

SOMERSET'S COBBLESTONE HOUSE

by Lisa Knight
Somerset field editor

In an effort to give something back to the community, the Company will let the Somerset Historical Society have use of NYSEG's historic Babcock cobblestone house at Somerset Station.

Wally Coates, the society's spokesman, says the organization plans an annual Somerset Day at the home that sits amidst the hum of a highly technical, coal-fired generating plant.

NYSEG acquired the Babcock and another cobblestone house near the shore of Lake Ontario, when it purchased the land to build the plant.

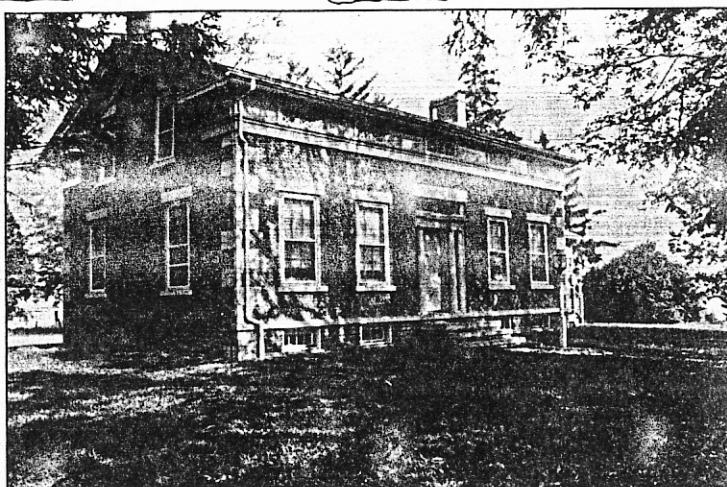
Under terms of an agreement between NYSEG and the historical society, the society will maintain the structure, built about 1848 by Jeptha Babcock. Coates says that, in connection with Somerset Day, the society hopes eventually to have open-house tours of the home with mid-1800's exhibits relating to the region. The Babcock house may also be used by small groups for meetings and conferences, he notes.

Jeptha Babcock came to Niagara County from the Albany area because land was available, and became active in local affairs. He was supervisor of the Town of Somerset in 1839 and became a state assemblyman in 1851.

In clearing and plowing farmland, pioneer farmers considered cobblestones an annoyance and threw them aside in a pile. When the Erie Canal was completed in 1825, the unemployed canal masons took great interest in these piles of stones. Thus began an extraordinary era of American architecture.

To qualify as an authentic cobblestone structure, stones had to be of uniform size and set in straight rows. Customarily, a home was built of field stones with a cobblestone facade. An insulating air space separated the two walls, which were often 18 inches or more thick.

As a rule, the smaller, more perfect stones were used on the front of the structure while slightly

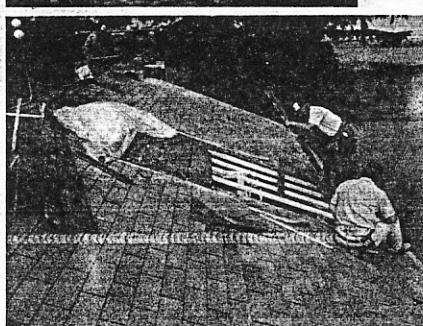


The restored Jeptha Babcock house at Somerset Station. It is one of 50 cobblestone structures in Niagara County.

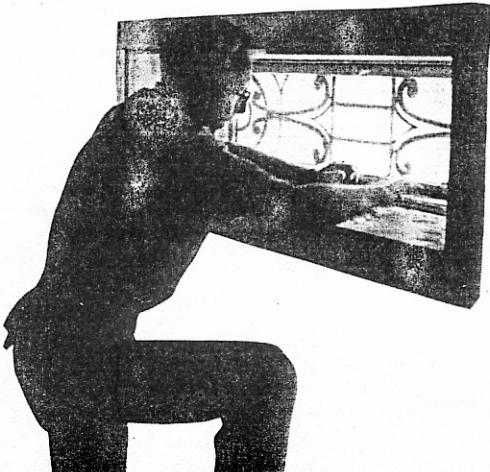
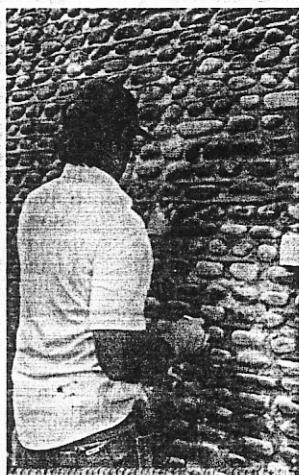
larger stones were put on the sides. Even larger stones comprised the rear walls.

