



'IN HONOR OF THE WORKER'

Sculpture pays tribute to Elberta Crate employees

Story by Amanda Karioth Thompson, Arts Consultant

Tallahassee sculptor Mark Dickson learned early the value of a hard day's work. He grew up in California and his father worked for the county irrigation district which supplied all the water for the area.

"My dad was a laborer and managed crews," said Dickson. "He was digging ditches and fixing leaks. He was on call a lot when I was a kid and took every shift he could because that was overtime. We had a company truck in the yard."

Dickson was raised to be respectful, resourceful, and industrious. "I always had chores and when I was 13 or 14, I worked in the packing shed of a peach orchard. I used to nail the slats of the wooden crates. I'd stamp the crates with all the different sizes, stack them, and put them in the cold box."



The 15' aluminum sculpture is located at the new St. Marks Trailhead, just off FAMU Way. PHOTO BY AMANDA KARIOTH THOMPSON

Music and art were also valued in Dickson's family and though his creative interests were encouraged as a youngster, he didn't realize he could seriously pursue them. That changed in junior college, when he enrolled in a sculpture class with an emphasis on metal fabrication. "That was the beginning of the rest of my life."

Dickson has lived and created in Tallahassee for more than 20 years. In that time, he's produced numerous artworks for public view. His most recent sculpture draws upon his interest in this community's history and his enduring respect for those who make a living with their hands.

The piece, titled "In Honor of the Worker," is located at the Robert and Trudie Perkins Way and FAMU Way roundabout. It pays tribute to the employees of the Elberta Crate & Box Company, which opened a factory in Tallahassee in 1922 near what is now the west end of FAMU Way. The factory offered steady jobs to many African American men and women, processing hundreds of trees daily to manufacture crates that were used to transport goods all over the country.



**This is of the largest sculptures Dickson has created.
PHOTO BY AMANDA KARIOOTH THOMPSON**

In a remarkable parallel to Dickson's teenage job experience, the company was originally founded in 1905 in central Georgia, to support the burgeoning peach industry. With the arrival of refrigerated railroad transportation, crates for packing produce were in high demand. The 40-acre Tallahassee factory was constructed to help keep up.

There were 700 people on payroll in 1955 making it the city's largest private employer until its closing in 1977. Workers were paid relatively well but serious health and safety hazards prompted a strike in 1969 which resulted in better wages and employee benefits. This history has been largely lost but the Blueprint Intergovernmental Agency's History and Culture Trail project seeks to tell the story.

The project is designed to recognize and honor the historical contributions and cultural impact of the communities and economic engines adjacent to the FAMU Way Corridor, an east- west roadway from South Monroe Street to Lake Bradford Road.

Part of the Blueprint Capital Cascades Trail Segment 3 project, the History and Culture Trail is expected to be completed this year. It represents a \$1.1 million investment that leverages a \$315 million Blueprint infrastructure investment in the Southside. Once complete, the History and Culture Trail will join a host of amenities along FAMU Way, including the Skateable Art Park, the Coal Chute Pond Trail, a playground, the new St. Marks Trailhead and more.

After years of extensive research and community involvement, informational panels will be installed along the 1.5-mile History and Culture Trail to display images and historical material about the neighborhoods, businesses, and individuals who lived and worked in the area. The trail will also include 12 new pieces of public art which are vital in further enhancing and interpreting historical accounts while offering additional opportunities for engagement.

The inclusion of art into any environment plays a significant role in sustaining cultural identity and creating a sense of place. The return on investment is substantial. Public art serves as a tourism driver, encourages lasting economic growth, and contributes to business development. It fosters community pride, connects citizens to their shared history, and makes cultural heritage a tangible community asset.



Dickson working on the sculpture in his Tallahassee studio. PHOTO BY BOB O'LARY

After investigating the open call for public art proposals developed by the Council on Culture & Arts in partnership with Blueprint, Dickson was intrigued. He felt inspired to submit an idea but wasn't immediately sure how to approach the piece. "It was a struggle and it took a while really thinking that over. I wanted to be sensitive, thoughtful, and aware."

He came up with a monumental design reminiscent of pieces created during the Works Progress Administration era. He explained, "the biggest statement of this sculpture is the worker, the actual figure. The gear represents the workers' grasp of industry and their control of the machines and the process. My nod to the factory itself can be seen in the abstract crate which includes the names of the streets that used to surround the site."

Dickson was one of seven artists selected to create artwork for the History and Culture Trail, which represents one of the largest infusions of outdoor public art in Tallahassee-Leon County history. It took him more than five months to carefully cut, shape, weld, rivet, and polish the aluminum sculpture. During the process, Dickson stayed true to his original concept with one exception.

“As I started to make it, it just got bigger and bigger. This is one of the biggest pieces I’ve done. I had to work from scaffolding in my studio. I’ve never had to do that before.” The completed sculpture tops out at about 15 feet, a scale that serves to symbolically elevate the stature of these unsung workers and their contributions to our local and national economy.



Sparks fly during the installation of the sculpture. PHOTO BY AMANDA KARIOTH THOMPSON

The piece also exemplifies Dickson’s stylistic leanings. “I like abstraction and assemblage. I love industrial, derelict materials and stuff from salvage yards. I’m interested in looking at things in a different way. I especially love the concept that there’s a story in the material.”

Dickson applied that sentiment to this piece with the inclusion of decommissioned, aluminum storage dewars from the National High Magnetic Field Laboratory, referred to locally as the MagLab. “The head of the sculpture is actually a couple of those tanks that have been cut and manipulated and welded together.” This type of resourcefulness would have, no doubt, been practiced by the workers of the Elberta Crate factory in both their professional and personal lives.

Dickson identifies with and is inspired by the individuals his sculpture is meant to commemorate. “I’ve always worked with my hands. I’m an artist but I’m also a blue-collar, hot, sweaty, physical laborer,” he shared. “This piece is about the Elberta Crate workers back then and every worker that still makes things with their hands. There’s so much honor in that.”

To learn more about Blueprint’s Capital Cascades Trail Segment 3 Project, click here: <https://blueprintia.org/projects/cct-segment-3-amenities/>