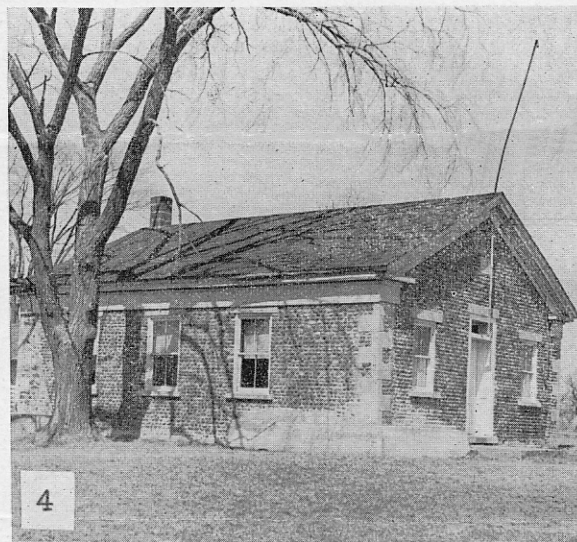
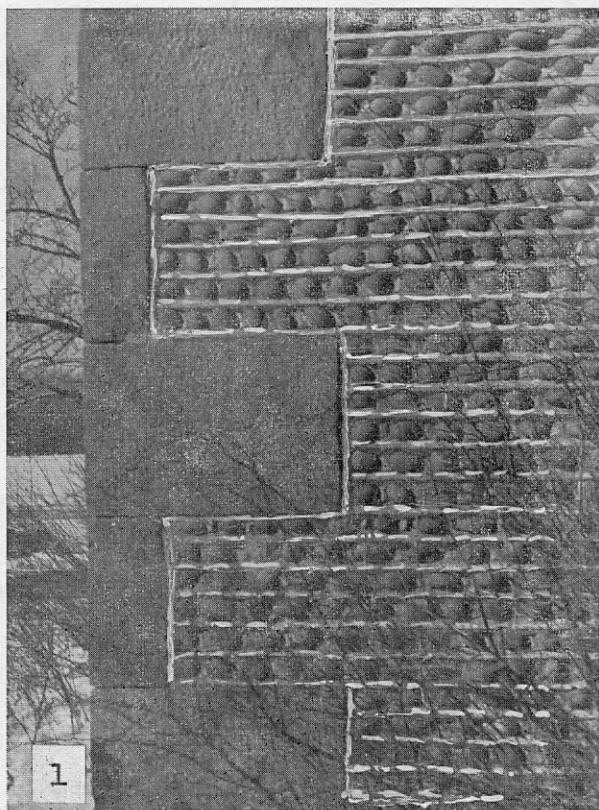




"Cobblestone" Houses Along Lake Ontario and Lake Erie

By B. H. LEFFINGWELL

At the Big Springs Historical Society, Caledonia, N.Y., November 10, Carl F. Schmidt, architect of Rochester and Scottsville, gave an illustrated lecture on the history and construction of the famous "Cobblestone" houses. These are found in a 60 to 80 mile radius along the western end of Lake Ontario, in New York State, and in Ohio along the shores of Lake Erie.

At the completion of the first

Erie Canal, from Buffalo to Albany, in 1824, tons of cut stone were available for buildings. And many of the masons, who had worked for several years on the Canal, were unemployed.

Wages for a stone-mason were \$1 per day for 10 hours work. It took about two years for one man to build a good cobblestone house. Thus the mason often lived and worked with the family for that period of time, until the house was completed.

Rough stones from the fields were used for the actual foundation walls, from 15 to 20 inches thick. Tons of these stones were available all along the lake fronts. The stones were ground down and rounded by cen-

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turies of the ice glacier which had engulfed this territory. They lay exposed, roughly, in a belt 10 miles along the lake, up to "The Ridge" which, presumably, was the original lake boundary.

After the rough walls were up, then began the tedious and painstaking "facing" of the walls. This was done with cobblestones picked up by children, hauled to the site, and carefully sorted and grouped into piles for color, size, and texture.

Where the name "cobblestone," so long associated with these houses, originated, is unknown today. It is certain that from about 1828 to 1860-66, building these houses was a widely practiced industry.

While houses faced on the front or sides with smaller stones, or covered with mortar and plaster facing, have been built in Southern France around Dieppe and in Europe and the East for centuries, the American work is entirely different. Visitors to this part of Western New York and Ohio are fascinated by the beauty of these old houses.

While about 90% of the cobblestone houses were built in a 60 to 70 mile radius of Rochester, there are 15 or 20 in and near Canandaigua. They are also found in Ohio and Pennsylvania, Illinois, and Wisconsin. As people moved westward and needed houses, the masons moved with them and built those houses.

