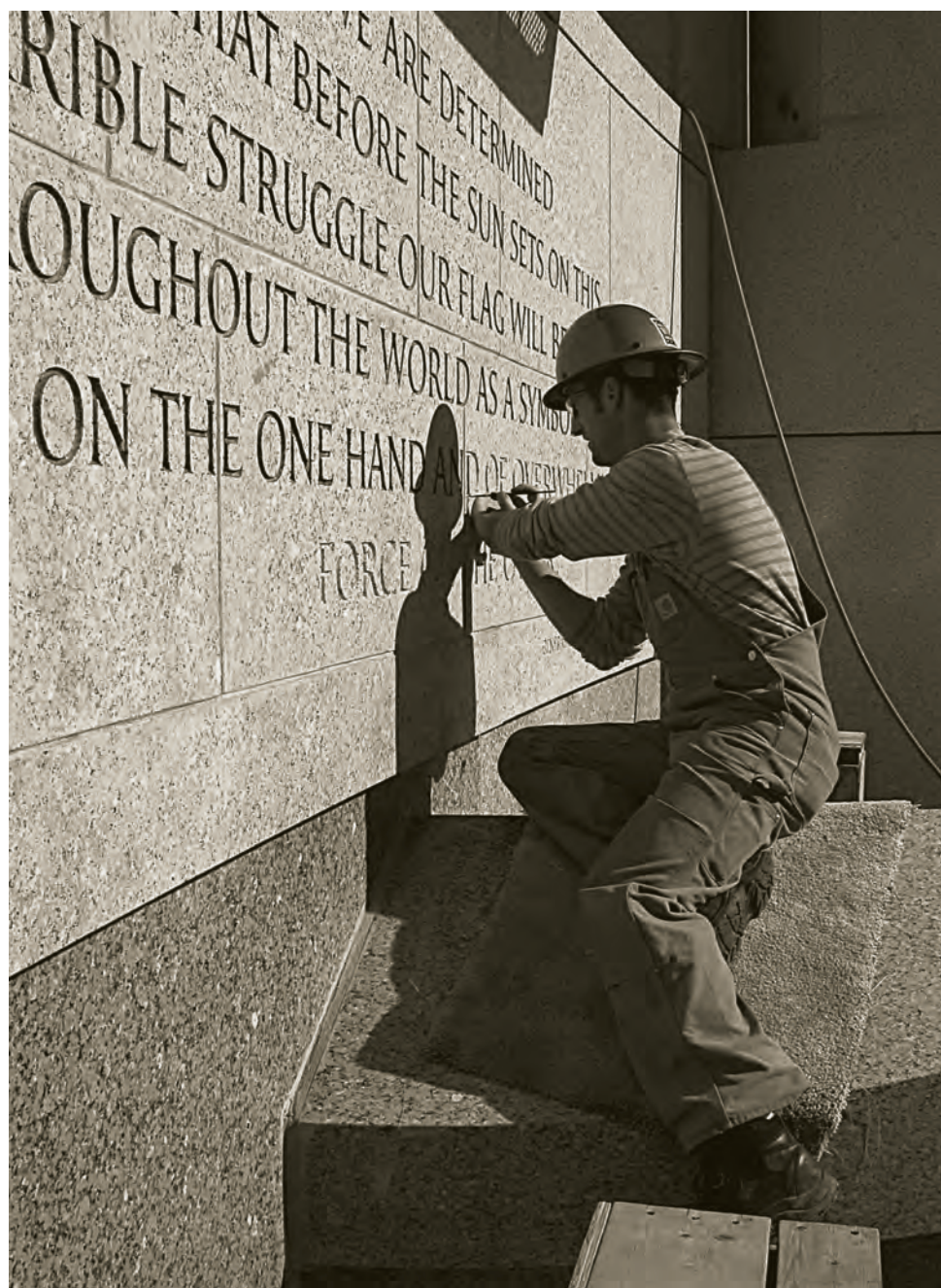
## Interview with Nick Benson, stone-carver

*A third-generation stone-carver and calligrapher born in 1964, Nicholas Benson creates tombstones and architectural lettering for public buildings, memorials, and monuments. He owns and operates the John Stevens Shop, a historic stone-carving business in Newport, Rhode Island. The shop was run by eight generations of Stevenses until 1927, when it was purchased by Benson's grandfather, John Howard Benson (1901–1956), a distinguished calligrapher, author, and teacher, who was at the forefront of the renaissance in American stone carving between the wars. Benson learned his craft from his father, John Everett Benson (b. 1939), a renowned letter carver who has incised such national treasures as the John F. Kennedy Memorial, the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial, and the National Gallery of Art. Nicholas Benson has done inscriptional work at the National Gallery of Art, the Mellon Auditorium, and the National Cathedral in Washington. In 2000, he was commissioned to design and carve the inscriptions for the National World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C.*



*Above* A detail of a 1998 headstone in Wakefield, Rhode Island, commissioned by Robert Loffredo in honor of his late wife, Elaine.

