

*The number of fascinating websites and books containing information on the bluestone industry in Ulster County and its neighbors indicates the resources' importance in the development of our area and beyond. They cover not just bluestone's impact on the physical places, but its impact on the lives of thousands of families. Bluestone was so crucial to the county's residents and their story that even my modest historical archives easily provided a dozen books with insight into the wide-ranging business of the region's bluestone.*

**On** the prominent New York State Thruway Authority "Historic New York" marker located at a rest stop near Catskill, NY, is, appropriately, the story of the "Catskill Mountains." It reads:

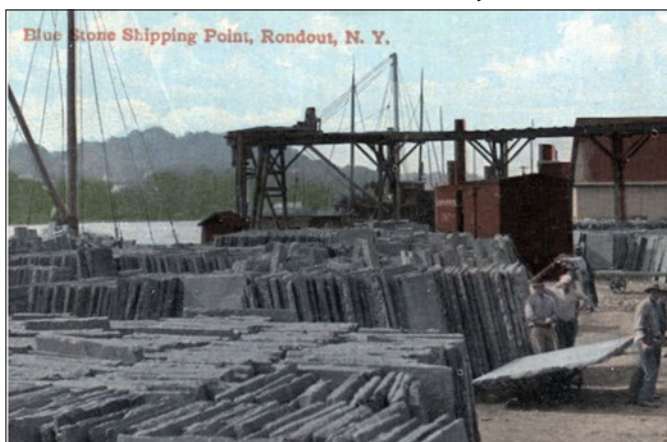
"The deep ravines, irregular ridges and rocky slopes of the Catskill Mountains long remained wild and desolate. Small settlements began in mountain valleys before the American Revolution. After the war, the population grew steadily as New Englanders streamed into the higher areas, which they called "cold lands."

The timber those cold lands nurtured undergirded the building of everything from homes to furnishings to rail lines to the chemicals for tanning leather; the cold earth gave up rock, cement, and sand for paving streets, constructing dams and monuments, making glass; and finally, the terrain provided something more ethereal, but no less nourishing—inspiration.

The historic marker continued,

## Ulster County Bluestone

by Vivian Yess Wadlin



"Catskill vistas attracted many artists and inspired such writers as Washington Irving and John Burroughs." Its visual artists, such as Frederic Church and Asher Durand, are as legendary, with almost every art museum in the nation holding Hudson River School painters' interpretation of the Catskills.

But before there were the writers and artists, rugged early settlers had to build the infrastructure creating the wealth affording people such as Irving, Burroughs, Church and Durand, the livelihood via well-heeled buyers to turn their vision into the works that guide and inspire us today. This story is about one of those wealth-building, and inspiring natural assets—the beautiful and ancient bedrock of Ulster County—bluestone.

In the late historian Alf Evers' section of the small but worthwhile book written with Robert Titus and Tim Weidner, *Catskill Mountain Bluestone*, Evers lays out the connection between bluestone and artists, many of whom came to use the stone in their work. Evers also provides us a touching glimpse of early settlers' hand-carved inscriptions—their emotional outpourings with bluestone as the vessel helping hold fast to the memory of a loved-one lost.

Ulster County proved to be the largest source of very high-quality bluestone in the Northeastern United States—an added benefit was Ulster quarries' proximity to one of the world's best water-transport river systems. At the height of business, more than

Postcard top to bottom: Rondout's Wilbur finishing and loading dock for bluestone. Courtesy of Friends of Historic Kingston. Beers Atlas 1875, Fitch building on the Rondout. Circa 1906 postcard showing bluestone quarry in Sullivan County.

10,000 men were employed there in mining, shaping, hauling, shipping, and selling bluestone. The size of organizations quarrying ranged from a few (usually families) to ventures of many hundreds. The number of other enterprises supported, wholly or in part, by Ulster's bedrock is incalculable.

