

Virginia Tech unveils statue of first student

The Class of 1956 commissioned the work as its 50th-anniversary gift to the university.

By Lindsay Key

Sculptor Larry Bechtel was walking along the Duck Pond at Virginia Tech about three years ago with his daughter when he ran across a walking stick. He immediately picked it up.

"I saw the stick, and said 'This is an Addison stick,'" Bechtel said. "I hung onto it until the project came along."

The project that Bechtel anticipated is the Class of 1956's most tangible gift to the university -- a life-size bronzed statue of the university's first student, William Addison Caldwell.

According to researcher and university relations staff member Clara Cox, Caldwell arrived in Blacksburg after a 28-mile hike from Sinking Creek in Craig County with his brother Milton "Mic" Caldwell. Addison Caldwell, or "Add" as friends and family called him, was the first to enroll in the new Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College, which after four name changes eventually became Virginia Tech.

Bechtel was hired by the Class of 1956 to design a statue of Caldwell, midstride, to be placed behind Brodie Hall on Tech's campus. The statue was unveiled and dedicated Friday afternoon in front of more than 300 Class of 1956 alumni in town for homecoming weekend.

Class member Gen. Tommy Thompson said the class raised \$571,000 for the university as a 50th-anniversary gift. The statue's price took up about \$81,000 of that amount. Other gifts included scholarship endowments, donations to the historical Solitude House by the Duck Pond and construction of a new cafe in Newman Library.

Thompson said about 56 class members rallied together three years ago to begin fundraising. Then they decided how to spend the money.

"In the beginning, we had a meeting with the school to determine the number of ideas," Thompson said. "One was to memorialize Addison Caldwell in bronze. We decided that he would be a good person to remember. Larry Bechtel was skilled to do the statue, so we talked about how much it would cost."



Matt Gentry | The Roanoke Times

A bronze statue of William Addison Caldwell of Craig County, who walked 26 miles to enroll at the then Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College in 1872, was unveiled next to Brodie Hall on the Virginia Tech Campus Friday. The sculpture was made by Blacksburg artist Lawrence Bechtel (left).

Vice president of alumni relations Tom Tillar said the Class of 1956 is not the first to consider an Addison Caldwell statue but was the first to include it in its class gift. Assistant vice president of alumni relations Andy Hall said both the public and the returning class members seem excited about Caldwell's recognition.

"Many have called for information about it. The fact that the gift is tangible is nice, because it allows the people to see it and know that it's a permanent part of campus," Hall said.

The process of getting Caldwell from the studio to the campus was quite an endeavor, Bechtel said. He began working on the sculpture at home about a year ago. His first model was 6 inches tall and made of baked clay.

His second model was 22 inches tall. He hired graduate student Eric Johnson to model a period costume tailored to fit him, and used Will Caldwell, the great-great-nephew of Addison Caldwell, to help model a facial portrait.

"I like historical research, so I enjoyed looking through archives at Newman Library, talking with Caldwell family members, visiting the Caldwell family cemetery in Radford and going on the Addison march with the Corps of Cadets," Bechtel said, referring to a hike the Corps takes along Caldwell's route.

Then Bechtel carved out a life-size version of Caldwell -- all 5 feet, 7 inches of him -- from a block of dense polyurethane foam. He coated it with clay and finished the details -- the buttons, the pack, the shoes, the facial features and the walking stick.

Next he boxed up Caldwell and sent the statue to the Carolina Bronze Foundry to be molded and cast, a process that took about three months.

The installed statue stands at ground level.

"We tried to simulate his walking on a path, rather than putting him on a pedestal," Bechtel said. "We wanted to show him in his long country stride on his way to Virginia Tech in Blacksburg. We wanted to make the sculpture Addison's size. He appeals because he's a 16-year-old country boy coming from a modest background."

The statue is placed on campus in what is thought to be a place Caldwell once walked. "I think it's a beautiful symbol that is universal," Bechtel said. "We're all like Addison Caldwell in a way -- we leave our homeplace and walk over the mountains metaphorically, searching for that place of enlightenment and understanding."

"For Virginia Tech, it's a beautiful way to think about the origin of the university."