

UPSTATE

PEOPLE • PLACES • PLEASURES

Cobblestone Country

A unique form of architecture rose from the rock piles of the Rochester region

GIFT GUIDE

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Virginia Kildoo runs Tinker's Dam, an antiques and folk art shop, at her cobblestone home on Route 98 in Albion.

STONE HOUSES 4 THE ROUGH-HEWN BEAUTY OF these upstate idiosyncracies makes them hard acts to follow. Karen Mitchell took the cover photo of the cobblestone house of Barbara and Peter Peck, which is featured in this issue's Interiors column.

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HOME IS A ROCK PILE

*Our region's cobblestone buildings
were made from what the glaciers left behind*

By Chuck Lyons

Cobblestones. Like lilacs, dairy farming and George Eastman's dreams, they are firmly rooted in the soil of upstate New York. And like all these, they altered the landscape.

Only about 800 cobblestone buildings were ever erected, says Delia Robinson, research director of the Cobblestone Society, and 700 of them are within 75 miles of Rochester.

"It blossomed here," she says.

The buildings are local originals, and the people who live in them, when they are aware of their homes' uniqueness at all, praise them.

"This is a fine home," says John Jack, who with his wife, Martha, moved out of Rochester to a Farmington cobblestone 10 years ago. The Jacks had shopped specifically for a cobblestone home before settling on the 1842 farmhouse they now occupy.

"We always wanted to own one," he says. "I wished I'd moved here 40 years ago."

Ingeborg Hume, an elementary school teacher in Albion, about 35 miles west of Rochester, also looked for a cobblestone when she moved to Albion 18 years ago. She had lived in one for 10 years before that, she says, and wanted to live in another.

"I think they're lovely."

But many cobblestone owners are more like Bill Lattin, director of the Cobblestone Society, who grew up in an



The Farmington home of John and Martha Jack was constructed in 1842.

Orleans County cobblestone. He was in junior high school, he says, before he realized his home was different from those of his friends.

In general, people who live in cobblestones say the buildings are just like other houses, and when they get together with each other they don't talk about cobblestones, according to Ruth Spencer, who lives with her husband in a cobblestone house in the town of Clarendon, in eastern Orleans County.

It's people who don't live in cobblestones who want to talk about them, she says.

They and people from outside the area see them differently, says Robinson, a native of Pennsylvania who can remember her own parents' excitement when

they first saw this area's cobblestone buildings.

Now she lives in one; and when you do that, she says, "there will probably be people in the front yard taking a picture of it, especially people from out of state."

The buildings are part of this area, and they are here, Robinson says, because the raw materials are here, because the craft settled here, and because they filled a local need.

"It was a way to use up a nuisance," she says.

When the last of the great Ice Age glaciers retreated northward 12,000 years ago, it left behind chunks of sandstone and limestone bro-

ken loose from the prevailing bedrock as well as pieces of harder stone, like gneiss and quartzite, dragged down from Canada.

Among these were cobblestones.

What is a cobblestone? Traditionally, a cobblestone is any stone that can be picked up with one hand. A stone that can be picked with thumb and forefinger is a pebble, and anything too big for one hand is a boulder.

