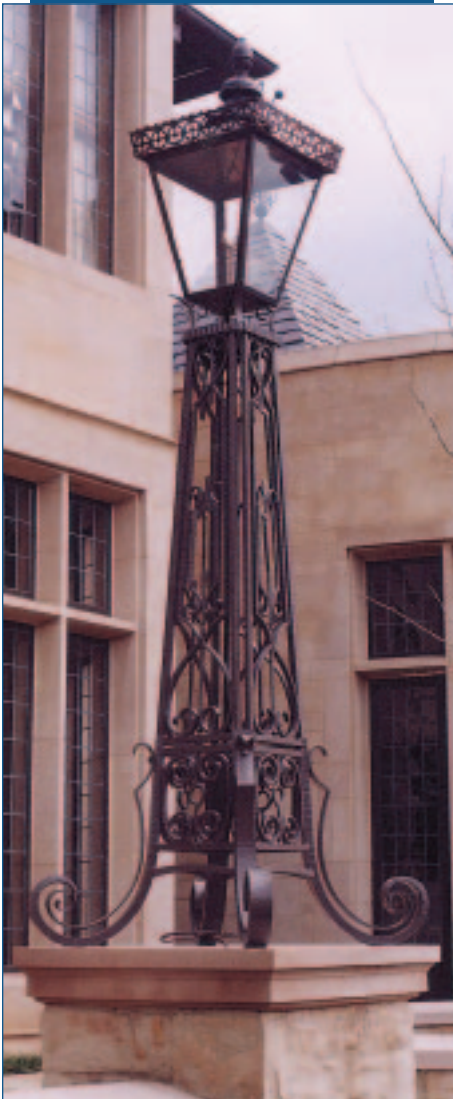


**Phillips Metal Works is run by John Phillips with the help of Mark Vaughn, who is an accomplished fabricator as well as a former professional photographer.**

**The Works of John Phillips**  
Montgomery,  
Alabama

# The rich history of ironwork has endeared with many attributes, from the warmth and safety of twisted bars and honed edges to the natural beauty of fluid and flowing forgings.



Lantern Stand.

Properly designed work can beckon or repel, simulate strength or accentuate delicacy, and inspire awe and even amazement. Most important of all, blacksmithing has always symbolized toil turned to purpose.

It was my admiration of these qualities that prompted my start in blacksmithing 14 years ago. I am still intrigued by the limitless possibilities contained in a piece of steel and the endless number of ways to achieve a finished piece. The hardest part of a commission is to pick a starting point.

The “Union Headboard” is a good example of finding a starting point. The headboard was a blank slate project – just build whatever you want and call us when it is ready. What started out as a wedding present turned out to be an anniversary present! I knew that I wanted to do something with an Art Nouveau feel, so I pored through all of my books for ideas. One evening as I was looking on the Internet I saw a railing that Enrique Vega had forged out of some extremely large bars. And there was my inspiration. I adapted his double humps with some ideas of my own and got to work. A year and a half later and it was done. The nicest parts of this project were that I had the time to build it exactly like I wanted and that it went to a good home.

One of the most interesting projects I have worked on was for Blount Cultural Park. Mr. Blount started out in rural Alabama digging ponds with his brother in the 1940s. In the next fifty-odd years his company had built the Superdome, launch pad 39A at Cape Canaveral (Apollo 11), a two-billion dollar university in Saudi Arabia, and many other notable projects. Mr. Blount’s life story is the American dream come true.

On the home front, Mr. Blount had built his estate into a replica of the English countryside. He built the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts in his backyard (a BIG yard – 300+ acres) and donated it to the city. Enamored with Shakespeare, Mr. Blount built the fifth largest Shakespeare Festival in the world directly behind his house so that he and his wife could walk to the

plays. He also built a major Shakespeare Garden next to it. As a final farewell, Mr. Blount has turned his estate into a cultural park and opened it to the public. I had done work on his family chapel (fencing and interior), so I was especially excited to be contacted about building the signs for the park.

We built four signs for the park; one was quite large. It was particularly challenging as it had to be built in the shop, taken apart, then reassembled and erected with a crane on site. We built a special set of sawhorses that would hold up the posts and keep them at the proper dimensions for fitting the straps. The most exacting part of the job were the scrolls that had to meet the brackets at just the right places with virtually no room for error, since the position of the straps were predetermined. Fine tuning a 1/2” by 6” scroll that is six feet long is not your casual stroll to the anvil!

After the Blount Cultural Park sign was finished, I had a customer ask me to build a mailbox similar to the signpost. I had been talking to Ken Mankel about custom building a very large forge for big scrolls, so I went ahead and ordered it. It is a six-burner, 800-pound forge with doors on three sides so I can pull long pieces out of the side, rather than through the end. This makes it much easier for two people to handle both ends of a heated bar and allows me to put large scrolls back in the fire to heat them in the curved sections to tweak them.