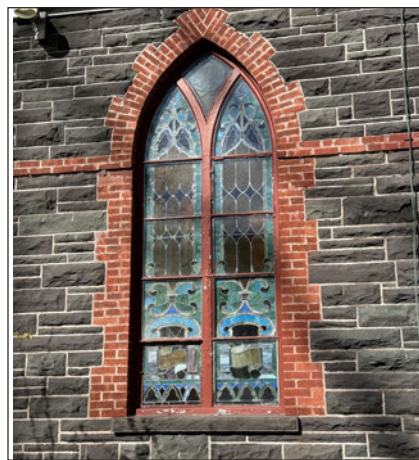
Bluestone's quality of "not slippery when wet," meant it was used extensively in sidewalks. New York City was a vast market, but eventually the sidewalk pavers were in every town or village with the money to replace its formerly muddy paths. Many bluestone sidewalks continue to serve, highlighting their durability.

The stone's natural beauty and imperviousness to weather, fire, and insects also recommended it as a building material. Having been laid down by Mother Nature in vast thick sheets added to its ease of exploitation. Bluestone's expense relative to brick or wood meant it was often used to make a statement regarding an owner's intent for a building to be a many generational domicile. When not built entirely of the stone, structures often sported it in foundations, window and door sills, patios, or other decorative flourishes.

*Ulster County, New York: The Architectural History & Guide* by William B. Rhoads is the go-to for a history and description of architecturally significant early buildings. In the introduction to the book, Joan K. Davidson, former commissioner of NYS Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation, noted Rhoads' purpose. "It is to validate our instinctive love of the places we love." Amen.

Recently, I was reminded of Davidson's sentiment while passing through Saugerties on Burt Road. I was delighted to see part of the circa 1883 "Cloverlea," also known as the Sheffield Estate (see photo page 4), had been saved and was now housing a "Therapeutic Collective." Turning to Rhoads, I found, "Bluestone from local quarries was used in the foundation and window trim..." of the building.

As with other works of man/woman in his guide, Rhoads lists not only the relevant building materials used but adds color with fascinating details about the individual owners or designers and, in some instances, the economic, political, or social structure at the time of construction.



Rhoads describes the Francis de Sales Roman Catholic Church in Phoenicia, NY, completed in 1904, "Built of bluestone with vibrant red brick trim, St. Francis de Sales Church stands as a monument of the bluestone industry." He added the stone was quarried and finished by the members of the church. (See photo, taken in May 2024, on page 4)

Almost every town in Ulster County has or had at least one building in some fashion featuring bluestone—which makes sense—it was mined here for about seventy years. In addition to buildings, bluestone was used in larger projects, such as the piers of the Poughkeepsie to Highland Railroad bridge, now Walkway Over the Hudson. Although today discolored red and orange by rust, the sections of the piers above the waterline are *bluestone*.

Another fine source for local history, the *The Story of Historic Kingston*, by Blauweiss Media, contains a chapter titled simply "Bluestone." Kingston was a focal point of most area quarries because of its river and canal shipping systems, and, later, rail transport options. Blauweiss' images are as informative as they are beautiful, providing a big picture using both historic and current photos. The text is six pages of detail, taking the industry from its infancy in 1820 to "yesterday." It covers the story of the quarrymen, the enterprises, the quarry locations, the workers, and bluestone's rocky market impacted by national building surges and slumps.

Kingston was not the only beneficiary of bluestone's largess. Saugerties' role in the industry is detailed by Alf Evers in his *Kingston: City On The Hudson*. In a chapter titled "North River Bluestone," Evers covers the industry's positive financial impact in that village and the stone-docks of Malden, close by. He covers as well the eventual toll of its demise—among those noted were lost livelihoods, and the remaining quarry pits and quarry dumps. Evers explained that early on, Rondout (now part of Kingston) received the brunt of many unpleasant aspects of the bluestone business—noise, crowds of workers, draft animals (and their droppings), landscape destruction, stone dust, and road destruction from heavy wagons bearing the large blocks for finishing along the Rondout Creek. More on this later.

"It (the bluestone industry) reached out to localities such as Jockey Hill, Hallihan's Hill, Sto-

ney Hollow, Lewis Hollow, and the huge California Quarry above the base of Overlook Mountain (Woodstock) in its search for salable upper strata stone.” Evers continued, “All of the above quarries usually prepared the stone and shipped their products out via Rondout’s waterfront stone yards.”