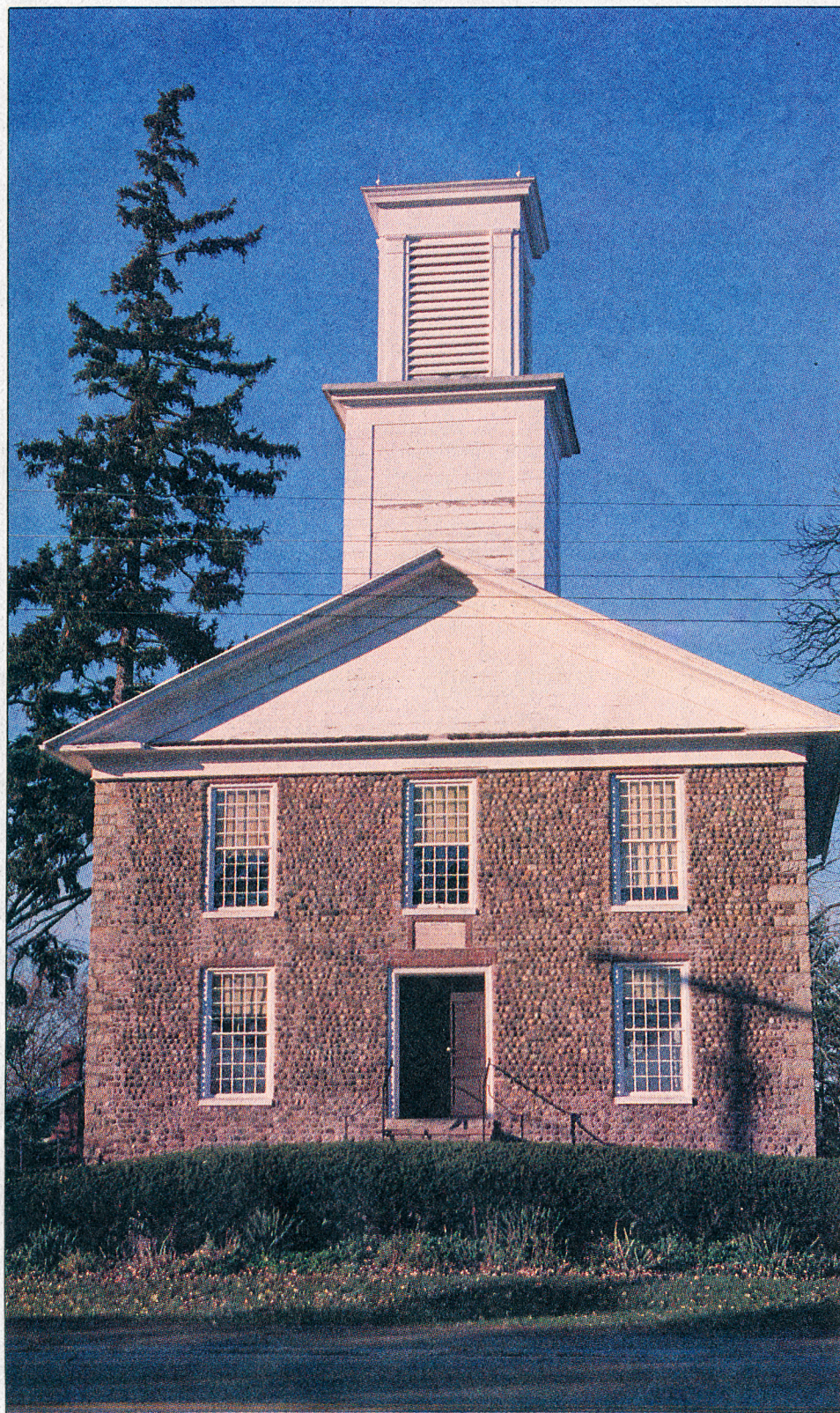
When the first white settlers moved into this area after the Revolutionary War, their main concerns were to clear the forest, plant crops and survive. The stones that had lain here since the glacier made that work harder. The fields had to be cleared of them, and the stones disposed of.

Cobblestone building, which flowered here roughly from 1830 to the beginning of the Civil War, provided something to do with these stones.

And besides the stones, the ingredients of a "soft mortar" — lime (made from limestone), sand and water — were also found in abundance.

There are some early 19th-century buildings in England that greatly resemble the cobblestone structures of upstate New York. These "flint buildings," as they are called, are composed of rows of small stones with mortar shaped between the courses much as it is shaped in New York buildings.

The English buildings are the ancestors of our cobblestones, Robinson says, but the buildings here were not put up by masons left unemployed by the completion of the Erie Canal, as has long been believed.



Universalists built the cobblestone church in Childs, Orleans County, in 1834. The stones were gathered from nearby fields and brought to the site by ox cart.

She has been able to trace the builders of several cobblestones and has determined that they were not masons who had come here to work on the canal. Several were masons who had been in this area before the canal came through, she says, and in other cases buildings were put up by people who were not masons at

all. Sometimes a farmer who might have worked on the canal simply built one for himself.

The craft came here, she speculates, through engineers who had traveled to England to study canals and canal building and had learned the cobblestone craft from observing the flint buildings



The Ward House, above, was built in Childs about 1840. It's now owned by the Cobblestone Society, of which Delia Robinson, below, is research director.



to be found there.