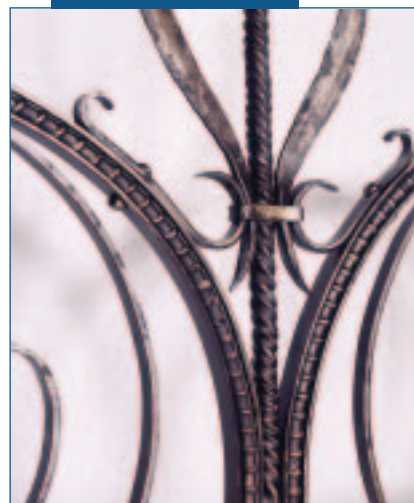
Before I even had a chance to unpack the forge and fire it up, another customer approached me about replicating a sculpture I had made from twisting a piece of 1/2” by 6” flat stock into an abstract “dancer”. The only hitch was that it had to be much bigger and it had to be done in three weeks for his daughter’s wedding. So Mr. Mankel’s new forge had its first project – a 36”-long heat on a piece of 1/2” by 9” flat stock to be twisted 180 degrees to form our sculpture. After recruiting Bob McQueen to lend a hand, Mark and I heated the piece and all three of us twisted it. Moving it about 30 degrees per heat, it took a few



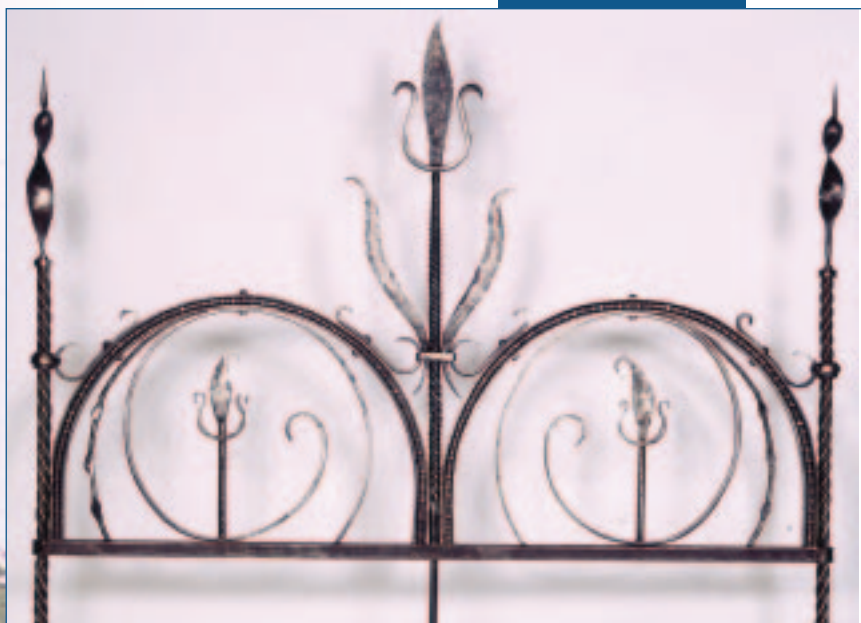


"Sundancer"

"Knocking on Osama's Door" door knocker. Hand-forged from steel, mounted on heart pine salvaged from a local barn. The double eagle heads signify our nation's strength and vision. It is a functional door knocker.



"Union" Headboard, king size.





hours to get it around. Finishing the extremities in the large forge was a snap. This project was especially rewarding, as the client was very active in the design phase. He would stop by at each step of the project and we would plot and plan the next steps.

My latest project was a pair of lantern stands for an estate in Birmingham. The client was also very involved in the design of the stands. They had to set on stone platforms, next to steps that led up to the house. The biggest design challenge was to get the scale right. The client had already purchased a pair of large Bevelo lanterns, so we had a starting point.

We loosely worked from a picture that her architect had provided to come up with the design. I then scanned the drawings into my computer and used Adobe Photoshop to superimpose the drawings onto a photograph of their house. This allowed me to adjust the scale of the stands to a good height. I then created a full-scale mock-up of the stand and put it in place to make sure we were on track. The computer mock-ups made it much easier for all of us to see the final product.

The lantern stands took more than 300 hours to complete. Some interesting facts about the stands: The feet are 1" by 2 1/2" flat bar. As you progress toward the middle, the stock changes from large flat or square, to smaller flat to round. This helps give it some depth. The textures also change on each layer. All of the hammer work was done with a 25-pound Little Giant.

It is very important to remember that it is my clients who make this work possible. My work is very labor intense and therefore relatively expensive. While it is fashionably artistic to loathe those with means, it has been my experience in working with affluent clients that most of them are a joy to work with. I believe that my clients have a special appreciation for the mental effort, inventiveness and discipline involved in creating ironwork, as these are probably the same values that brought them success.

Since the job of blacksmithing leaves a lot of time to ponder all of the world's problems, I have come to a conclusion: Contemporary blacksmithing is, in large measure, a celebration of our country's abundance. According to Andrew Taylor, democracy is a progress from bondage, to spiritual faith, to great courage, to liberty, and to abundance. Blacksmithing has played a significant role in all of these steps, from the great architectural works that adorn the European churches, to the flintlocks of our patriots, to the utensils that allowed the explorers and pioneers to venture West and create our great country. Two hundred years later, it is the blacksmith who celebrates our country's abundance with ornamental and sculptural works. ✨

## BOOKS OF INTEREST

The following books were (and are) significant teachers of mine:

*Foxfire 5* - given to me by my brother, this book started me thinking about blacksmithing as a career.

*Edge of the Anvil* - first practical book that I found - was my first real instruction.

*Samuel Yellin Metalworker* - definitely set the bar for quality - very intimidating.

*Wrought Iron in Architecture* - great resource for historical styles.

*The Art of Albert Paley* - inspired freedom in design and forging.

All of Dona Z. Meilach's books - great design inspiration and documentation of contemporary work - it's very interesting to look at her first book, *Decorative and Sculptural Ironwork*, and see how contemporary work has progressed in the current books.

*Metzger - Basics of Style for the Artist-Blacksmith* - just found this book - wonderful history of the development of style with great thoughts and designs. I still reference a lot of these books and read every book that I can get my hands on.

Scroll Mailbox.