*Right* Nick Benson carving the World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C.



1920

King George V unveils the Cenotaph in Whitehall (Nov. 11)

1925

*Mein Kampf*, Hitler's autobiography, published (July)

**JD: How much stone cutting did the World War II Memorial involve?**

NB: There are 4,682 letters in total—a lot of lettering—in twenty-two inscription locations. The letters vary in size from three-quarters of an inch tall to more than nineteen inches.

**JD: What kind of granite was used?**

NB: It's a South Carolina granite called Kershaw. One of the reasons [memorial designer] Friedrich St. Florian chose it is because it has a large grain. Even from a distance, you can see the character of the granite. Finer granite, especially with such large architectural forms, would get lost. We asked the memorial committees to come up with succinct, evocative inscriptions

that could have a large physical letter size so they would carry well. As the letters get smaller, they become more difficult to read because the forms compete with the grain of the granite. It's important not to turn this three-dimensional sculptural form into typography. You want the inscriptions to be sculptural elements that will partake of the architecture scale of the monument, so you can't think of the lettering graphically—black on white.

**JD: Do people read inscribed letters as they would text in a book?**

NB: They do. The key thing about carved letters in stone, what's called the "lapidary letter," is its sculptural quality. The interior of the letter is left somewhat rough so that the interior, abraded surface over time will catch debris and give the letter a dimensional patina. Raking light—light that passes across the surface of the stone so shadows go in and bounce off the interior of the carved letter—really shows off the carved letter.

**JD: Was the memorial carving done in situ?**

NB: All the carving was done in situ. There's one man in particular who was an absolute godsend, Joe Moss. He is one of the best pneumatic carvers you'll find, probably the country's leading pneumatic carver.

**JD: Was it carved only with pneumatic tools?**

NB: Only pneumatically. It's a two-step process. Initially, we sandblast it. Sandblasting is a method of etching into the stone. You take a rubber mat in which lettering has been cut like a stencil, and place it on the stone. The stone is exposed where the lettering is. As you blast sand at high pressure at the stencil, it etches the letter into the stone. The inscription work was initially blasted to a depth of about three-sixteenths to a quarter of an

inch. Then we go in with our chisels and make the pretty U-cut. Some of the colored pieces in the granite are hard, some are soft, some are in between. When you blast at it, the sand etches into the softer part and leaves the harder parts. You are left with a pebbly surface in the interior of the letter. Later, we go in with our pneumatic chisels and make it uniform.

**JD: How do you move forward in a situation where a single mistake can be irreversible?**

NB: You're taking out such small amounts of stone at any given time that it's not as if you're going to misstroke and blow out the center of an O. It doesn't work that way. The strike of the piston and hammer against the chisel is fairly light, and you're taking off small bits at a time.

**JD: Do you invent a new typeface for each project?**

NB: I invented one for this project. In my monument work, I generally draw every letter by hand. Every letter is different. My brushwork is consistent, but in the very subtle inconsistencies are the beauty. It's like an oriental rug. Some of what makes it so beautiful is the human error, subtle things, in the design.

**JD: Tell me about the typeface for this memorial.**

NB: I call it the World War Two font. I had to make it a very heavy weight to carry the material. The memorial design makes nods to the classical, and there are Romanesque arches. Friedrich, in particular, wanted a letter that was connected to the classical form in some way. When I say the classical form, I mean the Roman capital letter. The Trajan Inscription is considered the archetypal Roman capital letter. That letter was developed with the use of the broad-edge brush and through the repetitive movements of the hand. The Trajan Inscription is mind-bogglingly beautiful, yet it is incredibly idiosyncratic.

When you look at my lettering, I have a sweep that's typical of the brush-drawn Roman. The broad-edge brush has flat bristles on the top like a calligraphic pen; when you move one way, it's thin, when you move the other, it's thick. It's held at a forty-five-degree angle, just like a pen. You come down, you put a little more weight at the top as you begin, you draw the weight up a little bit, then you bring pressure down at the bottom. It draws the eye beautifully.

**JD: Do you work with a brush when you're in the conceptual phase of the design?**

NB: Yes. Water-based black poster paint on paper drawn to scale, full size. One to one. Years of experience tell me what the letter will look like carved in stone regardless of its graphic representation on the page. When I started painting out the World War Two inscriptions, I did several different versions, knowing what I needed to do in order to make it work well with the stone. If you looked at what I painted graphically, you'd think, "Those letters are awfully heavy, the weights are very strong, they are very thick strokes, I don't know, it looks too thick." No. It was all in my



In 1995, students from Fox Middle School in Hartford, Connecticut, began to research the African American slaves who were interred in unmarked graves in that city's oldest burial ground. They looked at "God's Little Acre," a section in Newport's Common Burying Ground where African American slaves were buried in colonial times. It contains the stone of Pompey Brenton, whose face is the only African American visage ever carved on a colonial gravestone. After coincidentally discovering during that same visit the John Stevens Shop, where the Brenton stone was originally carved by John Stevens III, they raised funds to have Nick Benson adapt the stone to commemorate the Hartford slaves. The African American Monument was unveiled in 1998.

mind, knowing this is what I am going to need in order to make letters carry.

