

## Were cobblestones brought over as ballast?

The best answer we have is an article from *Nantucket Magazine*, Spring 1995, written by Don Costanzo:

Never fear, Nantucket cannot be robbed of her own peculiar charm. The covering of the cobbles on the business section of Main Street certainly would not do it any more than did the rebuilding of the other streets.

<http://www.nha.org/history/faq/cobblestones.html>

HARRY B. TURNER

If nothing else, the great debate in 1919 between those who would pave over the cobblestones and those who would not proved that causes are surely nothing new on this island.

While paving Main Street's cobblestones may have been one of the first ideas to threaten the island's historical integrity, it certainly was not the last. Superstores, wind farms, and trophy houses have all done the same since, and have generated the same spirited debate.

### Asphalt versus Sentiment

TODAY, ONE WOULD UNDOUBTEDLY HAVE TO BE, WELL, YOU know, stoned to suggest paving over cobblestones in a town that just last year passed a bylaw limiting the paving of public dirt roads. Yet back in the summer of 1919, automobiles (there were about forty on island at the time) were changing everything, as cobbled streets throughout town and as far out as Cliff Road to West Chester were being resurfaced with asphalt. Paving seemed part of a logical process, and there were many people who believed Main Street should not be spared the smoother surface.

The business section of Main Street, commonly referred to then as "the square," was in very poor condition and the town was considering a much cheaper alternative to the labor-intensive re-laying of the cobblestones—concrete. A special town meeting to decide such matters was to be held on August 5, 1919.

There were basically two opposing factions in town that summer: those on the side of progress, led by *Inquirer and Mirror* editor Harry B. Turner, and those favoring the preservation of Main Street as a cobblestoned thoroughfare.

A week before the special town meeting, Turner argued: "It is the town who will say whether the square shall be concreted—not a two months' summer visitor bubbling over with sentiment and trying to preserve something left by our forefathers. ... It may not be next year, or the year after that, or the year after that, but it will be smoothed over some year—when the time arrives that common sense takes precedence over sentiment."

Scores of letters sent to the *Inquirer and Mirror* in opposition to the paving of Main Street were never published by Turner. Those letters would eventually find their way to the pages of the *Cobble*, an anti-cover-the-cobbles publication issued in September 1919 by a group calling itself the Nantucket Protective Association.

Familiar as they were with the corruption of life in "America," it was the summer visitor who led the charge to save the Main Street cobblestones. And, it was they who ultimately did just that. The group backed the *Cobble*, their weapon on paper, and their vocal opposition with action and money.

"We believe in telling the truth and shaming the devil," the *Cobble* charged in an editorial. "Apparently,

Mr. Turner does not agree with us. Consequently our story must remain half told, unless we tell it ourselves. If we kept silent the very stones would presumably cry out. . . . To avoid so disconcerting a phenomenon, we therefore salute, may we not say, our fellow Nantucketers and beg them to listen to our own statement of our cause."

Letters were also published in which one writer questioned the rationale behind paying money "to make Nantucket into a second-rate Cottage City." A.Y. Billings argued that "concrete spoils the character of town, and in itself creates filthy conditions that the summer visitor has hoped to leave behind him. It is hot and 'citified,' which means it is unsuitable. One may like smooth, comfortable streets, but why take a very second rate substitute to achieve such a result?"

At the special town meeting in August, Henry Herman Chamberlin and Sarah Elizabeth Gardner, both summer residents, spoke in favor of retaining the cobbles along Main Street.

Chamberlin said that Nantucket owed much of her wealth to the summer visitor, and believed that the summer residents did not want the characteristics of Main Street changed. He said Nantucket should keep her unique features and quaint-ness and that "the square" was an asset the town could not afford to lose. Gardner echoed his sentiments.

The selectmen said it was much more expensive to re-lay the cobblestones, and favored paving Main Street as the cheaper alternative already being used on many of the other streets in town. Basically, they told the summer folk to put up or shut up. Three years later improvements were made to Main Street's cobblestones with funds put up by, you guessed it, Nantucket's sentimental summer visitors.