When they returned, one or two copied the style they had seen. Others copied the houses the first engineers had built, and then those houses in turn were copied.

The style had caught on.

In the early days, the stones used were picked up in the fields or from piles formed over the years at the edges of fields. But as the art progressed, more attention was paid to matching the stones in size and color. At this stage, stones were often hauled from the lakeshore in wagons. These "watershed" stones, which lakeside entrepreneurs sometimes sold for 50 cents a wagonload,

were smoother than the field stones that had been used earlier.

The cobblestones generally were used to face a wall that had already been built from larger, more coarse field stones. These "rubble walls" were often as much as 18 inches thick, and little thought was given to the type or size of the stones used in constructing them. The decorative facade was then applied with the cobblestones.

About 90 percent of all the cobblestone buildings in North America are close to Rochester, but there also are smaller concentrations in Wisconsin, Illinois and Michigan as well as in Ontario, Canada. Most of these structures are believed to have been built by upstate New Yorkers who followed the early western migration and took the craft of cobblestone building with them.

Many Midwestern cobblestones are found around places with familiar upstate New York names — Farmington and Geneseo, Ill.; Rochester, Mich.; Ontario and Palmyra, Wis.

One author has even reported the existence of a cobblestone building in Colorado that is known to have been built by a mason from Rochester.

Closer to home, Wayne County has about 150 documented buildings, while Ontario, Monroe and Orleans counties all have about a hundred.

Most of the buildings today — the majority of which were originally farmhouses — are in the hands of private individuals, according to Lattin, who is the curator of the Cobblestone Society

Continued

COBBLESTONES

Museum and the Orleans County historian as well as the director of the Cobblestone Society.

And they are sought after.

There is a certain appeal to cobblestone houses, says Kathy Selso, who manages a Wayne County branch office of a real estate firm, and that appeal makes them worth more money.

"I'm partial to them myself," she says.

Selso was reluctant to put a value on that appeal, but officials of the Cobblestone Society estimate that a cobblestone house is worth about 10 percent more than a comparable house made of a different material.

Selso did say, however, that the houses tend to come on the market fairly often.

Most of the buildings are in private hands. Few are on the National Register of Historic Places or under the protection of any local or state law. Their owners can simply demolish them if they wish.

That still happens occasionally.

In the 1940s, Lattin says, a man in the Orleans County town of Murray blew up a cobblestone house he owned to protest what he considered too high a tax assessment. And once in a while one is torn down, although not very often anymore, Lattin says.

Robinson lives with her husband and four children in a cobblestone that forms part of an unusual row of such structures near the intersection of Routes 104 and 98 in Childs, Orleans County, about 25 miles west of Rochester. Three of the

buildings, an 1834 cobblestone church, an 1840 house and an 1849 school building, are part of the Cobblestone Society's holdings.

The society's museum is in the basement of the church, and schoolchildren come every year to tour the one-room schoolhouse and occupy the old desks for an hour or so. The Cobblestone Society also has several other buildings at the Route 98-Route 104 intersection that serve as local history museums and exhibits.

But most of New York's cobblestone buildings are not museums. They are homes filled day-to-day with the laughter of children and the noise of an ordinary household. Most owners say they are proud of their cobblestone homes and like them.

Jack says he gets a sense of history from his Farmington cobblestone, and he has done everything he can to preserve it.

"I hope it lasts forever," he says.

Robinson says simply that she likes the feel of hers, and Hume talks about her house's charm.

Cobblestone houses stay cooler in summer, their owners say, and the thick walls help insulate them in winter. Most owners also like the deep windowsills provided by the thick walls. They are ideal for plants or even for sitting in the sun to read.

Though Selso, the real estate agent, echoed a popular belief that cobblestone houses are harder to heat than more conventional buildings, cobblestone owners insist that isn't so.

A cobblestone is no harder to heat than any old house, Robinson says. And Hume of Albion says she heats her home with wood and a fireplace insert.

"I have a furnace," she says, "but I don't use it."

If a cobblestone is drafty, it is probably because cracks have developed or because there are leaks around doorways and windows. The original builders

of these houses did not work to make them airtight as today's builders do.

