

Stone World

New Hampshire fabricator undergoes steady expansion

Since its foundation in 1986, Ripano Stoneworks of Nashua, NH, has grown on a consistent basis — upgrading its facilities as well as its stoneworking equipment

by Michael Reis



Ripano Stoneworks has grown steadily over the years, and it now operates a state-of-the-art facility in Nashua, NH.

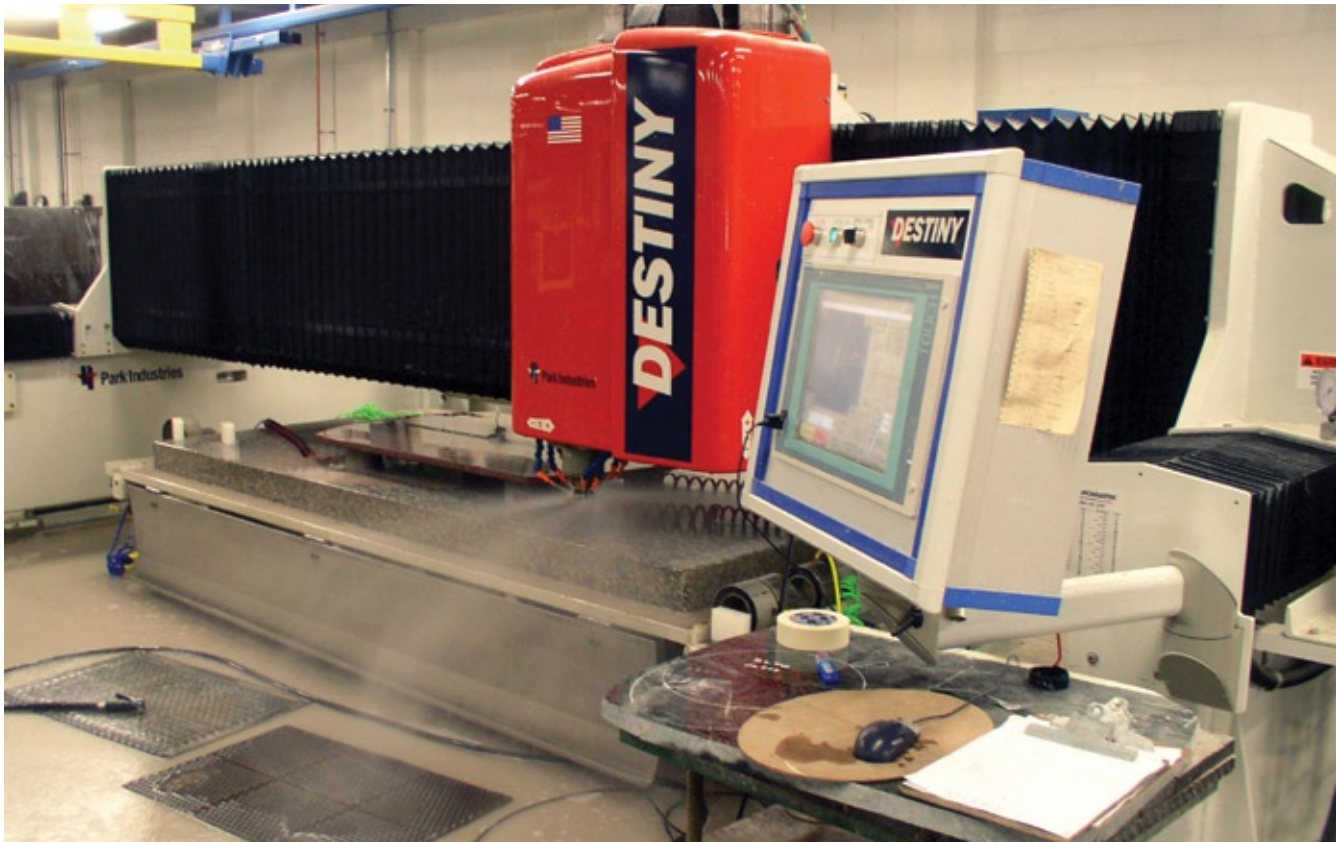
For over 20 years, Ripano Stoneworks has fabricated stone in the greater metropolitan area of Boston, MA. Over that time, the company has steadily grown in terms of production and fabrication equipment, and today it has a facility in

Nashua, NH, with over 35,000 square feet of space. Moreover, there is room for further expansion in the future.

