

The Portland Quarries

by Dean Jacques

Along the beautiful curve of the Connecticut River that separates Portland from Middletown, prehistoric sediments collected and eventually formed a rich repository of brownstone. This process occurred during the Triassic epoch of world development.

Brownstone has unique qualities that were highly valued by early European settlers. It was plentiful in the area, relatively easy to quarry, and soft enough to allow for fine carving and polishing. Furthermore, its brown color appropriately expressed the somber realities of the times. That the quarries were close to the river allowed stone blocks to be transported by ship to various locations.

The earliest records of this budding industry date back to when Portland was known as East Middletown. The property was designated as a "common ground," which meant that acquisition of the stone was free of charge to any Middletown resident. Unfortunately, it was soon discovered that non-residents were taking the stone as well. In 1686, a English born stone cutter was assigned the duty of protecting the quarries from outsiders. This included rights to quarrying the stone in exchange for "certain masonry services" to Middletown. His name was James Stancliff, the "first pounder" or warden.

It is believed by many that, in 1690, **James Stancliff** became the first European to build a house within the area of what would someday become Portland. He not only sold the stone that he cut, he also carved numerous gravestones in the area.

Middletown deeded rights to the quarries to **Wesleyan University** from 1833 to 1884. During this time, proceeds from the quarry business helped to finance the university's expenses. The stone itself provided ideal construction material for many of its buildings. They are still being used on campus, adding their stately New England grandeur to this ivy league school.

In 1886, the quarry property was privately leased to a company named Middlesex Quarrying Company. Around this time, brownstone excavation reached its peak, employing over 1,500 workers. This readily available employment attracted immigrants from Sweden, Ireland and Italy, creating an ethnic and cultural mix that is still apparent in the town today.

The quarries produced enough brownstone to employ a fleet of **25 ships**, delivering construction material as far away as Boston and New York!

These major cities found the versatility of brownstone to be as fashionable as it was convenient. Whole neighborhoods were composed of houses still collectively referred to as "brownstones."

It was used locally as well, in public schools, churches and private residences. Beautiful examples can be seen at the old Town Hall, Middle School, Liberty Bank, Stonehaven and Trinity Church, all located on Main Street. Brownstone foundations can be found on many of the older houses in town. The Civil War monument, on the corner of Main and Bartlett, provides a sample of its artistic potential.

Across the river, brownstone was used to build St. John's Church, the Masonic Temple, and the old Crescent Street Hospital.

The prevalence of this uniquely colored brownstone lent an architectural somberness that seemed appropriate to post-Civil War America. So many Americans were either killed or maimed in that war, that the grief-stricken, antebellum period came to be known as the "Brown Decades."

In 1884, **E. I. Bell** established the **Connecticut Steam Brownstone** Company, an innovative enterprise that made it possible for the stone to be cut on site (at the quarry) to the architect's specification. This reduced production and transportation costs considerably.

As time went on, however, construction methods and materials started to evolve. The introduction of concrete sounded the death knoll for the busy Portland Quarries. Operations became intermittent.

In 1936, flood waters filled the quarries, effectively ending their centuries old career. People tried to pump the water out, but this ended up to be costly and ineffective. It is surmised that the flood opened some underground springs, making a full reacquisition impossible.

For a while, the abandoned quarries were almost forgotten. Even residents who lived nearby rarely thought of them, and new people moving into town might never see them at all!

It seemed as if the movement of time had effectively separated the once popular quarries from the lives of Portland residents. But time has a way of reversing itself in unpredictable ways. The beautiful "brownstones" of the past became in need of restoration. A modest but growing demand for replacement material encouraged new operations at one end of the larger quarry. Local teachers, hoping to spark historical interests in their students, sponsor field trips to this work-site.

With the quarries just a few hundred yards from Portland's business district on Main Street, it seemed only natural to include them as a vital element in promoting the local economy. Thus began a grassroots movement to encourage awareness of the quarries as a vital element of Portland's history, as well as a potential resource for the future! This movement gained momentum, and encouraged the National Park Service to officially designate the Portland Quarries as a **National Historic Resource**.

Awareness of the quarries continues to rise. The Town of Portland now owns the quarries and adjacent riverfront property. There is even a local civic group known as **Brownstone Quorum** that is committed to the preservation and community-oriented utilization of the site. The quarries were even showcased on the PBS documentary series, Positively Connecticut.

And so the Portland Quarries are reclaiming some of their significance. Their craggy walls, rising from the still waters of their flooded basins, stand as a huge and silent monument to an earlier century of Americana.

Local historians share what they know, gleaning information from ancient ledgers and probate records, but the majority of the past remains locked within those steep cliffs, unarticulated, yet somehow shared with visitors who choose this location to peer into the past.