

COBBLESTONE HOUSE TOUR

10-1-09

BY C.W. LATTIN
Orleans County historian

In celebrating the Bicentennial of the Town of Gaines, the Cobblestone Society will host a tour of homes on Oct. 17. The self-driving tour will include five cobblestone residences in the Town of Gaines, four of which will be open for viewing.

The Orleans Chapter DAR House will also be open, in addition to the three National Historic Landmark cobblestone structures at the Cobblestone Museum in Childs.

Ticket/tour booklets including maps will go on sale at 11 a.m. the day of the tour in the Cobblestone Museum Church at 14394 Ridge Road (Route 104 at Route 98).

The private residences and DAR will be open from 1 to 5 p.m. that day.

As director of the Cobblestone Museum, I, will give a brief talk on cobblestone masonry construction from 12:45 to 1 p.m. in the historic cobblestone church.

The five cobblestone homes on the tour were all at one time farm residences. Some are made of field stone, others are a combination of field stone and lake washed cobbles.

The definition of a cobblestone is: *A stone which you can pick up with one hand.* That of course will vary somewhat in size. "Cob," the root of cobblestone from Middle English, means a small rounded lump.

These structures were generally built during the second quarter of the 19th century. The exterior walls are a veneer of graded cobbles usually covering a rubble wall made up of larger field stones. This was all put together by local masons using soft lime mortar.

Generally, cobblestone

Vol. XXXI, No. 40

Bethinking of Olde Orleans

rural areas because farmers had access to the stone and had a means by which to haul it using an ox cart.

Legend has suggested that masons working on the Erie Canal turned their skills to this form of building, once the canal was finished in 1825.

This legend may be partially true; however, Cyrus Witheral, a local mason in Gaines born there in 1817, is documented for a number of cobblestone homes in Gaines built during the 1840s and '50s. Surely he had nothing to do with the canal. Recently, his headstone at Otter Creek Cemetery in Gaines has been marked with a bronze plaque indicating that he was a master of cobblestone construction, including buildings in the herringbone pattern.

Cobblestone homes must have been status symbols, as many were built for more prosperous farmers.

This form of masonry was certainly a regional fad, as there are about 900 cobblestone buildings in New York state. Most of these are within a 75-mile radius of Rochester. There is a total of about 1,200 in North America, mostly clustered around the Great Lakes.

By the mid-19th century, this fad met its demise, as it was labor intensive, since no two cobbles were exactly alike. Consequently, we all know the younger generation does not always appreciate what the older generation highly prized. Besides, bricks were much easier to stack up as