

THE COBBLESTONE HOUSES OF WESTERN NEW YORK

by Dick Backus

January 1947

" Does he have the Phd. death rattle ? "

Harvard's " Copey "

July 28, 1812

" Honorable Father-

I address you from the falls of the Genesee. I have purchased a lot in the village of Rochester which is in a state of nature at present, but the prospect for business is very promising in case the difficulties are settled between the American and British nations.....Just above the bridge are falls of twelve feet affording the best water-power for mills and machinery....."

Hamlet Scrantom

" The latter part of this memorable decade (1824-34) saw ambitious buildings and private residences going up like magic.....many of a particular architectural school of mansions, with majestic rows of Grecian columns across their gable fronts, gave our Third Ward its academical appearances."

The above quotes from " Rochester- A Story Historical " by J.M.Parker, 1884 ( the latter from a chapter entitled " A Decade Memorable " ) are included to suggest that the beginnings and rapid rise to prosperity of Rochester together with western New York, were simultaneous with the developing architectural style, common thruout the country and known as the " Greek Revival ".

That the pretentious homes of the merchant, recently come to fortune, should be pillared and pilastered in that current style is quite understandable. And understandable too that the New England-born farmer, grown prosperous on the flat and fertile lands of his new home, should build his comfortable farm-house in the then fashionable manner, though he usually omitted the pillars and pediments and other " inordinate " manifestations of the style.

The " cobblestone house " as it is called by the Western New York stater is primarily a farmhouse building and is a purely localized expression of the Greek Revival. It is true that a few of the earlier examples reflect some Federalist features and that some of the last are built in the "Victorian" Style. These are few in number however. With the possible exception of a couple of dozen houses, all are within a sixty mile radius of the city of Rochester.

The distinguishing feature of the cobblestone house, of course, is its unique stone masonry. Stone has been used as a building material for many centuries, of course. In the architecture of Colonial America, particularly Pennsylvania, it was a common medium. In those cases, however, chunks or blocks of stone were used rather than "as is". Before the colonial builders, French, English and Italian architects had constructed with stone " as is " but the

stone and mortar were laid flush so that an absolutely flat surface was produced. Though a few proto-cobblestone houses were built in this manner, the masons almost immediately allowed the stones to project  $\frac{1}{2}$  to  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inches past the joint of mortar. This technique emphasized the stones and produces an ever-changing pattern of shadow and light across the walls.

For purposes of convenience the Cobblestone Era is divided into three periods; the Early- from the late 1820's until 1835, the Middle- from 1835-1845, and the Late from 1845 until the Civil War. These divisions of course, are rather arbitrary and some houses built in one more nearly typify the work of another.

The earliest of the cobblestone masons picked the stones from the fields at random. They were unassorted as to color and shape and varied somewhat in size, being anywhere from 2-4 inches high and 3-6 inches long. They were laid in rough horizontal courses with no effort to emphasize the horizontal joint. The quoins were of rough limestone blocks as were the lintels and sills. The quoins were anywhere from 12-20 inches long and from 7-12 inches square. These limits were observed pretty well thruout the era although they were later carefully dressed and chamfered. Two to three horizontal courses were laid to one quoin height in the early work.

The next step in the evolution of the masonry was an attempt by these early masons to accentuate the horizontal joint by trowelling up at intervals, a ridge of mortar between the courses. This ridge was uneven in width and rather wavy as well as intermittent. During the latter part of the Early Period the masons attempted to lay the courses more and more evenly and built up a continual ridge of mortar along the horizontal joint although it continued to be rather irregular.

The early years of the Middle Period saw the masons selecting the stones more carefully for uniformity of size and the use of smaller ones ( around  $2\frac{1}{2}$  inches high and 4 inches long ). The horizontal joint was regular and well-defined and the vertical joints were often emphasized by a couple of small parallel cuts in the joint between the stones. The courses were laid four or five to a quoin height on the front elevation and one less on the other elevations where slightly larger stones were used. The quoins and lintels were more regular than in the earlier work. Bricks were sometimes used for these purposes and occasionally wooden pilasters instead were placed on the corners. During the latter part of the period the use of stones from the shores of Lake Ontario that had been smoothed by the action of the waves was begun. These stones and the subsequent masonry is called " lake-washed " .



