



ALEXANDER ALLEN HOUSE, POMPEY

## Cobblestone Buildings of Onondaga County

by Glenn Hinchey

Cobblestones have been used as a building material since ancient times. They were used in building Roman fortifications in England in the 3rd century, and were used in Italy, France and England during the Middle Ages. A number of cobblestone buildings built in southeastern England in the late 18th and early 19th centuries are very similar to those found here. It is thought that English masons who came to this country to work on the Erie Canal introduced cobblestone construction to New York. With plenty of masons available after the completion of the canal in 1825, cobblestone construction soon became a local tradition. Eventually more than 800 cobblestone buildings were built, the majority of them in New York. The few cobblestone buildings in Vermont, Canada and the Mid-west were built by masons who brought the craft from New York.

Onondaga County has a rich and diverse heritage of cobblestone construction. The buildings range from simple utilitarian farm structures to elegant mansions. They are found throughout the county except in the southwestern quadrant. Out of about 100,000 buildings in the county, only 25 are cobblestone. This may not

seem like very many, but Onondaga County has more cobblestone buildings than any county to the east and all except six counties to the west.

Cobbles, deposited by the glaciers, are abundant in this area. As a building material they were very cheap, the only cost being the energy expended to pick them up and transport them to the site. They were easily collected along the shore of Lake Ontario or were culled from the farm fields where they damaged plows and made farming difficult. The sand and lime used for mortar were also inexpensive. Construction progressed slowly at a rate of about 3 or 4 courses per day. The mason's labor represented the bulk of the construction cost. Even so, a cobblestone house could be built for about the same price as a brick one.

As a building material cobbles have a unique natural beauty. When laid up in courses with raised mortar joints they create a rich visual texture that changes with the angle of the sunlight. The individual stones with their varied colors, shapes and textures blend together like the threads of a tapestry when viewed from a distance.

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## Cobblestone

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Most of Onondaga County's cobblestone buildings were built between 1830 and 1860 in the styles popular at that time. The earliest were built in the Federal style, some later ones in Gothic and Italianate styles, but the majority were built in Greek Revival style. Few were built after the Civil War. Changes in taste and increasing costs of labor led to their decline in popularity. Although some buildings of the early 20th century, in the Arts & Crafts style and Adirondack style were built using cobbles, they have a different style of masonry and belong to a different construction tradition.

Cobblestone houses are a valuable asset to our area. Their beauty, style and durability make them not only attractive homes, but unique examples of a forgotten local folk-art. Onondaga County has lost 15 of the 40 or so cobblestone buildings built here, an alarming percentage. Cobblestone construction, for all practical purposes, can be considered a lost art. We need to try to preserve the relatively few remaining examples we have, so future generations can enjoy their beauty.

Listed below are some of the cobblestone buildings in Onondaga County. For a complete list, send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to PACNY with your request.

- The Cobblestone Hotel (1839) (J.P. Hicks Bldg.) 400 First St., Liverpool.
- John Munro House (1850-51) Rte. 5 & Hamilton Rd., Elbridge.
- Alexander Allen House, Rte. 20 & Oran-Delphi Rd., Pompey.
- William G. Clark House (1845) 1408 Spring St., Syracuse
- Oliver Bostwick House (1830) 1942 Valley Dr., Syracuse
- Elias Cox House. Emerick Rd., Lysander.

Glenn is a PACNY member, a 1976 graduate of Syracuse University and has been working as a restoration craftsman in Onondaga County for 15 years. The Cobblestone Society address is P.O. Box 363, Albion, NY 14411, telephone (716) 589-9013. Special thanks to the Cobblestone Society, Onondaga Historical Association and some of the home owners for the valuable information provided for this article. ☺