

Current Cobblestone Buildings in Seneca County

by Seneca County Historian Walter Gable

Revised November 2019

There are at least fifteen cobblestone structures still in use in Seneca County today. Using an Ice Age residue of glacially-rounded native stones, pioneer craftsmen in the middle third of the nineteenth century perfected a form of folk art that was without precedent in America.¹ This cobblestone craft that developed in this greater Rochester area flourished, spread and died out within less than half a century. Nevertheless, it left its stamp permanently on this region. According to Rich and Sue Freeman, who wrote the book *Cobblestone Quest* in 2005, it holds a place in history as the last generation of completely hand-built houses.²



The Woodworth Cobblestone House, 936 East Tyre Road, town of Tyre, was built in 1844. It consists of a two-story main section with a one-and-a-half story wing to the west side. The basement has a fieldstone foundation and an old curved brick baking oven built into the chimney. The walls are a foot and a half thick and the cobbles themselves are random in color and size.³

The Lay Cobblestone House, 1175 Old School House Road, town of Tyre, was built by Hiram Lay. The cobblestone barn just across the road to the north was demolished when the Montezuma Wildlife Refuge acquired the property. The cupola from the barn was placed at some point on the roof of the house itself. The one-story porch at the entryway adds a Victorian note to the front of the house. There is a brick smokehouse on the rear slope, and the house has an original bake oven built into an inside chimney wall.⁴



The Seekell Cobblestone House, 1262 Gravel Road, town of Tyre, was built by early residents named Seekell. The house has wide floorboards, hand-cut beams, and hand-laid foundations. The old door at the original front of the house has nine panes. Once a double house, it has an open stair at one side of the house and closed and curved stair at the opposite end. Since the house

was constructed in two phases, there are many walls now inside that were originally outside. An unusual feature of the windows is the trim on the inside of the windows which tapers inward as it

approaches the ceiling, so that the sill or lower part measures thirty inches but the windows narrow to twenty-four inches at the top.⁵

The two-story five bay cobblestone house at 1229 Birdsey Road, town of Junius, was built in the 1830s or 1840s of Federal style. It perfectly illustrates typical construction methods of the time, and was built by three different workmen. The back was done by an apprentice, with large stones set in lines, which were far from straight. A journeyman then built the sides, with smaller stones and straighter courses. Then the master mason would build the front of the house using the smallest stones and presenting the house's most pleasing face to the road. There is a dirt floor in the basement, which once had a baking oven as part of the fireplace system, and twin chimneys on the north and south sides. The house has walls twenty-four inches thick. There is a hand-dug well, a milk house, and two barns.⁶



Tragically, this house was destroyed by fire in January 2018. Only the walls remain and they are only somewhat stabilized with wood studs. The owners simply lacked the finances to rebuild the cobblestone house, so they have built a new one-story home just north of the cobblestone. They hope that someone will want to acquire the cobblestone structure and rebuild it as bed and breakfast, as the town of Junius currently does not have any bed and breakfast.

The Graves Cobblestone House, 1370 Route 318, town of Junius, was built by John Graves in 1837. The two story, three bay house has four rooms downstairs and three rooms and a bath upstairs, with an open staircase to the second floor and a fireplace in the parlor. A wide overhang is formed by the roof and fan windows in the gables.⁷



A cobblestone church can be found at the corner of Stone Church Road and Route 318, 1434 Old State Road Extension, town of Junius. This building was constructed in 1839 as a Methodist Episcopal Church. It has a wide entablature and small returns, with a large oval stained glass window on the gable end. There was once a wooden porch that extended across the front of the church, which had wooden steps on all three sides. The building served as a church until 1969, when it became a private home.⁸

