

HISTORY OF THE OBELISK

Obelisks were carved and raised by many ancient Egyptian pharaohs in the Middle and New Kingdoms, but the most impressive examples were created in the 15th century B.C. These magnificent “skyscrapers of the past” were carved from a single piece of granite, could rise over 100 feet, and weighed as much as 450 tons. For centuries, obelisks remained one of the world’s greatest engineering feats and mysteries.

In 1994, the award winning PBS science program NOVA set out to solve the puzzle by transporting and erecting a large scale obelisk using tools and materials available in ancient times, for the special television mini-series, “Secrets of Lost Empires.”

The first attempt was made in Aswan, Egypt in January, 1995. Led by Egyptian expert Ali el Gasab, the team used a ramp and lever to maneuver their 30-ton obelisk to an angle of

about 40o, but they failed to raise the stone to vertical. In March 1999, NOVA returned to Aswan with engineer Mark Whitby who tried to rotate the obelisk with a complex rope and wood contraption, but this attempt was aborted due to lack of control.

Finally, in September 1999, at the Fletcher Granite Quarry in Chelmsford, Massachusetts, sculptor Rick Brown organized a final attempt. The new 30-ton obelisk, quarried in New Hampshire, was laid horizontally atop an earthen ramp. The wider, lower half of the obelisk sat upon a large “sandbox.” When the sand was removed from below, the obelisk slowly rotated toward its turning stone pedestal. Three large brake ropes helped control the delicate needle’s descent to an angle of 75o. Finally, 112 volunteers provided the human muscle to pull the obelisk upright.

In March 2000, NOVA teamed up with eBay to auction off the 36-foot, 30-ton obelisk. Retired pharmacist and poet, George Rapanos won the auction. Ten percent of the proceeds of the sale went to benefit New York City inner city public school I.S. 90, reflecting NOVA’s mission of science literacy for school children, and the remainder was used directly for the production of NOVA documentaries.

George Rapanos,
who with the help of Ferris State University built this
“Garden of Inspiration”