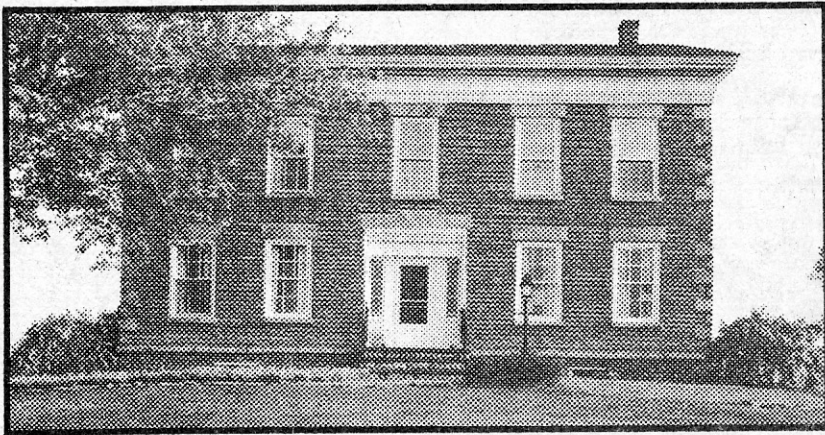


Cobblestone Homes: Charms and Woes



The Cobblestone Society

The 1840's home of Diane and Tom Conroy in New York State has herringbone-patterned stone exterior.

By SEBBY WILSON JACOBSON

ROCHESTER

"PART of the fun of living in a 155-year-old cobblestone house," said Jim Deisenroth of Macedon, N.Y., a village 17 miles southeast of Rochester, "is watching people take pictures of it."

"Some jump out, snap the picture, then peel off," he went on. "Others pretend to turn around in our driveway and take a picture. Only one out of a hundred stops and asks if they can take a picture."

The setting is photogenic — farmland overlooking the Erie Canal — but it is Mr. Deisenroth's house that is special. Its nubby walls have varicolored stones protruding from ridges of sculptured mortar. Against these are limestone corner quoins, lintels and sills.

Ninety percent of the cobblestone structures in the United States are within a 75-mile radius of Rochester, according to Olaf William Shelgren Jr., Cary Lattin and Robert W. Frasch, authors of "Cobblestone Landmarks of New York State," published by the Syracuse University Press in 1978.

More than 700 buildings were created of the prehistoric glacial debris near Lake Ontario and the Finger Lakes between 1825 and 1860. Masons who had worked on the Erie Canal used their skills to transform the bothersome stones in farmers' fields into inexpensive, durable structures. Most of the churches, schools, stores and houses still stand.

Restored dwellings like Mr. Deisenroth's bring out-of-towners into real-estate offices. Even abandoned structures or those corrupted by metal awnings and incongruous additions are snapped up. Most area realty dealers agree that a cobblestone house will cost about 10 percent more than a brick or frame house of equivalent age, size, condition and location.

Location can be one weak point. Many cobblestone houses were built beside modest country roads that have become major highways. Another, homeowners agree, is that energy, time and handyman skills or money are required to attend to the special needs of the houses.

A leaky roof is the bane of cobblestone structures. Water seeps into the mortar, freezes, thaws and eventually warps a wall. This happened to the distinctive herringbone-patterned 1840's home of Diane and Tom Conroy

in Albion. Until they can afford a mason and an architect, they have propped the bulging back wall with a beam.

If kept dry, the dense stone walls are a blessing. They grace the house with its most distinctive interior feature: 16-to-24-inch-deep window embrasures. The deep reveals and the doorways are often trimmed with decorative panels to match hand-crafted molding.

The stone and mortar walls are amazingly soundproof and are natural insulators, requiring about two months to heat up in the summer and to cool down in the winter. But because additional insulation cannot be blown into solid masonry walls, homeowners must "essentially build a house within a house," said Don Weber of Henrietta, who lives in an 1820's cobblestone house. He is in the process of doing just that, furring out the inside with wood and stapling fiberglass insulation to the studs.

The walls also make picture hanging and electrical updating difficult. Many occupants have learned to live without wall outlets, relying on fixtures wired through the wooden ceilings.

Preserving the cobblestone exterior presents the most difficult challenge. The earliest buildings have solid walls of large stones of irregular size and shape set in roughly mortared courses. Round or oval lake-washed cobblestones nestled in sculptured mortar distinguish the middle period. Later structures often have a mechanically precise veneer of small matching stones defined by beaded mortar. Whatever the era, weathering and settling create cracks in the mortar that are difficult to repair inconspicuously.

Early masons developed mortar formulas of lime (allowed to slake in a pit for six months) mixed with coarse sand from the building site. Ralph Antetomaso, a mason who has repaired over 20 cobblestone buildings in 25 years, uses a combination of Portland cement, sand, lime and mason's coloring to get just the right shade and consistency. The trick, he said, is to "stick the stone into the mortar quick, then leave it, like setting a chocolate chip into icing." The mortar rises around the stone, creating an excess that he trowels into V-shaped ridges, then roughs with a wire brush to match the pattern and texture of the original.

To encourage such painstaking renovation, the Cobblestone Society was formed in 1960. It also operates a six-building museum complex in Childs, 27 miles west of Rochester, that is open to the public during the summer.

Sebbi Wilson Jacobson lives in the middle of cobblestone country and writes about interior design.

TEXT CORRECTION BY ROBERT W. FRASCH Dec. 23, 1982

1. paragraph 5. Very few of the documented cobblestone building masons had any connection with the construction of the Erie Canal. This is an often repeated generalization by the press and now widely accepted as a fact. It is 20th century folklore.
2. paragraph 13. In America, natural lime mortar was slaked or prepared for use in just one or two days. The six months' concept was used commonly only in parts of Italy.