

*Student Research  
Paper*

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## **Cobblestone Houses in Cortland**

### **Introduction**

While completing my Associates degree at Monroe Community College, I participated as a member of a geography team that located cobblestone structures in the Rochester, New York area. As part of that research, I learned that cobblestone structures, such as houses and churches, are structural landmarks unique to the Western New York region, especially close to Lake Ontario. I was therefore surprised to see two cobblestone structures in Cortland. This certainly did not fit what I knew about cobblestones. I thought this research would be a good opportunity to explore them further; I therefore decided to focus my paper on the geography of cobblestone structures. Through this research, I intend to unearth the history of the two cobblestone structures found in Cortland and identify the current status of cobblestone houses; especially since the high watermark of cobblestone construction coincides with the bicentennial of the war of 1812.

### **Literature Review**

“Cobblestone” is a Middle English word. A Cob is a rounded lump, while a Ston,

is a small rock (Freeman 2005, p.7). Cobblestones began forming during the Ordovician, Silurian and Devonian periods (Shelgren 1978, p.1). The cobblestones in the New York area developed during the Holocene period right before the Last Glacial Maximum. New York's major landforms such as the Adirondack Mountains were also forming. This caused major uplift, which exposed local rock and created rivers (Kammer, 2010). During the Last Glacial Maximum, there were 17 glaciers in New York State, carrying Canadian metamorphic rocks such as gneiss, granite, and quartzite into New York State and mixing them into the local soil (Shelgren 1978, p.2).

There are two types of Cobblestones, field and lake-washed. The type of cobblestone is determined by how the stone was formed. According to Freeman, a fieldstone is a stone that was ground beneath a glacier. These stones are more angular, meaning; they do not have a defined shape and are found in farming fields and along hills (Freeman 2005, p.7). As for the next cobblestone type, the lake-washed stone; Freeman (2005, p.7) suggests that as the glaciers melted, they added water to rivers, increased the viscosity or pressure of these rivers, and this allowed large stones to roll along a streambed and take on a more rounded shape.

## **Cobblestone Structures**

In Europe, cobblestones have historically had a variety of uses. In the third century, the Romans built walls for coastal fortification using flint cobbles (a type of field

cobblestone) found in the countryside (Freeman 2005, p.9). As time passed, ancient Rome fell and more nomadic Europeans moved in. During the middle ages, the Saxons and Normans continued building walls using flint cobblestones (see figure 1) (Shelgren 1978, p.8). As time progressed, cobblestone streets and buildings began to appear. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, masons knapped or split the cobblestones and used limestone mortar in a flush treatment, which they used to lay the foundation for streets (Freeman 2005, p.9). In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, European settlers migrated to the United States and brought with them the knowledge and ability to create cobblestone structures, such as using rounded stones and decorative mortars (The Cobblestone Society 1963, p.3)

At the end of the American Revolution, soldiers and settlers moved northwest towards the Great Lakes in order to farm because of its fertile soil. When the first generation of farmers arrived, most of the area was rugged terrain (Lords 2002, p.2). They used wood from the forest around them to build their homes. These houses were logged or hand-hewn frame cabins. The farmers used their axe, broadaxes, froes, saws and other woodworking tools (Shelgren 1978, p.2). The farmers soon found the land to be full of fieldstones and had to clear the stones from the fields in order to plow. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, railroads took too long to transport crops from Upstate New York to the population centers on the east coast and farmers needed a bigger market to sell their material and crops. This dilemma brought about the idea for the Erie Canal.

The construction of the Erie Canal called for stonemasons and builders to quarry and lay stones (Shelgren 1978, p.3). Many of these stone masons were of English or Irish descent who emigrated from Pennsylvania and much of New England mainly because

Western New York could not supply the number of people needed to complete the Erie Canal in the allotted time (The cobblestone society 1963, p.3). They came to New York to help build the canal and when the canal was done, many bought farms and settled down (McKinney 2002, p.7). The completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 caused an economic boom; the price of wheat increased and farmers prospered; which influenced the masons to stay. As time progressed, wood construction became more expensive because it requires timber, it also required carpentry skills, which was rare at the time (McKinney 2002, p.8) and bricks were expensive to make. Due to these factors, alternatives were made and cobblestones were utilized. The farmers did eventually find a use for all the fieldstones they cleared and the stonemasons found a way to supplement their income. Cobblestone housing has certain advantages over wood. Cobblestone houses are fireproof, they do not need to be painted, they are easier to maintain, and the building materials were often free (Freeman 2005, p.10). Schmidt (1966, p.3) suggested that the cobblestone houses on Ridge Road are there because they are parallel to the Erie Canal. Orleans County tourism administrators' report that there are more cobblestone structures along Ridge Road, than any other highway in America; It is therefore called the "Road of cobblestone houses."

