Negotiating Modernity in the Monument Trade: The Barre Granite National Advertising Campaign of 1916 and the Vermont Marble Company Campaign of 1927

Bruce S. Elliott

Department of History, Carleton University, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

Anthony Giddens has argued that central to the problem of modernity was the discomfiting distanciation of social relations over time and space and with their disembedding from local face-to-face contexts a growing dependence on impersonal mechanisms and expert systems. (Giddens, 1990, 21, 26-28) In the monument trade, consumer trust in local craftsmen who had learned the business through apprenticeship gave way uneasily to industrial production and national corporate structures. (Elliott, 2011, 16) Wholesalers in the quarry towns of America were supplying distant stonecutters with finished monuments, lacking only the inscriptions, by the 1870s. (Gilmore, 1956, I, 16; Elliott 2011, 39) The use of local materials and iconographic forms gave way to white marble, then granite, as transportation improvements, metropolitan taste, and new technologies standardized monument types across North America. Distanciated relationships among producer, retailer, and consumer were mediated by a variety of new communications mechanisms: trade publications, business associations, and credit reporting developed to mitigate the uncertainties of business relationships disembedded from local contexts, and to foster trust in professional expertise and technological innovations beyond one’s understanding and control. Late additions were the professional advertising agency and the mass market consumer magazine. This paper explores the roots of corporate branding and national consumer advertising in the monument industry, in the context of growing corporate hegemony, the competition that underlay the marble/granite transition, and the mediating influence of advertising professionals.

As David Nye has explained, marketing of most products relied upon personal connection or recommendation until the 1880s. Only then were there enough “monopolies or large corporations that could control a national distribution network.” (Nye, 1985, 113) In the monument trade, however, the progression from advertising to retailers through trade journals to advertising to consumers through mass market magazines was pioneered not by its closest thing to a monopoly, the Vermont Marble Company, but by the upstart and fragmented Barre, Vermont granite industry.

The two industries were structured very differently. Antecedents of Vermont Marble were wholesaling white marble slabs from coast to coast by the 1850s via the expanding rail network. Aggressive entrepreneur Redfield Proctor consolidated a number of quarry firms and finishing plants to create the vertically integrated Vermont Marble Company in 1880, and by 1912 it controlled 45 per cent of the nation’s marble production. (Busdraghi, 2012, 26) But its third president, Frank Partridge, was much less expansionist and aggressive than Mr Proctor. The railway came to Barre 25 years later, and the granite industry there remained less integrated. In 1915 some 30 quarry firms supplied rough stone to 160 manufacturers who in turn sold to dealers across the country. Most manufacturers belonged to a local Association that had been founded in 1886 allegedly to plan an exhibit for the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago (Clarke, 1989, 44). But Chicago was not even selected as the venue until 1890 (Larson, 2003, 30) and the Association was more likely a response to unionization: the arrival locally, also in 1886, of the militant Granite Cutters’ International Association. (Clarke, 1989, 42-44) Only in 1930 would the largest quarry firm, Boutwell, Milne & Varnum Co., buy out ten manufacturers and enter the wholesale monument trade itself as a vertically integrated corporation. (Clarke, 1989, 62; Anon., 1930, 30) Boutwells was nonetheless large and ambitious enough by 1912 to launch initiatives on its own that the other firms required the combined strength of the Association
to accomplish. Individually and collectively, the Barre interests sought to use branding of their material to secure the kind of national dominance Vermont Marble had long enjoyed.

The Manufacturers’ Association adopted Barre Granite as a trademark, probably late in 1911, to better advertise its quality, and urged retailers to order direct from a “responsible manufacturer” selected from a list of their members. (Monumental News, 1912, 574, 581) In 1912 the Boutwell quarry firm engaged a Burlington advertising agency to promote their dark variety of Barre granite. The Hays agency devised the now century-old trademark with the words “Rock of Ages” in a circle, produced an elaborate two-tone advertising publication of the same title, and promoting the book in the Literary Digest. (Lamson, Box 283) The Monumental News observed, “This is the first attempt made to get the public to ask for a definite kind of monumental stone and the success of the plan will be watched with much interest.” (Monumental News, 1912, 832)

The Granite Manufacturers worked with the local Board of Trade to brand Barre the “Granite Center of the World” and adopted a full national retail advertising campaign, launched in 1916 by a national agency based in Chicago. It entailed (1) mass circulation magazine ads, (2) circular letters and advertising proofs to retailers, (3) the picture book Memorial Masterpieces, and (4) a special Barre number of a national trade journal. (Lamson, Box 321; Barre Granite Manufacturers’ Association minutes, April 1916) Their first circular letter explained that their “most radical departure” was using a national consumer advertising campaign to put the power of the brand at the service of retailers coast to coast. The advertisements repeated soft-focus photographs of memorials of the rich and famous, promoting middle-class emulation of elite clientele.

Compared with the $50 it cost to advertise to the nation’s 5000 retailers through a trade journal, the cost of consumer advertising ($6000 for a single page in Saturday Evening Post, with a weekly circulation of 2 million) encountered growing resistance from the membership, especially as wartime shortages reduced their ability to respond to orders. The campaign was terminated in November 1919 when the parties could not agree on an equitable way of apportioning costs. (Barre Granite Manufacturers’ Association Minutes, October-November 1919; Barre Granite, November 1919)

Boutwell, Milne & Varnum then launched a parallel campaign to tout their Rock of Ages brand, repeating the essentials of the Association program but adding a Certificate of Quality they promoted as an assurance to consumer and retailer alike. But through a tight system of inspection Boutwells reduced the number of manufacturers they supplied from 160 to 50 of the most reliable in a ruthless defense of the good name of their brand.