The company was founded in 1986 by Dick Laliberte and some partners. Laliberte had worked in the cultured marble business for 17 years with his

father, cousin, brother and friend. In that sector, they gained some experience with stone countertops in laboratory settings. In fact, the stoneworking operation's first saw came from that side of the business.

"Only a handful of us covered all



One of the latest machinery investments has been a Destiny CNC stoneworking center from Park Industries.

of New England,” Laliberte said. “You can say we worked within 150 miles, but we even went outside of that.” At the time, most of the company’s work was contracted through kitchen and bath dealers, which they had relationships with because of the cultured marble business.

Ultimately, the owners of Ripano Stoneworks sold the original building, along with the cultured marble business, and they moved to a 6,000-square-foot facility with an eye on expanding the stoneworking operations. The owners hired a seasoned stoneworking professional

as they continued to learn the business, while Laliberte focused on increasing sales.

Growth and investments

Ripano Stoneworks continued to grow “a little at a time,” and after eight years, the company was “bursting at the seams of its space,” Laliberte said. This prompted the company to move to a 12,000-square-foot facility in Hudson, NH, and to invest in more advanced stoneworking equipment. This machinery included a Cougar bridge saw and a Pro Edge unit edge processing machine, both from Park Industries. “That brought us to the next level,” Laliberte said, adding that over the next few years, the company also added several other machines from Park — including a Wizard radial arm polisher, a Jaguar bridge saw and an Odyssey CNC machine (only the third of its kind in New England at the time).

Today, the shop has much of the original Park equipment still in place. More recently, Ripano Stoneworks has added new machinery from Park Industries, including a Yukon bridge



A Yukon bridge saw from Park is among the other recent technology investments.



“Most of our dealers are on the upper end, and we’re not doing many L-shaped counters,” said Laliberte. “We are doing highly complex kitchens of 50 to 70 square feet, although some are as large as 150 square feet.”



A Sasso Flying Flat edging machine from U.S. Granite Machinery is used for processing backsplashes.



saw and a Destiny CNC stoneworking center. It also added a Sasso Flying Flat edging machine from U.S. Granite Machinery, which is used for processing backsplashes. Tooling within the shop is supplied by GranQuartz, VIC International, Marble and Granite, Inc. and Braxton-Bragg.

When the new CNC stoneworking center was added, Ripano Stoneworks sent one of the shop workers, John Santos, to Park’s facilities in St. Cloud, MN, for one week to learn operation of the machine.

Speaking on the advances in CNC technology, Laliberte pointed out that bowl cut-outs, which used to take four hours by hand, now take about one hour — 30 minutes on the CNC machine and 30 minutes for polishing. “The tooling also now allows for polishing on the CNC,” Laliberte said.

Slabs are maneuvered using a Gorbel 2000 overhead crane system from Mass Crane and Hoist, which is equipped with an eight-pad vacuum lifter from Anver.



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Water in the shop is recycled using the EnviroSystem from Water Treatment Technologies. “The city [of Nashua, NH] was adamant that nothing goes in the storm drains,” Laliberte said. “In a city environment, you’d be in big trouble [without water recycling.]”

In addition to advanced equipment for stone processing, Ripano’s facilities feature modern technology for material handling and storage. A Gorbelt 2000 overhead crane system from Mass Crane and Hoist is used for slab handling, and the company also added an indoor loading dock that can be reached using the crane. “Slabs are getting as high as 7 feet, so we needed to make sure it would work,” Laliberte said, adding that the crane operates on trusses measuring 10 feet, 2 inches in size. The crane is equipped with an eight-pad vacuum lifter from Anver.

Slabs are stored on racks supplied by GranQuartz, and in addition to storing unprocessed slabs, the company also has racks and a dedicated area for storing its stone remnants. “It has been working out fantastic. We can inventory them on a database, and we make sure we can access them easily,” Laliberte said. “We figured that if you can’t get to [the remnants], you can’t sell them, so we wanted to make it easy.”