Construction of a Cobblestone house was labor intensive. Stones had to be collected, and moved to the construction site. The collection process for a single home could sometimes take two or three years (Benson 2012, p.38). The mason would design the structure, and the farmer's family would decide what stones to use on the house, such as the size and the color of the stones. They used beetle rings, an instrument used to

measure the size of the stone (see figure 2) and a sorting board, a board used to sort the stone colors. If the farmer made a good profit from selling crops, the family would hold a neighborhood bee, a gathering of people who would come to help sort the stones with the family. The farmer's family would then give a big supper for compensation and sometimes, there would be dinner and dancing (McKinney 2002, p.3).

There are three periods of cobblestone construction. The periods are identified by the differences in stone size as well as the layout of the stones. This first (Early) period lasted from 1825 until about 1835. In the first period, masons used the readily available larger fieldstones for structures and the stones were not placed in any particular order; they were laid together randomly. The mortar or cement was V shaped, to make the stones appear to project out from the wall surface.

The next (Middle) period lasted from 1835 until 1845. The masons used smaller, rounded or oval shaped lake washed cobblestones, which were mixed with glacial fieldstones. Masons started to add more designs to construction, putting horizontal, vertical and diagonal designs into structures. The last (Late) period extended through the 1860s. The structures from this period are commonly found today. Most of these structures have small lake washed stones in an intricate design, typically for the front of a house. The design could be striped; meaning one row of cobblestone is dark and the next is lighter. It could also be herringbone; meaning the stones would be long and they would be shaped like a huge oval. The back and sides of the structure still had the huge fieldstones, since most people do not look at the sides of the structure. The intricate design at the front of the house during the late period required the masons to find specific

stones.

Cobblestone masonry disappeared for a few reasons. The first factor was time. As stated before, cobblestone structures took two to three years to construct, which did not coincide with the shift towards industrialization and mass production that occurred at that time. Second factor was money. Cobblestone construction is expensive; affordable mainly to the wealthy and elite. The third factor was the secrecy of the lime mortar formulas by the master stonemasons. Because of this, not many people know how to make the mortar. When the masons died, their formulas died with them (Benson 2012, p.38). Wooden balloon frame construction, fast drying Portland cement and mass-produced brick succeeded cobblestone construction, which was less expensive to construct.

## **Methods and Data Sources**

I will examine books and research papers that make reference to cobblestone structures and visit the cobblestone museum in Albion, NY to gain a better perspective of the architectural customs during that time period. I intend to visit the Cortland Historical Society to obtain information about the cobblestone structures found there. I will visit and/or interview the Monroe County Tourism Bureau, in an effort to understand the visitation and promotion of cobblestone housing in this region.

## Discussion

The first Cobblestone structure I researched was the Unitarian Universalist Church (U.U.C) in downtown Cortland (Figure 3), located at the intersection of Church Street and Elm Street. During my visit to the Cobblestone Society Museum, I was able to find specific historic details about the church in the National Register of Historic Places. This structure was constructed in 1837 and is one of Cortland's oldest buildings. It is also the oldest Universalist church in New York State. The church lot was offered by Calvin Bishop of Homer to the Universalist Society to build a house of worship in 1836. Benjamin Davis of Clarendon, New York spearheaded the masonry of the structure, assisted by Horace Bliss of Truxton, New York and other church members. Local farmers brought in all the stone from their farms to use for the structure and the women washed and sorted the stones. The church is a two-story rectangular building with a two-tiered square bell tower. The walls were created with grayish-brown cobblestones. The quoins or cornerstones were made of shale. The front or west wall features the smallest, smoothest, oval shaped cobbles laid up four rows per quoin. The walls were designed in a variety of ways; some are simple horizontal lines and others are in herringbone patterns (National Register 1992, p.1-2). Larger stones were used in the interior (Ralston).