These structures are categorized by historians as belonging to the early, middle or late period of cobblestone construction, with the late-period structures having more elaborate but tastefully built walls.

The Babcock House is described as a two-story Greek revival type of the middle period with equal-sized stones on the front and sides; limestone quoins, lintels, sills and watertable; and massive frieze and gable returns. Wrought iron grills protect the second-floor belly windows. On some Greek revival homes, small windows some one-third to one-half the height of a normal window are located under the eaves, and to look out, it was necessary to lay on the floor on one's belly.



Craftsmen restoring the historic cobblestone house (clockwise): repointing the exterior, repairing interior walls, mending the roof and scraping away years of old paint from one of the "belly" windows.



Of the 600 cobblestone buildings in the U.S., 500 are in New York State and 50 in Niagara County. The prime period for cobblestone construction, now a lost art, was from 1825 to the Civil War. When the Babcock home was originally built it was valued at \$1,200, a considerable sum for those days. Considering the three to four-year construction time in the 1800's, building such a home today would cost an enormous amount of money.

Also, methods of construction and the special mortar mix created by the masons were jealously guarded trade secrets which more often than not went with them to their graves.

The second cobblestone structure, the deteriorated Morgan Van Wagoner house, was located just east of the Somerset Station's main access road in the area where the plant's material handling building now sits. Representatives of NYSEG, the Federal Historic Preservation Committee and the New York

State Historical Society determined that this house had been altered so drastically that it had lost its historic value. Because of the alterations and its disrepair, the VanWagoner house was deemed a possible safety hazard.

Advertisements were placed in national publications to find parties interested in relocating it. Two criteria had to be met: the parties had to have a definitive restoration plan, and they were to be responsible for removing it from the site. Some 143 inquiries were received, but since removing the cobblestone house was estimated to cost \$500,000, no one followed through.

The VanWagoner house had to be demolished to accommodate construction of Somerset Station. NYSEG officials, therefore, decided to fully restore the Babcock house. Restoration was accomplished with the assistance of Dorothy Francis, a leading authority on historically significant buildings and their restoration. She worked closely with and shared the interest of Olaf Shelgren, head of the Cobblestone Society of New York State, himself an author on cobblestone structures and their architecture.

While renovation was underway, workers removing newer walls where the original kitchen had been, found the remains of a brick bread oven. They carefully unearthed and removed 15 bricks and sent them, along with photos taken before removal, to the Genesee Country Museum in Mumford. From this evidence and with knowledge of construction techniques of the period, museum historians produced a drawing of what the oven most likely looked like in its original condition. From this the oven was reconstructed in the house.

A concerted effort was made to restore the Babcock house faithfully to the way it probably was when Jeptha Babcock and his family lived there in 1848. Mrs. Francis and other workers stripped layers of wallpaper off walls until they were able to extract a piece of original wallcovering. From this a search was made until wallpaper was found that was a close match. Lighting fixtures, acquired from an artisan in Massachusetts, are handcrafted replicas of authentic 19th century pieces. They are made of wrought iron with lights that resemble candles. The craftsman covered the wiring with a sleeve, then dripped wax on it to make it look as if candles had run. There is no exposed wiring on any of the fixtures.

In addition, an artist from Pavilion antiqued the woodwork with a specially prepared "wash" to produce the appearance of aged paint. The color scheme of homes in that period would probably be considered quite drab by today's standards. Floors, woodwork and cabinetry were painted a pale gray, called dove or gull gray.

More information on cobblestone structures may be obtained from the Niagara County historian's office in the county courthouse in Lockport, or from the Cobblestone Society in Albion.