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The company processes 15 to 18 kitchens per week, running one shift.

Countertop designs are templated using the LT-55 laser templating system from Laser Products. The company also does some hard templating using Luan plywood and plastic as needed.

Sales and marketing

Most of Ripano's work is installed within 50 miles of its Nashua facilities, although it has also done some work as far away as southern Vermont and southern Maine. "We don't work within the city of Boston, but we do a lot of work

elsewhere in eastern Massachusetts," Laliberte said. "We are doing a lot of remodeling of older homes in the area. These are homes that are in a great location, but they need an upgrade."

In addition to single-family homes, Ripano has begun fabricating stonework for multi-unit townhomes and condominium complexes. "We're seeing more and more of those," Laliberte said, adding that the new technology has allowed them to process this work without affecting its custom

single-family residential work. "We never wanted to hurt our single-unit or dealer business, so we had to wait for the capacity [to add the multi-unit business.]"

With many jobs in progress at a given time, projects are tracked using a software system called Job Tracker from Moraware of San Mateo, CA. And to give dealers a place to take their clients and review stone options, Ripano also developed a 3,000-square-foot showroom on the premises.



In addition to the Destiny CNC machine, Ripano still operates an Odyssey CNC stoneworking center from Park Industries, which was only the third of its kind in New England at the time when it was purchased.

Ripano Stoneworks Nashua, NH

Type of work completed: kitchen countertops in natural stone and quartz surfacing, including single-family homes as well as townhomes and condominiums

Machinery: Cougar bridge saw, Pro Edge edge processing machine, Wizard radial arm polisher, Jaguar bridge saw, Odyssey CNC machine, Yukon bridge saw and Destiny CNC stoneworking center all from Park Industries of St. Cloud, MN; Sasso Flying Flat edging machine from U.S. Granite Machinery of Carpentersville, IL; tooling from GranQuartz of Tucker, GA, VIC International of Knoxville, TN, Marble and Granite, Inc. of Westwood, MA, and Braxton-Bragg of Knoxville, TN; EnviroSystem water recycling system from Water Treatment Technologies of Hampton, NH; a Gorbelt 2000 crane system from Mass Crane and Hoist of Chelmsford, MA; 8-pad vacuum lifter from Anver of Hudson, MA; LT-55 laser templating system from Laser Products of Romeoville, IL; job tracking software from Moraware of San Mateo, CA

Number of Employees: 27

Production Rate: 15 to 18 kitchens per week (one shift)

In operating the business, Laliberte said that one of the biggest challenges is making sure that all of the preliminary information is precisely accurate. "This business is very detail oriented," he said. "Even the wrong faucet hole will ruin the whole top. Fortunately, we have been around enough to ask the right questions."

Laliberte also said that the company works to make sure consumers understand the natural characteristics of stone, in terms of aesthetics as well as its practical properties. "Some stones are pitted; some are like glass," he said. "We try to set expectations in advance, so this way it doesn't sound like we're giving an excuse."

Ripano Stoneworks has 27 employees, including the office, installation/templating crews and the shop, which is run by Dick Laliberte's son, Matt. It has two full-time templaters and three installation crews on the road. When hiring workers, the company does some advertising in Help Wanted sections, but many of its new employees come via references from existing employees.

"We look for people with potential," Laliberte said. "We are planning for

growth, and we are reaching a point where one shift may not be enough. We are now doing 15 to 18 kitchens per week, but we could double that if we were to use the key machines more."

In addition to natural stone, approximately 15% of Ripano's work is fabricated from quartz surfacing, including Cambria, CaesarStone and HanStone.

In addition to providing a source of employment in the region, Ripano Stoneworks has made significant financial contributions and in-kind donations (in the form of volunteering) to the local community, primarily focusing on high school and college athletics programs. It has also contributed a great deal to industry education. This was recently demonstrated when Ripano Stoneworks opened its shop to host the MIA Advanced Fabrication Techniques seminar in August of 2006.

Dick Laliberte's contributions to the industry were honored at the recent StonExpo in Las Vegas, NV, as he was named *Stone World Magazine's "Fabricator of the Year,"* by a panel of stone industry veterans. □