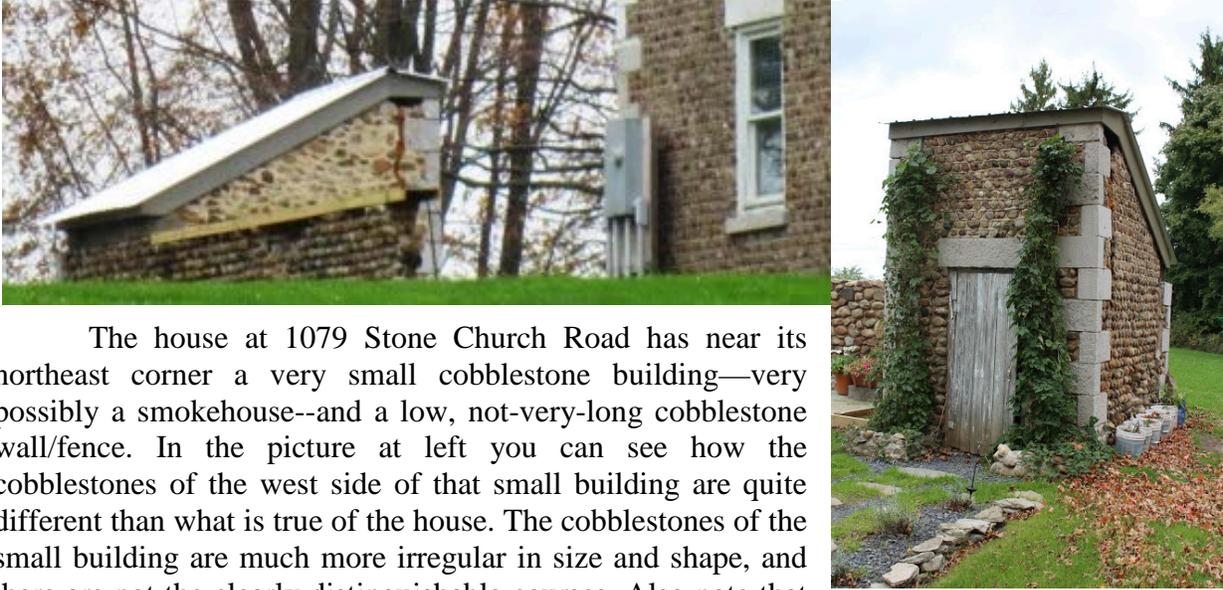


The Holmes House at 1111 Stone Church Road, town of Junius, is Federal style and was built of stones from nearby fields between 1820 and 1824. It is five bays wide and has a long cobblestone addition stretching to the south. All of the windows have stone lintels and sills, the lintels being 10.5 inches thick and the sills 4.5 inches. The courses of the house are four to the quoin, except for those on the north wall of the house and the south wall of the wing where they are three courses to

the quoin. All the quoins are made of squared limestone. There are two fireplaces in this house: a brick fireplace in the family room and a stone fireplace in the living room. Downstairs are seven rooms and a full bath; upstairs are four rooms, and a bathroom. The basement is the same size as the house and a former owner kept his cattle there.⁹

The Gassner Farm cobblestone house at 1079 Stone Church Road, town of Junius, was built in the 1830s-1840s in the Federal style. Because it so closely resembles another cobblestone on the same road to the south, it may have had the same builder. A local resident who lived here as a child reports that the wing projecting to the south housed a wood shed and the wooden door in the upper section of this gable served as the opening where wood was thrown in. For many years the basement was dirt-floored to help keep cool the food stored there.¹⁰





The house at 1079 Stone Church Road has near its northeast corner a very small cobblestone building—very possibly a smokehouse--and a low, not-very-long cobblestone wall/fence. In the picture at left you can see how the cobblestones of the west side of that small building are quite different than what is true of the house. The cobblestones of the small building are much more irregular in size and shape, and there are not the clearly distinguishable courses. Also note that the cobblestones of the small wall/fence are much more similar in appearance to those of the house than the small building. If you then look, however, at the picture at right (courtesy of Richard Palmer) you will note that both the nature of the cobblestones and the courses of the smokehouse appear much more uniform than in the picture at left above. Note also in the picture at right the stones in the wall/fence appear to be much larger and courser on this side of that wall/fence than what is shown in the picture at left above.

