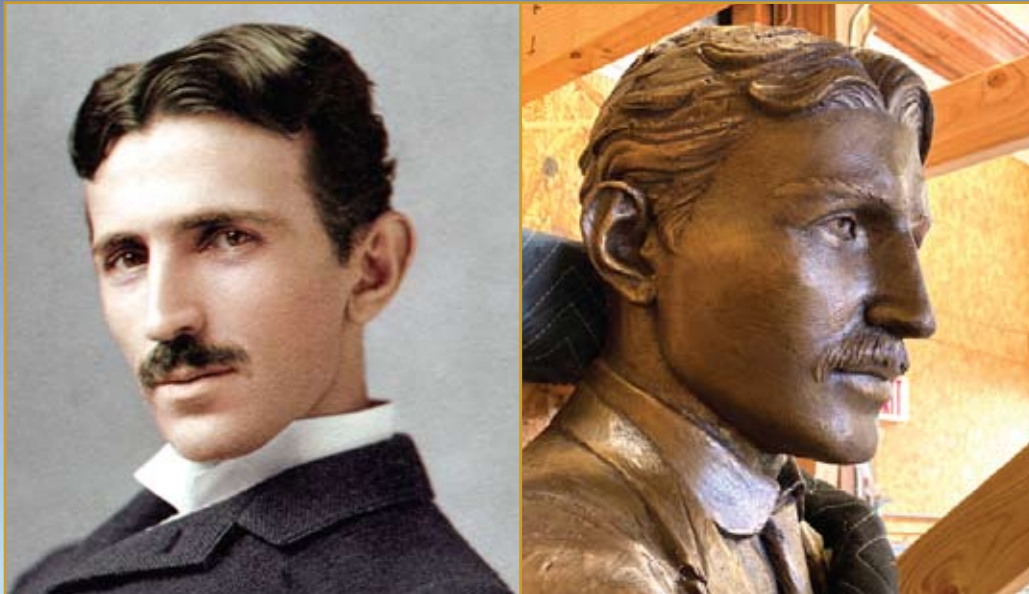


LIGHTNING IN HIS HAND



HOW AND WHY WE CREATED A SCULPTURE OF NIKOLA TESLA

By Francis S. Lestingi

When the Serbian-born, naturalized American citizen, Nikola Tesla, died in New York City in 1943, I was there. I was 6-years old, the son of an immigrant from Italy. Yet I would never hear of Nikola Tesla until 25-years later while studying for a PhD with a minor in History of Science.

It was then that I learned of the life, legacy, and contributions to humankind of Nikola Tesla. I discovered that Tesla was the first to develop the theory, technology, and physical inventions that would make long distance transmission of alternating current (AC) electricity a reality here in America and eventually throughout the entire world. In the late 19th century, the only source of electricity was direct current (DC) which could be transmitted only a mile or so from DC coal-fired generators. Of course, this necessitated the construction of 100s even 1000s of direct current generators within city limits. Thomas Edison promulgated this costly, inefficient, and polluting approach as he disseminated his DC electric light bulb business. (However, if you were supremely

wealthy like JP Morgan or the Vanderbilts, you had your own DC generator installed within your mansion on Madison Avenue).

Nikola Tesla had pioneered AC technology with the invention and patenting of the first AC motor in 1888 (the same 3-phase, 4-pole, rotating magnetic field induction motor that is in Tesla Electric Vehicles today). So when George Westinghouse won the contract to harness the power of Niagara Falls to produce electricity, he was prepared to utilize Tesla's vast expertise and mastery in AC technology which were imperative for the success of this unprecedented undertaking. Ultimately the Niagara Power Project definitively demonstrated, for the first time ever, that AC electricity could be transmitted over great distances, that is, from the Tesla-designed hydro-electric generators in Niagara Falls, NY to the city of Buffalo, some 23-miles away.

On November 15, 1896, the first long distance transmission of alternating current on the planet was achieved in Buffalo, NY. Ultimately, the entire civilization of planet earth adopted AC transmission that

Above left - Photo of Nikola Tesla.

Above right - Close-up of Nikola Tesla Statue in the crate.



Continued

commenced first in Buffalo. Nikola Tesla's dramatic and universal transformation achievement was described in 1896 by the Buffalo Enquirer, the city newspaper, as the "journey of God's own Lightning to the employ of all mankind." When, in 1897, Tesla spoke at the Ellicott Square Building (newly built in Buffalo and at the time the largest office building in America) during the celebration of the AC transmission accomplishment, he stated that Buffalo was "sure to become one of the greatest industrial centers of the globe."

So, armed with this comprehensive knowledge of Nikola Tesla and the city of Buffalo, who hires me right out of graduate school to teach History of Science and physics?.....The State University of New York College at Buffalo. (That was almost 50-years ago!) Of course, I taught my students all about Nikola Tesla and the Buffalo connection. And I quickly discovered in this city where Tesla gloriously initiated the transformation of the planet, there was shockingly and ashamedly not a street, boulevard, avenue, lane, or even an alley named in his honor; neither was there a building, school, mall, park, or even a plaque to commemorate the planet changing contributions of Nikola Tesla!

