

Sheet Metal 104 Apprentices (Re) Make History

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Apprentices from Sheet Metal Workers Local 104 in San Francisco have their work on display at the Jamestown Settlement museum in Virginia as part of the 400th Anniversary of the founding of the Jamestown colony on May 14, 1607. Under the guidance of Local 104's Training Center instructor John Gregson, apprentices fabricated items based on those produced by the Powhatan people indigenous to the area.

Left to right; Michael Jajeh, Sean Bonnet, Instructor John Gregson, Michael McCloskey, Mario Arciniega, Derek DeCot, Johnny Dominguez, Chad Savage and Phillip Bufka. All, except John Gregson, were San Francisco apprentices at the time of the picture, and are now journeymen.

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"We made replicas of artifacts that were found in burial mounds of the Powhatan. Rather than disturb the burial sites, the Jamestown museum wanted them duplicated," Gregson explained. Gregson said that he and his group of nine apprentices made ornaments and brass cooking pots in San Francisco and shipped them to the Jamestown museum. "We used photos of the original pieces to create the replicas," Gregson said. "To make the brass pots with iron handles, we heated them and beat them like they are forged metal."

Local 104 and Local 100 from Washington, D.C., were the two locals who participated in the project. The Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation, which runs the museum, wanted to show Native American culture, including aspects of their day-to-day life, as part of the commemoration.

Out of respect for Native American concerns about displaying items from their burial sites, the Foundation contacted Sheet Metal Workers International Association (SMWIA) President Michael J. Sullivan to find crafts workers who could recreate some of the tools, utensils and other items made and used by the Powhatan.

Sullivan put out a call to locals around the U.S., and the San Francisco and Washington, D.C., locals responded. The project was featured on the AFL-CIO's online blog in the article, "Sheet Metal Workers Knock Copper for Jamestown's 400th Anniversary," as well as in a 4-page story in the March-April issue of the SMWIA's magazine, The Journal.

The SMWIA Journal story noted that, "copper was highly valued by the Powhatans and other Indian groups even before the English came to Virginia in 1607, and imported European copper became one of the most important commodities that the English traded to the Indians in the early 17th century."

"The Indians used the copper they got from the English in a variety of ways. They made practical items like arrowheads and fishhooks from copper and also jewelry and ceremonial items." Gregson said that he found it interesting in reading about Jamestown that scrap copper exported from England played an important role in the trade between the settlers and local Indians.

Gregson completed his apprenticeship in England, working to form fenders for Rolls Royce and making a model of the rock of Gibraltar for the Queen.

"His experience with aluminum workers in Canada and the wide variety of work and activities that he has been part of in San Francisco has earned him the reputation of being a sheet metal worker that shares his love for the trade with all," the Journal story stated.

Also featured was the work of Ronald H. Koehne, a member of Sheet Metal Workers Local 100 in D.C. who works at Stromberg Sheet Metal Works Inc.

He crafted replicas of copper products for use in the interpretive program at the museum. Koehne, who has 40 years of experience as a sheet metal worker, was quoted in the AFL-CIO story saying modestly that, "I'd be a fool to call myself an artist. I'm just an old tin-knocker." He said that for the Jamestown project, "They wanted me to duplicate a copper pot found on site. I made it the same as you would 400 years ago, except I didn't use a wood form (over which the copper is first shaped). I used one made out of steel."

His replica of the cooking kettle showcases the hand-hammered fabrication process used by a skilled craftsperson and is featured in the Journal story.

Likewise, Local 104's Gregson shared his skills and knowledge with the San Francisco 4th year apprentices to create pieces using historical methods. Local 104's work, the copper and brass products shown on the cover of the Journal as they are displayed in the museum's main gallery, are modern reproductions of 17th Century artifacts excavated in Virginia.

“The pieces we made here will be part of the permanent collection on display in the main lobby of the museum,” Gregson proudly noted.