Figure " A "

This house is on the main street of Webster village, Monroe County. The date of building is unknown but it is rather typical of the work of the latter part of the Early Period. The stones are unassorted and are rather big. The horizontal joint is rather well-defined and the vertical joint is also slightly emphasized by two parallel cuts running vertically between each of the stones. The quoins are of brick which is unusual but not rare. The lintels are of flat chunks of red sandstone. The leanto on the rear of the house was of a later date ( also unknown ) but is authentic cobblestone masonry. The proportions, low-pitched roof, and cornices are typical of the Greek Revival. The house was probably built around 1834.

The horizontal joint was made even more uniform by the invention of the so-called "beading-tool", which when drawn along the horizontal joint produced a half-round moulding between the courses of stone.

The buildings in the Late Period were almost machine-made in appearance. The stones used were very small (  $1\frac{1}{3}$  by 3 ) and regular in size and shape. Lake-washed stones were used almost exclusively. Great care was used in selecting the stones for color. Often only red stones would be used in the front elevation ( red being the most common sort). The back and sides preserved the multi-colored effects of the earlier work. The quoins, lintels and sills were finely cut and carefully chamfered. The old "v'd" ridge in the horizontal joint was produced by a beading tool in that form, the half-round variety apparently having proved not too popular.

The walls of the Late Period are often criticized as being non-structural or veneer-like in appearance. This may be true, but the uniformity does give it a oneness of uninterrupted surface which makes it, to me at least, most pleasing. In any event all of them do seem to spring from the earth on which they stand. They are of simple beauty, substantial, unobtrusive and comforting. They were a part of their times. They were good.



Figure " B "

This is the Whitney House on the Lincoln Road in Wayne County. It was probably built one or two years after the one pictured in Figure A. The treatment of the horizontal and vertical joints is similar. The selection of the stones is more careful in respect to uniformity of size and are somewhat smaller. The quoins are of gray limestone and are roughly cut. The lintels are of brick. The doorway and other features are typical of the Greek Revival. The date-1836?



Figure " C "

This is the Tinker House on the Calkins Road in Henrietta, N.Y. The towns of Henrietta and Mendon are generally conceded as the area where cobblestone construction originated. This house was built in 1830. The present owner is the grandson of the man who had the house built and has recently reconditioned it, preserving all of its original charm. The stonework is quite regular for a house of this date, the stones being quite uniform in size and the horizontal joint quite well-developed. The quoins and lintels are of roughly-cut limestone and the courses run two or three per quoin. The Federalist doorway with its fanlight is a feature to be found only in the earlier houses. Just inside this door is a tightly spiralled, steep staircase to the second floor. The central chimney has the flues of five fireplaces in it. Fanlight window in the gable is a Greek Revival feature.



Figure " D "

This is the Anthony Shaw House on the Palmyra-Marion Rd. in Wayne County. It is typical of the masonry of the Late Period and was probably built around 1850. The stones are small and uniform of the lake-washed variety. Those in the front elevation are of red only. The quoins and lintels are of finely cut gray limestone and have chamfered edges. There are six courses per quoin in the front and five on the sides where stones of a slightly larger size are used. The three freize-windows just under the cornice are a typical Greek Revival touch although the wrought or cast-iron grills have been removed. The excrescence tacked over the front door is a Victorian improvement.

