



*Michael Petrasek and
American International
Construction*

BRINGING THE PAST
BACK TO LIFE THROUGH
**HISTORICAL
RESTORATION
AND
RECONSTRUCTION**

— Written by Nancy Christie





Fons Lee and Adam are part of the next generation to work at American International Construction.

"I'D LOVE TO SEE THIS THIRD GENERATION THAT'S NOW ON BOARD BUILD OFF OUR STRONG FOUNDATION AND REALLY KEEP MY FATHER'S DREAM ALIVE."

When Michael Petrasek joined American International Construction (AIC) in 1981, a company founded three years earlier by his father John, it was only supposed to be a short-term arrangement. At the time, the younger Petrasek was a senior at Bowling Green State University with a dream of becoming a photojournalist.

But then his father asked him to come work at the firm for a year to help the company during its growth phase. Although the younger Petrasek had reservations—"Construction was not what I wanted to go into at all. It was so anti-creative in my mind." He couldn't refuse his father, who had struggled in post-war Europe before coming to the United States in 1951 to create the American dream.

"He put me through college. He did everything he could to give me the best life possible—better than the life that he had experienced to that point," Petrasek said. "So, I tabbed my dream of being a writer/photographer and said I'd help him."

That one year turned into seven, with Petrasek working at the company as well as doing photography on the side, "to keep the creative juices flowing," as he put it. Then came what he termed the defining moment of his life. His father became ill and suffered a stroke in 1988, and Petrasek had to make a choice. He would either have to take over the business and keep it going to support the family or shut the doors on a business his father had worked so hard to build.

"I had two young sons at that time, so I decided to keep it going," he said simply. Petrasek took over as president of the company, and here I am. 41 years later, still forging along."

Although construction was a far cry from writing, he soon realized that there was a level of artistry and creativity that goes into building restoration, especially when it's done on historic structures. The historic preservation and restoration work soon proved to be the perfect outlet for his imagination and creative talents as well as a source of pride and joy.

"There is an artistic side of repairing things to look like they once did, without making them look like they were repaired: blending and matching mortars and stone and patching material," he said. "It's hard to explain the feeling that you get when you take something that's old and dilapidated, that has been neglected for a long period of time. Then you put this extreme labor of love and intense passion into making it come back to life. That's actually the creative side of life, albeit it's in a construction setting. When we get these old stone edifices that are awe-inspiring to begin with, even though they are dilapidated, and then showcase our work—the before-and-after side of things—is really gratifying."

Now in its 44th year, American International Construction has completed more than 5,000 projects, with the historic restoration accounting for the majority. As he listed a few of the more notable historic structures in the area the company has handled, the pride in Petrasek's voice is almost palpable.

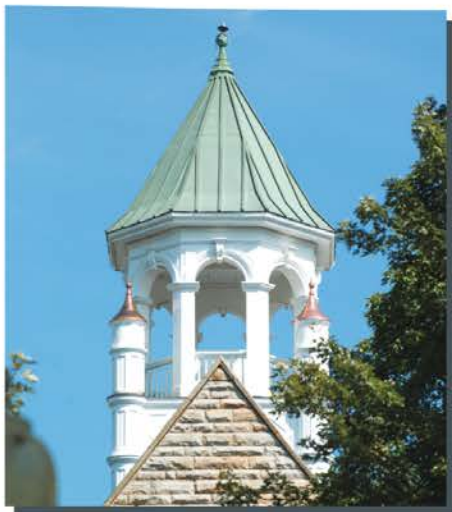
"FARMERS CAME THROUGH LIKE NO OTHER, AND I'M TOTALLY INDEBTED TO THEM BECAUSE OF WHAT THEY WERE ABLE TO DO FOR US DURING COVID."

"At Baldwin Wallace University, we did Marting Hall, one of the classic structures in the Cleveland area that was built in the 1800s. It was a four-year restoration of the entire facade from the ground up, including the cupola which was completely rebuilt," he said.

Another project was the Kulas Gate stairway, built in the 1800s from sandstone quarried from Berea, that leads to the historic part of the Baldwin-Wallace campus. After a major excavation to uncover some of the original walls that he likened to "an Egyptian archeological dig," it took the company two years to rebuild the staircase to match its original appearance. To commemorate the recreation, the company stored a time capsule inside one of the columns. Among the items were two photographs: one of the workers who originally built it and a second with the AIC crew. "Now the Kulas Gate stairway is one of the most photographed areas on campus," he added.

And then there is the Burrell Observatory, also on the campus. "A dilapidated, rundown, but beautiful looking observatory with a copper dome on 5th Street, just tucked away behind a bunch of trees," Petrasek said. "It was the first project that we got at B-W, and we were allowed to really put our heart and soul into bringing it back to this gorgeous structure today. It had good bones and great character, but we literally breathed life back into it."

Although the company is headquartered in Berea, it is frequently hired by clients from coast-to-coast. This is the result of connections that came from contacts developed in the early years of the business as well as the reputation for excellent work that AIC has earned. As Petrasek pointed out, building restoration requires technical expertise, professional training, and a good head for heights, since projects might take



Marting Hall Cupola Restoration at Baldwin Wallace University. The cupola was built in 1897 and restored in 2012-2013.

workers up 300 feet or more via aerial lifts and scaffolding.

