

Forever in BRONZE

By Mary Anderson

Staff Writer

SEAGROVE — Ed Walker and his staff of artists and technicians at Carolina Bronze Sculpture work discreetly in the background to take well-known sculptor's creations from clay to unveiling.

Statues of prominent figures and special memorials the country have been ordered at Carolina Bronze. Carolina's only full-time bronze arts foundry, on Maple Road near Seagrove, the artists are frequently in the shop, working on their pieces. The more than 200 sculptures in the production process are completed.

From Seagrove, the finished monuments are shipped to their destinations for celebration. They are unveiled to the public for the first time.

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Paul Church / The Courier-Tribune

ATTENTION TO DETAIL — Above, Ed Walker, artist, sculptor and owner of Carolina Bronze, attaches a portion of a sculpture to the base. In the background, Stuart Thrift examines a piece to for any imperfections. At right, Ronald Reagan stands seven feet tall in the Rotunda of the Capitol in Washington, D.C. The statue by Chas Fagan was made at Carolina Bronze and unveiled in a ceremony on May 25. Below, pouring the bronze into the mold means the sculpture is in the final phase.

Bill Ross and Dennis Carnevale are casting a bust in bronze.

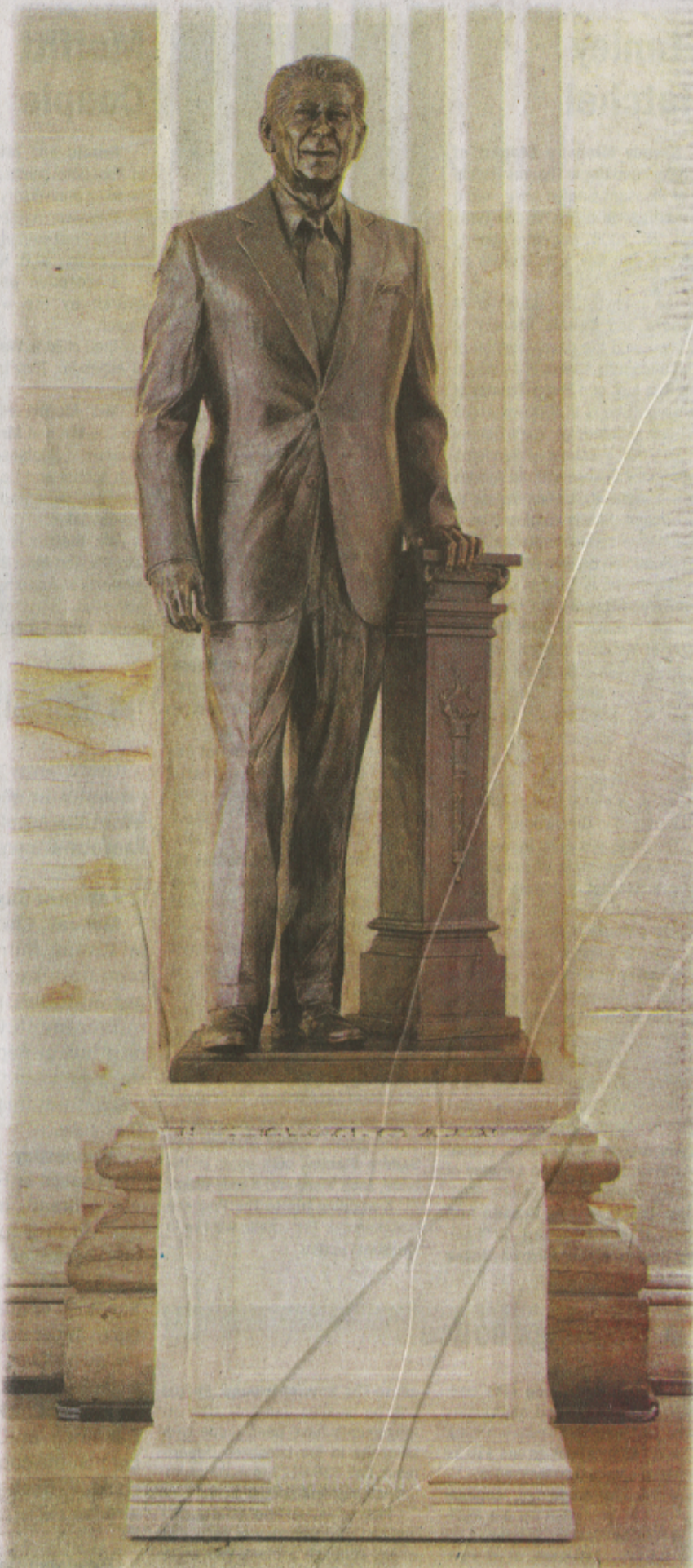


Photo courtesy of Architect of the Capitol

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SEAGROVE — Ed Walker and his staff of artists and artisans at Carolina Bronze Sculpture work discreetly in the background to take well-known sculptor's creations from model to unveiling.