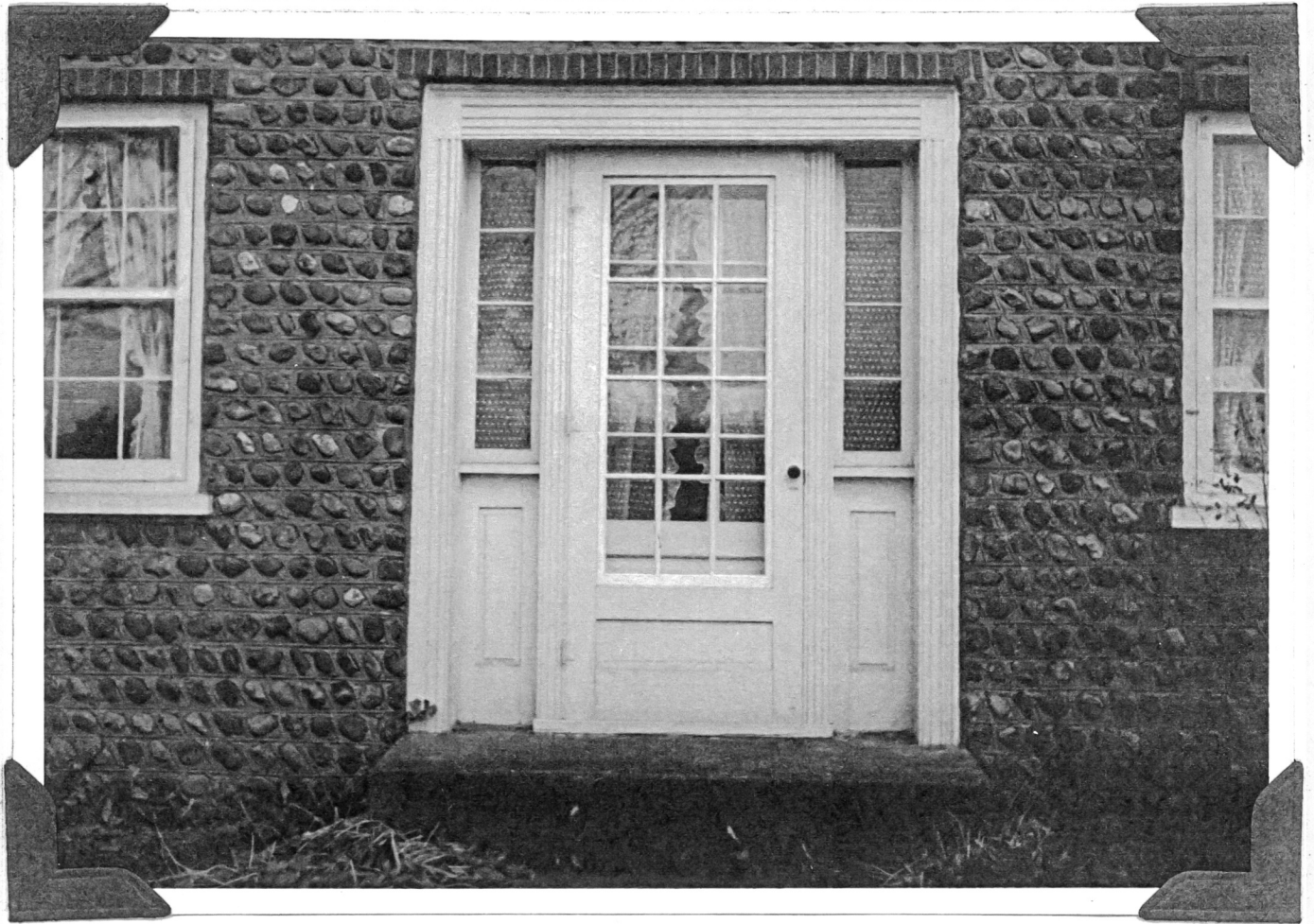


Figure " E "

This doorway is from the Whitney House ( Fig.B ) and is typical of ones in cobblestone houses and the Greek Revival in general. This photo shows the detail of the masonry rather well.

