

Bethinking of Old Orleans

C.W.Lattin County Historian

Vol. XII

7-6-90

No. 27

COBBLESTONE FOLK TALES FACT OR FANCY

"If a man is sufficiently imaginative to produce evidence in support of a lie he might just as well speak the truth at once."

Oscar Wilde

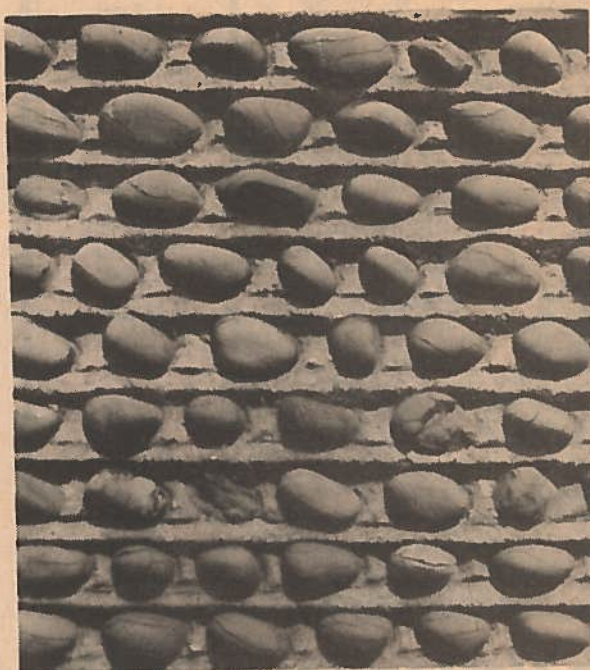
It's often much more difficult to write about something than to do it. Anybody can make history! But to write about it so that it is accurate, takes great skill. Old stories, myths and legends although intriguing, inventive and sometimes amusing, can be quite misleading. So it is with cobblestone buildings which were erected in our area during the second quarter of the 19th century. The first published research on this subject did not occur locally until 1916 in an article by Marc Cole which appeared in the Country Gentleman. It was too late as he was not able to get first hand information directly from a cobblestone mason as they were dead. Rather, he took second and third hand information. When more serious research began in the 1940's it was in the form of looking at the existing cobblestone buildings. In visual terms they produced evidence, yet in audible terms remained silent. In more recent years researchers have found diaries, ledgers, account books and articles from periodicals dating to the 1840's and '50's, that now give us more factual information on cobblestone buildings.

In his first book on the subject in 1944, Carl F. Schmidt spoke of these structures as Cobblestone Architecture. When he published his second book in 1966 he referred to these structures as Cobblestone Masonry. Indeed, he recognized his first terminology was erroneous. Actually, cobblestone buildings were built in various architectural styles including: Federal, Greek Revival, Gothic Revival, Italianate and some were simply utilitarian or lacking a specific style. In other words, without knowing it, we sometimes create our own myths. Therefore, to be correct, it's cobblestone masonry not architecture.

But the myths go on. For instance, "Ox blood was used to color the mortar." Fact or fancy? Well, it's fancy! Cobblestone masons did not to our knowledge color their mortar with ox blood. The mortar was simply locally burned lime mixed with sand. Originally many cobblestone masonry buildings would have appeared with very light, almost white colored mortar when new. As the lime in the mortar eroded, the color of the sand has become more predominate. If colorants were ever used, research has not yet proved what. "Cobblestone masons were secretive about their mortar mixes." Fact or Fancy? Well this is fancy also! It was no secret how to make soft lime mortar. Brick and quarried stone buildings used the same kind of mortar. In 1838 The Genesee Farmer and Gardner's Journal published the recipe.

"Cobblestone masons were secretive about how they laid up their walls." Fact or fancy? This too, is fancy! This myth began because cobblestone masons covered up their work temporarily, not to keep people from seeing what they were doing, but so the sun wouldn't dry out the mortar too quickly. People going by obviously just didn't understand there was a pragmatic reason for this and assumed otherwise. "The pointed horizontal mortar mouldings between the rows of stone were put on to deflect Indian arrows." Fact or fancy? This one is total fabrication! What few Indians who traveled through this area during the early years of cobblestone construction, were peaceable. Various designs in the mortar were simply for aesthetics.

"All cobblestone buildings are made of stones picked up at the lakeshore." Fact or fancy? This is false! Most all of the early cobblestone structures made use of field stone in their entirety except quarried trim. However, most of the later cobblestone buildings used lake-washed stone for outer or exterior veneer with the inner thick rubble wall made of field stone or perhaps in a few cases quarried stone. "Having such thick masonry walls must really insulate." Fact or Fancy? This common



remark is totally inaccurate. A twenty-inch stone wall, although solid has practically zero insulative quality. Indeed, stone houses are cooler in the summer only because of dampness. But get a warm spell for two weeks and the cobblestone house is just as hot as any other. In the winter they stay cold.

"Cobblestone masons built several cobblestone buildings in an area at the same time so they could go from one to another because the mortar didn't set up quickly." Fact or fancy? Although this sounds quite plausible, it's not necessarily true. Actually, the mortar sets up quite quickly. We do know that approximately four rows of stones could be laid up at a time. Otherwise, it would squish out. With careful observation of a cobblestone building, you can see the overlap of joints, usually about four rows above one another. In constructing the cobblestone church at Childs, the building was begun in April and completed in October, all in the fair weather season of 1834. These masons just were not dilly-dallying around at other locations.

And finally, "Cobblestone buildings were built by masons who worked on the canal." Fact or fancy? Once again, this is fancy. It makes a nice story but other than hearing or even reading this misnomer, no one has been able to prove its legitimacy. Some cobblestone masons who were in their twenties during the 1840's were just too young to have worked on the canal which was completed in 1825. This also carries over to "the Irish who dug the canal and then built these structures." Legends such as these die hard. Not to belittle the Irish, as indeed, they did work on the canal when it was widened and deepened beginning in 1836. Immigration records begin to show an influx of people from Ireland starting in this decade. Perhaps that's when the legend began. For the most part, cobblestone buildings were built by local Yankee or English-descended masons. Many were professional contractors.

Legends, myths, folk tales and fabrications, for whatever reason, add color to our own local heritage. In many cases that's all we have. But before we assume that all these tales are completely true, we must continue to delve into our past. If anyone can prove any of the so-called legends mentioned herein, please respond to the Cobblestone Resource Center. It is anxious to acquire documented information in the form of old letters, ledgers, diaries or publications from the 1830's, 40's and 50's or any written proof. But please, no hearsay. The folk tales, although charming, are not the documented evidence we need.