

NEW YORK'S COBBLESTONE LANDMARKS

by ROBERT W. FRASCH

Cobblestone buildings belong unmistakably to New York State where hundreds can be found along the Lake Ontario plain and in the Finger Lakes region. Those abundant cobblestones of New York and Northern Pennsylvania were a gift from the Ice Age. About 14,000 years ago the glaciers of the Ice Age retreated northward into Canada while depositing countless roughly rounded cobblestones which had been partly polished in the ever moving mass. These small rounded stones were considered a minor nuisance by the first settlers to reach Western New York after the American Revolution. These pioneers built their first homes of logs or hand-hewn timbers and sometimes of the flat or squared field stones.

A generation later in 1825, the famous Erie Canal transformed Western New York into a prosperous agricultural region. It also began a construction boom of major proportions bringing masons, carpenters and joiners to build both the canal and cities like Rochester and Syracuse that mushroomed along the route. With prosperity; a new influx of masons; and a local abundance of cobblestones; the stage was set for a unique new development in American masonry construction - namely, the cobblestone wall.

Sometime between 1825 and 1831, the first crude attempts were made by masons using this new material. At first the rougher cobblestones were gathered from adjacent fields and laid up in rather uneven rows. By 1831, the art had advanced to a degree where a number of homes proudly bore date stones and the mortar was being treated between the stones in a variety of patterns and shapes. An 1834 church in Childs, Orleans County is preserved by the Cobblestone Society as an outstanding example of early cobblestone work. It has wooden sills and lintels with irregular limestone blocks to square the four corners. By the 1830's, the cobblestone wall had become a popular new folk art as homes, schools, churches, barns, and even cemetery vaults were constructed. Soon the rougher field cobblestones were not good enough for popular taste. Lake Ontario shores were found to be an inexhaustible supply of very smooth lake cobblestones polished to perfection by the constant wave action. Records tell how farmers took day long trips by oxcart or horse-drawn wagons to gather a load of lake-washed cobblestones. Many such trips were required for one building. Records of cobblestone churches in Middleport and Webster describe the many lakeside picnics and cobblestoning bees that were required for the congregations to gather and sort the many loads of smooth beach cobbles for those major buildings. In Webster, boat loads of selected beach stones were collected after each storm. The 1849 schoolhouse museum in Childs, Orleans County is preserved by the Cobblestone Society as an excellent example of the later cobblestone work with its smooth lake cobblestones as small as eggs, laid in perfect rows, with finely cut stone sills, lintels and corner stones (Quoins).

By the 1850's local masons had become highly skilled in this craft but the era of cobblestone construction was rapidly coming to an end. Smaller perfectly matched stones took much more time to gather, sort, and lay. With a few exceptions, the Civil War in 1861 marks the end of the cobblestone era. The new industrial age of factories and mass production ended nearly all handicrafts, including cobblestone masonry so unique to New York State.

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In all, between 800 and 1,000 cobblestone buildings were constructed. Perhaps ninety percent are south of Lake Ontario, but some are widely scattered in a thin line eastward through the Mohawk Valley into Bennington and Brattleboro, Vermont. As many as 100 are to be found westward through Southern Ontario, Canada, Southern Michigan and west of Lake Michigan as far as Beloit, Wisconsin, on both sides of the Illinois-Wisconsin border. Interestingly enough, whenever the origins of those buildings outside of New York have been traced, there is usually a direct connection to a western New York farmer or mason who had moved westward with the frontier in the 1840's and 1850's. Clearly, the Rochester region is the heart of America's cobblestone country, both geographically and historically.

Today, in parts of New York's countryside, "going cobblestoning" is an interesting variation of "antiquing" as a popular weekend excursion. Positively the best route for this is the old Ridge Road (U.S. 104) west or east of Rochester. This old road follows the crest of a natural ridge or glacial sand bar, the remains of an ancient glacial beach. Following the ridge west from Kodak Park in Rochester, you will encounter an average of one cobblestone building per mile to, and well beyond, the cobblestone museum village at Childs. At Childs, you'll enjoy the museum buildings and the Historic Village Inn, an old stagecoach inn still doing a thriving business. The old Ridge Road east from Rochester to Sodus (immediately south of the modern improved U.S. 104) is also rewarding. Circle back to Rochester via the Lake Road through Sodus Point and Pultneyville. Other good choices to combine cobblestoning with antiquing are Routes 5 and 20 from Alexander in Genesee County as far east as Bouckville and Madison in Madison County. The more adventurous will explore country roads anywhere in Wayne County between Macedon and Lyons; Ontario County in Victor, Farmington, Manchester and Phelps; Niagara County around Wilson and Orleans County around Albion and Childs. The Cobblestone Society Museum in Childs sells literature and old copies of annual cobblestone tour booklets describing and mapping specific areas. Arm yourself with county maps and you'll enjoy adventuring without the annoyance of getting lost. Also bring your camera and notepad to fully document your trip and your discoveries. The Cobblestone Society would be delighted to receive duplicates of your photos and any other documents relating to cobblestone buildings.



Shoreline Cobblestones at Pultneyville, New York

Photograph courtesy Chester A. Peters
Pultneyville, New York