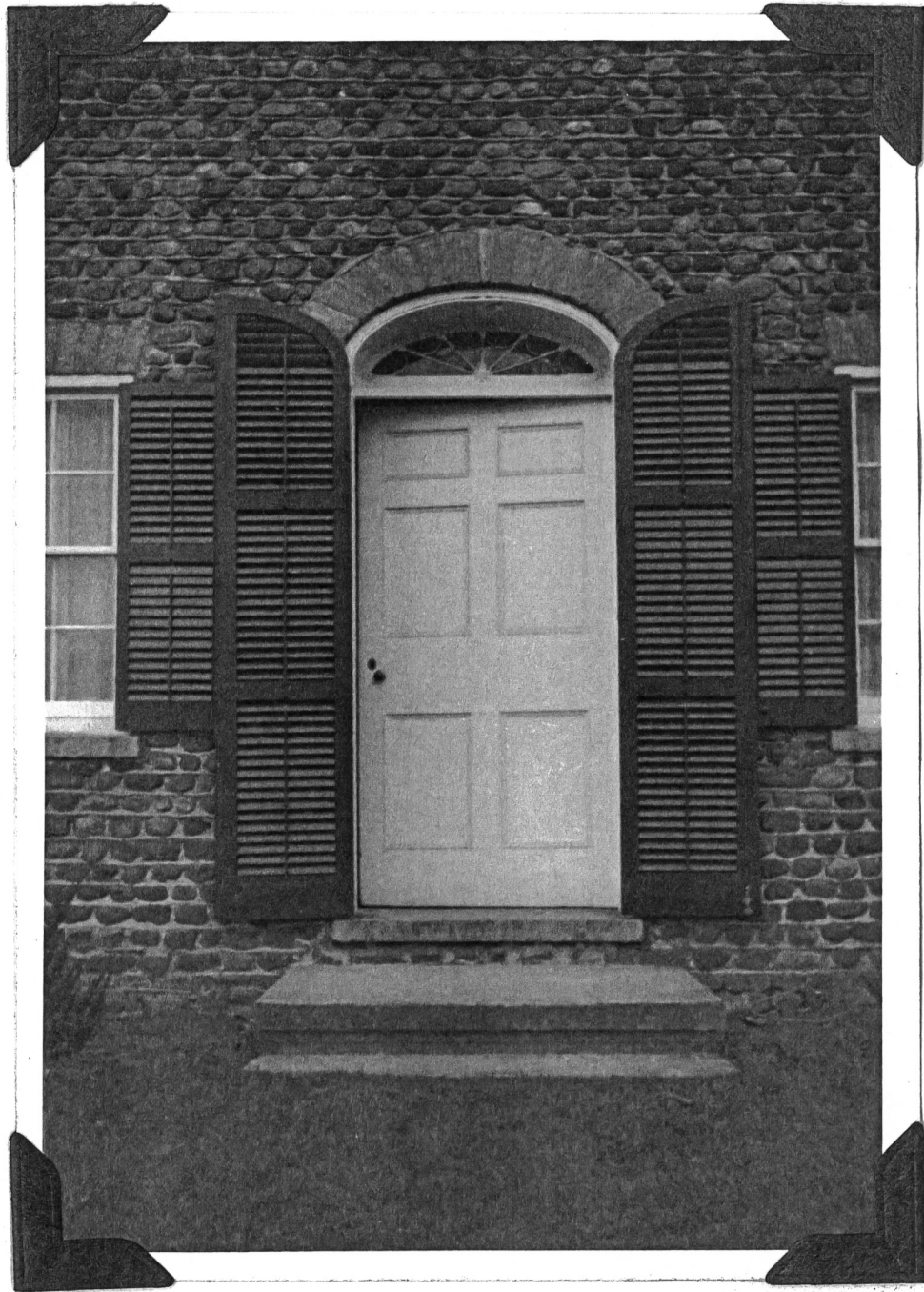


Figure " F "

This doorway is from the Tinker House ( Fig.C ) and illustrates the Federalist doorway which is found in several of the earlier cobblestone houses. Note the masonry detail.



Figure " G "

This is the First Baptist Church on South Ave., Webster, New York, my home town. It was built in 1853 after the congregation had spent a couple of years in gathering the stones. Its masonry is typical of the Late Period. The front elevation consists of red stones only, which are small, very regular, and run six courses to the fine-cut and chamfered limestone quoins. The side elevations are of slightly larger but uniform stones, mostly black and yellow with some red. They run five courses to the quoin. The back is very coarse and irregular and runs four courses to the quoin. The horizontal joints are made with the half-round beading tool except for the back which was trowelled. The lintels and sills are of limestone. The cupola, which was struck by lightning last summer, is rather unusual. The delicately designed dome and entablature are supported on eight Ionic columns. Some incidental information I gleaned - the cordwood ordered to heat the church the first winter cost  $68\frac{1}{2}$ ¢ per cord delivered.