The company's capabilities and unyielding commitment to quality have made it the go-to choice for many facility managers and building owners who want expert service and superior results. With several high-profile structural disasters, such as the 2021 collapse of the 12-story Champlain Towers South condominium in Surfside, Florida, it has become increasingly important that building exteriors as well as interior spaces such as parking garages undergo regular maintenance and repairs as necessary.

While he relishes the chance to bring the past back to life, Petrasek turns toward the latest in modern techniques and materials to accomplish his goals, such as drone inspections for structures that are very tall and difficult to access.

"Technology is always improving, and there's a better ways of doing things," he

said. At the same time, he noted, "we still have that old school mentality of how to restore things with craftsmanship and artistry."

With the next generation of the family—sons Adam and Lee, nephew Andrew, and niece Samantha—now actively involved in the business, there is also an infusion of new approaches and fresh ideas that benefit both clients and the company, said Petrasek. "They are keeping us in the forefront of our industry with new technology and techniques, making this company even better and brighter."

Over its more than 40 years, AIC has had numerous successes. But it has also faced a few unexpected impediments. As Petrasek noted dryly, "There are always interesting challenges that arise that you can't foresee. You can never be complacent."

And while that applies to work on the job



"NOW THE KULAS GATE STAIRWAY IS ONE OF THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED AREAS ON CAMPUS."

site, it is equally true for the business side of things. "In 2008 when the market basically crashed, we did a lot of introspection and reflection," he recalled. "We asked ourselves, what do we have to do to make ourselves better, yet still stay within ourselves and do what we set out to do all those years ago?"

Then came the pandemic: another "interesting challenge" that indirectly led him to Farmers National Bank. While Petrasek knew Chris McManis, now Vice President and Commercial Relationship Manager, when he was with another bank, it wasn't until COVID-19 that the affiliation with Farmers came to be.

"Chris, who was now with Farmers, called me late on a Friday afternoon and offered to help me with my PPP loan application even though I didn't bank with them. He said he could get the loan approved in a short period of time because Farmers was a smaller bank and could react quicker."

said Petrasek. After consulting with his accountant, Petrasek decided to give McManis, and by extension, Farmers, a shot.

By the following Wednesday the loan was approved, and two days later, the money was in the company bank account. This level of personalized service and rapid response led Petrasek to transfer all of his financial business to the bank. Or, as he put it, "I moved all my eggs into Farmers' basket. Farmers came through like no other, and I'm totally indebted to them because of what they were able to do for us during COVID."

Despite his busy schedule, Petrasek still makes time for another project near and dear to his heart: Welcome House headquarters in Westlake, Ohio, on whose board he has served for the past four years. The nonprofit is dedicated to helping individuals with developmental disabilities to live in a residential setting.

In a sense it's still a type of renovation, with lives being rebuilt and futures being renovated, thanks to a living environment that allows them to enjoy a full and rewarding existence.

Although Petrasek may have relinquished his dream of becoming a professional photojournalist, he hasn't given up writing altogether. "I still get the creative juices to flow by writing for Properties Magazine every now and then," he said. "It's a local publication here in Cleveland geared toward new projects, restoration projects, architects, engineers and real estate people. I get my byline and a little picture, and I'm thrilled!"

But in the end it all comes back to the business started so many decades ago by his father. When describing his vision for the company's future, he said, "I'd love to see this third generation that's now on board build off our strong foundation and really keep my father's dream alive."

CONSTRUCTING A MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL RELATIONSHIP

It took a pandemic to bring Mike Petrasek and his company, American International Construction (AIC), into the Farmers National Bank family. Although Chris McManis, Vice President, Commercial Relationship Manager had known Petrasek personally since 2009, it wasn't until 2020 that the company president made his decision to shift his banking to Farmers.

At the time, said McManis, Petrasek was having a frustrating experience with his incumbent bank regarding his PPP loan application. "For a lot of commercial relationships, you really find out how valued you are as a customer and how important your business is to the bank when something goes wrong," he noted. "Often, everybody leads with their best foot forward, but then they can't deliver at times of high stress or urgency."

In this instance, Petrasek felt that his PPP loan application was being pushed down the list, with more

priority given to larger entities. When McManis offered to handle the paperwork, Petrasek agreed, and the banker came through, processing the application over the weekend to get him the funding. That initial experience, said McManis, demonstrated that Farmers was willing to go above and beyond for people when they have immediate needs.

Once the loan was approved, Farmers became the bank of choice for all AIC's and Petrasek's requirements: Treasury Management, depository services and lending services for both the personal and business sides, including financing for the many restoration and reconstruction projects the company undertakes.

It's Farmers' holistic approach to servicing clients that has enabled the relationship to grow, explained McManis. "We spent time with Mike to truly understand how his business works and tailored solutions to make his life easier so he

can spend more time focusing on growing his business and less time working with a bank that couldn't meet his needs."

In return, said McManis, Petrasek is a great fit for Farmers. "Mike is a man of character and a true professional. He is a strong business owner with a teamwork mentality, which makes him very easy to work with and someone you want to put in the work for."

Since that first interaction, the partnership has continued to grow, said McManis. "Every chance Mike gets he reminds me of how much Farmers National Bank has meant to him and how grateful he is for our professional relationship. He always keeps me top of mind when talking with other business owners he knows and never says a disparaging word about me or Farmers. It's really fulfilling to know that what we do as bankers matters in the lives of our clients. Mike is a true testament to that."