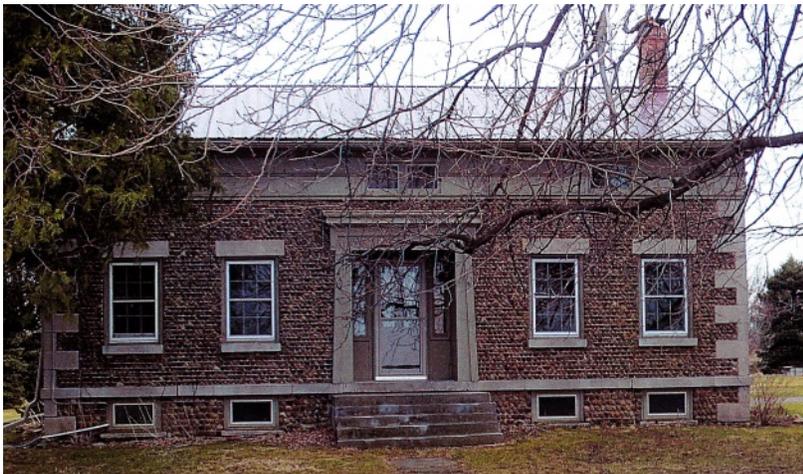
The Carman Cobblestone House, 533 Dublin Road, town of Junius, was built in the Greek Revival style in the 1840s or 1850s. One of the largest in the county, it has a bell on the roof housed in a cobblestone addition. The classical front columns are set on square bases of a different color. An unusual round window in the large pediment faces the road. The house was built by John Carman.¹¹



The Ferry Farm Cobblestone House, 2523 Lower Lake Road, town of Seneca Falls, was constructed in 1830 by Julius Bull and faces Cayuga Lake. Both this house and its property have had an interesting history. The first ferry across Cayuga Lake was operated from a landing here, until a bridge was constructed in 1800. Originally the house was used as a tavern, and it is locally believed to have

served as a station on the Underground Railroad. A symmetrical, five bay house built in the Federal style, it has stone lintels and sills, and there is a semi-elliptical fan window in each of the two gables of the main wing.¹²

A cobblestone house at 5102 Route 89, town of Varick, was built by Julius Bull in 1833. A simple rectangular building, it has four downstairs rooms with a central hall and four rooms upstairs. In the 1980s, the George Souhan family added an extensive three-bedroom wing to the west and an outdoor patio to the south. Three well-preserved barns remain from an earlier time, as does the boathouse across the road.¹³



A cobblestone house at 3333 Ritter Road (corner of Aunkst Road) in the town of Fayette had beautiful quoins at the corners and a distinctive will sill. The front entry is indented. The front side facing Ritter Road has several small frieze windows. The cobblestone house was built in 1843.

The house at 1515 O'Dell Road, town of Junius, is another example of how an original cobblestone home is often added on to make a large residence. Known as the Nearpass House, in this case the additions are wooden. Note that in the original 4-bay house, the entrance is not centered. Cut limestone blocks made up the steps and landing to this entry door. The cobblestone house was built in 1839.





At some point, an owner of the house at 543 Bedell Road, town of Junius, tried to paint the cobbleshones on the east side, which doesn't directly face the road.

This small cobbleshone house is located at 630 Dublin Road in the town of Junius. Current and recent owners have been restoring much of the exterior.



The house shown above is located at 3792 Post Road, town of Fayette. It is a good example of how an original cobbleshone house may undergo significant change over time. The cobbleshone house was originally a one and one-half house, but at some point (prior to 1900 probably) the house was enlarged by raising the roof to add wooden stories. The wooden portion reflects many qualities of building styles that arose later than those used in the original construction. For many years, the "ballroom" on the top floor was a gathering place for entertaining local farm families.

The photo at above right shows the wonderful details of the original cobbleshone structure. Note the cobbleshones are small and uniform. Also note the wood column effect at the corner and the wood frieze that separates the original structure from the wood addition above.

Houses that have Cobblestone Foundation Walls

1. 1974 Route 89, Seneca Falls



The house at 1974 Route 89, town of Seneca Falls sits on a ridge that slopes down considerably from the road level. There are cobblestone foundations on the south, east and north walls for the portion of the foundation that is closest to the road. The cobblestone courses are quite uniform. Also note the somewhat rough nature of the limestone quoins.

