The History of Reclaimed Cobbles and Pavers

Holding an item that was fashioned more than a century ago by skilled craftsmen always makes me pause and think about what it has witnessed — the people and events. The wear and discoloring are testaments to its history. Such was the beginning of my passion for reclaimed hardscape material, which I'm pleased to share with you in this article, the first in a three-part series. The next two installments will cover the unique installation requirements and creative uses of these versatile materials.

120 year old Medina Cobblestone Street

Granite Cobblestone

Most granite cobblestones in the United States originated from the other side of the pond. During the late 1800s, the U.S. shipped large quantities of lumber, cotton, tobacco, furs and other goods across the Atlantic to Europe. After ships unloaded their cargo, they needed to be weighed down to ensure safe passage back to America. Cobblestones were a popular choice for ballast.

When these ships returned to America, the cobblestone was offloaded and used for street paving in port cities from St. Augustine, Florida, to Bar Harbor, Maine. In addition, some European cobblestones were reused as ballast in canal boats traveling west to weigh them down to pass under low bridges along the canal. As a result, you'll often find cobblestones in former canal ports, like Buffalo, New York, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Technically, cobblestone pavers are small, naturally rounded rocks, not the quarried granite stones often referred to as cobblestone. The rectangular cut stone generally used for paving roads is actually a sette, commonly known as Belgian block.

Original cobblestones/settes are a piece of history that will not be re-created. While the settes' original split face was worn down over time by the steel-banded wagon wheels and horseshoes that traversed them, modern cobblestone would not be worn smooth in the same manner by vehicles' rubber tires.

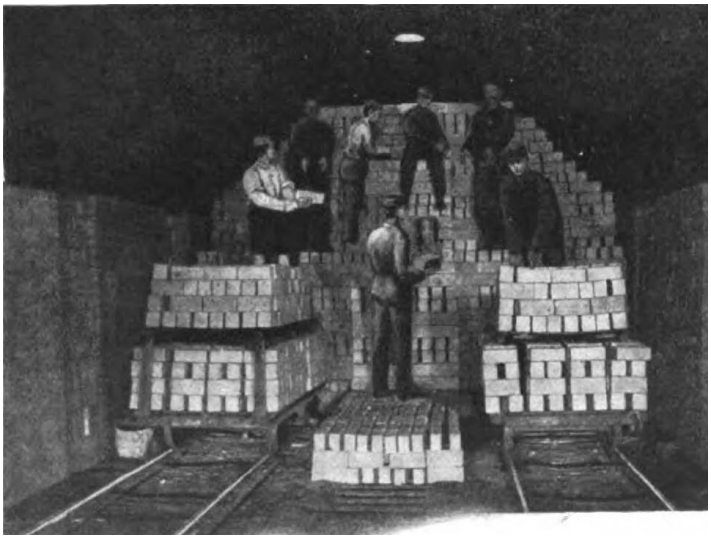
Historic cobblestones are available in a variety of colors, each with their own unique story to tell. The color you see on a stone today combines its original color with the patina it has acquired over generations in the road. Often, stones that initially appear similar in color are actually quite different when the patina is removed, or they're split to reveal the bare stone.

Cobblestones generally come in four sizes. The smallest are cubes, four inches on each side. Regulation cobblestones are somewhat larger—5 inches wide, 9 inches long and 5 inches thick—with a relatively flat top, despite being worn.

Meanwhile, at 4-6 inches wide, 10-15 inches long and 6-8 inches tall, jumbo cobblestones were produced in a cruder manner than other cobbles. As a result, their worn tops are more rounded than refined regulation stones, and their sides often have protrusions that prevent tight joints when laid as pavers. Once the tops were worn smooth, they became slippery when wet. Therefore, to help pedestrians and drivers gain better traction, jumbo cobbles were sometimes removed from the road, split in half and reinstalled with the rough split side facing up. These are, appropriately, known as half jumbos.

For crosswalks, builders would often use large stone slabs to provide a smoother pathway for pedestrians, particularly ladies in heels.