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Figure 1-

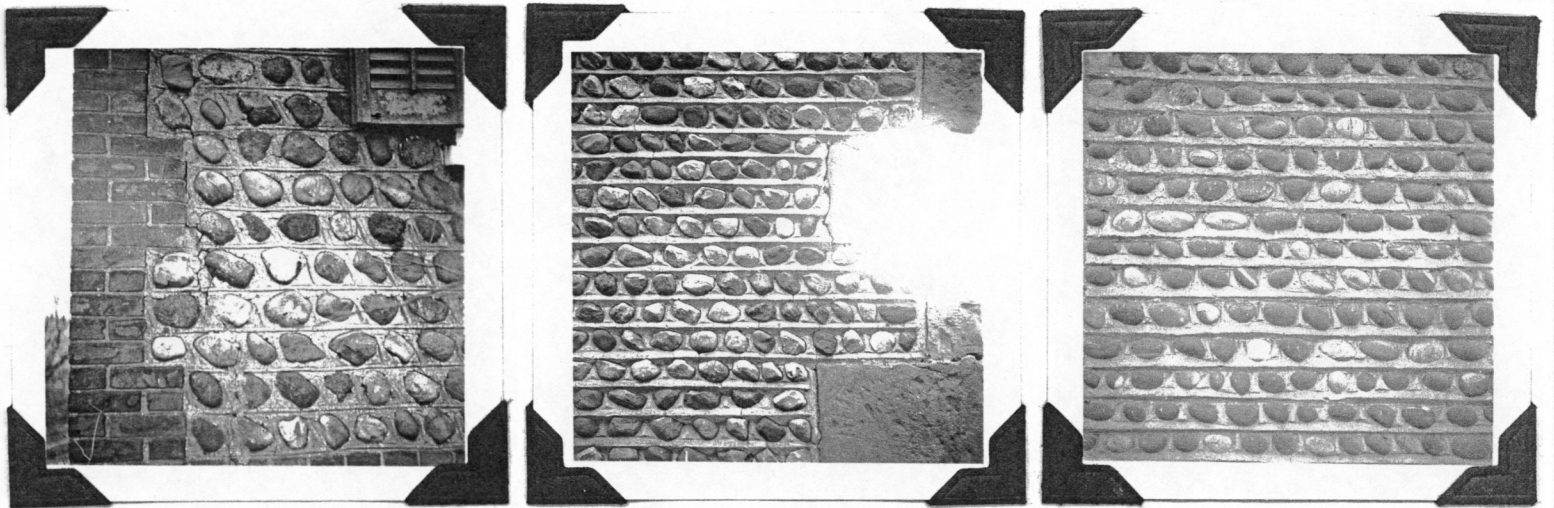
This is a picture of the late-type masonry in cross-section. The small elongated cobbles are seen protruding from the left hand surface. Note the rubble in the center and the large flat chunks on the inside.

Figure 2-

This illustrates the early type of cobblestone masonry. Note- irregularity of size, shape, and color of the stones; lack of continuity in the horizontal joint, roughness of quoins.

Figure 3-

This illustrates development in the early type of masonry. Horizontal joint is quite well emphasized.



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Figure 4-

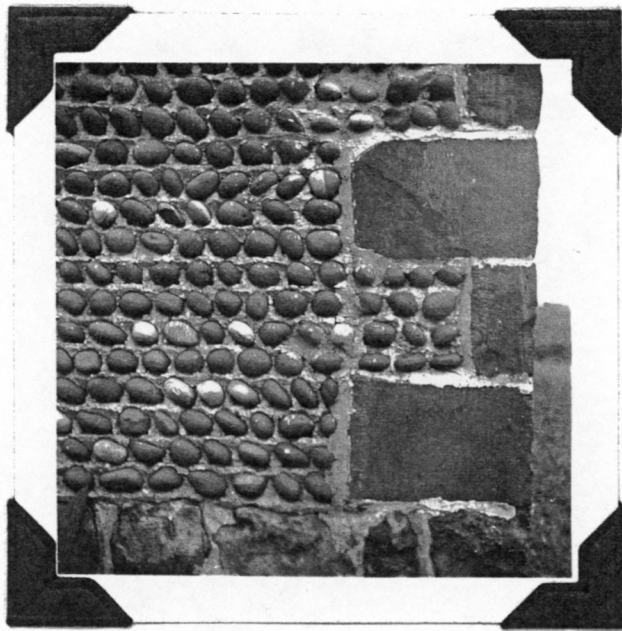
This illustrates the late early or early middle type masonry. The courses of stone are regular and the horizontal joint is continuous.