#### A Welcome Improvement

BEFORE COBBLESTONES, LIFE ON NANTUCKET WAS OFTEN ONE muddy mess. When it rained, the waste parts of butchered animals and manure decomposed in puddles of water on the sand and clay streets, where mosquitoes and flies thrived.

When it was cold, really cold, roads cracked and the ruts made by wagon wheels froze. Even under ideal conditions, large carts carrying heavy loads of supplies would crowd the already pedestrian-filled streets.

So foul and dangerous were the streets of Nantucket in 1806 that the selectmen enacted a bylaw that said any person caught riding through the streets on a horse, unless it was an emergency, would have to pay a fine.

Nantucket was in the midst of what historian Alexander Starbuck called a "period of depression and inactivity" in the whaling industry. Francis Macy, a selectman, said ". . . the streets of the town were thronged with the laboring poor. . . ." Thus, the one-dollar fine for violating the law was split evenly between the prosecutor and the island's poor folk.

Several years later, cobblestones spelled progress for the nearly seven thousand year-rounders and even more summer visitors. Street navigation was refined when cobbles were finally used for something other than improving a whaling ship's stability.

Where the cobblestones came from has been a debatable subject for Nantucketers. There are several theories as to their origins, and the question of how the cobblestones got here in the first place has become island lore. The popular belief is that the cobblestones were ballast, meaning heavy material placed in a ship's hold to improve its stability. There are some, however, who reject this explanation as apocryphal. An *Inquirer and Mirror* newspaper story of February 10, 1961, for example, disputes the ballast theory:

"... We have been able to turn up no evidence that any whaling ship ever sailed into Nantucket harbor without a cargo so that ballast was necessary to keep the vessel low in the water. . . ."

Although there is no concrete evidence favoring one theory over another, there is enough information to support the argument that the cobblestones *were* brought over as ballast on ships returning from Europe. And, it is no coincidence that the vigorous comeback by the island's whaling industry and the first attempts to pave the streets of town occurred at about same time—1821.

The whaling fleet exploded from just twenty ships in 1806 to seventy-eight in 1821. Those seventy-eight ships carried 27,495 tons of oil across the seas to Europe, whereas fifteen years earlier just under 5,000 tons were delivered. And since stones were used to provide ballast when no cargo was on board, plenty of cobbles found their way back here.

Also, more ships and more voyages meant more oil and prosperity for Nantucketers. If the streets were crowded with dray traffic in 1806, as the town claims they were, then the sand and clay ways of the island were, by then, taking more abuse than ever from the burgeoning economy.

In 1821 the Surveyors of Highways, appointed by the selectmen to maintain the roads, requested to pave the road near Paul Macy's store, in an area known as Straight Wharf, "to head a run of water into the harbor." Yet, while this paving project seemed to have more to do with drainage than traffic, a year later, in 1822, the surveyors paved heavily traveled Orange Street with cobbles. Many others followed.

Main Street, which was called State Street from 1799 to 1835, was paved with cobbles in 1837. Easy Street, North Water Street, upper Main beyond the monument, and some other streets that have since been black-topped were originally paved with block stones. The town, however, found that it could not afford to finance the cost of block paving, which far exceeded that of using cobbles.

Though cobblestones were likely shipped overseas from Europe, it is not known exactly where in Europe they came from. The most probable source is rivers and streams, where years of polishing by currents would explain the stones' smooth texture.

Progress reversed

TODAY, THERE ARE MORE COBBLESTONED STREETS IN TOWN than there were just six months ago. This past winter the town tore up a portion of India Street to replace antiquated sewer pipes. Instead of resurfacing the street with macadam, workers laid many of the same cobblestones that had been buried under the blacktop for nearly eighty years. The town tapped into its forty-ton stockpile of cobbles to make up the difference.

