

NEW YORK'S UNIQUE COBBLESTONE ARCHITECTURE

Cobblestone buildings belong unmistakably to New York State where hundreds can be found along the Lake Ontario plain and in the Finger Lakes region. 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 stones were considered a minor nuisance by the first settlers to reach Western New York after the American Revolution. These pioneers built wooden 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 architecture - namely the cobblestone wall.

Sometime between 1825 and 1832 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 1832 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. Suddenly the cobblestone wall had become popular as homes, schools, churches, barns, and even cemetery vaults were constructed. Soon the rougher field cobblestones were not good enough for popular taste and Lake Ontario shores were found to be an inexhaustable supply of very smooth lake cobblestones polished to perfection by constant wave action. Records tell how farmers took day long trips by oxcart to gather a load of lake-washed cobblestones and many such trips were required for one building. 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 the cobblestone mason had become a highly skilled craftsman 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 was the death knell of nearly all handicrafts, including cobblestone masonry so unique to New York State.

Today in the crossroads hamlet of Childs, New York, forty miles west of Rochester on U. S. 104, the Cobblestone Society uses its three cobblestone buildings as a headquarters and museums to preserve and exhibit the remaining examples of this lost art.

Reprint: York State Tradition,
Saranac, New York, Spring 1965
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