



Westford quarrying 100 years ago

Obtaining granite a century ago was far different than today, with modern machinery

and methods having replaced old derricks, horses and oxen — and blasting powder. This

scene was sketched at the granite quarry of William Reed in Graniteville.

Westford quarry reactivated to supply Lowell park needs

By GORDON B. SEAVEY
WESTFORD — The Palmer quarry in Graniteville has been reactivated to supply granite for the National Historical Park restoration project now going on in Lowell.

What had long been considered practically worthless, odd shaped and irregular blocks of granite, called "grout" by quarrymen, are being trucked to the city. Here the blocks are arranged along the banks of the Merrimack river for beautification and also to prevent erosion.

This slope protection or rip-rap requires assorted shapes of stone, some pieces weighing two or more tons, to be placed along the river's banks. The contractor for the work is Parcella Brothers of Plainfield, with offices in Lowell and Wilmington.

Historically, this hauling of granite from Westford to Lowell is coincidental with an activity of some 150 years ago, historian Allister F. MacDougall recalls.

In the period of their founding, Lowell and Graniteville are "Johnny come latelies."

LOWELL STARTED in 1822 with a population of 200; Graniteville, a section of Westford, as late as 1840 had about five families. As the industrial revolution developed, Lowell was the first planned industrial city in the United States. With the coming of the textile mills, powered by waters of the Merrimack, the fledgling city began to burst its seams. So did Graniteville, but not for the same reason. The little community had plenty of that very hard, igneous rock formation called granite!

Most of Westford was strewn with granite boulders, or erratics, left by a glacier 15,000 years ago. Snake Meadow Hill on North Main Street had its share.

Farmers had been working these great masses of granite

rock for years, hewing foundations for buildings, doorsteps and caps, and posts. Although heavy work, they found this lucrative in the dull and quiet winter months. Old homes in Westford are set on granite from the area.

WITH THE MILL building boom going on in Lowell, there was a great need for solid bases for heavy mill equipment and engine beds, mill dams and bridges. Mill walls were of red brick, but the window and door caps and sills were of cut granite. Foundations, too, were of solid granite. Westford granite is free of unwanted minerals and pieces cut over a century ago still retain their original color.

With the building of the city, streets had to be paved. Farmers hauled many a wagon-load of paving blocks to Lowell, some of which are still in use.

The substantial demand for granite led to the opening of

the tremendous vein of granite which runs from Ayer through Westford, which then crosses Tyngsboro beneath the Merrimack River to Dracut and Pelham, N.H. The earliest granite quarry in Westford was on Oak Hill, opened about 1826.

The palmer quarry, according to MacDougall, is the oldest granite business in New England conducted by the same family. It is fitting, he says, that under new management it should still be called by that name.

THE PALMERS were among the first settlers in Camden, Maine, a ship-building and fishing town along the Maine coast. Benjamin Palmer, who was to start the local quarry, was born in Thomaston, Maine in 1814 and went to sea as a cabin boy. As a young man, he learned the stone-cutting business in Boston. No doubt, he heard of the large granite reserves in Westford and at 32 decided he would cash in on this natural resource.

He began to work the ledges of Snake Meadow Hill in March, 1841, just a few months prior to the start of work on the first railroad to run through Westford. This was the Stony Brook line, from North Chelmsford to Ayer, financed in part by Westford money.

He saw that the railroad would need plenty of granite with which to build bridges and stations. He was right. The route, being practically at his doorstep, would also permit the Palmer quarry to ship granite easily and cheaply by rail.

Lewis P. Palmer, at the time of his father's death in 1888, assumed command of the granite operation.

AT THE TURN of the century, sons Lewis B. and Marc A. joined the firm. Rene L. St. Gelais of 8 Maple St. is now quarry foreman.