Richard Valero, of Valero & Sons Inc., has tons of his own cobbles. He says his family got them about thirty years ago when the harbor was dredged. Valero says the cobbles are quite popular with homeowners, and he uses them for stone walls, driveways, and general landscaping.

Most of us became familiar with Nantucket cobblestones on our first bumpy ride up Main Street; we may have even bragged about it to our family and friends. And for some odd, sentimental reason, it is still a thrill, no matter how many times we do it, to go bouncing up Main Street in a car.

With complete understanding and acceptance of the qualities that bring the summer visitor back year after year to spend dollar upon dollar, getting rid of the pavement and putting the cobbles back on India Street was a simple, logical decision for the town. Where was the argument against such a decision? It never existed.

Eighty years ago, sentiment saved the cobblestones. Today, common sense has brought them back. If only Mr. Turner knew how well the two could work together.

When not traveling—preferably to warmer climes—former Nantucket Beacon editor Don Costanzo runs a music-booking agency on Nantucket. And he continues to write.

People have pondered the origin of Nantucket's cobblestones for years. Here is an excerpt from an *Inquirer and Mirror* story of February 10, 1961, entitled:

#### THE COBBLESTONES OF MAIN STREET; WERE THEY BROUGHT AS BALLAST?

THERE HAS ALWAYS BEEN A QUESTION ABOUT THE COBBLESTONES WITH WHICH MAIN STREET is PAVED. VISITORS ASK WHERE they came from and the stock answer seems to be that they came in as ballast in empty whaling ships which were returning to their home port after having unloaded their cargoes abroad. No one has ever been able to prove that this is the source of cobblestones. Nor have they been able to disprove it, from any of the records that are available. Some times it is claimed that the sidewalk bricks came on the island the same way but there are records to flout that statement.

Nantucket's Main Street is one of the most beautiful thoroughfares in the world. With its serpentine, meandering lay-out, its lovely old houses and its cobblestone pavement, it is utterly charming and unique. Visitors are always impressed. The cobblestones are a great part of the interest and charm and, if you talk with Charlie Chadwick, Allen Backus or Bob Stark, they will give you a pretty fair argument in support of the "ballast" idea. If, however, you talk with Dr. Will Gardner, an acknowledged authority on Nantucket history, or with Archie Cartwright, who actually sailed on whaling expeditions, you get another version. These latter two gentlemen claim that the cobblestones were purchased and brought onto the island for the express purpose of paving Main Street with them.

...The year 1836 was about the peak of the whaling industry. There were, then, about 75 whaling vessels calling Nantucket their home port. These ships, when they were hunting whales, would often be gone for from two to four years. The traffic between England and Nantucket and the colonies in those ships, when they left their cargoes in England, was infrequent, as we can see. There was always a paying cargo in England waiting to be brought here. All Yankee captains knew the value of their cargo space and seldom, if ever, made a voyage without a payload. Can anyone imagine these money-seeking, tough-minded voyagers making a sea journey of from four to six weeks duration without a cargo? We have been able to turn up no evidence that any whaling ship ever sailed into Nantucket harbor without a cargo so that ballast was necessary to keep the vessel low in the water.

... A detailed map of the Island and Nantucket Town was copyrighted by R. Newton Mayall in 1954. It was printed and distributed by the Nantucket Information Bureau. In the legend on the map is this item: "Main St. was laid out in 1697 and paved with cobblestones in 1837 brought from Gloucester."

We telephoned Mr. Mayall, in Boston, and he could not tell us where the information originated. He said the legend had been given to him and that he could not answer for its source or its authenticity.

... We have a theory of what happened and present it for what it is worth. If anyone, who happens to read this, has any information that we can use we will appreciate it.

...Main Street was paved for the first time in 1837—with cobblestones. The landowners saw their beautiful homes fronting on a disreputable, muddy, filthy, virtually impassable street. We theorize that they all "chipped in" and paved the street with their own money, the way they wanted it paved and that they brought in the cobblestones from Gloucester, Mass., for that purpose. Can anyone intelligently dispute that or prove otherwise? If anyone can, please let us hear from you.