

THE BULLETIN

Cortland County Historical Society

Cobblestone Structures in Cortland County

By Richard F. Palmer

(First in a series)

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Upcoming Events

Lunch & Learn

12:10-12:50

May 9—Greek Peak
Today 60 Years and
Counting, Jessica
Sloma

May 16—Community
Support—Small Steps,
Tom Gallagher

June 1-2

Attic Treasures Sale

Brief History of Cobblestone Architecture

Ancient history tells us that the use of cobblestones as building material dates back to the third century when the Romans used them to construct coastal fortifications. Waterborne flint cobblestones were found in abundance in the English countryside. Natural lime mortars were perfected, but the stones were not laid in defined courses as was done in later periods.

During the 11th century the Normans and Saxons built walls of flint cobbles or "flint heads" in rough courses. During the Middle Ages came cobblestone streets, houses and outbuildings. Hundreds of years later American craftsmen, using the European precedent, refined and improved cobblestone building techniques that incorporated coursed, un-coursed, dual courses and herringbone patterns. Cobblestone houses and other structures have been a source of curiosity in central and western New York for decades.

There are more than 700 cobblestone structures throughout New York State, extending from Albany to Niagara counties. Cobblestone architecture is unique among the varied architectural styles to be found in this region. Records preserved by the Cobblestone Society of Childs, New York indicate that 90 percent of all cobblestone buildings are found within a 100-mile radius of Rochester. The late Carl Schmidt of Scottsville was the foremost authority on cobblestone construction, authoring many books and articles dating back to the 1930s.

In his definitive book, "Cobblestone Masonry," Schmidt noted that because of innovative methods used by masons in this region, there developed a cobblestone masonry which distinguishes it from "all previous small-stone masonry. This includes European methods, as well as those used locally."

A frequent question asked by the uninitiated has been "Why are these old buildings confined to this region, who built them, how and when?" Generally the golden years of the cobblestone era were from about 1825, when the Erie Canal was opened, to the 1860s. There are, however, examples from a later period scattered here and there including Vermont, Canada and the Midwest. It is not known where or when the first cobblestone houses were built. The earliest date stone found so far is 1832.

Why cobblestones? First, because they were plentiful. They had been rolled, rounded and left by



Cobblestone Structures in Cortland County Continued

the glacier that had passed over the region, as settlers came and cleared land for homes and fields, the glacier-carried stones had to be reckoned with. Along with using them to build miles of dry-stone wall fences, some were incorporated into building foundations and they gradually applied to above-ground construction.

The rough field stones were used at first. As the skill and artistry of the masons developed, water-washed stones were gathered from gravel pits. Then the builders looked to the shoreline of Lake Ontario where nearly 100 miles of washed stones of every form could be collected. We have dismissed the notion that many masons came into the region to work on the Erie Canal. It is an entirely different craft. Some records indicate the masons came from England.

Each mason developed an individual style and technique, preparing his own mortar. The real secret of a good cobblestone wall depended on the quality of mortar used. Whether fact or fancy, it has been said that often if a visitor came around, a mason would stop everything and wait for them to pass so as not have his special skills observed. The average mason was paid between \$1 and \$1.25 per day, plus board, for a 10-to-12-hour day. The work was tedious and exacting, more so as cobblestone structures became more elaborate. Only the more wealthy landowners could afford them.

The more one studies the cobblestone era, the more interesting it becomes. Just driving around to different sections to look at the variety of buildings and note their special architectural features can develop into an interesting pastime. There are more than 700 cobblestone structures in New York State, chiefly in 25 counties. Only a few were constructed in Cortland County.

Unitarian Universalist Church in Cortland

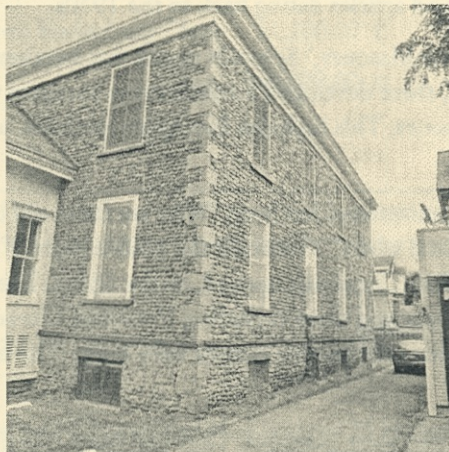
Cortland County has four cobblestone structures, two of which are on the National Register of Historic Places. Best known of these is the Universalist Church at 3 Church St., Cortland, built in 1837 and placed on the National Register in 1992. The church is reputed to have been a link in the Underground Railroad during the Civil War.