You also may see cobblestones with notches cut into the top on one edge. These stones were typically placed along the inside edge of a trolley rail; the notches allowed the flange of the wheels to pass without interference.



Bricks Stacked in a Kiln

by Scott Smith, Experienced Brick & Stone

Street Paver Brick

The first documented brick street was built in a small West Virginia town in 1875. A doctor was tired of the muddy street in front of his office and petitioned the town to pave it with bricks. When the town board declined his proposal, the doctor simply paid to have the street paved himself. The project was a success, and bricks streets became all the rage, replacing wooden planks and loose stone. Over the next few years, street paving brick technology improved from the hand-pressed clay brick used in buildings, particularly with the discovery that pulverized shale mud with a minimum amount of entrained air created a strong, durable paver.

Original Brick Street

At first, pavers were hand-formed in brick molds, but by 1890, they were cut from extruded logs and repressed to create spacing lugs. The newest pavers were extruded through a die that created the lugs on the sides of the logs, and the wire cut face became the wearing surface. You'll often find fingerprints on older bricks from being hand-stacked before going into the kiln. Occasionally, you may even see a paw print, initials or another imprint.

The top of the bricks was worn smooth by steel-banded wagon wheels and horseshoes. Eventually, however, the smoother ride and lower installation cost of asphalt won out over street pavers, which saw their last use in the early 1930s.

Granite Curbing

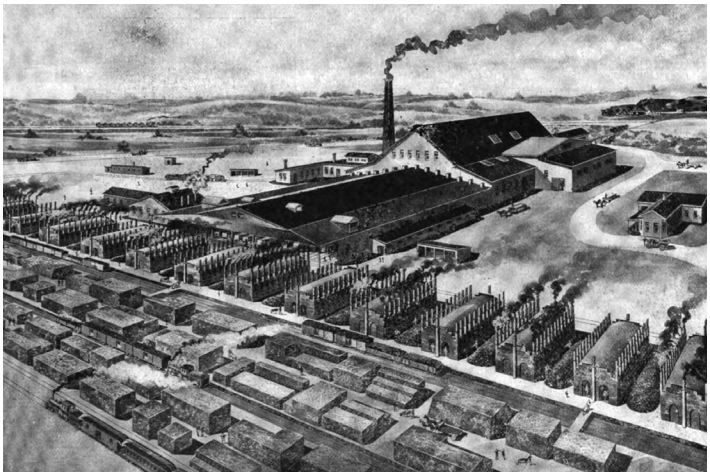
Granite curbing has been used for roadways for more than 120 years. Quarried mostly from Vermont, New Hampshire, North Carolina and Georgia, granite curbing is found in an attractive array of colors, including light to dark gray, red, brown and white.

Over the past century, the tools and methods used to create granite curbing have evolved, resulting in three distinct generations of historic curbing. The 1800's curb is the most rustic. At this time, granite was roughly split to create curbing that ranged from 4-8 inches wide and 12-24 inches in height. The top and street-side face were hand-tooled to create a flatter surface, while the remaining sides were left rugged and uneven.

To split the stone, a mason repeatedly hit a hand drill—or star drill—with a hammer to bore a hole in the granite, into which he inserted a plug and feather set. Workers then struck the plugs with a small stone maul in sequence, pausing between each series of strikes to allow the stone to react to the pressure. Eventually, a crack appeared, and the stone split apart. Marks from the drills, and the tools used to flatten two sides, are often still visible today.

Second generation curbing is distinguished by its sawn top. As quarry tools became more sophisticated in the early 20th century, large 12- to 18-inch-thick slabs were cut from rough blocks using a wire saw and then split vertically into curbing such that the top was an even saw cut and the remaining five sides were rough. Boreholes from splitting the large slabs are often visible on the bottom of this curbing.

Finally, the third generation of curbing is the most recent and features a saw-cut top and bottom. In this era of curbing, the sawn granite slab was split with a guillotine, leaving no boreholes or other distinguishing marks.



Metropolitan Paving Brick Co.

Medina Curb Tool Marks