



HISTORIC—This cobblestone schoolhouse, one of last to be abandoned as a school, is a good example of masonry art. It's in Scottsville Road, Chili.

'Cobblestones' Still Intrigue

Picturesque Structures Found Few Other Places

By ARCH MERRILL

PEOPLE FAMILIAR with the Grand Canyon of the West have been known to sniff at our "Gorgeous Gorge" at Letchworth Park. Middle Western visitors have pronounced the lakes of Wisconsin and Minnesota just as charming as our Finger Lakes. And some sojourners have not even been impressed by the beauty of the Spanish War Eagle beside our War Memorial.

Arch Merrill's History

They ask what have you got here in Western New York that we have not in Joliet or Bemidji?" For such you have a handy two-word answer: "Cobblestone buildings."

FOR THIS IS America's "Cobblestone Country."

Virtually all of the cobblestone buildings in this land are concentrated within a 50-to-60 mile radius of Rochester. There must be more than 250 of them, scattered to the east, west and south of this city.

We who have grown up with these familiar relics of our pioneer era take the picturesque structures for granted.

But tourists and newcomers to our region are mightily intrigued with the cobblestone houses, churches, schools, stores, barns, even sheds that dot this countryside. For they see precious few of them anywhere else. There are some in Ontario, Canada; around Albany and a few in Michigan and Ohio.

No doubt those were inspired by the cobblestone masonry that originated in this area and were built by former Western New Yorkers.

FOR THE technical aspects of cobblestone masonry and its history I rely on the book, "Cobblestone Architecture," published in 1944 by Carl F. Schmidt, Scottsville historian-architect. I hope it is still in print. In 1953 Gerda Peterich, then an Eastman House researcher, contributed a technical article and excellent photographs of cobblestone masonry to an architectural journal.

In late years I have seen too many of these unique buildings razed or altered beyond recognition. I particularly lamented the passing of the fine specimen which stood at Culver Road and Main Street and was the residence of the late Detective Capt. Jack McDonald, a rock-like character himself.

I hope the cobblestone landmarks will never go the way of covered bridges, canal weighlocks and other relics that are part of our heritage.

"COBBLESTONE buildings are built of small stones laid in horizontal rows between straight lines of exceedingly hard mortar . . . Due to the materials, which are local, of warm and colorful tones, the structures appear to have grown from the soil on which they stand." That description from Schmidt's book cannot be improved upon.

Who built the first cobblestone house or where or when are questions lost in the mists of history.

The buildings go back to around 1825, after the dig-

ging of the Erie Canal had brought many skilled masons to this frontier. The first ones were built of stones, irregular in shape, size and color, picked up by the pioneers in the fields. Some of the earliest examples are in the Henrietta-Mendon area which abound in what geologists call "glaciated stones."

THE MASONS began improving their skills and around 1835 began selecting smaller, roundish, more uniform stones. These were plentiful around the Ridge Road, the wave-built natural highway which formed the shoreline of the glacial Lake Iroquois. So it was between 1835 and 1845 that many of the early cobblestone buildings on and near the Ridge Road were built.

But plenty of them rose in the interior, too. Teams of oxen and horses hauled countless loads of cobblestones from Lake Ontario to such distant places as Phelps, Geneva, Marion, Farmington and the Genesee and Wyoming Valleys.

After 1845 greater use was made of the round, lake-washed stones found on the shore of Lake Ontario. The masons selected them meticulously for uniform size, shape and color. Some of the stones were graded for size by passing them through an iron ring or holes cut in a board.

So a more perfect and perhaps, more monotonous pattern was evolved a "heringbone" pattern which featured longer stones laid at angles rather than in narrow rows.

Few, if any, cobblestone buildings were erected after the Civil War.

NAMES OF FEW early cobblestone masons have been preserved. Many of the houses seemingly were the work of the same artisan or group, although it is recorded that many a pioneer built his own cobblestone dwelling.

Many of the masons guarded their formula jealously. Some even refused to let anyone watch

them at their work. It took two to three years to build some cobblestone houses. Could one be reproduced today? Is cobblestone masonry a lost art? One craftsman told me that only the length of time and expense involved could prevent a skilled mason from building one today.

Our cobblestone buildings possess a distinctive warmth and dignity. Many are fine examples of Greek Revival architecture with charming doorways. Some have been marred by the addition of wooden lean-tos and incongruous frame porches.

Several stately cobblestone churches, notably one in Webster and another at Alton, are still houses of worship although others are deserted or have been diverted to other uses.

Once cobblestone schools were almost as common as chestnut trees in this area. Many of the old district schoolhouses still stand but most of them have been converted into residences. Others are vacant. I think one of the last to be abandoned was the one on the Rochester-Scottsville Road, north of the village.

One cobblestone structure in particular has always fascinated me. It is a former blacksmith shop at Alloway, Wayne County. It has eight sides.

THERE ARE more cobblestone buildings on the Ridge Road than any other highway anywhere. I counted 32 of them between Wolcott and Gaines.

The largest "cluster" is in the hamlet of Childs, an old stage coach stop on the Ridge Road. On the north side of its main street, but not in a row, stand a handsome but now unused Universalist Church, built in 1834; a district schoolhouse whose bell has long been muted and three occupied cobblestone houses.

As this is written, a movement is under way to preserve this "Cobblestone Colony," at Childs, especially the church, through an organization of regional residents.