COBBLESTONE ARCHITECTURE OF THE ROCHESTER AREA

People are simply fascinated with cobblestone houses. As a photographer I am primarily attracted to the textures of their walls. Architecturally their main interest lies in their unusual masonry techniques. Stylistically they do not differ from other houses of their time and not many of them can measure up to the beauty of their clapboard or brick contemporaries. In some instances, however, stylistic detail and cobblestone technique blend so perfectly, that a unique architectural beauty has been achieved. Houses which are less fine architechturally still have a beauty of their own because of their close tie to the soil from which their building material was gathered. It is this earthy quality that attracted me to an intensive study of cobblestone architecture. I have combined an interest in geology and architecture to come to the following conclusion:

There are four distinctive groups of cobblestone houses:

1. Houses east of Rochester along the lake shore are built primarily of red sandstone cobbles. Close to the lake, lake-washed cobbles are the preferred material. Further inland the cobbles are coarser and less rounded. The general tonality is brownish-red. Embellishment is achieved through the use of vary-colored cobbles, of which the most outstanding example is the color banding of the Alton Church. Lintles and quoins are of limestone. Styles tend to be Greek Revival.

2. The area west of Rochester along the Ridge Road uses also red sandstone predominantly, but masonry techniques are less fine. Lake-washed stones are rare. The general tonality is pinkish-red. Quoins and lintels are of red Medina sandstone. Embellishment is achieved by the use of differently shaped stones and herringbone patterns, with little attention given to the possibilities of design with color. - Styles tend to be transitional from Early Republican to Greek Revival.

3. South of Rochester, in a wedge of about 90 to 120 degrees, the general tonality is grey-yellow. There is no embellishment by either stone patterns or color design. Cobblestones are of the open field or drumlin variety and are of granites, quartzites and limestone. Quoins and lintels are of limestone or dolomite. Styles are late Colonial and Early Republican.

4. The fourth group is an inter-regional group, scattered over the three above mentioned areas. Cobbles are not

of local origine and do not reflect the soil of the immediate vicinity of the dwelling. They are transported from the lake, extremely finely selected for size and color and layed with the highest skill. These are proud, large houses, very well executed, and show very fine architectural detail. However, their beauty does not depend primarily on cobblestone techniques, but on their limes, proportions and stylistic detail. They are late in date, in the mature Greek style or in American Gothic. Only one is known to be built by an English architect. Examples of this group are: The Barron House in Geneva (Greek Revival); the Drumlin Farm at Elbridge (Gothic Revival, built by an English architect); and the Murray Farm near Gaines (transitional Early Republican and Greek. Not included in this collection).

It is after intensive study of many individual examples and many field trips that I came to this generalization of my observations. I believe I have drawn all the conclusions which can be drawn from observation only. Circumstances permitting I should like to do intensive research in their origine and history and to trace them beyond the Rochester region. My collection of cobblestone photographs, of which this exhibit is only a part, will, of course, constantly grow.

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Section I

THE GEOLOGICAL ORIGIN OF COBBLESTONE HOUSES

To my mind there is nothing finer than a house built from the locally available material. It is as if it grew from the soil, as if it were tied to the soil. These are the buildings of pioneer times, when man had to be content with what he could find in his immediate surroundings, and, with his inherent sense of beauty, make the best of it. Many of these pioneer buildings still stand, though they are detached from their original surroundings. New England's clapboard houses stand in towns and villages, the forests once embracing them now cut down. Pennsylvania's stone houses underwent a similar change; and right in our neighborhood, to name but one example, there is a house built of pink sandstone with white veins, cemented with pink mortar, built in the finest of American houseplan tradition. It stands in the town of Medina, from which the building material once received its name. But how many people know of this original tie to the soil?

Cobblestone houses tell their story more vividly. The ever-presence of cobblestones on fields, dirt roads, and gravel pits cannot escape the eye. This unusual building material was one "imported" from Canada by the advancing glacial ice sheet. It has been deposited in great abundance in our area in the glacial till. One of the most conspicuous geological features in this neighborhood formed by the advancing ice sheet are the drumlins, now often opened up and used as gravel pits. There we find glaciated cobblestones, that is, more or less rounded stones, from two-and-a-half to ten inches in diameter. (Smaller stones are called pebbles, larger stones, boulders.) Similar cobblestones are found on the surface of fields, and provided in most cases the building material for the early cobblestone buildings. Much more smoothly rounded than these field cobblestones are those which have been worn down by the action of water. This type is found along Ridge Road West and East, and provides building material of great decorative possibilities. The smoothest of all are the cobbles found along the shore of Lake Ontario. Relatively small in size, they provide some of the finest wall textures and are used primarily in public buildings, and in the more pretentious private homes, with some exceptions made right along the lake shore east of Rochester.

