

AMERICAN ROAD PROJECT

by Martha Mitchell



More than 140 years ago, Wisconsin's scenic Rock River brought prosperity to an emerging town in the Badger State. Located on the Wisconsin and Illinois border, Beloit provided companies with a committed, hardworking labor force and an important natural resource.

One such company was Beloit Corporation, once the largest paper-making machinery plant in the world. For many years the company served as the lifeblood of the growing industrial area. It became a part of the fabric of the community, and its factory stood as a proud local landmark.

Yet Beloit Corporation experienced the same unfortunate economic hardships as many Midwestern manufacturing companies. Eventually it succumbed to changing times. The once grand and prominent building was vacated and became an empty eyesore along the river.

In 2001 Beloit businessman and entrepreneur Ken Hendricks purchased the factory with the promise of renovating and utilizing the property. He renamed the facility "Beloit Ironworks"—a name chosen to reflect the company's historic roots.



"Ken's vision was to bring jobs back to Beloit with the Ironworks complex," says Mike Slavish, Director of Real Estate for the Hendricks Group. "He believed passionately that it was the poor management of the Beloit Corporation that had led to [the company's] bankruptcy, and not the fault of the working man and woman."

Renovation began on the 750,000-square-foot property in 2002. Former office buildings, the foundry, and manufacturing and storage areas were transformed into attractive loft offices and efficient manufacturing space while retaining much of the architectural integrity. Despite this progress, the exterior of the original buildings along the river remained a blot on the landscape without much promise of improvement.

The Larson Group, headed by Jeff Larson, was retained to explore concepts, messages, and material ideas for the exterior restoration. "Initially, there were challenges establishing what would be the best way to resurrect the exterior of the Beloit Corporation," says Jeff Larson. "But, talking with people in the community, it was clear the personal element needed to be emphasized." This led to the proposed use of vibrant murals depicting men and women who had worked at Beloit Corporation. Larson's vision, "Forged on the Rock," was unveiled in September, 2003.

"It was a lengthy process redeveloping the riverfront side of the building," Larson says. "Over the course of the two years, we designed vinyl panels that withstand the elements."

Work during the first year included extensive research and designing to determine materials that would capitalize on the brick structure. The second year's efforts focused on creating and attaching printed vinyl murals, each approximately 20' x 25' in size. Together, Beloit citizens, business leaders, and the Larson Group helped bring back the riverfront's vitality.

Beloit Ironwork's larger-than-life murals honoring the history and employees of the former Beloit Corporation are best seen at night, when lights behind glass panels randomly flash to simulate the sparks of a foundry.

The murals are an artistic representation of what helped forge Beloit: deep-rooted values of pride, hard work, and commitment to the community. They stand as a testament to these ideals.



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