Figure 5-

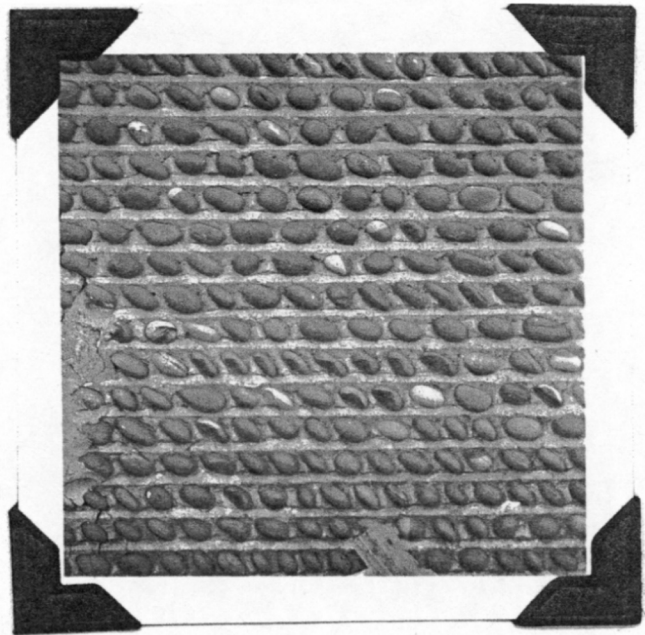
This illustrates the middle middle! Stones are uniform in size. Horizontal joint is a highly developed "v".

Figure 6-

The use of lake-washed stones identifies this as the transition period from middle to late.



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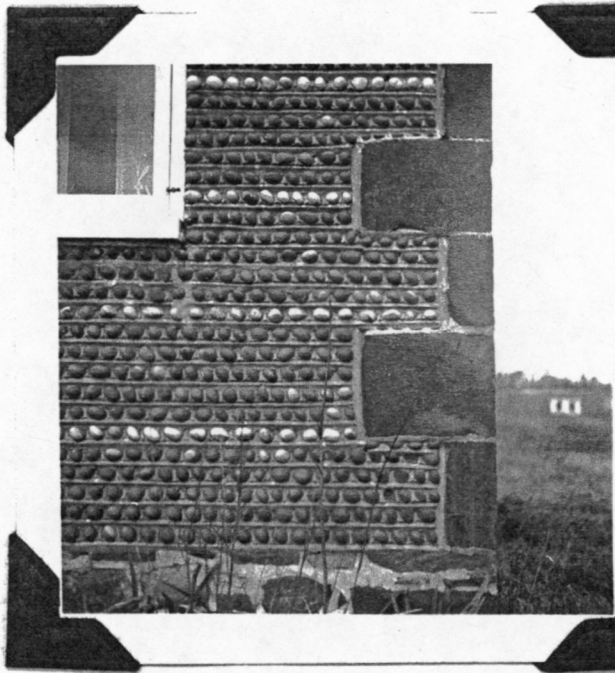
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Figure 7-

