

## PROJECT OVERVIEW

Lenoir, N.C. is now the sacred keeper of a monumental piece of public art by renowned international sculptor—Thomas Sayre.

For the past year, the Caldwell Arts Council has undertaken a massive public art project to bring Sayre, who is also a principal of multi-disciplinary design firm Clearscape, to Caldwell County for the creation of one of his world-renowned sculptures. From the ground up, Sayre and several local contractors used a technique called earthcasting. This style of casting creates a mold in the earth in which concrete is poured and then pulled from the ground, creating an inspiring 26-foot diameter, 40,000-pound centerpiece for Caldwell County's sculpture collection.

The final piece resembles a circular hole saw called Across the Grain, which will be bordered by a grassy plaza in the former Blackwelder Hospital site in downtown Lenoir on the corner of Harper Avenue and Church Street.

The finished plaza features a sidewalk with green stepping stones that honor the financial donors for the project. There is seating created by local artists using historic timbers along with a grassy berm for viewing the sculpture in different perspectives. The entire process is complex, and involves considerable planning and engineering skills. For now, you can see a powerpoint slideshow of this event by clicking here: [Slide Show](#)

## WHO IS THOMAS SAYRE?



[Thomas Sayre](#) has designed and built public art projects all over the world and has been part of the design team for civic, educational, and museum buildings. He, along with architect Steve Schuster, is a founding principal of the multi-disciplinary design firm, [Clearscapes](#), and has collaborated to produce lighting, furniture, terrazzo floors, and specialty surfaces.

Growing up in the shadow of Washington National Cathedral, Thomas' early art education, and his love and respect of natural materials, came from the stonecutters and the Cathedral. His education continued at St. Albans School, University of North Carolina, University of Michigan, and Cranbrook Academy of Art.

While occasionally producing "studio" pieces, most of his efforts are focused in the public arena. It is here where the idea of producing art intersects with the realities of life. The art will work only when disparate opinions come together through collaboration to form a coherent vision. To learn more about Thomas, visit his [website](#).

## **WHAT IS EARTHCASTING?**

### **How the earthcasting begins**

The project dig and concrete pouring will begin the week of April 9, 2012 in downtown Lenoir. Sayre began with his team by tracing the design onto the ground using a smaller model as a guide. Prior to the actual digging in Lenoir, Sayre spent countless hours test digging the design in farm fields to see what type of profile and texture could be accomplished.

Next, a backhoe was used to trench intricate designs into the earth to create a texture and mold that became the unique, jagged edges of the circular piece. Unlike traditional castings, concrete is not poured into a mold of fiberglass or plywood. "A mold for the size of sculpture would prove to be too big and heavy," Sayre explains. The artist uses steel supports and pours in earth-tone concrete into the finished earth mold.

### **Up from the ground**

The concrete cured in the mold for three weeks before Sayre's team carefully dug it out. "We dig around the inside and outside of the cured concrete like a cake knife trying to lift out a cake," explains Sayre. "Because there is so much friction, we must dig from around the piece in order to lift it."

The entire sculpture was lifted out of the ground using a 90-ton crane and placed on a sturdy concrete subfooting. Final temporary bracings are assembled while more concrete is poured to secure the structure. The entire process, from fabrication to dedication, took about four months. At the final unveiling, Lenoir and Caldwell County laid claim to one of Sayre's earth-casted sculptures, a true marriage between human intentions and natural actions.

## **ABOUT THE NAME**

Like all of his previous landscape-sized sculptures, Thomas Sayre draws inspiration from the surrounding community. The final piece resembles a circular hole saw and is called Across the Grain. Sayre derives its name from many places, both from Lenoir's treasured past and its anticipated future.

### **Wheels of the past and future**

It is apparent how the industrialization of water wheels, turbines and sawmills impacted the furniture industry in Caldwell County. These wheels came out of the ground and some ran in water, which is represented by the green stepping stones in the sidewalk that will surround the sculpture.

All of these wheels touched Caldwell County's past in some way. "And like a skilled man, the furniture world changed quickly, and we started asking ourselves, what are the new wheels of Caldwell County's future?," Sayre explains. "The new wheels will drive the spirit and economy of Caldwell County."

### **A logging lexicon**

Thomas Sayre recognizes that the term “across the grain” is a logging term. When you cut across the grain, you are making a commitment, an intentional act to make something. “This ability to commit to doing something ensures that there is a future,” explains Sayre. “The act of bringing this sculpture to Lenoir is going across the grain, and I get the sense there is something unique here.”