The church had many functions during the Civil War Era. The city of Cortland gave \$100 towards the building of the church and in exchange was able to use the basement as a town hall from 1838 until 1885 (UUC). The church was also a station for the Underground Railroad and its members provided runaway slaves with bandages, food

and clothing. They also hosted many abolitionists and speakers, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Clara Barton, Lucretia Mott, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Susan B. Anthony and Theodore Parker (National Registrar 1992, pg 2).

The second structure that I researched was the Harmony Grange; located in Blodgett Mills (figure 4). I concluded it to be a cobblestone structure, with small, round, and uniform cobbles in a small section of the house. This was an indication that the structure was built during the middle to late period. I also noticed a creek behind the building with small stones, which may have been surplus collected from the original construction. I was unable to obtain any information about the structure from the Cobblestone Society Museum. Ms. Brundage, the curator, informed me that there was no available data, due to the lack of documentation for many structures, including this one. She also requested that if I found any information about the structure, that I relay it to her, in order for her to update her records.

Based on my own research, I found that the Harmony Grange was originally a cobblestone schoolhouse (Blodgett Scrapbooks). There is, however, conflicting information about the exact date of construction. It is believed to have been built sometime in the 1820s, when the first settlers came to the area. The Cortland Standard (1973) reported, in an article dated within that era, that the building was purchased from Wayland and Jennie Spencer for \$275 in September of 1878. The building was enhanced when the stucco upstairs section was built above the cobblestone section; the building was renamed the Harmony Grange (Say new school 1977). A Grange can be defined as a farmers' association that sponsors social activities, community service, and political



lobbying. The Harmony Grange took possession of the building in 1895. Due to lack of membership and funds, the Harmony Grange closed the building, in which ownership was reverted to the New York State Grange Association. The structure was used only for a short while because the bathroom was outside, and there was no running water or electricity. Presently, a man by the name of Scott Friedah is in the process of purchasing the building (Boylan, 2013).

I had a phone interview with Mr. Friedah on February 16th, 2013 at noon. I asked how he found the building and he responded that he was never a member, but he had friends that were members of the Harmony Grange and he noticed the building before, while growing up. He explained that he bought the building because the New York State Grange Association determined it to be derelict and qualified for demolition, since the Harmony Grange was no longer in operation. I inquired about his intentions for the building, to which he replied that he would transform the building into a trading post that utilizes the barter system to trade dry goods and other items. He and his wife currently own a bakery within the Cortlandville area.

He went on to talk about the architecture of the building. He said the building was an open building, meaning there were no support beams to hold up the building. I then asked if he knew where the cobblestones came from. He noted two possibilities; they were either taken from Tioughnioga River, which was further down the road, or the rocks may have been shipped via river. He said the Tioughnioga was much more suitable than it is currently for nautical traffic in the early 1800's, which allowed for the transport of goods. He said the Tioughnioga was made wider due to flooding in the spring. At the

time, he said he didn't have the paperwork telling him about the house, but he hopes to receive the information soon.

He did note some concerns he has about the house as well; for example, it would take some time before he can get the building back to coded standard and be deemed usable. His concerns include preservation of the cobblestone section of the house, water and roof damages, installation of plumbing and electricity, the ability to add new windows and dead bugs. He said he had to present his request for better windows to the town board and he fears they won't allow the changes. I asked him if I could relay information to the Cobblestone Society Museum. He agreed, in hopes that it will assist them in any way and provide him with needed resources to fix the building. He also noted that the house could not be put in the National Registry due to its age.

### *Tourism*

Through my research, I've come to realize that there is currently little to no exposure to information on Cobblestone structures. There are several factors that have contributed to this lack of exposure. The first is a lack of funding. As part of my research I visited the Cobblestone Society Museum (C.S.M) in Albion New York; where I spoke in length with the curator, Debra Brundage. She gave me a tour of the museum infrastructure, which includes several cobblestone structures. Her files included information about the local structures and Universalist Unitarian Church in Cortland. During my visit with Ms. Brundage, she spoke in detail about the increasing lack of

funding coming into the museum. The C.S.M is dependent on contributions from its members and patrons. Since the 1960's, the initial membership fee has increased to fifty times the original amount and patrons' contribution increased to twice the original amount, with the lifetime membership option being discontinued (The Cobblestone Society. 1963). There has also been a decrease in requests for tours and educational information by schools, which have also affected funding. Despite her marketing attempts for the museum and its cobblestone structures, the waning public interest continues to render her efforts futile.

