

# Bethinking of Old Orleans

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A MYTH DISPROVED

This week I'd like to take for this column an article which appeared in "The Cobblestoner," (Vol. XI, No. 1) which is the newsletter of the Cobblestone Society. The following story was prepared by Delia Robinson, Research Director of the Cobblestone Resource Center.

"Let's start the New Year off right by eliminating the long-accepted and widely-spread story of "how the Irish built the Erie Canal and, when unemployed, traveled Western New York offering their skills to build cobblestone buildings." Through research conducted over the years by the Cobblestone Society together with information provided by Robert Frasc from the Canal Museum Associates in Syracuse this story can be completely discredited.

The vast majority of the cobblestone masons documented to date were neither Irish nor Canal masons. The few masons who built cobblestones and had some connection with the Canal were local farmers and settlers who earned extra money by helping construction through their local area, and were primarily men of New England origina.

As reported by the "Canal Packet, The Newsletter of the Canal Museum Associates" (Vol. III, No. 2), Mr. Richard Wright, Director of the Onondaga Historical Association, was asked by the U.S. Immigration Service to prove the long-accepted folklore that the Irish built the Erie. After exhaustive research Mr. Wright found only "three Irish who worked on the original ditch." The Erie was built between 1817 and 1825, yet Irish immigration did not begin until the mid 1830's and did not reach great proportions until the 1840's.

This is where the myth begins. In 1836 it was found necessary to enlarge the Erie and the contractors took advantage of the abundant new cheap Irish labor. The newspapers of this period were filled with colorful stories of brawling Irishmen working on the Canal. In addition, many of these workers told succeeding generations "how they dug the Erie." Thus the misunderstanding began. The colorful stories of the Irish workers, often based in fact, actually grew from the work on the first enlargement of the Canal rather than the construction of the original Erie. By the time those workers were unemployed cobblestone construction was an established fact in Western New York."

As county historian, I would like to add my own thoughts to further prove the above. When we look at the overall church history in Orleans County, we can discern a lot about our ethnic backgrounds. For instance, we commonly know that a greater percentage of Irish are Roman Catholic. When we look at when the Roman Catholic Churches were established locally, we find that St. Joseph's in Albion was formed in 1852 and that St. Mary's in Holley was not established until the mid 1860's. This was a good thirty years after a number of mainline protestant churches were established in the county. St. Mary's in Medina has its beginnings dating back to the mid 1830's but this is all past the time of "Clinton's Ditch."

My point is, if there had been a large population of Catholics locally, they certainly would have established themselves in congregations. Further, we have to remember that the Irish Famine did not occur until the 1840's. It was then that the Irish immigration started on a large scale and it is obvious to me that it is mirrored in the establishment of local Catholic Churches.

My thanks to Delia Robinson for correcting this long-standing myth of "How the Irish Built the Canal". Indeed, the Irish were the leading work force when the canal was enlarged but they were not responsible for the original Erie Canal construction which was completed through Orleans County in 1824. The first cobblestone structures locally, were not built until the early 1830's. Most were constructed in the 1840's and we know by then that some of our local masons were only in their twenties, making them much too young to have worked on the canal.