Those Old Cobblestone Streets!

This is the second installment in the series “Those Old….” which covers elements of the region that are part of its history. The first installment was Those Old Stone Walls. Of course, with all the articles we offer, we’d like it to be a topic of discussion with the sharing of information, anecdotes, and corrections. It goes without saying that the further one goes back in history the harder it is to find double and triple confirmations of facts. All mistakes, errors in grammar, syntax and spelling are the fault of yours truly. Corrections and suggestions are always encouraged. Suggestions for future installments are always appreciated.

For those of us who grew up in New Bedford or the greater New Bedford area, the “cobblestones” that comprise the streets in the historic district, are typically regarded in a fond manner. It’s a nice touch, a reminder of how things used to be, and keeps one foot (pun intended?) in the past. The old buildings, the 19th century – or 19th century style in some cases- lamp posts just wouldn’t convey the same atmosphere without those “cobblestones.” There is something too modern with asphalt paving. Can you imagine the historic district paved with asphalt? Me either. No thanks.

So what is the story behind the “cobblestones”? Why were they used or preferred over other methods that have been around for centuries or millennia? Were all streets paved this way or just downtown?

Let’s start with a doozy. Those cobblestones we mention to out of town/state friends and family and love so much (unless you are crossing the street in high heels) are actually not

cobblestones! Nope! A “cobble” is specifically a stone that has been rounded by the slow erosion of water. It’s a naturally rounded stone or pebble. Not necessarily round stones – there are roads that are entirely paves with round stones – but rounded. These stones were specifically gathered from streams, brooks, and rivers. As we all know the pavers we see in the historic district are not round. The pavers used here are called “Setts” or Belgian blocks. More on those later.



Unpaved Pleasant and Market Streets; Appearance Shows Why Roads Were Paved – Spinner Publications Photo

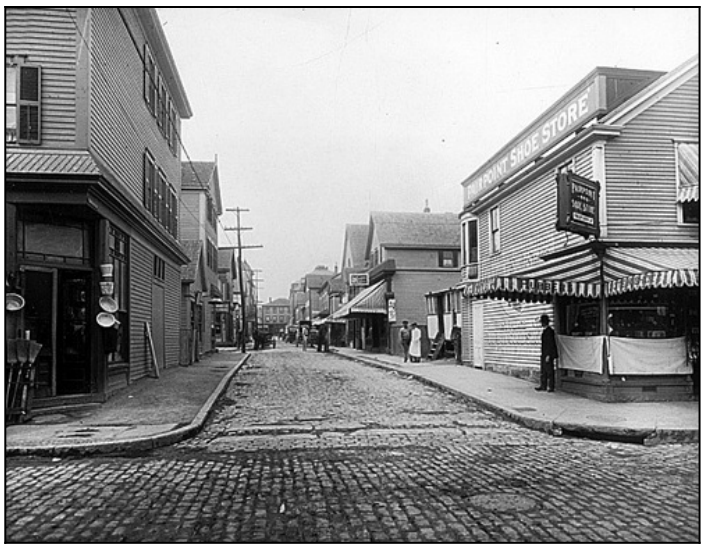
Actual cobblestones *were* used at one time. It was a natural progression from dirt packed roads as frequency of use picked up. Horse drawn carriages would eventually, with time, dig a rut or deep track on any road used frequently enough. Not only did this slow travel down and make the logistics of repair an issue, but could make commuting somewhat hazardous. An unevenly eroded lane or one saturated with rainfall, could mean a toppled or stuck carriage. The waste from animals along the road once mixed with the mud was a haven for mosquitoes,

flies and promoted illness. Bad for business. Bad for one’s health. Truth is horse drawn carts were brutal on traffic lanes and made it even more hazardous for pedestrians and horse riders. Besides, it just looked terrible.

Cobblestones were often mortared or packed into a compacted sand layer. This allowed the stones to shift with pressure and time instead of cracking, making them a sensible alternative to paved roads and easier to maintain from a physical and economic point of view.

Cobblestones were in abundance because of their availability. Ships crossing the Atlantic from the Old World to the New World would use cobblestones as ballast if their hulls weren’t full of commodities. Once they reached port, the cobblestones would be replaced with goods. These excess cobblestones then ironically became a commodity themselves. Also in use were Macadam roads, which was the use of aggregated smaller stones cemented together and layered on native soil. While considered more durable and did away with some of the issues of simple dirt roads, dust was still an issue. Something that didn’t come with the territory with cobbled streets. Also, heavy rains would still damage and affect the macadam roads.

Eventually progress and technology improved to the point that paving with asphalt and/or concrete became far cheaper and easier to do. Obviously, the smoother, cleaner ride with less noise pollution were factors that contributed to the transition to asphalt and concrete. While these types of roads have been around since Babylon, they weren’t economically feasible until the beginning of the 20th century. By the 1920s asphalt roads were far more prevalent.



Howland Street after transition to Setts – Spinner Publications

So on to the aforementioned setts. What are they and why are they used in the historic district here in New Bedford? Setts, also called Belgian Blocks, are rectangular in shape and quarried stone, usually granite. These stones were also in abundance since they were also used as ballast. Unlike cobblestones, they were shaped to fit between the frames on vessels. They are called Belgian blocks, not because the stones were necessarily quarried from Belgium, but because Belgium is where the process of quarrying and cutting them into rectangles originated from. Setts eventually replaced cobblestones because of the flatter, more even surface and less chance of cart's wheels getting wedged or stuck between cobblestones. Setts could be placed closer together, with less friction for the carts in a smoother, quieter (albeit still noisy), safer ride.

The first street to get the setts was Water Street in 1838. New Bedford's cobblestones and sett paved roads extended far past the historic district. Though roads paved with setts were gradually covered in asphalt and the sett paved roads shrunk. The advent of the automobile sped this process up to the point we are now. Many a road wears to reveal the setts underneath, before the city repairs it and once again hides the history. All hail progress.

So now that we know these streets are actually paved with Setts and not Cobblestones, should we correct people who use the term Cobblestone? To do so would be snobbish. I've heard of beer snobs, wine snobs, and art snobs, but history snobs?! I say let colloquialism win the day. When someone says *"I just love your cobblestone streets."* Shake your head in agreement, smile and say *"Me too."*

---

ngg_shortcode_0_placeholder



A Busy and Cobbled Purchase Street – photo by Spinner Publications

Special thanks to the New Bedford Whaling Museum and Spinner Publications for the use of the photos. Without their generosity these articles would consist of dry text. The info and credit behind the photos in this scroll gallery break down as follows:

#1: Acushnet Avenue and Coffin Streets. Showing how far the use of pavers spread. Spinner Publications.

#2: Commercial Street near Water Street showing Babbitt and Wood. Note the cobblestones, not setts at this time. Whaling Museum.
#3: Front Street from Rodman Street 1894. More Cobblestones. Whaling Museum.
#4: Northeast Corner of Union and N. Water Streets. Whaling Museum.
#5: Pleasant and Market Streets. Spinner Publications.
#6: Purchase and Union Streets. Spinner Publications.
#7: Union and Acushnet Avenue. Whaling Museum.
#8: Union and Water Streets in 1893. Spinner Publications.
#9: Union Street. Whaling Museum.
#10: Akin Denison Bros. Coal Yard on an unpaved South Water Street. Whaling Museum.
#11. Howland Street. Spinner Publications.