Statues of prominent people and special memorials all over the country have been completed at Carolina Bronze, North Carolina's only full-time fine arts foundry, on Maple Springs Road near Seagrove. The artists are frequently in the building, working on their pieces as the more than 200 steps in the production process are completed.

From Seagrove, these monuments are shipped to their destinations for celebrations as they are unveiled to the public for the first time.

Walker said he rarely gets to see one of the sculptures on display.

"The artist is the creator and the sculpture is the star of the unveiling. We are busy on multiple pieces and are never involved in the ceremonies," Walker said. "When a piece is bolted in its crate for shipping, we say good-bye and turn to the next job. While a work is in progress, we cannot talk about or allow photographs of the piece."

The unveiling ceremony is another reason for Carolina Bronze's discretion. Sculptures are guarded from the public until the unveiling ceremony because advance publicity or pictures would spoil the event — the magic of seeing a magnificent bronze sculpture for the first time in the place it was designed to be.

"We are to the sculptor what the printer is to the printmaker," Walker said. "We reproduce the original exactly as created by the artist."

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Walker, himself an artist and sculptor, chose the foundry to express himself as an artisan and artist because the process covers every aspect of art, including photography, printing, painting and sculpting.

"We are making something permanent, something never to be thrown away and that is a rare thing these days," he said. "Casting is a way to make complex shapes and surfaces that won't break, and if it does, you can put it back together."

Carolina Bronze has been creating permanent art in North Carolina for 20 years. The first four years were in a leased building before Walker built the foundry near Seagrove, coincidentally in the midst of the Seagrove artists' colony of potters. Walker said he couldn't have planned a more creative atmosphere, but the search for land took him to that location. The search for land in Randolph County was because Melissa, also an accomplished artist, got a job teaching art at Randleman High School.

"She is one of the few art teachers who is National Board Certified," her husband proudly notes.

Both Ed and Melissa Walker are natives of Burlington. Ed Walker earned his undergraduate degree in art from East Carolina University and his master's degree in art and sculpture from the University of North Dakota.

Jobs after college took them to New Orleans where Ed taught at Tulane University for five years and their two children, Sage and Nathan, were born.

"We wanted our children to grow up with family connections and be closer to their grandparents, so we decided to move back to our home state," Walker said.

Both children have grown up in the foundry business — literally.

"I'd pick them up after school and bring them here. They called it the fun house, rode bikes through the building, played with the clay and learned everything we do by just being here," Walker said.

Art has been an integral part of their lives.

"Art enriches lives," Walker said. "Everybody is a better person with an appreciation of the arts. I believe all students should be exposed to and taught art

Have you seen these?

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SEAGROVE — Ed Walker, an artist, sculptor and owner of Carolina Bronze, said he has no idea how many sculptures have been completed at the foundry in the past 20 years.

Many are smaller pieces in museums, galleries, parks and public buildings.

Others are larger and on permanent display, many in North Carolina and Virginia.

Perhaps you've seen a few of these:

■ The seven-foot statue of Ronald Reagan, 40th president of the United States, was unveiled in the Rotunda in the Capital in Washington, D.C., on May 25. It's the creation of Chas Fagan, Charlotte sculptor and artist, who has chosen Carolina Bronze as the foundry to produce his work. Watch the touching acceptance speech by Nancy Reagan on the Carolina Bronze website at www.carolinabronze.com.

■ Nathaniel Green, for whom Greensboro was named, stands 10 feet tall in that city and was created by sculptor James Barnhill, an

artist and teacher at A & T State University.

■ The statue of the Greensboro Four, whose sit-in at Woolworth's became the symbol of the Civil Rights Movement, is on the A & T campus in Greensboro.

■ An eight-foot bronze of President George H.W. Bush, with two eagles symbolic of the presidency, is the centerpiece of a monument to the former President in Sesqui-centennial Park in Houston, Texas.

■ A statue of the former president when he was a fighter pilot, Lt. George H.W. Bush, is in the museum aboard the supercarrier, USS Bush.

■ Four life-size firefighters are in a park in Raleigh by sculptor Carl Regutti.

■ Busts of World War II Allied leaders, Winston Churchill, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Joseph Stalin, Benito Mussolini and Clement Attlee, were commissioned for a display in Bedford, Va.

■ A life-size police dog stands in a memorial park in Virginia for police dogs who fell in the line of duty.

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in many forms. It makes them better students and better people."

Sage works at the foundry. She graduated from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte with a degree in Asian Studies and has plans to go to graduate school in International Studies.

Nathan, whom his dad called a computer genius, is a student at Alamance Community College. Two years ago, he worked full time at the foundry and convinced Walker they should both take classes in 3-D imaging and get the software for the foundry.

Until then, Walker said, they had relied on word-of-mouth among sculptors for business, but the 3-D component streamlined some of the multiple steps in the foundry process and Walker has carefully begun advertising in select publications.

When Nathan decided to become a full-time student, Walker thought he'd have to do the computer designs, but John Wendelbo found Carolina Bronze.

