

NCMCA Golden Anniversary Celebration Series – August 2024

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We're celebrating the North Carolina Masonry Contractors Association Golden 50th Anniversary Year by highlighting some monumental events that have taken place throughout the existence of NCMCA. Each month throughout 2024 we will have articles that will showcase the history and folks that helped NCMCA get to where it is today. Please enjoy this yearlong series with our eighth article, "Competition Masonry!"

From when he was the masonry instructor at Mount Pleasant High School, NCMCA's Ryan Shaver recalls the school's 2012 graduation ceremony. "In her speech as Student Council President, Aurelia Edwards made this analogy about Mt. Pleasant; 'You know you're from Mt. Pleasant when the tires on your truck cost more than your truck and when the number one sport is Masonry!'"

Anyone who is familiar with Mount Pleasant High School will appreciate Aurelia's sentiment. The school is unsurpassed in winning masonry contests and championships including twelve national gold medals for masonry. But even though Mount Pleasant's masonry program is exceptional, competition masonry in North Carolina is not unique to only Cabarrus County, where Mount Pleasant High's sister school, Central Cabarrus High, can also boast of a large trove of national masonry medals. Competition masonry is a tradition all across the state. North Carolina is known around the country for participation, quality, and the intensity of our masonry contests. Several states are making progress, but right now, no one else comes close. And it's not just at high school level.

The North Carolina State Fair Masonry Apprentice Skills Contest in Raleigh has been an annual event ever since Rex Girton won the first one in 1955. Ryan Shaver won the contest as a seventeen-year-old apprentice with C.M. Allmon Masonry in 1992. He's among the many young men (and just "men" so far) who've won the Fair Contest and who have hailed from every corner of the state. More than fifty different masonry firms, including McGee Brothers Company, presently holding the record for the most company apprentice winners at the fair, have entered winners. For most of its history,

the contest was sponsored and conducted by the North Carolina Department of Labor. Later, by the NC Department of Commerce. In recent years, ApprenticeshipNC, a division of the North Carolina Community College System, has managed the contest. The contest is hosted by the North Carolina Department of Agriculture who provides the venue and prize money that supplements generous tool prizes made possible by NCMCA member companies and chapters.

In recent years, responsibility for securing materials, setup, judging, and cleanup has fallen on NCMCA. Calvin Brodie has chaired the Fair Contest for at least thirty years assisted by vice-chairman and contest master of ceremonies Doug Burton. Both are NCMCA past presidents. Doug says, “We are ‘year seventy’ with the fair contest this year. We claim it’s the longest running contest in the country. No one has disputed that claim, so we run with it.

“Calvin Brodie has been involved with the contest since it’s inception. Maybe not quite that long, but close to it. I became involved in 1986 and continue to this day.

“We have been in two different locations (at the fair grounds) and for many years competed with the pig races but we have prevailed. Strong industry support from providing materials and manpower to judging and cleanup. Forty apprentices competing in a three-hour contest requires a decent amount of logistics.

“Brodie Contractors, Pinnacle Masonry, and Whitman Masonry for the past twenty-five years have provided most of that support. Ryan Shaver in his previous role as NCMCA’s Workforce Development & Training Coordinator has taken the contest to another level and handles most of the logistical duties along with the previously mentioned contractors for equipment and manpower support.

“The event at the state fair every year draws a lot of industry support but there is added public awareness as fair attendees walk by our tent and see our activities. A great day for masonry.”

Perhaps not one of the longest-running contests but certainly among the most intense and prestigious, is the annual spring NCMCA Samuel A. McGee Memorial Masonry Apprentice Skills Contest, a competition for NCMCA member-firm working apprentices with less than 6,000 hours and/or three years of apprenticeship. At stake

is the coveted “David R. Sigmon Award” for top score. The superior level of talent combined with the short duration of time allotted to build the featured project, two hours verses the usual three hours, make this among the toughest apprentice competitions in the nation. The records of the first competitions are apparently incomplete so the year of the first contest and the names of all the earliest winners are not confirmed. The first recorded winner is Cameron Mullins from Brookshire Masonry in 1982.

