By John Hill  
Journal Staff Writer

PROVIDENCE — Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside is getting ready for his closeup. And Jeffrey Buccacio Jr. is his makeup man.

The approximately 20-foot-tall statue of the Civil War general on his horse watched downtown for more than a century. He has seen Exchange Place renamed Kennedy Plaza and watched horse-drawn carriages give way to trolleys, then cars, then hybrids. And the years have not been kind to him.

The pollutants and acid rain that have fallen on him for more than a century left the statue streaked and encased in a blue-green coat of copper sulfate, a corrosive byproduct of the copper in the bronze that was degrading the metal.

SEE GENERAL, A4

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VIDEO: Watch Jeff Buccacio restore the statue of Gen. Ambrose Burnside at providencejournal.com

Refurbished statue of Ambrose Burnside ready for inspection in Kennedy Plaza

Jeff Buccacio of Buccacio Sculpture Studio rises to the occasion to sandblast the upper portions of the Gen. Ambrose Burnside statue in Providence's Kennedy Plaza recently. The public sculpture of the Civil War general on his horse has been cleared of its blue-green coating of copper sulfate. THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL/SANDOR BOODO
and obscuring the work.  
City Parks and Recreation Director Wendy Nilsen said after the city upgraded Kennedy Plaza, it seemed a waste not to upgrade the largest piece of public art in Burnside Park, right next door.  
“We made all those changes to bring Kennedy Plaza up to snuff,” she said.  
“That was part of the plan, to bring General Burnside up to snuff.”

To do that, the city hired Baccacio, owner of Baccacio Sculpture Studios LLC of Natick, Mass., for $35,000 to burnish Burnside’s image.  
The most important step, he said, was to remove the green copper sulfate from its surface, a byproduct of acid rain and pollutants that was eating into the metal. In some places, such as Burnside’s hat and the horse’s ears, the once-smooth bronze was as bumpy as rough granite.

Throughout last week, Baccacio went over the statue inch by inch, slowly blasting the green corrosion away with a mixture of sand and finely ground walnut shells, strong enough to strip off the corrosive coating without damaging the statue underneath.

Then he heated the memorial’s surface with a blowtorch and applied multiple coats of lacquer to recreate its original color.

Then it was three coats of carnuba wax, armor to protect the restoration from the attacks of climate—at least for a year or two.

“Look at that,” Baccacio said, beamimg as he had sculpted the general himself.  
“He’s going to look awesome.”

The public sculpture of Gen. Ambrose Burnside is shrouded in plastic and surrounded by a cloud of dust as Leco Davioli sandblasts the surface recently.  

The statue was unveiled on the Fourth of July, 1887. It was part of what Sarah Zalun, a preservationist with the state Historic Preservation and Heritage Commission, said recently is known half-humorously as the Bronze Age—the period from the 1870s to the 1920s, marked by both a nationwide mania to memorialize the Civil War and by America’s emergence as an industrial power, which created milllions interested in helping finance them.

Truth be told, Burnside is better remembered for his woes—the term “burnside” was coined to describe them, later reversed to “bluebarn”—than for his generalship. He rose from commander of a Rhode Island unit to lead the Union Army in Virginia. But after the army was mauled at Fredericksburg in 1862, he was relieved of his command.

He was sent out west and did well, returning east to serve under Ulysses Grant. But on July 30, 1864, units under his command badly botched a chance to break through the Confederate lines at Petersburg. Grant called the failure “the saddest affair I have witnessed in war.”

Baccacio was again stripped of command, this time without another assignment. But his statue in Rhode Island was undiminished. He won three one-year terms as governor, serving from 1866 to 1868. and in 1874 was elected U.S. senator. He was reelected in 1880, but died in 1881. He is buried in Swan Point Cemetery.

Within days of his death, a public campaign was organized to build a memorial to him, and in a few years it raised more than $30,000.

Laertes Thompson, a nationally known Irish-American sculptor, won the commission. It was his last significant work, and the only one he did of a man mounted on a horse.

“If that’s his only horse,” Baccacio said, “that’s pretty awesome.”

Baccacio grew up in Natick, Mass., and went to college at Arizona State University. What was supposed to be a quick stint in Los Angeles turned into 15 years of doing sculpture and costumes for the movies. He worked on, among others, “Iron Man,” the “Men in Black” and “Alien” franchises, “Spider-Man” and “Hallowboy.”

But he said the peace years started to get to him.

“I realized I was watching my daughter grow up with the pictures on my iPhone,” he recalled. “I said, ‘That’s not the way to go.’

He and his wife came back to New England and started Baccacio Sculpture Studios, which does private and public commissions as well as restoration work. In Providence, he worked on the Irish Famine Monument near Dyer and Friendship streets, the Edward Triangolo statue at Johnson’s Wales University and the George M. Cohen statue on Wickenden Street.

As a sculptor, Baccacio said, poring over Thompson’s work is an education. Getting the proportions right is a particular challenge for memorial statues, he said. They’re designed to be looked at from below, so the farthest-away elements, such as Burnside’s head, have to be slightly larger to appear normal to a viewer on the ground.

“It’s like a sculpture lesson for me,” he said. “I get to see how some master sculptors worked.”

He said the fun of a restoration job is to watch people walk by the statue every day suddenly see it anew.

“People stop and stare,” he said. “They look at it a little longer, and maybe they say, `Who was that guy?’

“It’s a rediscovery.”

For more information:

Baccacio Sculpture Studios, (401) 477-7551
On Twitter: @digitalbacci