Further reference to the origin of the building material is made on some of the individual labels.

Illustrations: 1. Drumlin. 2. Open gravel pit. 3. Action of water wearing on stones.

Section II

CONSTRUCTION OF COBBLESTONE WALLS

This section describes the difference between "hit-and miss" fieldstone walls and walls in cobblestone masonry. The latter are distinguished by the regularity with which the stones are laid in straight horizontal rows.

Illustrations: Ruin of fieldstone house built in "hit-and miss" technique as compared to an early wall in cobblestone masonry.

Three distinctly different techniques of laying cobblestones are illustrated with photographs of cross-sections of cobblestone walls from ruins.

Of great importance in the construction of a cobblestone wall is the cement. Panel five shows the great resistance of the cement used as compared to the weathering of the soft sandstone cobbles imbedded in it.

Section III

COBBLESTONE TEXTURES

The unique beauty of cobblestone architecture lies in its surface textures. Architectural detail, such as treatment of doors, windows, pediments of gables is much more effectively set off by clapboard or brick. Cobblestone textures tend to distract from it, and so does the color of cobblestone walls, with the exception of the soft red walls along the east shore of the lake. It is to the textures that we have to resort to satisfy our sense of beauty - the textures and the admirable masonry techniques.

Much research is needed to uncover the origin of cobblestone technique. At present, little or nothing can be said about it with absolute centainty. Whatever it is, the beginning of it in this area shows much cruder techniques than a later stage. The earlier settlers had less time for embellishment, less money for help, bigger stones in their fields to get rid of first. Finer techniques developed gradually to the point where textures were secondary in beauty to architechtural detail which becomes more and more predominant. (See Barron House, Geneva). Attempts have been made to date cobblestone houses by their textures. To a certain extent this is possible, but in doing so, the following factors must be taken into consideration:

1. Materials available in the immediate or nearby surroundings.
2. Financial and social status of builder.
3. Available help (women and children plus hired help), and available time.
4. Is the building a private home or a public edifice? The latter are usually of much finer techniques.
5. Last but not least, how interested was the builder in the embellishment of his dwelling?

In the following examples I have, with purpose, selected some of the more striking textures, mainly to arouse interest in this all-important aspect of cobblestone architecture. Since there are almost as many varieties of textures as there are cobblestone houses, any small selection as this one will necessarily remain incomplete.

Illustrations: Eight different textures.

Section IV

MASONRY AND DECORATIVE DETAIL

The decoration of houses is always finer in front than on sides and rear. In cobblestone houses this is not only expressed in the architectural detail, but also in the treatment of textures and masonry refinement. Each area has its own characteristics in this regard, and fine use is made of the inherent qualities of the locally-available building material.

Illustrations:

Panel one: Courses of stones show a reduction by one per corner quoin successively from front to rear.

Panel two: Different colors are used in front and on the side. Finely selected red sandstone is used in front, while the sidewalls show a salt-and-pepper effect.

Panel three: Different masonry patterns appear in front and on the sides.

Panel five: Bands of herringbone pattern or stones of contrasting size are found on Ridge Road West.

Panel six: Colored banding is typical of the Sodus-Alton region.

Section V

FUNCTIONS OF COBBLESTONE ARCHITECTURE

Cobblestone masonry technique has been used for every type of building from farm out-buildings to pretentious homes and to churches. To my knowledge, the following collection represents every known use of cobblestones.

Illustrations:

Store buildings
Blacksmith shop (octagonal)
Insurance office 1844
Cemetery wall and cemetery vault
Quaker Meeting House, Scottsville, 1834
First Baptist Church, Webster, 1957
King Farm, Township of Phelps. - Everybuilding of this farm is built with cobblestones which oviously originated in the fields around it.
School building, Parma, 1847
Polygonal Block at Bouckville, New York, 1850

Section VI

STYLES AND PLANS OF COBBLESTONE HOUSES

Most cobblestone houses of the Rochester area were built during the years between 1820 and 1850. We find very modest dwellings as well as elaborate masions. From a small four-room ground plan to the larger houses, all architectural styles used during this period are employed. Thus, there are houses in the Late Colonial and Early Republican styles; in the Greek Revival, and in the Gothic Revival styles. Predominating in the southern area are the Early Republican houses. East and West of Rochester the Greek Revival style lead. Very few houses are built in the Gothic Revival style. These are found scattered throughout the area. The latest date of a private residence built in cobblestones, to my knowledge, is 1851.

22 Illustrations, arranged by styles of houses.

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