Among the earliest winners is NCMCA Past President and Mason Contractors Association of America (MCAA) Vice Chairman Kent Huntley, then an apprentice with McGee Brothers Company. Kent says, “The day I turned seventeen (November 8, 1986), I competed in what is now known as the Sam McGee Memorial Contest. Thankfully, I was able to win which started my passion to help others be able to compete, and to use competitions like this one to recruit young people into our industry. Obviously, winning the contest didn’t really change my status as a mason, but it was an amazing opportunity to see how I could stack up with other masons at my level from across the State. In attending the Sam McGee Contest each year, I am always reminded by the current winner of how old I must be to have my name on the plaque from 1986! Now, thirty-eight years later, I am one of the old guys!” In his “old age,” Kent regularly serves as “Head Judge” for various masonry competitions.

The NC State Fair Contest and the McGee Memorial Contest now serve as the qualifiers for North Carolina’s entrants in the MCAA’s Annual Masonry Apprentice Skills Competition held each year at the MCAA Annual Convention, most recently as part of “Masonry Madness Day” at the Las Vegas “World of Concrete.” The MCAA contest had been held for several years before NCMCA finally entered a contestant, 2003 McGee Contest winner Matthew Botts of Masonry Unlimited of Cherryville. Matthew won! Since Matthew’s 2004 third year division win at Las Vegas, North Carolina contestants are always “in the hunt” and considered among the favorites. NCMCA contestants have consistently either won or placed in most every MCAA Apprentice Skills Challenge. In fact, North Carolina contestants have had at least one First Place finish in one of the three divisions for every consecutive year since 2014 with multiple division winners on several occasions. Congratulations to Cade Huntley of Huntley Brothers Company for his 2024 win. For a complete list of MCAA Skills Challenge winners: <https://masoncontractors.azurewebsites.net/Competition/CompetitionWinners>

Among the largest masonry contests in the nation is the Annual North Carolina SkillsUSA State Masonry Championship Competition. Traditionally, a hundred or more masonry students from high schools across the state compete in the event that has been held at various locations across the state including Asheville, Charlotte, Fayetteville, Winston-Salem and Hickory, but in most recent years, has been held at the Greensboro Coliseum. Conducting the contest is a huge undertaking for the masonry industry. NCMCA is now the lead organization for planning and coordinating with the NC Masonry Instructors Association for the contest, and then executing the springtime event. NCMCA's Ryan Shaver is a past contestant. He won the North Carolina title in 1993.

As he tells it, that led to bigger things. "While in high school, I found myself in a class that would forever change my life and set me on a career path that would prove to be the best for me; 'Masonry.' I had an instructor that gave us everything we needed to succeed while in high school but being young, I would not realize this until I got in the real world. Doug Drye poured a ton of masonry skills into me and challenged me daily to be better than the day before.

"The first contest that Mr. Drye entered me in was in Fletcher, NC in a horse arena where I had to dig down to firm ground to start my project. Unknown to me, but Mr. Drye put me in that contest knowing I was not ready but he did it for a purpose. When the contest came to an end, I did not finish my project and I was pretty upset when I came off the arena. He looked at me and said, 'How'd you do?' I answered him and said, 'I did terrible. I didn't finish my project.' Mr. Drye responded and said, 'Will that ever happen again?' I said 'NO!' What he did that day was light a fire under me that is still burning today!

"That summer was the turning point in my masonry venture. Mr. Drye got me a job with a small masonry contractor in the area and I had a great time working that summer. I got a ton of experience and it set me up for my senior year.

"When school started in August, I was excited to show Mr. Drye how much I had improved and learned over the summer! In October, he registered me in the State Apprenticeship contest at the NC State Fair in Raleigh. When we arrived that morning, I remember seeing grown men with full beards and some were holding

children. I asked Mr. Drye, 'Are they competing?' He said focus on what you have learned and do your very best.

"I built the project that was given to us and finished in the allotted time. When the award ceremony was underway, I was nervous and anxious to see how I did. I am seventeen-years-old! When NC Commissioner of Agriculture Mr. Jim Graham called out my name for First Place, I was extremely excited. I was the First Place Champion in a contest that in 2024, we will be celebrating its seventieth year at the State Fair!

"In April 1993, we were back competing, this time in Greensboro in what is now called the SkillsUSA State Masonry Contest, which was VICA, Vocational Industrial Clubs of America back then. I won the 1993 State Contest! My Mt. Pleasant High School teammates, Jason Harwood and Van Lambert, finished third and fifth place. We went First, Third, and Fifth in the state competition! My Greensboro win earned me a spot to compete in the VICA National Masonry Championship in Louisville, KY that year. I went on to win the Nationals in June of 1993.