2. 4315 Route 414, Fayette



This house in the hamlet of Fayette is in a somewhat neglected state. Note that the courses of cobblestones are not as uniform and neat as those of the house at 1974 Route 89 above.

3. 4511 Dilts Road, Varick



The house at 4511 Dilts Road, town of Varick has a cobblestone foundation to much of the house. Like the two houses discussed above, the cobble stones are rather small and uniform, unlike the large stones that are so frequently used in foundation walls.

4. 4593 Route 96, Varick

The picture below shows the courses of the cobblestone foundation to this house at 4593 Route 96, town of Varick. The stones are a little larger than those of the previous 3 houses. Note in the picture at right that the size of the stones for the foundation for the addition are much larger than those of the original part of the house.



Conclusion

Interest in cobblestone structures tapered off as labor costs increased. Cobblestone construction was very labor intensive, and also the advent of steam-powered sawmills and the availability of wood from Pennsylvania and from the Adirondacks lowered the cost of construction with wood.¹⁴

Although some of the cobblestone houses have been lost, most of their owners today appear to be maintaining them properly. They certainly are worthy of being preserved. Rochester architect Claude Bragdon referred to the Cobblestone Era as “evidence of our architectural Golden Age.” In his opinion, “Austere and humble as these buildings are, they show a beauty and integrity of a kind which made this country great, and should serve as inspiration to us today.”¹⁵

Appendix: What are the Difference between Siltstone Houses and Cobblestone Houses?

At a recent presentation on cobblestone buildings in the area, a person in the audience asked me why I hadn't included the ones in the greater Ovid area. I responded by saying that I thought the houses of which she was referring were probably siltstone rather than cobblestone houses. That question prompted me to go to page 38 of *Bits and Pieces*, a 1994 publication of the Ovid Bicentennial Committee and currently available from the Ovid Historical Society.



(Shown at left is a siltstone house in the Ovid-Lodi area.)

That source says there are about 10 houses between a point south of Lodi, where Upper Lake Road meets Route 414 and the Gilbert Road in the town of Ovid. Siltstone has hardness between flagstone and limestone. These siltstone houses were constructed by using pieces of siltstone layers of rock that were cut ("quarried") into stones. Cobblestone houses in the Finger Lakes region were built of actual stones (not "quarried") that were gathered from nearby fields or along the lakeshore

of Lake Ontario. The Ovid-area siltstone houses typically used long and thin, very uniform siltstones.

Cobblestones, however, could vary greatly in their size and color, although they were frequently sorted to make for greater uniformity in appearance. (Shown at right is a cobblestone house in northern Seneca County.)



Both siltstone layers of rock and cobblestones are a product of the glaciation of the area at least 12,000 years ago. The siltstone rock layers resulted from the pressure of the glaciers, causing compressed rock layers beneath; it is considered a kind of sedimentary rock. The cobblestones were part of the terminal moraine laid down by the retreating glaciers.

¹ Olaf William Shelgren, Jr. et. al, *Cobblestone Landmarks of New York State*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1978, p 1.

² *Cobblestone Quest*, p 7.

³ Edith Delavan, *Landmarks of Seneca County: A Photographic Exploration of Historical Styles*, Ithaca: Cayuga Press, 2004, p 32.

⁴ *Landmarks of Seneca County*, p 35.

⁵ *Landmarks of Seneca County*, p 40.

⁶ *Landmarks of Seneca County*, p 46

⁷ *Landmarks of Seneca County*, p 47.

⁸ *Landmarks of Seneca County*, p 49.

⁹ *Landmarks of Seneca County*, p 50.

¹⁰ *Landmarks of Seneca County*, p. 51.

¹¹ *Landmarks of Seneca County*, p 57.

¹² *Landmarks of Seneca County*, p 97.

¹³ *Landmarks of Seneca County*, p 155.

¹⁴ *More Legends and Stories of the Finger Lakes Region*, pp 146-149.

¹⁵ *More Legends and Stories of the Finger Lakes Region*, pp 146-149.

Notes: The pictures were taken by Walter Gable, Seneca County Historian.