The church was officially organized in 1835. The stones for this, the oldest church building in Cortland County, primarily came from the properties of church members. It has cobblestone walls and granite quoins (external angles). Interestingly, the then village of Cortlandville contributed \$100 towards its construction so it could use the basement to conduct business. It did so for 45 years.

Many famous people lectured here including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Thomas Starr King, William Lloyd Garrison, Theodore Parker, Henry Ward Beecher, Wendell Phillips, Lucretia Mott and Clara Barton. It is one of only 21 surviving cobblestone churches in New York State.

In 1895, a large arch was cut in the east cobblestone wall and a Morey and Barnes organ was set in the arch. It is only one of two such historic organs in existence. It is nationally recognized by the American Organ Historical Society for its superb sound quality and nearly original condition.

Due to deterioration the bell tower or belfry, as well as the bell itself, were removed in 2016.



View showing detail of south wall of church.

Cobblestone Structures in Cortland County Continued

Cortland Democrat

March 16, 1956

The Cobblestone Church By Frank Place

Have you ever looked closely at the Cobblestone Church, just as an example of the builder's art? Even to a layman (here meaning one who is neither builder nor architect) there are interesting points to be seen.

Examination of the stonework shows more than just mason-work. Design appears even in the laying of the cobbles, where one finds a row of flat cobbles set 45 degrees to the left of the vertical. Then, too, the occurrence of these herringbone strips is regular for some distance up the wall; then come bands of several courses of herringbone pattern.

The corners show architectural care in the laying the shale quoins, locking into the wall to the right and left alternately. The water-table is also of stone, also shale, though as all these have been painted over the kind of stone is uncertain. On each side of the door appears in the middle of the space a large diamond-shaped arrangement of flat cobbles, these set parallel to each other in each segment of the diamond.

The fact that the porch was an afterthought. Another point in the same class is that inside the porch over the double door there is an inscription that usually escapes the visitor's attention. On the long lintel one can read with difficulty these words: "Holiness to the Lord, Good Will to All Mankind," and below that a second line: "Universalist Church Erected 1837."

Grip's Historical Souvenir of Cortland (1899) quotes the building committee that was appointed "to fix upon the size of the house, form and materials of which shall be built, the plan of raising money and the site where it shall stand." The committee reported "that the meeting house be built on the lot offered by Calvin Bishop. That the size of the house be 60 by 44. That the walls be of cobblestone and such other materials as are necessary for the purpose..." Also it agreed "on a level floor, a gallery on three sides, west, north and south, two tiers of windows and a desk in the east end of the house." Construction took place in the same year. The result is a building that belongs in the classical Greek Revival of which the old New England churches are representatives. The church certainly outclasses all others on the street.

Having this in view every day I began to speculate on the dimensions. It looks as if the width on Church Street was equal to the depth of Elm. I took measurements with a surveyor's tape to show me that it was substantially as planned.

The addition of the porch and the transformation of the interior took place in 1889 (as I gather from news items). Other people remember the gallery and plain bench-pews; whether the present interior is an improvement is a question. No doubt the hall is more easily heated in its present vaulting, but it is something of a shock to get the impression of a theater from the rows of chairs. The two rows of windows are still there as intended but the upper row is now a blind, or blinds.

The Romanesque archway of the porch was never in the mind of the original architect. The church bell was formerly in the belfry of the old Presbyterian Church which was a fair companion of this church building, though of wooden construction. This bell has the highest pitch of the four that we sometimes hear ringing in sequence.

While speaking of cobbles we find almost no similar buildings in this area. The Randall farm-house off South Main Street and the cooperage-vinegar factory, Homer, are the only ones now extant, as far as I know. The old Cobblestone School, across the street from this church, was of simpler design and construction, but of the same date. The shale, or stratified stones of the quoins, is to be found in any quarry hereabouts. The cobbles were left by the glacier that passed through thousands of years ago.