"Fast forward twenty-plus years later and I became the masonry instructor at Mt. Pleasant High School when Mr. Drye retired. I tried to instill the same motivation that was put in me through the program to get the students excited about making masonry their career choice when they graduated.

"The fire that my instructor lit under me is still happening in programs across the state today! Our Instructors work to excite our youth and show them a trade that can create a lifelong career and be beneficial for them and their families. Masonry contests across the state are much more than just the one person that finishes first! It is a tool that encourages a student to take it to the next level like was done for me years ago."

A fourth generation mason from a masonry family, Kent Huntley says, "I have been extremely fortunate to be able to help SkillsUSA North Carolina for the last twenty years or so, and help SkillsUSA to put these competitions on. It is very encouraging to see the youth today compete and experience the same things I was able to do.

"North Carolina has a strong tradition in hosting and producing national winners at the SkillsUSA level, and fares very well competing in the annual MCAA Masonry

Apprentice Skills Challenge. Our industry has done a wonderful job of supporting these events, to make it possible for recruitment, excellent careers, for new apprentices, which makes our whole industry stronger! The competitions have continued to become better each year, and it is amazing the support, monetarily and with volunteers, by our industry, which makes this possible! NCMCA has been very instrumental in making these events exciting and keeping each of us involved!”

The annual North Carolina SkillsUSA Masonry Championship has been remarkable in producing National Champions like Ryan. Indeed, the 2024 National Championship was recently won by East Rowan High School’s Mason Ridenhour. Since 1969, North Carolina Masonry State Champions have gone on to win 40 National Masonry Championships for a total medal count of 58 counting Silver and Bronze. No other state comes close. Ryan Shaver’s high school masonry instructor, Doug Drye, retired with the most National Gold Medal wins of any masonry instructor and was inducted into the MCAA Masonry Hall of Fame in 2020. It’s a lot of pressure on the competing North Carolina students. It’s understood that by being from North Carolina, they have a “target” painted on their back.

Besides the major competitions, regional and local student masonry contests take place all around the state and have become successful enough to attract local and state dignitaries to the events. Everyone has a good time but no one doubts the seriousness of the student contestants and their instructors.

Years ago, NCMCA regularly conducted Journeymen Masonry Competitions. The last one in 1997 at Clemmons was won by Russell Huntley of McGee Brothers Company, with Jerry Eckard of Master Masonry claiming the “Over-Sixty” category win. It was a good show and featured a live radio broadcast, but the journeymen were no less serious about winning than the apprentices and students. Maybe it’s time to put “braggin’ rights” to the test again with another journeyman contest.

North Carolina holds another masonry superlative: In 1996, twenty-one-year-old Travis McGee of McGee Brothers Company entered into the Guinness Book of World Records for laying 1494 brick in one hour on a Habitat for Humanity house project in Texas.

Laying lots of brick quickly has earned several North Carolina masons recognition and

big prizes. Garrett Hood, Tyke Mangum, and Matt Cash each have won the Las Vegas National SpecMix Bricklayer 500 contest for the most brick laid “properly” in one hour. Garrett Hood won the championship twice (2008 and 2010) and won “Top Craftsman” for the “most sellable wall” in 2015. Here’s a link to a WFAE-FM radio story from 2009 when McGee Brother Company masons won the Bricklayer 500 for two years in a row. (Then they won again in 2010...)

<https://www.wfae.org/local-news/2009-07-16/champion-bricklayers>

It all comes around. Ryan Shaver is now co-chairman of the National SkillsUSA masonry competition event and is nationally sought-after as an expert on masonry contests and workforce development. He says, “Thankfully North Carolina has many opportunities statewide for masonry contest for our youth! The industry support in North Carolina for these contests is unmatched anywhere in the United States! My story is an example of the impact can be made to a young person that can change their path for a lifetime.”

Now retired from the masonry industry, Lynn Nash says, “Because I was in the Carolinas, I’ll bet I’ve photographed more young people building masonry contest panels than anyone else in the world.”

Competition masonry in North Carolina: *Like nowhere else on Earth!*

Article by Lynn Nash



Gary Young arrived in a limousine wearing a white tuxedo for the NCMCA's 1988 Journeyman Masonry Competition in Raleigh. *Photo by Burnie Batchelor*



The winners of the September 1997 NCMCA Journeyman Contest in Clemmons were, left to right, Danny Bowman, fourth place; Red McAdams, second place; Russell Huntley, first place; Jerry Eckard, “Over-Sixty” winner (ninth place overall;) Ronnie Atkinson, third place; and Darrell Henshaw, fifth place.