Robinson remembers helping a neighbor remove the window casing in a cobblestone to find a gap between the tops of the stones and the edge of the wood used to build the window frame. The gaps are what cause drafts.

In the older cobblestone houses, she says, plaster was applied directly to the inside of the rubble wall. But in later models a false wall was built with an air space between it and the rubble wall. That false wall allows moisture to escape, she says, and helps insulate the building.

It also has made it easier for later generations to install electrical wiring. "It's very difficult to put an electrical outlet in a stone wall," she says.

That problem is solved in houses with the false wall and those that have had drywall put up in recent years; the wiring can be run behind that. But in old cobblestones, such as Spencer's, the electrical outlets are often put in the floor with the wiring run below.

The problems of electrical outlets and the leaks around openings are easily fixed.

A more serious problem is acid rain.

This airborne pollution, believed to come from Midwestern power plants, is brought to earth in the East and is, among other things, eating at the soft mortar of the cobblestones.

In houses that have been exposed to a good deal of acid rain, such as those in Canada, Robinson says, you can touch the mortar between the stones and it will crumble under your fingers.

Getting this pollution damage — or even ordinary cracks — repaired can be difficult.

Modern cement cannot be used; the buildings have to be fixed with the old-time mortar. Using modern "hard" cement will just aggravate the damage, Robinson says, because the "soft" and "hard" mortars will pull away from each other, making new cracks or enlarging

those already there. But it's difficult to find a mason who knows how to make and apply the old mortar and is willing to spend the necessary time.

One man who attended a Cobblestone Society workshop on repairs became so entranced by this vanishing craft, however, that he quit his job and is devoting himself full-time to cobblestone repair work. He uses "dug" sand, procured locally, Robinson says, and hydrated lime, believed to be the closest thing to the lime that pioneers made in limestone kilns.

A lot of people are willing to tackle these problems because they love old houses, especially cobblestones, Robinson says.

"People in general want to see them saved."

The structures are special.

"No two buildings are the same," Robinson says. "They were built by hand by a creative individual who was experimenting with a craft, with the way light hits a building, with decorations in the mortar, and with what size stones were used."

In the 1980s, people are preservation-minded. They are looking for historic buildings like cobblestones and are buying them to keep them from being lost, are caring for them and maintaining them, and are learning to love them.

"People feel they have something unique if they have a cobblestone," Robinson says.

CHUCK LYONS is a free-lance writer who lives in Palmyra.

Editor's Note: Pages 6 and 7 have been merged to consolidate the article, eliminating advertisements in order to match the appearance of the other pages. The article skipped over page 3.



James Deisenroth in his Palmyra home, built in 1827.

INTERIORS

Historic home



Every so often, strangers actually knock on Barbara and Peter Peck's front door in Macedon and announce, "I've always wanted to look inside a cobblestone house."

The pushy types don't get their wish, but the Pecks understand the curiosity. They're originally from Sparrow Bush, N.Y., and until a year ago they lived in "a tract house" in Fairport.

"We wanted to live in an old home with space around us. And when our two kids, Mark and Lara, went off to college, we found this place," says Peter, manager of customer support for the Information Products Division of Xerox Corp.

Their home, which sits on six acres, is known as Bullis House. It was built in 1839 and is on the National Register of Historic Places.

The 2,400-square-foot home has a spacious plan around a generous center hallway. The floors are origi-

nal hardwood, and the walls are 19 inches thick and display the original windows. The master bedroom, dining room and family room all have fireplaces.

The large family room and kitchen is where the Pecks hang out. It is decorated with Peter's collection of antique lunch pails, including one whose patent was owned by his great grandfather. He whips up Italian and French dishes for guests. And Barbara, who works for Travel Flair, creates the desserts. On evenings alone, the Pecks dine off snack trays in front of the tube.

The room opens out onto an attractive herb garden that Peter put in last spring. "I took some ideas from a place in Charleston, S.C., and drew up the plans. Like all changes to a landmark home, they had to be approved by the Landmark Society," he says.

Everywhere there's an ambiance of times past. But no, they have no ghosts.

—SABEEHA H. JOHNSON