

Portland Quarries

by Jack Dillon, April 1999

The history of the Brownstone Quarry operations is long and interesting, and begins when the shoreline of Portland was known as the East Banks of Middletown.

To appreciate the longevity of the quarry, it is necessary to first place it within a time perspective.

When George Washington was born on February 11 or 22, 1732 (depending on your calendar, be it Julian or Gregorian), Portland Brownstone had been excavated for almost a hundred years! The property belonged to Middletown at the time.

In 1665, the governing body of Middletown, fearing that this natural resource was of a limited, exhaustible supply, voted "that whosoever shall take or raise stone at ye rocks on the east side of the river for any without the towne, and said digger shall be none but an inhabitant of Middletown and shall be responsible to ye towne twelve pounds per tunn of stone that he or they shall dig for any person without the towne."

If any person reported someone from "without the towne" taking the stone illegally, the culprit would be fined twelve pounds and half of that amount would go to the informer! Perhaps this was the original designation of the term "block watch" (only kidding).

For the Town Fathers to have enacted this 1665 ordinance, there must have been significant usage of brownstone that they were trying to curtail. Even at this early date, considerable stone was shipped to distant places. It was a marketable material which also served as ballast in the hold of sailing vessels (stabilizing the hull to counteract the effect of wind against the vast square footage of sail topside).

I won't pursue the chronological progression of the quarry businesses that thrived here in Portland. Such information can be acquired through numerous records available elsewhere. I will focus, instead, on the socio-economic environment that was prevalent during the boom of the Portland Brownstone. The human element is always more interesting than dry facts and figures. After much investigation, I have come to understand and appreciate the everyday lives and concerns of the average quarry worker, his family, and also his employer.

The work was labor intensive, involving hundreds and sometimes over a thousand workers in any given year.

The men who mined the quarry came from all walks of life and educational backgrounds (although most had very little schooling). Their human needs were very basic compared to standards of today. All they required was a decent wage, housing, and enough food to support their families. To supplement their incomes, many nurtured small gardens and raised domestic livestock.

According to records I examined, the quarry employers had no problem with workers who, for whatever reason, did not show up for work. Individuals who were absent for a day or even a week were welcomed back without question and assigned to their old crew. They did not get paid during such absences, of course. Others picked up the slack so that work continued on schedule. The attitude suggested that: if you can afford to lose a day's wages, that's your business.

A hand-written time-ledger, in my possession, shows notations regarding the reasons that various workers did not show up for work, giving us a picture of their personal lives. Some took days off to slaughter pigs, to plant and harvest crops, or take their families to the circus across the river. There were a few who had reasons that were, well, less responsible. Scribbles noted that so-and-so was absent due to a "bender," "jollification," "spree," or more to the point, "downright drunk." One such reference showed that a man lost a week's work because his wife was on a jollification. After spending some time atoning for their sins at the Town Farm, they would return to working at the quarry as if nothing had happened.

It's difficult to encapsulate the socio-economic structure that the quarry provided in Portland during a period that lasted almost three centuries. I spent years acquainting myself with the many "personalities" involved, and feel as if I almost know them personally. I sometimes imagine that if we ever met face-to-face, we would strike up a conversation like a reunion of longtime friends. In the spirit of sharing our common heritage, I will be submitting different episodes of quarry

history in future editions of Portland On the Move. It is my hope that they will whet your appetite for more information about our communal roots, and history in general.