

Laborers' memorial installed in Marseilles

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A 2,800-pound tribute to Laborers' Local 393 was lowered into place in front of its union hall in Marseilles just before noon on Wednesday.

"It's a workers' and veterans' memorial," said David Raikes, 393's field representative.

"It will be dedicated to our workers that have lost their lives on the job and the veterans that have been our union workers."

The monument will be the centerpiece of a memorial site next to the south bank of the Illinois & Michigan Canal.

Already in place are the black iron railings and a 52-foot silver flagpole topped with a full-color eagle.



Photo: Charles Stanley

Easing a 2,800-pound tribute memorial to its base late Wednesday morning in Marseilles are (from left) Todd Stehl, business manager for Laborers' Local 393; retired Laborer Mike "Rambo" Farrare; and field representative David Raikes.

Eventually, a plaque will be added to the base of the monument, two small garden areas installed and a storyboard put on display to tell the history of the union from its start in the 1930s, Raikes said.

The nearby section of the canal also will receive some special treatment.

Raikes said the union is adopting the canal bed west to the old iron swing bridge and east to the newer foot bridge behind the fire station.

Within the next couple of years the area will be cleaned up and landscaped, he said.

"We are going to work with the Canal Corridor Association and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources to beautify this area."

The limestone monument was carved by Elgin sculptor Walter S. Arnold.

Arnold grew up in the Hyde Park-Kenwood neighborhood of Chicago. Inspired by the sculpture

elements of buildings at the University of Chicago, Arnold began carving stone at age 12.

When he turned 20 Arnold began an apprentice in marble carving in Italy. Back in the United States he spent five years working on the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. and then established a studio in Chicago, later moving to Elgin.

Arnold, who is a member of the Laborers Union, met Raikes in 2003 at the 100th anniversary of the Laborers. The two hit it off and Raikes began dreaming about Arnold doing a monument for Marseilles.

The commission was finally given for the work to begin a year ago. Arnold estimated he has spent 500 to 600 hours converting a 5,000 pound chunk of Indiana limestone into the finished work.

The front panel displays five Laborers from different eras in 393's history. The back panel shows the buildings, bridges and other projects the union has worked on.

Arnold said while each sculpture is different, the enthusiasm and spirit behind the Marseilles memorial made it special.

Raikes commended Arnold.

"He put his heart and soul into this," Raikes said.

"The strength and stability of the stone, combined with the concrete and iron at the rest of the site, really depicts who we are. We make our living with our hands and our backs."