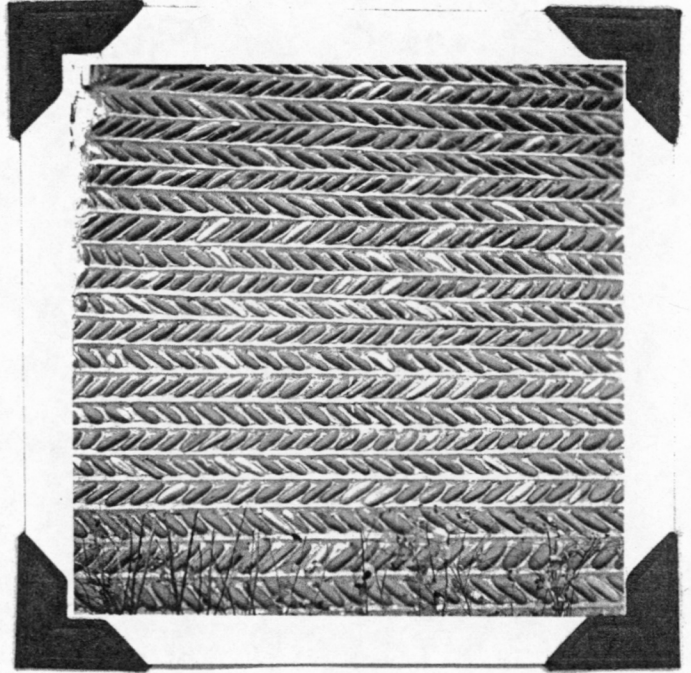
This is typical of the late type of masonry. Stones are very uniform and lake-washed. The horizontal joint has weathered considerably in this case. On the whole all of the cobblestone masonry has withstood the onslaught of local weather remarkably well.

Figure 8-

This is also late type masonry. Notice how the stones are laid aslant and parallel to each other.



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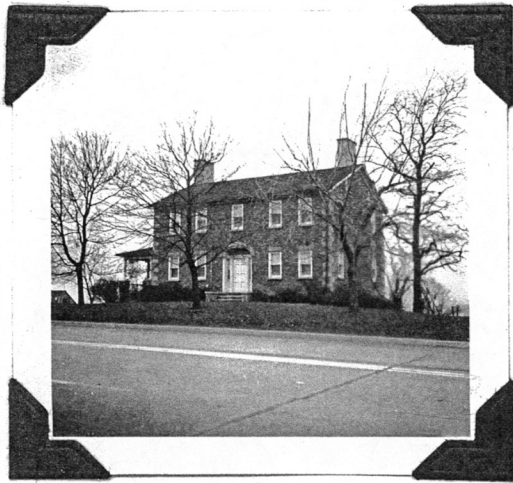
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Figure 9-

During the late period some of the masons became quite fanciful in their work. In this case he has laid five courses of red stones and then snuck in one of white. The stones also decrease in size from sill to cornice. This is the Feller House in Sodus, N.Y.

Figure 10-

Another rather lurid touch is the so-called " herring-bone " pattern. It is rather self-explanatory. This is from one wing of the Anthony Shaw house. ( Fig. D )



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Figure 11-

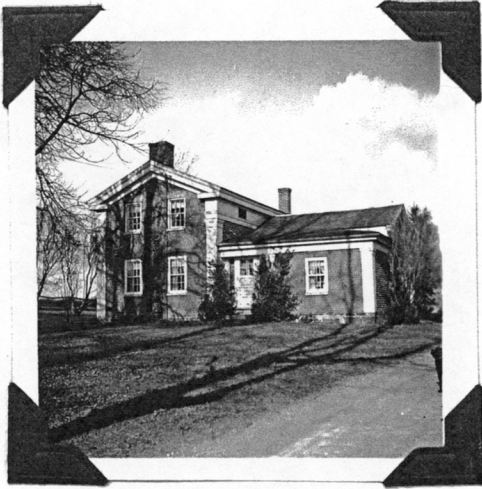
This is the Abel House in Henrietta, Monroe County, built in 1832. Note the Federalist doorway.

Figure 12-

The Capt. Throop House in Pulteneyville was built in 1832 also. Although it has a Greek Revival doorway, I think you will agree that the overall appearance is more Federalist than Greek Revival.

Figure 13-

The Abel Hanks House on the Leheigh Station Rd. in Henrietta was built in 1839. The plaque on the gable has a sprawling eagle and the word "LIBERTY" in addition to the name and date.



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Figure 14-

Wychmere's pilastred corners are rather unusual. Note the freize window up under the cornice. This is of the late middle period.

Figure 15-

The Joseph Middleton House in Webster was built in 1844. The old sisters living in it are descendants of the original owner, talked my ear off, fed me freshly-cooked doughnuts. Lovely, simple, maple staircase on right hand side of hall just inside front door.