**JD: How long have you been cutting stone?**

**NB:** Twenty years. My dad taught me. He got me into the shop more than twenty years ago. I was fifteen and needed a summer job. My father was hard on me and got me moving quickly, making finished work for him, and carving at the shop level, which is a particularly high level of craftsmanship. He has the highest standards of anybody you're going to find, bar none. I cut his designs from 1979 until 1993. I took over the business in 1993.

**JD: When you look at a block of text are you conscious of individual letters or the entire composition?**

**NB:** Both. The entire composition is key, but the proportion of the letter, the design of the particular letter form itself, is extremely important too. Equally important is the cadence of the text, how the negative space is used, word spacing, line spacing—all of that is crucial to good inscriptional carving. And very complicated and subtle. That's the type of thing that people don't see. The inscription will be easy to read, the letters will look pretty, and they won't give it a second thought. The inscription work on this monument was made to be highly legible, easily read, with no strange idiosyncrasies that would have people scratching their heads and wondering.

**JD: To obtain "perfect" lettering, you'd think the letters would be of uniform weight, but they're not.**

**NB:** Not even close. There's a subtle shift from thick to thin in every letter. When you go back to the history of monument making in this country in particular—for instance, when you go to the Common Burying Ground in Newport, which is a very old cemetery, and so many of the stones in there are John Stevens Shop stones—all of the interesting colonial tombstones were one-offs. That is, there was one version of a design, one man's thought process from concept to product, all the way through.

**JD: Customized for each client?**

**NB:** Pretty much. They put everything they could into developing it, and the styles were constantly progressing. The most interesting thing is that they didn't have typographic standards to look at, so they were developing letter forms from memory.

**JD: Weren't they influenced by books and broadsides?**

**NB:** In the early 1700s, in colonial America, there were not a lot of printed pieces, and the examples they had were extremely rough. It wasn't until [John] Baskerville and some of the other English typographers in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century that those faces become popular in America. In early colonial stones, they developed both lettering and the ornamental work at the same time, the two were linked.

They were strong, unified pieces of work. When the typographic standard came in, people began to request specific typefaces. That is when the split occurred between calligraphy and monument work. They were no longer letterers anymore, they were just making facsimiles of typefaces. The ornamental carving was quite good all the way up to the Victorian era, but the lettering fell off. It became odd, stylized, flat-footed. There was no longer that brilliant, lively calligraphic form.

**JD: Do you use a graphics program?**

**NB:** I use Fontographer, which takes the scanned, brush-drawn letters and translates that into a typeface. For this project, I drew each letter by hand, scanned it into the computer and made a typeface from which I could type, and then set, in the computer, all the type that we see on the memorial. We spent hours using complicated things like bézier curves, making outlines of the brush-drawn letters, making hair-splitting assessments. It's delicate work, making an outline that will be somewhat of a representation of your brush-drawn letter. Mainly, I brush letters by hand, transfer them onto stone, and then carve. I cut with mallet and chisel 99 percent of the time.

**JD: Do you have a favorite letter?**

**NB:** *R* is one of my favorite letters because it incorporates all of the strokes of the alphabet. You have the vertical, the horizontal, the curved form, and the diagonal. That's what we use often as a sample, test letter. It's a good letter.

**JD: My son, who is studying Chinese, told me that in China if a woman has a choice between a handsome man and one who writes beautifully, she will always choose the man with the beautiful handwriting.**

**NB:** I'm not surprised. They've got such a reverence for calligraphy in Asia, and everyone has some skill with the brush. People here appreciate calligraphy, but it doesn't receive the same reverence that it does in the East.

**JD: Do you judge people based on their handwriting?**

**NB:** Not at all. When I was a kid, my handwriting was nearly illegible.

**JD: What happened?**

**NB:** Study, study, study, and perseverance. Hermann Zapf, the great type designer, said, "My friends would go out and drink and dance while I stayed at home and bravely drew letterform." You've got to put in the time.

In 1997 Benson carved a French limestone tablet that was commissioned by Henry Sharpe Lynn to commemorate the renovation of the Anglican Cathedral refectory in Birmingham, Alabama.



1929

Quartz crystal clocks that are accurate to one second in ten years are introduced

1929

New York Stock Exchange collapses on "Black Friday" and the Great Depression begins, lasting until 1939; it is the longest and most severe depression in the industrialized world (Oct. 28)