Left to right, NC Commissioner of Labor Harry Payne and NC Commissioner Jim Graham help celebrate Jeff Scott's victory at the 2000 North Carolina State Fair's Annual Masonry Apprentice Skills Contest.



Leland Eckard and the Western Carolina Chapter took responsibility for setup and cleanup for the 2001 North Carolina VICA State Conference Masonry Contest in Hickory. (It was “VICA” until 2004 when the name changed to “SkillsUSA.”)



In 2009, retiring Mount Pleasant High School Masonry Instructor Doug Drye was recognized with a plaque from the masonry industry and a reception with all his past national masonry champions present. Top row, left to right: Chad Smith, 1998; Jared Gandy, 2009 NC Skills; Doug Drye; Ryan Shaver, new Mt. Pleasant masonry instructor and 1993 National Champion; Corey Honeycutt, 2009 NC Skills Masonry I - 1st place; Frank Paul, 1998; Heath Drye, 2006; and Josh Kimrey, 2006. Bottom row, left to right: Ben Petrea, 2000; Pete Cieslak, BIA-SE; Cody Alward, 2003 and 2004; Brant Bost, 1996; Shann Womble, 1990; Tim Kidd, masonry instructor, West Stanly High School, 2009 “Douglas Drye Best Masonry Program” award; Paul LaVene, Carolinas Concrete Masonry Association; and Sam McGee, McGee Brothers Company. Doug Drye is the country’s most successful masonry instructor based on total National SkillsUSA competition wins.



In the fall of 2018, the NCMCA Metrolina Chapter hosted Greater Charlotte area masonry students and apprentices that achieved success in masonry competitions across the country in 2017 and 2018. Pictured, bottom left to right, Grant Helms, First Place Winner at the 2018 NC State Fair Masonry Apprentice Contest; Rex Huntley, Third Place Winner in the NCMCA 2018 Annual Samuel A. McGee Apprentice Skills Contest; Ashton White, 2018 National SkillsUSA Post-Secondary Masonry Champion; Jamison “JK” Huntley, winner of the 2018 David R Sigmon First Place Award at the Sam McGee Contest and 2018 First Place Winner, First Year Division at the Mason Contractors Association (MCAA) of America Skills Challenge at Las Vegas; Mason Saunders, 2018 National SkillsUSA Secondary Masonry Champion; and Kelby Thornton, who earned the right to represent masonry on the USA WorldSkills team when they compete in Russia in 2019. Back, left to right, Ashton White’s masonry instructor Rodney Harrington, West Rowan High School; Metrolina Chapter President Brandon Hartsell; NCMCA’s Ryan Shaver; Zack McGee, Fourth Place Finisher in the 2018 Sam McGee Contest; special guest Jeff Buczkiewicz, MCAA Chairman and CEO; Cody Alward, Mason Saunders’ masonry instructor, Mount Pleasant High School; Danks Burton, NCMCA Training and Apprenticeship Committee Chair; and NCMCA President

Kent Huntley, whose firm, Huntley Brothers Company, took home the “David R. Sigmon Award” traveling plaque for the third year in a row with Huntley Brother’s apprentice JK Huntley’s 2018 Sam McGee Contest win.



Several Past Fair Contest Champions were in attendance at the 2018 North Carolina State Fair Masonry Apprentice Skills Contest. Left to right, Chaz Tomberlin, 2015; Haran McGee, 2013; Lane Mullis, 2014; Ryan Shaver, 1992; James Mangrum, Jr., 1977; and Zackery McGee, 2016.



Colson Childers of Griffin Masonry won the NCMCA 2023 Samuel A. McGee Memorial Masonry Skills Contest hosted by EastWest Products in Kinston.



Oldcastle/Adams Products Company hosted the 2024 Samuel A. McGee Memorial at Waynesville. Left to right, NCMCA Secretary/Treasurer Mike Rogers; Annayeli Dionisio, fourth place, Fred Mason's Masonry; Cade Huntley, second place, Huntley Brothers Company; Alec Huntley, first place and the David R. Sigmon Award, Huntley Brothers Company; Everado Gonzales, third place, Brodie Contractors; O'Connor Leonard, fifth place, Gates Construction Company; NCMCA Land of the Sky Chapter President Micah Rogers; and NCMCA President Cliff McGee. *Photograph by C.E. Moser.*
