

VOLUME 18 | NUMBER 3 | MAY 2013

# LAKE MURRAY

COLUMBIA

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# Historic markers

## Irmo company strikes gold in plaster reconstruction and restoration

Story by **Joey Holleman** • Photographs by **Tim Dominick**

**P**etals had broken off dozens of delicate plaster flowers on the walls of the Columbia City Council chambers. Multiple large holes had been poked in the vaulted plaster ceiling to allow for modern electrical lines, hidden for decades by a false ceiling. The ornate iron and glass skylight needed repair work, which was news to city officials who didn't even know it was there when the project started.

Even a few months into renovations, the council chambers looked like a disaster area ... or an ideal workplace for Kirk Dillon and his crew.

"In construction, this is fun stuff," Dillon said. "A lot of people look at this and feel overwhelmed."

For Irmo-based Dillon Construction Services, drop cloths and scaffolding spread out in a massive room in need of historic stucco, plaster, metal and glass work is nirvana. The company does plenty of standard new stucco and plaster work, but repairing historic buildings "is a labor of love. If I could do restoration work full time, I would," Dillon said.

Dillon, 55, got into the field in a fairly traditional manner. He got married,

**DILLON CONTINUED ON PAGE 20**

Look up. Irmo-based Dillon Construction Services has an interesting niche — repairing and renovating old plaster. They're working here in the Columbia City Hall and have done lots of other work in old structures throughout the state. Below, a restored plaster flower in City Hall.





**DILLON FROM PAGE 19**

needed a job and found one in construction near his home in Mobile, Ala. About 25 years ago, he decided to start his own company. He and his wife looked at growing cities along interstate highways in the Southeast – Charlotte, Greenville, Nashville, Atlanta and Columbia. They decided Columbia felt right. Not too big. Not too small. A good place to raise a family. And centrally located among a bunch of other growing cities where work might be found.

Back then, Dillon was into basic plaster and stucco work, but he quickly began to get jobs that included ornamental



Dillon

or historic work in Charleston. He and Hank Bauer, Dillon's Charleston-area manager, did special training in restoration work and plaster work and gained on-the-job expertise with each new project.

"You get one job at a time, and you work very hard at

it and word begins to spread," he said. "Charleston is all about reputation and relationships. At the start, you get one chance so don't blow it."

The company's reputation rose after working on Charleston's Market Hall, which suffered extensive damage during Hurricane Hugo. The restoration of that National Historic Landmark in the 1990s won numerous awards.

Dillon also worked on the Unitarian Church and the Exchange Building in Charleston, where the company opened a satellite office, and the John C. Calhoun House at Clemson. The company's historic work in the Columbia area, however, was limited for many years.

"Columbia for a long time didn't have the mindset of Charleston or New Orleans," Dillon said. "People here didn't want to spend money on restoration. They'd just tear old buildings down. That is changing."

Dillon has done work on several well-known historic buildings in Columbia, but the contract to restore the council chamber at City Hall has allowed the company to make a big splash locally.

The company, with projects throughout the East Coast, now has so much work it's difficult to find enough skilled craftsmen, Dillon said. Some have been found close by. Dillon's children,



**Details.** Anthony Riley works on the damaged decorative plaster molding in Columbia City Hall.

Lauren and Lance, are both working for the company.

Lauren had no intention of joining the family business when she graduated from Virginia Tech with a landscape architecture degree. But while living for a year in Ireland, she fell in love with the ornamental plaster that was everywhere on old buildings.

"After being exposed to it, I said, 'All right, I want in,'" Lauren said.

She especially enjoys detailed work such as replicating the flower petals in the Columbia council chambers. It's a 10-hour process that involves applying multiple layers of rubber on one of the

few intact original flowers to create a mold for new ones.

The discovery of the vaulted ceiling and skylight in the council chambers put the entire project behind schedule and well over budget. (The original \$250,000 budget expanded to nearly \$1 million as new projects were added.) The goal now is to have it done this summer. Dillon finds it hard to talk about a completion date when new challenges keep popping up. "Historic work means you can't meet all the deadlines," he said.

But he does guarantee one thing: "When this room is done, it'll be the nicest room in Columbia."

## Recipe for a plaster flower

Procedure followed by Lauren Dillon to replicate dozens of decorative plaster flowers that had been damaged in the Columbia City Council chambers.

- Pick the most intact of the flowers.
- Clean it.
- Apply sealant and a mold release.
- Mix a special rubber compound.
- Brush a thin layer of rubber on the flower.
- Allow about 45 minutes for the rubber to dry until slightly tacky.
- Brush on eight to 10 more layers, allowing for drying each time.
- Allow mold to set overnight.
- Peel off rubber.
- Create a mold base of plaster that gives the rubber a firm backing structure.
- Mix plaster – in this case Hydrocal white – and pour into the plastic mold.
- Allow plaster to dry.
- Peel off plastic mold.



- Use dental tools to trim rough edges or clear up imperfections.
- Repeat for the dozens of similar plaster flowers that were broken.



## LEXINGTON WOMEN'S CARE ANNOUNCES

# New Lexington Location

Lexington Women's Care is pleased to announce a new office location in the town of Lexington. Patients can expect to receive the same compassionate care and comprehensive services at all three Lexington Women's Care locations. Our team of board-certified OB/GYNs, five certified midwives, a certified nurse practitioner and a certified physician assistant offers a full suite of services from routine adolescent and well-GYN care to specialized diagnostics and treatment. For every woman at every age and stage, we offer a convenient location to serve you.

[LexingtonWomensCare.com](http://LexingtonWomensCare.com)

Now accepting new patients. Walk-ins welcome. Most insurance accepted.

### NEW LOCATION!

#### LEXINGTON

811 West Main St., Suite 210  
8 a.m.–4 p.m. M-TH, 8 a.m.–12 p.m. FRI  
(803) 936-8100

#### WEST COLUMBIA

2728 Sunset Blvd., Suite 201  
(803) 936-8100

#### IRMO

7033 St. Andrews Rd., Suite 305  
(803) 749-9920