

PORTLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

PORTLAND, CONNECTICUT

On Thursday, July 28, 1983 twenty members of the Portland Historical Society met in president Ray Robinson's back yard to hear a proposal for study of the brownstone quarries with a long-range intention of setting up a working quarry museum. The proposal was made by Ronald Roth of the New York City Landmarks Commission, himself a resident in one of New York's many brownstone buildings. His interest caught by a Cornell University preservation course and the demolition of an attractive old building on the site of the United States Steel Building, Mr. Roth completed a graduate program in preservation at Columbia University. In his six years with the Landmarks Commission he worked on the restorations of many brownstone buildings, and so became curious about their origins. Brownstone was used for a broad range of later 19th century structures, from tenements to mansions. Portland's quarry is probably the largest in the country, possibly the largest in the world. At its height in the late 1800's it employed 1500 workers, no mean feat in a town with a population of 4100. Many workers, of course, lived in Middletown, in ethnic neighborhoods there. This period was a time of tremendous civic life as a plethora of clubs and voluntary organizations sprang up to fill peoples' leisure hours. The quarry owners ran the town, exerting tremendous political influence and keeping an eye on how their workers voted. Quarry workers were initially (after the original Yankees) Irish, who were later replaced by the Swedish immigrants; newer arrivals would work for lower pay. Until the advent of the Connecticut Steam Brownstone Company with its custom cutting machinery, an innovation by E.I. Bell, carvers were supposedly sent to the building sites with the stone, to apply the finishing touches. The quarries worked from hiring day on April 1st until November, according to several long-time residents, with occasional summer days off, when the temperature in the pits may have gone as high as 180. In winter, stone could not be quarried because moisture and freezing affect the performance of this material, so durable when it is properly cut, dried and laid. Toward the end of the 19th century, improvements in paint technology (and an appreciation for less earthy, more exotic colors), slowed the demand for brownstone. Limestone became more popular, as well, and the advent of the concrete industry offered America a newer and ostensibly better way to build. Mr. Roth pointed out, however, that concrete can fall heir to failures that make the shaling of brownstone seem insignificant.

None of the old quarry families--Shalers, Halls, Brainerds, Pattens, Russels-- seem to remain in town, although Haddam still has a few Brainerds, and Bessie Raftery, a niece of the Brainerd sisters at the mansion called Stonehaven, may be married and living in Litchfield. (The sisters are long gone.) The Brazos family of Middletown were the last of the quarry owners--one of them died recently in Middletown, although others might remain. Quarrying stopped in 1932 or -33; Wesleyan was unable to get a 1928 order filled although other factors than supply may have been at work. In 1936 the quarry was flooded--an ad for the property, circulated at the meeting, offered real estate plus 50,000 gallons of water--owned by a Mr. Ehlers, who is currently holding the property and selling rights of way. Curiously, old quarry records were auctioned off in 1946 and apparently never picked up.

Mr. Roth would like to see the brownstone quarry opened as a museum and operational, not only to illustrate the way in which brownstone is quarried, but to provide the actual substance for restoration work. The current restoration material is a gritty chocolate-colored cement aggregate mix with a ten-year life span. A builder's need for brownstone in Portland several years ago forced him to get stone from the Longmeadow quarry which may not still be operational. Herbert Ellsworth explained that the few pieces of brownstone used in the new library came from Canada, packed in styro-foam. Mr. Roth said, from his experience in New York City building tendencies, that there is an increasing call for masonry construction. He envisions a project like the Quincy Marble Museum in Vermont, where quarrying techniques and artifacts are displayed to the public. Central School was mentioned as a possible site for a museum display with a favorable response from the audience. The Connecticut Humanities Council, based in Middletown, sees great potential in Mr. Roth's idea. The initial phase would be a planning stage, lasting roughly until the end of the year. Portland would be required to provide about \$500 for this venture, which could be paid in "in-kind" contributions--donations of services, supplies or office space by various residents. The second phase would involve putting together the exhibit, and be considerably more expensive, requiring perhaps \$15,000 from the town. A steering committee will be assembled from interested area residents and historians, hopefully John Sutherland, a specialist in oral history from Manchester Community College, and Lawrence Gross, curator of the Merrimac Valley Textile Museum operating on the same principles as those proposed for Portland's brownstone museum. Additional sources of funds must be investigated. Historical Society members offered quite a bit of information to Mr. Roth, including reminiscences of the previous generation working in the quarries and newspaper articles on the subject. Mr. Ernest Swanson was particularly helpful, having grown up in a quarry family and worked there briefly himself as a lad. The fact that most Historical Society members are life-long Portland residents means that the potential resources of the community are tremendous, and should be tapped.

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