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NAPOLEON STONE LOOKS TO THE LONG TERM

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APOLEON STONE, A MICHIGAN-BASED COMPANY SERVING THE MIDWEST, HAS GROWN UNDER THE GUIDANCE OF TWO MEN WHO TRADED THE WORLD OF FINANCIAL SERVICES FOR A STAKE IN SOMETHING MORE PERMANENT.

John Carretta and Mike Sullivan wanted to use their skills – honed in the financial services industry – in service of a long-term endeavor as business owners. Familiar with the stone industry from working as advisers for both mining and industrial minerals-related companies, they decided in 2005 to acquire a sandstone quarry based in Napoleon, Michigan.

“A lot of people have started out in the financial services industry and have said, ‘I’ve got to go buy a business,’ but do nothing about it,” Carretta said. “For us, we spent a lot of time looking for the right business to acquire within this industry. Quarries are long-term, and this is a long-term investment for us.”

Napoleon Stone, Michigan’s largest dimensional stone quarry, had a long history in the industry before Carretta and Sullivan took over in 2005. It has been serving Midwestern customers for more than 50 years. The base of Napoleon Stone’s success is its core product –

by Joel Davis

*Photos Courtesy
Napoleon Stone*



*Napoleon Stone supplied several tons of terracing and retaining wall blocks for this private residence located in Ann Arbor, Michigan.
Photo by Greg Easter, ©2008*

a tan, buff sandstone. “For us, it’s a nice contrast,” Carretta said. “When we sell to a landscape dealer – say they carry a Pennsylvania blue stone, they might carry a limestone, they might carry a granite – we can come in with another color so when customers show up to buy a product. We can make sure the landscape supply yard has a full line, so if the customer wants something that is buff, we’re their source.”

The company’s two main natural stone product lines are marketed as “Irish Hills Dimension Stone” – a machine-cut line that includes drywall, full veneer, steps, outcropping, hearthstones, and other options – and “Napoleon Natural Stone,” which includes patio/walkway stone, steps, flagstones, retaining walls, outcropping, steppers, and wallstone. All of the material offered by Napoleon Stone is available either on one or one-1/2 ton pallets or shipped in bulk form. The company owns a fleet of trucks to deliver to stone yards or direct to the job site.

Napoleon Stone, based in Napoleon, Michigan, is one of the only dimensional,

landscaping or building stone quarries in the state. The company has one full-time salesman now. Carretta’s role in the company involves sales and marketing, customer and governmental relations and training. Sullivan oversees the finances, quality control and the day-to-day operations of the quarries.

In an industry where transportation costs tends to be an issue when it comes to competitiveness, Napoleon Stone is blessed with an advantageous location: 40 minutes from the Indiana border, 40 minutes from the Ohio border, and only 225 miles from downtown Chicago... on the dot.

“Our location allows us to competitively service most major Midwest metropolitan markets including Detroit, Illinois, Cleveland, Columbus, Pittsburgh, Chicago, Cincinnati and Indianapolis,” Sullivan said.

When they bought the business, the pair found a blank slate to work with. “In 2005, when we bought it, we purposely avoided getting into the building products world,” Carretta said. “We could have done it... it would have cost a lot of money to get into it.

We said, ‘Look, let’s take our time here and avoid that if we can for now.’ We probably missed out on a good year or two with that, but we were able to organize the business a lot better.”

This involved breaking from the quarry’s traditional, almost laissez-faire, business model, according to Carretta. “A lot of quarries in the past were what they call mom-and-pop operations where they pop out material, and they put it on pallets and kind of wait for the orders to come. That’s what this business was before we bought it. The owner had a pretty good customer base, primarily in Michigan. He just answered the phone, so to speak. He never did any sales and marketing. The Internet wasn’t around. Email wasn’t around. He never purchased any equipment such as saws and splitters or even the tools that allowed you to cut and saw the product.”

The pair also modernized business procedures at the quarry, updating both the training and safety plans and implementing a quality control program. *Continued on page 2*

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They embraced web-based marketing as well, using their website, www.napoleonstone.com, in a way the previous owner had not.

Carretta and Sullivan set modest goals for their first year of operating Napoleon Stone. “You want to completely understand the business you bought,” Carretta said. “Even though you bought something most of the time the owners don’t tell you all the secrets. We spent the first year really getting to know the business we bought and all our existing customers. During the second year we said, ‘Let’s put a plan together where we can continue to be innovative for both current and new customers and introduce new types of products we can sell every year.’”

Soon the company bought a guillotine, the next year investing in a bridge saw. Succeeding years saw the purchase of a Park Industries splitter. When customers began asking if the quarry could do finished work, they invested in a small saw.

“We put the saws and splitters in to create dimensional products and building products so we can go into that marketplace, too,” Carretta said. “We make traditional landscape supply yard products. We’ve got three saws and three splitters. We can make not only landscaping material but building material like veneer. We can make patio pavers.”

Napoleon Stone uses splitters from Park Industries and has designed and built its own saws. Starting a veneer line, the company has ventured into the building market. “We continue to reach out to architects and contractors to see our products so when they are putting together a design for a building or house, we get consideration along with traditional things they might show someone like brick,” Carretta said, adding that the company relies not just on the equipment but its talented, dedicated employees.

The quarry does not employ any designers or installers on staff, but it does assist architects in their efforts to use its stone on projects. Napoleon Stone worked with a West Coast-based architect on a large, very high visibility municipal project in downtown Cleveland called the “Euclid Avenue Corridor Project,” funded by the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority, which involved a complete rebuild and beautification of the city’s main thoroughfare. It opened in October 2008.

Carretta and Sullivan advocate a controlled and disciplined approach to growth. The company is getting 25 to 50 new customers per year, pushing into Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky, Wisconsin, West Virginia, and Pennsylvania, but the owners are careful to grow the customer base at a reasonable rate. “Be



Above, left: Napoleon Stone supplied the natural stone products for the Euclid Avenue Corridor Project in Cleveland, Ohio, completed by sculpture firm Murase Associates in September, 2008.

Above, right: Natural ledge steps create a graceful access down a steep hillside. Natural steps can make a bold statement on any residential or commercial outdoor project.



Above: Napoleon’s Natural stackable wall stone is both functional and decorative, and can be worked into site planning with the client’s project determining the tonnage needed. Napoleon Stone can supply large quantities delivered in bulk, or on 1 or 1.5 ton pallets.

Below, left: Napoleon’s 6-inch split drywall is used in both landscaping and building applications.

Below, right: Custom 13-inch thick sawn top and bottom out-cropping featured at a residence in north central Indiana.

careful what you wish for,” Carretta said. “If you get too big, too fast, you annoy your existing customers.”

Napoleon Stone operates on a 50-acre site – essentially two quarries divided by a road. There is a fabrication or saw shop, and a splitting station, adjacent to the office and maintenance garage.

The quarry is known for its steps and outcropping and its ability to supply large volumes of large stone for retaining walls. It also has the ability to customize its offerings based on the needs of the customer. “Some of our customers have come to us and they ask, ‘Can you do this?’” Carretta said. “Most of the time, we’ll say ‘We’ll figure out if we can do it, and we’ll get back to you.’ The equipment we’ve invested in has been a great way to continue to grow and a great way to get new customers.”

The owners have left the financial services industry com-

pletely. They don’t miss it. “At Napoleon Stone, it all about building a sustainable, long-term business that provides exceptional service to our customers,” Carretta said.

For more information about Napoleon Stone, their projects, and the scope of products they can provide, please visit their website www.napoleonstone.com