Many record books, kept by the owners during construction of the houses, have been found, showing the cost of materials, labor, lumber, etc. Medina limestone blocks, left over from the first Erie Canal construction, were largely used for the "quoins" or corner reinforcements, as no examples have been found where the small stones continue on around the corners without these supporting blocks. Photo 1 shows these corner blocks.

These houses were highly fire-proof from the outside, but many have been destroyed, due to chimney defects, in the past 100 years. In some cases the cobblestone facing has been covered up and hidden under modernization and additions.

The first period (1828-35) saw the various sized and colored stones laid in more or less irregular horizontal lines, sometimes only on the front, or sides of a house, the back being plastered plain.

In this period 2½" to 3" diameter fieldstones, granite, and slate stones, rounded by being tumbled by the receding glacier and lake water movements, were laid in horizontal tiers. They were used rather indiscriminately as to color. Plain, flat plaster filled in the interstices. All work was done by hand.

In the middle period (1835-1845) the stones became smaller, 1½" to 2½". They were still set in horizontal rows. Very carefully selected stones were used. The space between the rows became narrower, with a hand-formed, raised "ridge" between each row.

The house walls were about 15" to 20" thick, the smaller "facing" stones being laid in horizontal rows of various patterns and sizes to form the final outer coating. The "ridge" between the rows of stones gave a beautiful "highlight" effect to the work, as the sun and shadows played on the stones and ridges.

The third period, roughly 1845 to 1860, saw the stones becoming smaller, 1" to 1½", very carefully selected for color, tone, and texture. Well rounded stones were favored. All were put in the wall very painstakingly.

The horizontal ridge, now formed by a V-shaped tool, produced very definite shadows. All stones used were not set flush into the wall, but were raised from 1" to 3½", depending on size, giving a wonderful play of light and shadows, and color.

Photo 1 shows how the stones were laid in close, horizontal rows, with the solid slab or block of limestone for corner strength. Here six tiers of cobblestones between each block bring it to the later period, but give an interesting close-up showing how the stones were set into the mortar, with the raised "ridge" separating the rows.

Each mason seemed to use the number of stones and designs that best fitted the material available. Periods over-lap. And many patterns are to be found.

Photo 2 shows the front of a two-story grocery store at East Victor, N.Y. The front was trimmed with stone slabs. A fan-light shows in the attic.

Photo 3 shows a two-story house with the corner limestone blocks and those used over the doors and windows — all solid cut stone. This house, west of Macedon, N.Y., exists and is occupied today, unchanged for over 100 years.

Photo 4 is a one-story school house near Williamson, N.Y.

A cobblestone house east of Pultneyville, N.Y., done in the later or mid-Victorian period, shows the windows with pointed arches over each pair of tall French windows that reach from the floor up. This type is rarely found. Five rows of close-set horizontal stones run from each of the corner-stone blocks in the manner shown in Photo 1.

This house has five rows of tiny red stones alternating with one or two rows of white larger stones. In some houses the stones graduate, starting at bottom 4½" to 6" and getting smaller as the rows go up, until the top row stones would be only 1½" to 2" in diameter.

Modern workmen have attempted to duplicate the mortar used for these small stones, but the secret is lost. Even analysis of the material has not solved the mystery.

Much of the lime was burned in home-made kilns during the winter, the workmen used the most suitable and handy stones; but time has proved they chose wisely and well. The ratio of limestone and sand was roughly one to six, or one to seven parts, each.

While more houses remain today, many types of other buildings were constructed. Numerous small milk "smoke" and out-houses were built. Some fine public buildings are still existent. The majority of the work was done on houses in small towns, or farmhouses along the more travelled roads through the State.

Searchers for these old buildings, however, are often astonished to find some hitherto unknown building of great beauty hidden away on a back road and in some woods. Only one five foot cobblestone wall remains in Western New York. This is on the Cox farm, Canawages road, near Scottsville, N.Y.

Perhaps one of the most famous stone objects ever built in (1820-1824) America was the famous "aqueduct" that carried the first Erie Canal over the Genesee River, which passed north and south through Rochester, N.Y.

This was widely visited by early travelers from New England, and foreign visitors of the day. It is shown on several of the old blue Staffordshire dishes of the 1835-40 period. It was built of solid blocks of Medina limestone, granite, etc.

The old Reynolds Arcade, now demolished, was another early Rochester showplace, having the first "Arcade" right down through the middle, with a glass roof. For years this was a sort of social gathering spot. It led to the famous old Opera House on Corinthian Street where many of the leading actors of the day appeared.

North of Elba, N.Y., there is a small settlement where several fine cobblestone houses, stores, lawyers' offices, etc., still exist. And movement has been started to found a society to preserve the old houses and make this the center of the society. It is thought about 300 cobblestone houses and other buildings are extant and are occupied today in Western New York.

These old cobblestone buildings that remain are an example of Yankee ingenuity and skill, and Mr. Schmidt's illustrated lectures before the many historical groups never fail to win wide praise and interest.