

The Nancy Kimball Cobblestone Home – Part

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There is almost no documentary evidence available that would prove precisely when Elgin's earliest homes were built. Rarely, there are diaries, letters or recollections that will verify construction dates. Thus, we know that James T. Gifford's "Stone Cottage" at 363-65 Prairie Street was built in 1849-50. However, there are almost certainly several other homes still standing in Elgin that are older. Some of them may date to the early-to-mid-1840s, though it is impossible to be much more precise.

Among the oldest homes in Elgin is the Nancy Currier Kimball cobblestone home at 302 West Chicago Street. Based on published histories and recollections, this home was most likely built in 1846. One of six cobblestone structures remaining in Elgin, this 1.5-story and basement home originally had six rooms. The 1-story frame addition along the west side was built sometime between 1913 and 1935, evolving from a small, open porch along the northwest wall in the 1890s, that became an enclosed porch by 1913. There was evidence of a frame west wing of the cobblestone by the 1880s that was razed when the home next door was built in 1890. The home stands on the northwest corner of West Chicago and North Crystal streets, halfway up the hill from the Chicago Street bridge, affording a fine view of the east side of town.

About 90% of all cobblestone buildings in this country are found in a 60-mile radius of Rochester, New York. Construction of the Erie Canal in the Rochester area from about 1820-25 attracted stone masons to build the lock and bridge abutments. When the canal was completed, many of the masons turned to building cobblestone homes. As a building material, stones were cheaper than bricks and were plentiful in the area. Many of Elgin's pioneers emigrated from upstate New York, including James T. Gifford, the city's founder, and Ralph Grow, the stone mason who built the Nancy Kimball cobblestone.

Elgin is believed to have the largest concentration of cobblestone construction in the country outside of the Rochester area. At one time Elgin

had about 20 cobblestone structures, including homes, two churches, a stable and a store. Of the six that remain in Elgin, three are on the west side and all were built for the Kimball family: 302 West Chicago Street (circa 1846), 219 West Highland Avenue (circa 1852; a stable for the Waverly House hotel) and 326-28 Mountain Street (circa 1850; home of Edson Kimball, a second cousin of Samuel and William; chosen as the city's top landmark by Elgin's 1976 Bicentennial Commission). The three on the east side are James T. Gifford's home (363-65 Prairie Street; 1849-50), and homes at 319 DuPage Street (circa mid-to-late-1840s) and 302 Fulton St. (circa 1850).

The durability of cobblestone may be illustrated by a recollection of Irene Solyom Biddle, who grew up in the cobblestone at 326-28 Mountain Street in the 1920s and '30s. Family and friends set about tearing down their old cobblestone carriage house, which was too small for their new automobile. However, after two days of hard work, only a hole was made in one wall. She says, "It took a very long time to knock down the cobblestone, and a lot of hammers and steel mallets bit the dust before the job was finally completed."

Though all of Elgin's cobblestones are among the oldest homes in Elgin, there are a pair of brick homes that may be as old or older: the General William Lynch home at 35 Leonard Street (built by a stone mason named Charles Stevens) and the Asahel Hinsdell home at 443 East Chicago Street (the only Elgin home in the "Historic American Buildings Survey" of 1934).

Nancy Currier Kimball was the matriarch of the Kimball family that claimed and developed most of the west side of Elgin in the mid-1800s. Her husband Joseph, after reconnoitering the area the year before, met Elgin founder James T. Gifford in Chicago in early 1835. They agreed to share the work of building a dam to provide water power for mills. Joseph Kimball and his kin, settling on the west side of the river, would build a saw mill. James Gifford and his kin, settling on the east side of the river, would build a flour mill. In July 1835 Joseph left his brother Jonathan and son Samuel Jewett in Elgin and set out for New Hampshire to get his family. However, he was stricken with cholera and died in Ohio later that month. In 1837 Joseph's widow Nancy, son William Currier and daughter Ruth Ann came to live in Elgin.

The original Kimball homestead was on South Street, between Vine and Jewett streets. Nancy lived there until 1846, when her sons Samuel and William contracted with a stone mason named Ralph Grow to build the

cobblestone home which they presented to her. This property was deeded to Nancy in August 1848 by her son William.

Nancy Currier Kimball was born September 26, 1787, in Concord, New Hampshire to William and Mary (Carter) Currier. She married Joseph Kimball (1783-1835) in 1805 in Plymouth, New Hampshire and they had nine children – two boys and seven girls, though the last-born girl died in infancy. Both boys became mayors of Elgin – Samuel Jewett, from 1856-58, and William Currier, from 1870-71. Nancy died on September 22, 1888, four days short of her 101st birthday.

William Currier Kimball (1806-75), Nancy's first-born, married Caroline Willard (1813-84) in Canada, where he was a merchant, in June 1835. A few weeks later his father Joseph wrote to him, urging him to come to Elgin. Three weeks after writing the letter Joseph died of cholera. William came to Elgin in 1837 and, along with his brother Samuel, claimed much land on Elgin's west side. About 1838 William opened a general store at the northwest corner of State Street and Highland Avenue. In the mid-1840s he established Waverly Mills, a flour mill across State Street from his general store. In 1853 he opened the Waverly House hotel across Highland Avenue from his general store. All three of William's business ventures were successful, though he lost the hotel in the economic crash of 1857. The cobblestone stable behind his hotel still stands at 219 West Highland Avenue. About 1870 he built his own home at 52 North Crystal Street, a once-grand brick mansion that still stands, but was converted to apartments in the mid-1940s. William and Caroline were the parents of seven children, four of whom died young.

Samuel Jewett Kimball (1809-66) married Clarinda Jane Hill (1812-97) in 1834 in New Hampshire and their first child, Joseph Currier, was born in November 1836, the first white male child born in Elgin. The only two earlier white children born in Elgin, Louisa and Charlotte Kimball, were distant relatives of Samuel. Their second child, Walter Hill, born in October 1838, lived long enough to participate in Elgin's Centennial celebration in 1935. Samuel's sterling character, compassion and hospitality are emphasized at length in his biography in the 1888 county history. Samuel was influential in getting the railroad to come through Elgin and to schedule early morning and evening milk trains to Chicago. The railroad made dairy farming profitable, at a time when grain farmers were struggling. Samuel

persuaded many farmers to switch to dairy, and taught them to build milk houses with vats piped from cold springs to keep the milk from spoiling.

To be continued...

Acknowledgements: Mike Alft's books and newspaper articles; *Courier-News* and *Daily Herald* newspaper articles; *Autobiographies of Fox Valley Pioneers* (1981); obituaries; county histories; Kane County Recorder of Deeds; etc.