In 1925, Boutwells distributed a lavish promotional history of their firm, including an enthusiastic account of the success of their “Rock of Ages” brand, their “Certificate of Quality and Workmanship” (“impregnable protection: an instrument of honor”) and their national advertising. (Bell, 1925) It was likely the wide distribution of this book that inspired a new Boston agency to approach Vermont Marble in 1926 and voluntarily undertake a survey of the company’s promotional strategies in hopes of securing an advertising contract, to which the company agreed in February 1927. (VMC Annual Report, 1926) They struck at an opportune moment. Vermont Marble was becoming increasingly a supplier of building stone as memorial sales sank from 60 to 25 per cent of their business. (VMC Annual Reports, 1924-26)

Vermont Marble had begun advertising in the trade journals only in 1912, probably in response to the Rock of Ages promotion, and had long relied upon a network of regionally-based travelling agents armed with hefty monument catalogs. The campaign they adopted in 1927 was in many respects conservative. A trademark “The Memory Stone” echoed Boutwells’ “Rock of Ages”, and they advertised to a deeply conservative list: the family magazine Ladies’ Home Journal, the farmers’ magazine Country Gentleman, and Catholic and Protestant religious magazines. They continued to refer to the retailers as “Master Craftsmen in Marble”. (Memory Stone, 1927) Two innovations were more daring, but were soon abandoned despite becoming widespread in the advertising business. The display advertisements for Ladies Home Journal were in full colour, something that had only become possible the year before, but at nearly double the cost of black and white. (Marchard, 1985, 7)

The second innovation was a movement beyond even situational or lifestyle advertising, which showed products in use, (Marchard, 1985, xvi; Nye, 1985, 123) to images and text that attempted to weave a company name “into the fabric of American mythology” and culture (Nye, 1985, 132). This form of advertising depended upon a compelling or sympathetic image that would attract the eye and make a connection with the reader, but it depended upon the text to link the image to the product. Using the most modern technologies and associative techniques, the campaign’s antimodern content paradoxically referenced an upscale construction of traditional America and recalled the New England
roots of the American character. A couple walking a dog past an elderly woman rocking on a Salem porch evoked a “simple poignant human story” that was “founded on the noble sentiment of family ties” set in iconic New England settings. (Vermont Marble, February 1927) The approach proved too subtle to reverse the slide in sales, and in 1928 Vermont Marble abandoned colour and substituted more obvious representations of monuments. As retailers gave pride of place to granite in their showrooms, and cemeteries in increasing numbers banned marble monuments, the efficacy of national advertising remained far from clear, but abandoning it appeared suicidal. (VMC Annual Report, 1927)

In 1930 Boutwells (since 1925 the Rock of Ages Corporation) bought out ten Barre manufacturers, entered the wholesale trade (Clarke, 1989, 62) and adopted the colour advertising idea that Vermont Marble had abandoned. In 1931 the Granite Manufacturers Association resumed national advertising, uniting the smaller producers in competition not with Vermont Marble so much as with the new Rock of Ages conglomerate. Ironically, in 1940 the Association’s Boston agency was accorded the advertising industry’s national medal for excellence in copy for an advertisement that took the focus off gravestones and “made the advertisement about people”: the type of advertising Vermont Marble had experimented with and abandoned twelve years earlier. The winning advertisement featured a woman in Edwardian dress waving farewell to a departing train. Four narrative paragraphs related the story of “Aunt Meg .... Who Never Married”, having lost her sweetheart Jim Foster in the war. The fifth transitioned from short story to the need for a suitable memorial when “someone we loved has passed away”. The Aunt Meg advertisement came to be regarded as an industry classic: turning consumer need into a case history (Schwartz, 1966, 38). The Aunt Meg ad was included in Julian Watkins’s 1949 book The 100 Greatest Advertisements (Watkins, 1949, 134-135). Barre interests again stepped in where conservative Vermont Marble feared to tread.

Data sources
The paper draws mostly upon primary materials. Vermont Marble Company’s archive is scattered but most useful for this paper were the typescript annual reports at the Proctor Free Library, which include annual commentaries on the company advertising program, and the Memory Stone, the company’s dealer newsletter in which, from 1925, they detailed their new product lines and explained their advertising campaigns. The granite campaigns are documented most thoroughly in the Barre Granite Association’s in-house periodical Barre Granite, which represents the pro-advertising faction within the organization. Between them the Aldrich Public Library and Vermont Historical Society, both in Barre, hold a close to complete run. The Association’s minutes are helpful but laconic for key periods. The Aldrich also has the papers of the Lamson Advertising Service, which catered to the monument industry. Lamson filed circular letters and advertising proofs from both the Barre Granite Association and Boutwell, Milne & Varnum Co. campaigns, and retained responses to a questionnaire he circulated about the efficacy of the former. An assortment of monument industry trade journals commented on the campaigns sporadically, as did the advertising industry journal Printer’s Ink.

Sample references
American Stone Trade
Barre Granite
Granite, Marble & Bronze
Memorial Merchandising
Monument and Cemetery Review
Monumental News
Printer’s Ink
The Reporter
Vermont Marble/The Memory Stone

Lamson Advertising Service Records, Archives of Barre History, Aldrich Public Library, Barre, VT.
Annual Reports, Vermont Marble Company, Unpublished Typescripts, Proctor Free Library, Proctor, VT.
Barre Granite Manufacturers’ Association Minutes, Unpublished Manuscripts, Barre Granite Association, Barre, VT.
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