It was said that the last surge of interest in the cobblestone structures occurred during the Bicentennial Celebrations in the 1970's, when a tour of cobblestone structures was marketed as a form of patriotism to America's heritage. I decided to seek out any existing attempts at marketing for cobblestone structures. I found one ad posted by the curator of the C.S.M. in *The Great Lakes Seaway Trails Magazine* (figure 5); it was all she could afford, due to the decrease in funding. I was not able to find information in any of the major travel brochures for the area, such as *Visit Rochester* for example. However, I was able to find summarized information about the C.S.M. on the Orleans County website.

Another notable factor affecting the lack of exposure is that the current generation is not particularly drawn to historic fixtures or landmarks, unless they absolutely need to be or unless they include some high tech or modern elements, like a science museum would. The C.S.M office is a small room, in Albion, with limited resources. The curator works part time and most documents are not filed electronically. All this being said to

emphasize the inability of the major contributors to the continuation and preservation of cobblestone structures and their history to make any notable strides.

Around the time of the first bicentennial, the residents of the homes would come outside and discuss the architectural elements of their homes to passing visitors, sometimes even allowing them to enter. After some time, there was an increased interest in and need for privacy, which therefore meant that tours would be reduced to visitors simply viewing houses from the outside. I did find an old brochure that describes the driving tours in Wayne County, which included a map of cobblestone houses (figure 6). With this being such a low-tech experience and with the continuous increase in gas prices, it proves to be a less than affordable or family-friendly attraction.

I made the suggestion that a tour of the cobblestone structures could be included in the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the War of 1812; to which Mrs. Brundage agreed and made note of. At first, my suggestion seemed to be a good idea. However, I came to understand why so many Americans did not know much about the War of 1812 or the attractions associated with it. I came across two articles about Governor Cuomo and ex-governor Paterson vetoing legislation for a bicentennial committee in New York State. The bill called for a committee of 24 members to coordinate the commemoration for the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the War of 1812 from the year 2012 through to 2015. The plan would implement a series of reenactments, tourist attractions, and would highlight a few key historic sites within the state; such as Sackets Harbor, Fort Oswego and Fort Ontario. It also endorses the inclusion of the War of 1812 in elementary and secondary school curricula (Groom 2010). The committee would include local institutions and fixtures that

has historic value; such as the Cobblestone Society Museum. The committee and planners would have had funding, and the states support to hold events throughout 2015, then the committee would be disbanded in 2015. So far, Washington D.C., Virginia, Ohio, North Carolina, Michigan, Maryland, Kentucky, Iowa, Indiana, and Illinois have bicentennial committees and the Canadian government is injecting millions into the plans for the war of 1812.

It is said that Paterson vetoed the bill because it was not considered in the already completed NYS budgets and he thought their intentions could be served without appointing an expensive committee to execute them (Groom 2010). Cuomo vetoed the bill for the same reasons, but said the Regional Economic Development Committee could also accept the responsibility of spearheading these commemorative events (NewzJunky 2011). David Turner, director of Oswego County's Office Of Planning, Community Development And Tourism feels that the Upstate New York region would be at a disadvantage, regarding development of the Upstate economy to promote history and draw tourist to the area (Groom. 2010).

The war of 1812 is highlighted only briefly because it is not considered an uplifting American story. Peskin et al state that the Canadians celebrate this war because their ancestors, as depicted in the accounts of the battle of Queenstown Heights and Crysler's Farm, are alleged to have helped in repelling American invasions. This war is less significant to American history because it did not transform the nation as others did; like the American Revolution or the Civil War for example. In fact, the spectrum changed completely because industry and transportation improved as a result of the War of 1812

(Peskin et al 2002, pg. 1-4).

Since the information available to me dates back to the 1930s up to the 1970s, this research proved to be a bit daunting. I would have liked to acquire any known statistical figures, regarding the popularity of the fixtures that were part of the War of 1812, such as Fort Niagara, The lighthouse at Charlotte, and Fort Oswego, to see if they have been declining as tourist attractions over the years following the end of the war. I will be sending the information I uncovered about the UUC and the Blodgett Mills Harmony Grange meeting hall to curator Brundage, so she may be able assess the current condition of the structures and update her own records. I would also like to intern for the C.S.M and locate any other cobblestone structures that might exist in the area. In addition I might attempt to pool the efforts of other GIS students in Cortland and surrounding areas, to map other existing cobblestone structures in their locale. They could research where the houses were made, what time period they were made in, who the mason was (if possible), the history of the house, and maybe a little bit about the landscape. I would then construct an interactive website, where those interested in finding information about local cobblestone structures in and around their area, can acquire said information based on their location. In an effort to re-energize the tourism value of these structures, I will also provide links to and factoids about the Cobblestone Society Museum, its cobblestone fixtures and the other structures I uncovered through my research. This may appeal to a Canadian market force, architectural enthusiasts from other parts of New York and even from other states within the US.