In this book, too, are photos vividly portraying the scope of the bluestone industry’s impact. Evers’ long view of history is evident when he writes about the hardships faced by families in Ireland—unfair land laws exacerbated by famines, and in Europe—the *unsummer-like* summer of 1816 caused by an 1815 volcanic eruption far away in Indonesia, all propelling the poor toward America. Many ended up as the laborers in New York’s bluestone, brick, charcoal, tanning, glass, cement, and manufacturing industries feeding New York City and other growing centers of commerce.

That brings us to Lowell Thing’s fascinating book, *The Street That Built A City*. West Chestnut Street in Kingston stood well-above the fray of production and shipping at Rondout in the mid to late 1800s. Large, Victorian-era homes lined *the street*, most facing the distant but visible confluence of the Rondout and Hudson. West Chestnut Street residents over looked (literally) the noisy hum and grime of industry below. Above the sweat and toil, the barons of extraction, transportation, and manufacturing industries, dwelt. Author Thing wisely chose the 1850 Joseph Tubby painting, “View From Chestnut Street,” to illustrate the Rondout area from the safer and quieter distance of “the street.”

It would not remain so. The Rondout industries expanded, and Thing notes, “The village of Rondout was rushing up the slope toward the top of the hill (West Chestnut Street).” Peace, quiet, and fresh fragrant air, all wafted away before it.



One of those ever-expanding industries, the Fitch family’s North River Bluestone Company (North River was one of the original colonial names for the Hudson) was headquartered in a beautiful 1870 bluestone building set between Abeel Street and the Rondout. *The Ulster County 1875 Beers Atlas* featured etchings of the era’s many important buildings—including that of the sturdy, intricately designed bluestone monument celebrating the source of the Fitch family wealth. (Image on page 1)

That wealth arrived at the docks via wagon loads of flat stones, sometimes 200 vehicles a day. There, workers would do the final dressing of each slab or block before it was loaded aboard a ship, canal boat, or train to fill orders emanating from towns and cities, governing bodies, wealthy individuals, engineers, architects, waterworks, etc.—orders that had begun in far-flung locales.

The area’s bluestone quarrying and stonedock hustle did not last. The stone’s many uses were gradually supplanted by other materials, primarily cement. Though the quarrying and dressing of bluestone died out, the enduring lore and allure of it did not.

In addition to our general admiration of bluestone as part of our infrastructure and housing, we can admire the one-of-a-kind Opus 40, in Saugerties. It is a sculpted 6.5-acre within a 63-acre bluestone (former quarry,) landscape. It is the vision and creation of artist Harvey Fite. According to the Opus 40’s website, Fite was inspired by the stone work of ancient Mayan and Aztec civilizations. Historically designated in 2001, Opus 40 was hailed by Architectural Digest as a “...beguiling work of art...”



We are grateful to the late Harvey Fite for his inspiring work, his wife for making it available to us, the not-for-profit organization that stewards it today, and the 360-385 million years of pressure Mother Nature put on sandstone—compressing it into the resource for Fite’s masterpiece, and, sometimes, the sidewalk beneath our feet.

Sources:

- *Ulster County, New York, The Architectural History and Guide*, William B. Rhoads. Black Dome Press.\*
- *The Street That Built A City*, Lowell Thing. Black Dome Press.
- *Rondout, A Hudson River Port*, Bob Steuding. Purple Mountain Press.
- *The Story of Historic Kingston*, Stephen Blauweiss & Karen Berelowitz. Blauweiss Media.
- *Catskill Mountain Bluestone*, Evers, Titus, Weidner. Purple Mountain Press.
- *Kingston’s Buried Treasures*, Chapter 7 “Kingston’s Bluestone Industry: The Rock that Paved A Nation,” (Lecture Series) Dr. Peter Roberts, Jr.
- *Kingston, City On The Hudson*, Alf Evers. Overlook Press.
- Friends of Historic Kingston FOHK.org
- Opus 40, Saugerties. Opus40.org

\*Black Dome Press continues to publish books of local historical interest. Those noted here are available at [Blackdomepress.com](http://Blackdomepress.com)

About Town print edition free at more than 100 locations throughout Ulster County and limited availability in Dutchess. Consult website.

Images below far right and far left: Gail and Bruce Whistant images show their use of discarded bluestone on the left, and the deep grooves carved into roadbed bluestone from the heavy wagons hauling it to one of the ports in Ulster County..

Center images: Logo of Opus 40 and photo from the organization’s website.