Sayre further states that there are other towns and cities much larger that have tried pieces of this scale, and they aren’t even close to realizing a completed project.

## **WHY LENOIR?**

### **How did Thomas Sayre choose Lenoir?**

Thomas Sayre’s first interaction with Lenoir was as a young, upcoming competing artist at the second Sculpture Celebration in Lenoir in 1986. More than twenty years later, he was asked to be the judge at the Sculpture Celebration.

Sayre was also invited by the Caldwell Arts Council to survey the current 77-piece sculpture collection in Caldwell County. “That exercise was to look at the current condition of the collection, and secondly, to see what the Caldwell Arts Council was going to do with the collection,” Sayre explained. “This led us [Lee Carol Giduz and Thomas Sayre] to ask—wouldn’t it be nice if there was a larger, more well-known sculpture that might be a destination piece for the collection?”

Thomas Sayre had also lived a decade in neighboring Burke and Rutherford counties and had developed a love for the region. “Lenoir has a similar landscape, and so it’s in my blood,” he said. “I love this landscape so much that I’d like to dig into it.”

Sayre explains three important reasons that compelled him to agree to build one of his sculptures in Lenoir. “First, it was the landscape itself because I lived nearby for ten years. Second, it was the unusual history of sculpture in this community. And thirdly, I’ve come to have enormous respect for the leadership in this town. For a town this size to elect to raise the money to do a large, prominent and contemporary sculpture in its downtown on city land is unusual. There are communities I have worked with who claim more sophistication who can’t even get out of the starting blocks. I find this inspiring.”

### **How did the sculpture collection begin in Caldwell County?**

Since 1985, the Caldwell Arts Council has hosted the annual Sculpture Celebration on the first Saturday after Labor Day. Artists come from across the United States to compete for prizes.

Dr. Henry Michaux, a Lenoir native and sculpture professor at the University of South Carolina, probably didn’t foresee the remarkable attention and exposure that the Sculpture Celebration would bring to Lenoir. The event was Dr. Michaux’s idea, and he approached Sam Sturgis, long-time director of the City of Lenoir Parks and Recreation Department and Liza Plaster, director of the Caldwell Arts Council. Together, they created an event that would both celebrate sculpture and serve as a catalyst to get more people to enjoy J.E. Broyhill Park. Also involved was Bill Brown, a sculptor from Linville Falls and son of one of the early directors of the Penland School of Crafts.

Over the years the Caldwell Arts Council has used private donations to purchase pieces from the competition to place in the community. The first three pieces were purchased in 1986. A pig weather vane, which now sits atop the Caldwell Arts Council, would become the first of 77 pieces that would be installed throughout Caldwell County on street corners, schools, parks, community college, and local libraries. Three pieces in the collection are commissioned works, and Thomas Sayre's project will be the fourth.

### **What kind of exposure has the collection gained?**

The public collection has garnered national attention in *Our State* magazine, *Carolina Weekend* on UNC-TV, *Orlando Sentinel*, and been touted "where sculpture reigns" by the *Charlotte Observer*. Lenoir was also recognized by Appalachian State University in 2006 as having the largest collection of permanent public outdoor sculpture of any community of its population in the United States. This study also put the collection in the top 3 percent of public collections in the United States.

### **What other sculpture-related initiatives are occurring?**

Visitors to downtown Lenoir will notice sculptures in brick planters along the streetscape. These sculptures are a part of Tucker's Streetscape Gallery, an ever-changing outdoor sculpture gallery in different locations throughout downtown. All of the artwork is available for sale and is managed by local artists. The next time you visit, you'll see new pieces as older ones are sold.

In 2007, the Caldwell Chamber of Commerce's Tourism Advisory Council, a group of individuals representing government and tourism sites throughout the county, along with the assistance of Magellan Strategy Group of Asheville, N.C., decided to use sculpture as an important positioning strategy for promoting Caldwell County. In a 2007 study by Magellan Strategy Group, the collection was identified as "providing a distinctive attraction possessed by few other destinations" and "reflects the legacy of craftsmanship in the county."

The Chamber began formalizing a brand identity using the most recognizable piece in the sculpture collection, the West Wind Sentinel on U.S. 321 by Mike Roig. This piece was used as inspiration for both the tourism and Chamber logos.

The Caldwell Arts Council's collection of sculptures can be viewed on their website: <http://www.caldwellarts.com/55-permanent-sculpture-collection/> - and as these pieces are moved to new locations periodically, you can click on the image to find where a particular sculpture is located now.