## Conclusion

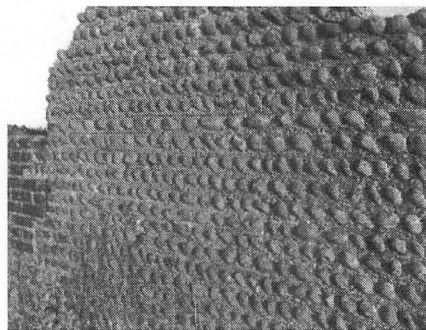
Through this research, I learned that cobblestone structures, such as houses and churches, are structural landmarks unique to the Western New York region. I was initially surprised to see two cobblestone structures in Cortland, since this did not seem to fit my prior assumption of cobblestones and where they might be located. This research was a great opportunity to further explore them; by unearthing the history of the two cobblestone structures I found in Cortland. I also considered the current status of these structures, given that they do coincide with a notable event in American history, The War of 1812.

The most resonant points of this research, for me, came from the discovery that there are actually two types of Cobblestones, field and lake-washed and that there were three periods of cobblestone construction. The periods are identified by the differences in stone size as well as the layout of the stones. This first (Early) period lasted from 1825 until about 1835. The next (Middle) period lasted from 1835 until 1845. The last (Late) period extended through the 1860s and the cobblestones structures from this period are mostly likely the ones commonly found today.

Cobblestone structures are definitely noteworthy bookmarks in the history New York State. But they are not cherished, as they should be. There were attempts made that would have indirectly impacted (positively) the reinstitution of historic cobblestone infrastructure into New York tourism market; the lobbying for the Bicentennial Committee for example, but they unfortunately have not made any strides to date. A lack

of support and dwindling interest might be to blame for the almost phantom existence of these architectural marvels. But it is my opinion that the current generation could and should make needed effort to preserve the legacy of those before us, for the education and cultural fortification of future generations. I do sincerely hope that the Cobblestone Society acquires the resources it so desperately requires, in order to continue its preservation and of these historic landmarks.

## Figures



**Figure 1-Flint Cobblestone Wall**



**Figure 2-beetle ring**





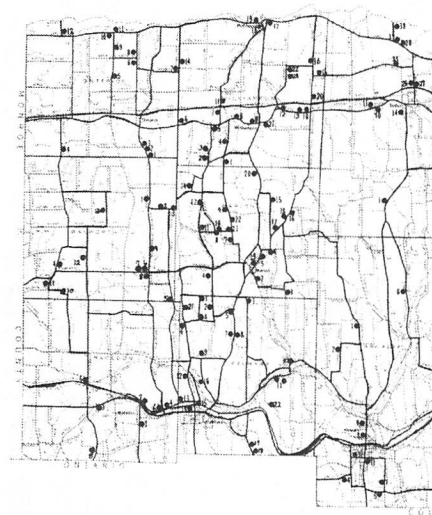
**Figure 3-Unitarian Society Church**

**Figure 4- The Harmony Grange**

Wayne County Cob



**figure 5- cobblestone ad in great seaway map**



**figure 6-cobblestone driving guide**

<b><u>Cobblestone Society Museum</u></b>	14393 Ridge Rd W Albion, NY 14411 585-589-9013	Museum The Cobblestone Society Museum, the only cobblestone museum in the world, showcases the unique masonry construction method using stones rounded and polished into cobble by glacial action. The museum offers guided tours of seven buildings housing artifacts from the Cobblestone Era (1825-1860) including the oldest cobblestone church in North America and the cobblestone parsonage once owned by Horace Greeley. Designated a National Historic Landmark. Open daily (except Mondays) June 23rd to Labor Day. September & October: Sundays only. Group tours by appointment.
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**figure 7- cobblestone online ad**

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