Wendelbo, born in France and educated in England with a master's degree in aero-engineering and yacht design, came to the U.S. in 1998 on a three-month assignment to help a sculptor in New York. The assignment went on for years, Wendelbo married a Chapel

Hill girl, moved to North Carolina and was amazed to find Carolina Bronze.

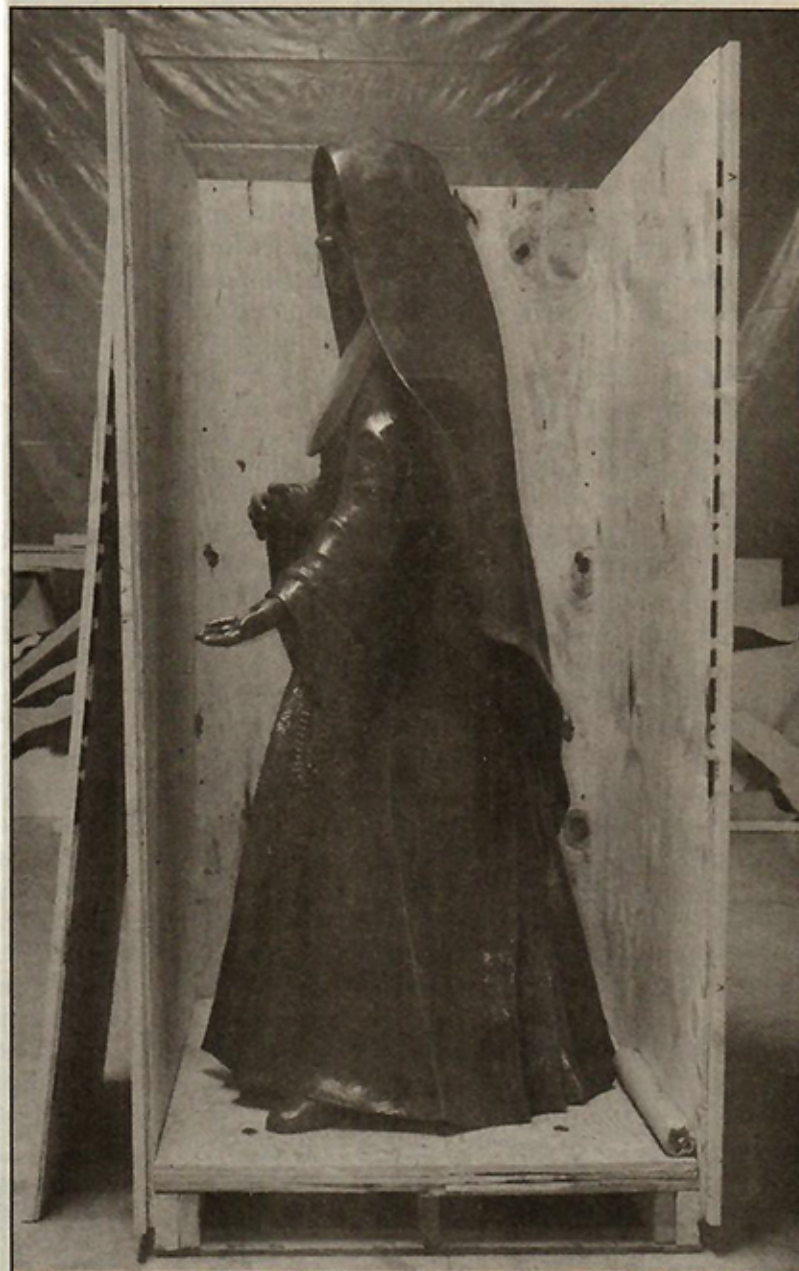
"I couldn't understand how a small town like Seagrove could have this high-tech, state-of-the-art equipment," Wendelbo said, "and the building is almost a replica of the company where I worked in New York."

He applied for a job. Nathan was going back to school and it all fell into place.

"Things don't just happen. This was meant to be and the job is everything I could hope for," Wendelbo said. "Here, everything is under one roof and the engineer, me, is in the hands-on environment. I can be involved in every step."

Walker had said earlier of moving his business, finding the dedicated and talented employees and the life his family has here, that "there are no accidents in life. Everything happens for a reason."

The building in Seagrove attests to that philosophy. Walker set out to build the best bronze casting facility in the state. After it was completed, Walker found a graduate school assignment from 1973 — to design an ideal studio and foundry — and realized he had replicated his design in his building.



Paul Church / The Courier-Tribune

INVITATION TO TOUCH — Above, the sculpture of Franciscan Mother Marianne Cope is a tribute to her work with the lepers in Hawaii in the 1800s. The sculpture by Franciscan Sister Rosaire Kopczenski, is bolted in her crate, ready for shipment to a park in Hawaii. Below, two clay models of former President George H.W. Bush as a fighter pilot are still in the foundry. The finished bronze is in the museum on the USS Bush.



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