Figure 16-

The great-grand-daughter of Zimri Waters owns and lives in this house. She is a character, walks like a sea-captain, summers in Nova Scotia and has some nice antiques. Staircase almost identical to the one in the preceding house. Note the freize windows and the unusual front-porch.



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Figure 17-

The farm-folk who live in this house don't know when, why or how this house was built and don't care. They were most genial however and said I could take all the pictures I wanted. Obviously thought I was crazy. Note the recessed porch in the middle of the house. This is a common feature.

Figure 18-

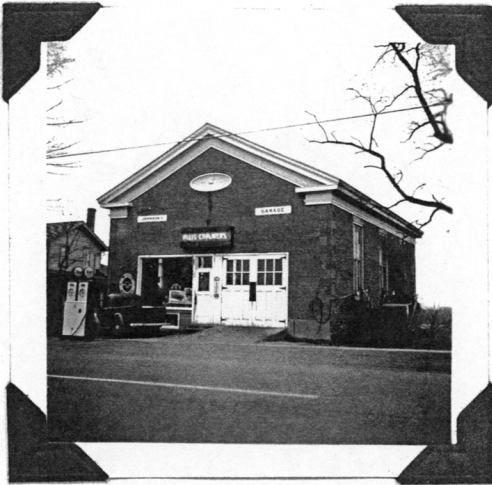
A good Dutch farmer of which there are many in Walworth and environs lives in this house. Again note the recessed porch which has been walled in in this case.

Figure 19-

The Feller house in Sodus you have already seen. It also has a walled-in recessed porch in the wing off to the left.



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Figure 20-

Another view of the Hanks House. Many of the cobblestone houses are now owned by justly appreciative people and are carefully reconditioned and maintained in all their original beauty. In many other cases handsome yellow asbestos shingles have been tacked over the outside, porches in the best of the "Victorian" styles have been affixed to the front door, etc,etc,etc,etc.

Figure 21-

The Universalist Church built in Webster village in 1844. In this case and the next one garage-owners have done less harm than many home-owners. The problem of who and when blocked in the old windows under the lintels now inscribed "Johnson's" and "Garage" in such a masterly and authentic manner is a perturbing problem.

Figure 22-

This gasoline station in Williamson is still a handsome building, Note the delicacy of the iron-work in the frieze windows.



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Figure 23-

The "Ridge Chapel" on the famous York State artery of the same name was built in 1839. Note the pilastered corners. The aesthete who tacked the crapper on the front is burning in Purgatory.

Figure 24-

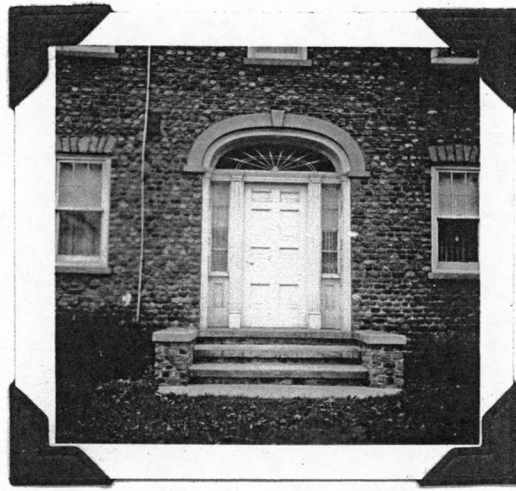
This barn in Marion, N.Y. may have been a house once but I doubt it. Also saw a cobblestone silo from the car near Bouckville, N.Y.

Figure 25-

When I worked on a county road gang on the Schlegel Road in Webster we used to get our water out of the well in front of this schoolhouse. The advent of the school-bus, central schools, etc. has forced Dist. No. 7 out of business. Numerous people have tried to buy it but the original deed stated that after five years of abandonment the property reverts to the heirs so the situation is in a snarl of wherefores and whereases.



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Figure 26-

Front door, Capt. Throop House, 1832

Figure 27-

Front door, Abel House, 1832

Figure 28-

Front door, Middleton House, 1844