

# BLASTING THEIR WAY TO SUCCESS

*Dunnville Cutstone Co.  
reopens an historic quarry.*

**K**neeling on a rock shelf over a freshly drilled bore hole, Aaron Keopple is in a careful hurry. He's being careful because he is connecting lengths of detonation cord with electrical tape. The hurry part comes from having promised his wife that he would be in the shower by 5 p.m. to take her out to dinner for their wedding anniversary that evening. It's now about 20 minutes to the appointed hour and he has several more tape connections to make before setting off the blast that will separate this 10-foot slab of sandstone from the layer he is standing on.

Aaron Keopple never had any aspirations, interests or dreams of running a stone quarry, even after he bought one. That was in 1999. At the time, Keopple, 35 and a UW-Stout grad, and his family were living in Owatonna, Minnesota, when he decided to purchase a 62-acre parcel a few miles downriver from Downsville, in Dunn County.

"I had enjoyed hunting on that land for years. It was just recreational land to me then," he explained. "Shortly after that, Craig Thibado and I bought another 45 acres just to the south

of the first parcel."

It wasn't until 2001 they discovered there might be some real marketable value in the fine-grained sandstone that was still abundant on the property. Keopple says that a big part of the inspiration for reopening the quarry came when they learned that a church in Durand had been looking for stone of this color and type to match the original facade.

"But they went with another product because the natural stone had been bid too high," Keopple said.

## Replace, restore and repair

Once word got out that Dunnville sandstone could become available again, more requests for the durable, buff-colored stone came in from architects and distributors both locally and in distant cities. Some needed to match the look of original Dunnville stone in 100-year-old buildings. Sometimes they just wanted a small piece to create components like window headers and sills. Others needed larger quantities to build additions.

As the opportunity to reopen the quarry materialized, Aaron Keopple liked the idea of building a business of his own.

"I am one of those people who doesn't like working for someone else," he said.

Drawing on his background in manufacturing engineering, he set out to teach himself a lot more about the architectural stone industry, brought in some investors, and researched the market (which has been on the upswing the past 10 years, according to Keopple). After gaining the necessary permits and approvals, Keopple formed the Dunnville Cutstone Company in 2005.

## Digging deeper

This came more than 60 years after regular quarrying operations had ceased. Keopple believes that the original quarries were closed as a result of shortages of men and materials during World War II.

"There were probably just not enough men around to work the quarry, plus there was a

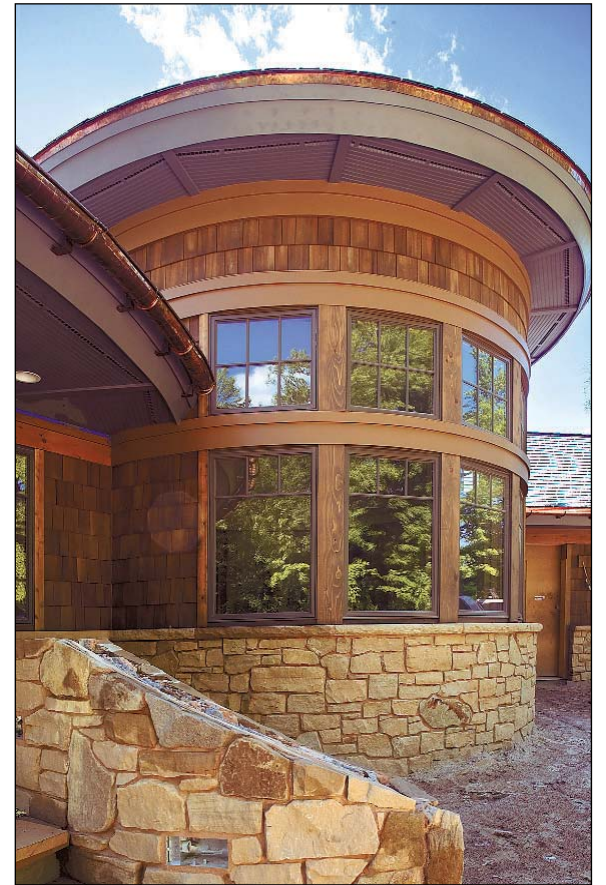


Photo by Dunnville Cutstone Company

▲ This photo shows a spectacular cabin built in Grand Rapids, Minn. The expansive structure heavily features the sandstone mined by the Dunnville Cutstone Company.

shortage of steel for the equipment it requires," Keopple theorized.

The historic quarry Keopple has reopened was originally one of four in the area. Known locally as Ulmer's quarry, this one was the second to the last to close.

"Due to a fire, it was shut down as a dimensional stone quarry and then used as a rip-rap quarry for a while," Keopple said. "The one to the north was the last to close. That one was part of the Downsville Stone Company. Now the DNR owns all the land the other quarries are on."

## Rock of Ages

Dunnville Sandstone is finer-grained than other sandstones, Keopple explains.

"That makes it easier to work with because it's not as hard on tools as the coarser stone. It also resists the weather by forming an outer shell or crust that protects it from deteriorating. Weathering actually helps it to harden up."

Another appealing characteristic of the stone is its color. Local architects in the mid and late 1800s and early 1900s seemed to prefer it. The Mabel Tainter Theater and the Louis Smith Tainter House in Menomonie are two of the more prominent examples of the stone's visual appeal. Old quarry logbooks show that the stone was shipped to build schools and libraries in Eau Claire, Shell Lake, Bloomer, Osceola, Granton and even as far away as Conde, S.D., and Virginia, Minn., for a railroad depot.

Once the railroad spur was laid along the river in the 1880s, Dunnville sandstone could be shipped all over the country. East Coast architects took a liking to the stone's lasting qualities for projects big and small. It was the stone of choice in 1910 for St. Thomas Cathedral in New York. Stone carvers on that project were quoted as saying it was the finest sandstone in the world. It was also used to construct many of the much-photographed old "brownstone" houses that still line residential streets of the city.



Photo by Joel Becker

▲ Water shoots into the air as a crack is blasted in the sandstone at one of the quarries that operated more than 100 years ago.