

Along with snow sports, silver and culture, Aspen's other luxury commodity is marble.

# A MARBLE STORY

Just over 20 miles from Aspen, some of the world's most renowned marble is quarried for private homes and public projects.

By Oliver Sharpe

The discovery of silver in Aspen in 1879 generated international fame for the town and vast fortunes for many residents. Over the course of 14 years, the Aspen lode—one of the richest in history—was producing  $\frac{1}{16}$  of the world's silver and literally put the city on the map. Simultaneously, just 22 miles southeast of Aspen, a lesser known geological find created another boom town with a rich history.

The enormous marble deposit in the Crystal River Valley was originally discovered in 1873 and began operating in 1894 after being prospected by George Yule. While the mining industry and much of Aspen's vitality disappeared when the repeal of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act demonetized silver in 1893, the neighboring town of Marble—and its namesake Yule Marble Quarry—persevered and continues to produce stone for magnificent projects and homes around the world, now under a new name and ownership, Colorado Stone Quarries ([coloradostonequarries.com](http://coloradostonequarries.com)).

Artists and architects prize the marble for its smooth grain texture and luminous surface. Its characteristics were created roughly 30

million years ago as magma bubbled toward the Earth's surface, encountered a pocket of limestone and—in a process known as contact metamorphism—recrystallized the sedimentary carbonate rock into 99.5 percent pure calcite. The marble's unique color, another attraction for artisans, is derived from the remaining noncalcite "intrusions" that present as colorful veins coursing through a bright-white background. Today, it comes in several "styles," including Calacatta Lincoln, Calacatta Golden, Statuario Colorado and Aspen Grey.

The distinct white marble quickly gained notoriety, thanks in large part to a block displayed at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. The first major order for marble was placed in 1894 for the Colorado state Capitol building and over the years the quarry set records for some of the biggest contracts in the history of quarries, including the Lincoln Memorial and Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

Extricating marble in solid quantities large enough to be the starting points of masterpieces is an artform unto itself, one made more difficult by the quarry's remote location and 9,300-foot elevation. The first commercial operation cut stone at rate of 2 inches per hour and included a giant hoist at the entrance that transferred

slabs to a small gauge railway that descended a precarious 3.9 miles and 1,300 feet before arriving at a finishing mill on the valley floor.

Despite being painstakingly difficult to quarry, this Colorado marble is staggeringly prolific. It adorns structures in 31 states, including: the Cuyahoga County Courthouse in Columbus, Ohio; the Widener Library at Harvard University; state Capitol buildings in Arkansas, Montana, Nebraska and Utah; the Hearst Castle in California; and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

Today, the quarry is owned by the R.E.D. Graniti company of Carrara, Italy, another town whose name is synonymous with marble. Production is less difficult, thanks to advances in technology; Colorado Stone Quarries, a subsidiary of Red Graniti, can extract stone at a rate of 50 inches per hour and produce 2,500 tons of material per month. The stone remains extremely popular, finding its way into high-end projects in the U.S., Europe and Asia.

Beyond custom designs for homes and government buildings, the marble promises to remain famous: Thanks to the efforts of an enterprising Girl Scouts troop that petitioned the state legislature in 2004, Colorado marble is officially the state rock.