Well, at long last, a few years ago through the indefatigable efforts of Martin McGee, Paul Swisher (former student), and Stephen J. Lestingi (my son), we started a non-profit to do something about the shameful neglect of this man of science. The group is called the Buffalo Niagara Nikola Tesla Council, Inc. I was able to design, finance, and commission the sculpting of a 7-ft bronze statue of our too often forgotten and neglected fellow New Yorker. I thought it would be meaningful to have Tesla holding a bolt of (gilded) lightning. When he was born during a lightning storm, his mother is alleged to have said, "He will be a man of light." He was the first human to produce artificial lightning and, after all, lightning is electricity. But the ironic aspect of my decision to have Tesla holding a lightning bolt is, that I discovered the afore-mentioned lightning quotation by the Buffalo Enquirer after I had submitted the statue design to the sculptor. Thus we had validation and endorsement of the design conveyed from the past.



Above right - Pouring of the concrete base donated by Concept Construction, Inc with engineering donated by Trautman Associates, Inc.
Above left - Installation of 3.25-ton granite pedestal by Komm & Son, Inc.



Above right - Installation of the 400-lb statue. Above left - Statue installed and veiled.



Above - Unveiling day Welcoming Nikola Tesla Back to Buffalo.



Above - Information Panel accompanying the statue.



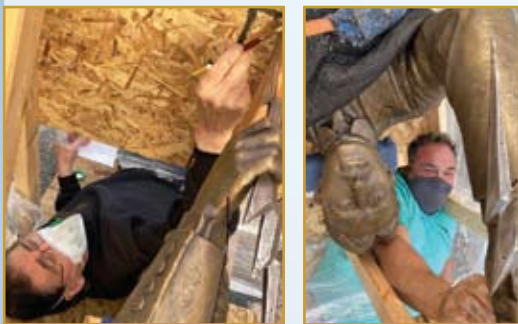
Above - Francis S. Lestingi addressing the attendees at the Unveiling.

GILDING THE LIGHTNING BOLT

Originally, the 7-ft bronze statue of Nikola Tesla was scheduled to arrive in mid-summer. This would have allowed plenty of time to size and gild the lightning bolt, to have the statue with pedestal installed, and to prepare for a gala Installation Celebration on a Friday in mid-September.

But just before the COVID pandemic, an earthquake hit Salt Lake City where the statue was being sculpted and cast, and we were informed that the delivery date would be delayed: it would now be the Monday, four days before the Friday of our now coronavirus-altered Unveiling Event. This meant that I would have to size the lightning bolt on Monday and gild it on Tuesday to meet the previously scheduled installation on Wednesday.

However, the freight shipping company informed us that the statue would arrive on Friday, the scheduled day of the Unveiling Event! After several frantic phone calls, the freight company agreed to deliver the statue late Monday but since they did not have a “lift gate” they would not be able to unload the statue. The monument company had closed and could not provide assistance, so as a last resort, I called my always reliable (and very strong) son Stephen.



Above - Francis S. Lestingi (left) and Stephen J Lestingi (right) sizing the Lightning Bolt in upside-down position.

Stephen finally managed to unload the 400-lb crated statue to parking lot ground just as the sun was setting. Because we could not uncrate the statue we had to size the lightning bolt with the statue still inside the wooden crate lying horizontally on the ground. Although challenging at times we accomplished the task before night fall. We had to leave the crated statue in the parking lot overnight hoping that nothing untoward would happen to it.

The next morning the monument company, Komm & Son, Inc used their lift equipment to transport the crate inside to their studio. Balancing on a ladder, I was able to gild the bolt with 24K Manetti loose leaf with the statue still in the crate but this time standing upright. On Wednesday, we had the successful installation and veiling with black cloth. And finally on Friday we had our modest COVID-curtailed Unveiling Event as scheduled.

Right - Monument company moving the crated statue into their studio.



The easy aspects of this project were the following: the logistics of commissioning the 400-lb bronze statue to be sculpted and cast in Salt Lake City by sculptor Mark DeGraffenried of MarbleCast Products, Inc.; having the 3.25-ton granite pedestal crafted in Vermont and installed with the statue; and having the pedestal plaque and Information Panel fabricated in Minnesota and Connecticut, respectively. What we were not prepared for was hurdling our way through the ominous and relentless dealings with the City of Buffalo Arts Commission. We spent several years, countless meetings, and endless hours justifying our donation of a work of art and a historical commemoration monument to the city's public arts collection. We all learned the meaning of "beaurocratic red tape" and the futility of "fighting city hall."



*Above left - Members of the Buffalo Niagara Nikola Tesla Council, Inc.
(Left to right) Martin McGee,
Francis S Lestingi, Stephen J Lestingi,
Paul Swisher.
Above right - Nikola Tesla Statue with
Lightning in his hand.
Left - Pedestal Plaque.*



But ultimately, everyone was happy. We welcomed Nikola Tesla back to Buffalo with an elegant statue during a modest coronavirus-restricted unveiling. We showed gratitude for his enduring contributions to humanity, and we even got the City of Buffalo Common Council to designate the parcel of land on which the statue stands, a prominent and beautiful downtown location, as "Nikola Tesla Park," the first and only park named in Nikola Tesla's honor in the entire United States. 