

# TURNPIKE TALES

by Jim Ford

## **"TURNPIKE TALES" #11**

*(Historical items from the "Madison Bouckville Antique Week" region)*

*By Jim Ford*

The Madison-Bouckville area has been rich in history from the arrival of the first settlers to the present day. As an addition to the website, we have decided to share some of that history in order that the patrons who travel to the Madison-Bouckville Show will have a better understanding of our truly unique region.

### **The Historic Howard Homestead**

The construction of the Chenango Canal led to prosperity for the Town of Madison and a boom in the construction of new dwellings. Some of the most beautiful structures were those made of cobblestone. In the township we have many fine examples of the art of those talented masons who remained in the area following the completion of the canal.

One of the outstanding examples of cobblestone construction in our area is located just to the east of Bouckville on Canal Rd. It is known locally as the Howard Homestead and vividly displays the talents of these fine craftsmen.

Potential farmland that had previously been too wet to use was now made tillable because the canal offered a way to channel the water away. The land proved to be very fertile and the farms of the area became some of the best in Central New York, known for grain and hops production.

A new roadway was built along the south side of the canal, through property owned by James and Silas Howard.

This soon proved to be a much better route than the original road on the north side of the canal where the Howards had their original home.

Since their property now straddled the new canal, they decided that a new home should be built on the south side and chose cobblestone as the building material. Built in the years 1840-1842, locally obtained sand and gravel from a nearby bed was used in its construction. This same deposit of sand and gravel was later known as the Madison Sand and Gravel Corporation. Joe Stevens, a mason who had worked on the construction of the locks for the Chenango Canal, seems to have been in charge of the construction.

In 1840, when the Howard Homestead was built, houses were built on "honor." It was an unwritten law that cobblestone homes should be built with "washed material." The sand and gravel was shoveled from the bank of the gravel bed and placed into a two-wheeled cart and drawn by an ox team to the bank of the canal where it was dumped into a watertight box. A few pails of water were thrown over the material and it was thoroughly shoveled. The water with the silt in solution was then drained off and the clean material shoveled back into the ox cart and drawn to the job. Three men and the ox team were able to produce about five yards of material per day.

The digging of the cellar was the first job to be done and since the home is rather huge, this was no small undertaking. The cellar of the home is divided into three sections. This gave the chance to create more walls and more stability for the upper portion of the home. Smoked meats, fruits, vegetables and canned goods were stored in the cellars. There was also a pie safe and a cistern. The remainder of the cellar area was used for general storage of household goods.

A sturdy foundation was laid with field stone and dressed limestone rock quarried at nearby Oriskany Falls and brought to the site by a canal boat owned by James Howard. The boat was appropriately called the "Madison." The dressed stone appear at the ground level of the home. Now all was ready for the construction of the above ground portion of the home to begin.

The cobblestones were of varying sizes. They had been deposited in the region by the glacier and were brought to the construction site by farmers who lived nearby. The farmers were paid by the load for this building material.

The stones were set in horizontal rows with mortar joints in-between. Row after row was placed as the structure gained height. What is not seen is that there are many more cobblestones behind those on the exterior of the home. For a home of this size, the basement wall may be up to four feet thick. The outside wall of the home has to be perfectly vertical as construction continues, but the inside wall will continually become narrower until the stone wall at the peak of the home may be only 12-16 inches thick. This means that on each floor level of the home, the walls start out tight to the stone and then show a wider and wider opening toward the ceiling level. This created a real challenge for the carpenters.

As the stone was being placed, the interior was being built by the carpenters as well. Massive, locally hewn beams were brought to the site and installed. Floor joists were fitted using the mortise and tenon technique. The finished product would have a massive interior as well as a massive exterior and produced a building that would stand the trials of time.

Windows and doors were framed. Limestone lentils were installed on the top and bottom of each, also brought from the quarry in Oriskany Falls, as were the stones used for the corners of the building. These were called quoins and their staggered effect gives a pleasing look to the home.

The home was to be heated with wood. Several chimneys were built to accommodate this heat source. The brick for the chimneys was from a brick factory on the north side of the canal, just after crossing the bridge going toward Solsville. That crossing is known today as the "Crooked S." The brickyard was also owned by the Howard brothers, as was a nearby sawmill.

The main portion of the home has two cellars beneath it, with two full floors and an attic area above. The lower end of the home has a third cellar under one portion, and a full floor and attic area above. Hop pickers were sheltered in the attic area during the picking season.

Although the main portion of the home had a full kitchen, the lower section had a "summer kitchen" where doors could be opened and a fresh breeze felt during those oppressively hot days of summer. Meals still had to be cooked for the family, guests and hop pickers even during 90 degree plus days. A section of the lower end of the home was kept for wood storage to be used in the kitchen and during the winter season.

The finished home was impressive indeed. The soffit and fascia construction is massive, as are the "returns." The living room was 32' by 15' and featured wide plank flooring. The windows were installed with 12 over 12 panes. A huge central hallway led to the upstairs and had scrolled paneling in mahogany wood. The depth of the window seats is truly something to behold.

As you can imagine, the home became a focal point in the area. People passing by marveled at the size of the home and the beauty of the adjoining barn and hop kiln. The kiln was used for drying the hops from the Howard's 18 acre hop yard.

Following the Howard brothers, the home was owned by Smith Edgerton and then by his son, Albert. Today the home is owned by the Jerry Schmidt family and is operated as a Bed and Breakfast known as the 1840 Inn. If you are passing through the Bouckville area and have a chance to view this magnificent structure, please do. It is located just a half mile east of Bouckville on Canal Rd.

(Information obtained from an article written by Helen Howard Peckham and notes of the author.)