

New Bedford's Historic Bluestone Sidewalks

“...few cities in New England to-day are better provided with flagged sidewalks than New Bedford...” By 1848, twenty miles of the city's sidewalks were flagged with bluestone and New Bedford, which began this effort in 1832, was justifiably proud of this important public works project. What is bluestone, where did it come from and why was it so popular for most of the nineteenth century?

The eastern Catskill Mountains alongside the Hudson River in New York were home to the bluestone quarries. Large scale quarrying began in the 1830s and Kingston, New York was one of the primary river ports shipping the finished product. Originally used for gravestones, this aesthetically pleasing material became very popular for sidewalks and residential walkways during the mid nineteenth century. Hard and long lasting, bluestone does not become slippery when wet and dries quickly after rainfall. A form of sedimentary sandstone, it comes in its traditional deep blue color as well as shades of green, gray and gunmetal.

As its popularity grew, bluestone was used for windowsills, lintels, stairs and other exterior architectural detailing. It became a status symbol for individuals as well as communities. William Vanderbilt is said to have paid \$10,000 for particularly large slab used in his New York mansion. Stanford White used it in many of his architectural commissions.

By 1880, the widespread use of bluestone in cities was over. Portland cement, invented by Englishman Joseph Aspdin in 1824, was not readily available in America until after the Civil War. Concrete was much cheaper to produce and install and caused the demise of the bluestone industry. New Bedford was at the forefront in its use of cement. In 1868, in his inaugural address, Mayor Andrew G. Pierce recommended that concrete be used instead of bluestone “...at a cost of about one-fifth of flagging.”

Much of the original bluestone sidewalk in New Bedford has been replaced by concrete during utility installations, street widening and other modern day projects. However, there are remnants of the original bluestone sidewalks and walkways throughout the city. Many homes built or upgraded during the 19th century still have their old bluestone walkways. Original bluestone sidewalks can still be seen on many streets including Cottage, Maple and Hawthorn. A few particularly large and beautiful old pavers still grace the front of the Double Bank building at the foot of William Street in the Historic District. Tree roots, age and erosion have had their way at times but the beauty and strength of the stone is still evident. Historic districts, including our own, install pavers to replicate the look and feel of their bluestone predecessors.

Bluestone is still available from building materials retailers and is quarried in south central New York and bordering northern Pennsylvania. It is often used as a decorative element in small and large-scale gardens in addition to its traditional uses.

Sources

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