Tradition Meets New Design

Historic New Jersey church's sign gets modern upgrade

BY JENNY IVY BYRNE

Jenny Ivy Byrne is a Denver-based freelance writer. She can be contacted at www.jenny-ivy.com.

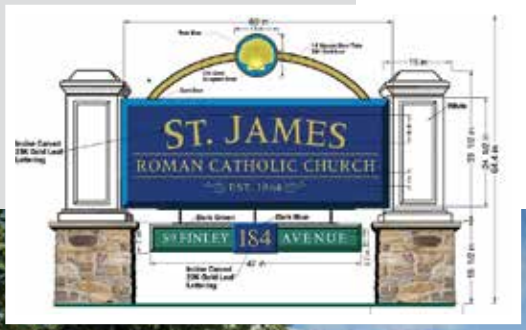
Having worked for 20 years with property managers, local universities and government buildings, Gary Johnson, owner of The Great American Sign Company, is always looking to take his creativity to the next level.

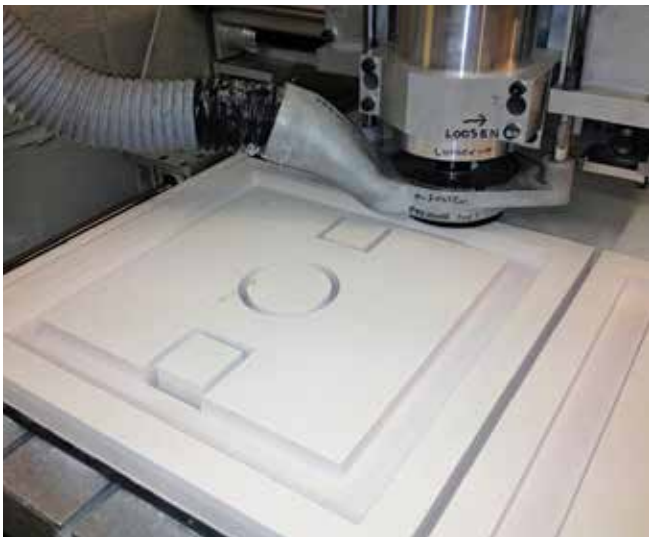
With a shop in Basking Ridge, N.J., Johnson's signs can be found in places such as the Brooklyn Federal Courthouse, Fairleigh Dickinson University, and around the New Jersey Transit system.

Government and property management projects have been the bulk of Johnson's work since he began his sign-making career as an art director for a full-service sign company in Hillside, N.J.

When Johnson founded his own business in 1990, he continued working with the Federal General Services Administration, and business boomed. Work for government properties is constant, he says, and it's given him the leverage he needs to dive into more "creative" work.

"We are actively working toward building larger more creative signs," Johnson says. "In the past three years, we have attended several workshops, including Dan Sawatzky's sign and sculpt magic workshops, as well as this year's Indiana workshop. We have been training for some time now with Enroute 4 Software, which gives us true 3-D carving capability, and next month we will have a new custom-built CNC machine that is





A steel structure stands during a dry before it's buried inside the panel and HDU posts to ensure the stone pillars were correctly positioned, level and plumb. Behind the new foundation is the sign it replaced.

A dry fit is done prior to applying gold leaf to the lettering. This is done to confirm that the panel and posts all fit together as designed.

An unfinished address panel is glued together.

designed to work with the new software seamlessly."

In April, Johnson took on his heaviest and thickest sign to date. The pastoral office at Saint James Roman Catholic Church in Basking Ridge called for an updated look to replace their deteriorating plywood signs. The church loved the six vertical designs Johnson first proposed and all seemed to be smooth sailing. "We were working up pricing and gearing up to produce production drawing when we received a call from the minister in charge asking us if we could change gears and convert the drawings to a horizontal format."

Johnson had to redesign the project. At the time, he was attending a workshop in Colorado, where he was inspired to incorporate stone, a symbol of the permanence of the church.

However, this would be the first time Johnson would work with stone, and as he phoned around for contractors, he kept getting estimates for "cultured stone," a veneer that replicates natural stones and is hand colored with iron oxide pigments.

But Johnson is selective with his materials—he works one-on-one with each of his clients to determine what will withstand the harsh New Jersey weather. In fact, Hurricane Sandy hit the town of Basking Ridge just as Johnson and the church were finalizing approvals.

"I don't necessarily trust an artificial product to not fade over time," Johnson says. "My architect recommended some-

A steel frame for the Parish Office ADA sign.

An unfinished arch and scallop sit atop the unfinished panel.

(Right) The assembly for the vertical steel support: the pipe with welded supports on top was designed to fit over a smaller diameter pipe, which was buried in and protruding from the stone base.

one who was in town, and that person happened to be a parishioner of the church. He gave us real stone at a price we could afford."

The stone base allowed Johnson to support 12-inch wide posts and a 4-inch-thick main panel, which was ultimately reduced from 8-feet wide to 5 feet in a last-minute compromise with the local building officials to allow the sign to occupy its original footprint.

The sign's main panel is composed of four sheets of 1-inch thick Komacel PVC welded together around two two-inch square steel tube supports. The steel support inside the panel was then bolted to a vertical steel pipe projecting out from the top of the stone pillar.

"I like PVC because it's hard, and I don't have to paint it," Johnson explains. "The coloring on there is mostly 3M self-adhesive vinyl. I like it because I can apply it and then I don't have to worry about it for a dozen years—paint's going to go bad long before the vinyl does. [Vinyl is] a nice, perfectly smooth maintenance-free surface."

The raised panel portion of the post was constructed from 1-inch thick 30lb Precision Board glued together with Coastal PB30 Expanding Urethane Glue and painted with white lacquer paint.

The arch at the top is curved one-inch square tube painted black with a 12-inch steel circle holding a three-dimensional scallop routed on Johnson's Gerber Dimension 200 Router using Enroute 4 Software.

The scallop was then painted with blue lacquer and gold-leafed with Manetti 23K Gold. Both the top arch and the bottom address panel are bolted onto nuts, which Johnson welded onto the steel supports he buried inside the main panel.

Like the main panel, the address panel is layers of Komacel PVC welded together. The lettering was carved using

a D-200 router. Welding was performed with a Millermatic 211 Mig welder. Johnson's drawings were created using Gerber Omega v 5.0.

The church's front sign mimics the colonial flavor of the pre-revolution New Jersey town, which is rich in history. Chartered in 1760, Johnson tells, Basking Ridge played host to George Washington, who often visited his friend Lord Stirling a brigadier general and major contributor to the Revolutionary War effort.

Although it's not against the law to deviate from traditional design, Johnson chose a colonial-style rectangle for the main panel and colonial-style pillars, because the church specifically asked that the sign not be "baroque."

"The arch was originally supposed to be more elaborate and feature a Jerusalem Cross rather than a scallop," Johnson says. "I wanted the cross to be in stained glass, which would have been awesome, but the church was afraid it would be broken and then decided instead to feature the scallop."

The scallop has long-represented The Way of Saint James, the pilgrimage route to the Cathedral of Santiago de Compestela in northwestern Spain. Scallops are often found along the route, and the grooves in the shell, which meet at a single point, represent pilgrims' routes that eventually arrive to a single destination: the tomb of James in Santiago de Compostela.

As mentioned, this was Johnson's heaviest and thickest sign to date—it took five people to lift it onto the vertical steel supports. "Being a dark color, I was concerned that the PVC would warp in the heat of summer, so I probably overcompensated with the thickness of the panel and the steel skeleton," Johnson says. "But being a church, I thought it should be constructed to last as long as possible." **SDG**