

YOUR WEEKLY DOSE OF TOWN HISTORY

The Advent of the Tuckahoe Marble Industry Circa 1835

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It would be Tuckahoe marble that would make our town famous in the first half of the 19th century. Why? The town had a population of little more than a 1,000, most of who were engaged in small farming and milling. Farming the land, raising livestock, blacksmithing, or weaving cloth, sawing wood, or grounding grain into flour at a nearby mill were the only other occupations.

It was not known that along a steep and irregular ridge that borders the Bronx River resided one of the largest sources of marble in the United States. This marble was more durable, fireproof, and resistant to rain and ice than other stones and even other qualities of marble. Tuckahoe marble was also a better insulator against heat and cold,

This long irregular ridge that parallels the Bronx River stretches from Bronxville though Tuckahoe and Crestwood all the way up to the Scarsdale border. The quarrying of marble started as early as 1823 under the direction of Abijah Morgan, a member of an old family that dated back before the American

Revolution.

It would take the arrival of Alexander Masterton in 1832 to jump-start the marble industry in Tuckahoe. Masterton was a Scottish immigrant who started off as a journeyman mason and later became a self-taught architect. One source claims that Masterton and his New York City firm obtained a \$3 million contract to repair buildings in Washington, D.C. that had been damaged twenty years before by the War of 1812 when the British burned the Capitol. Masterton streamlined the marble industry when he employed quarrymen to extract huge blocks from the ground and hired stonecutter to actually dress the finished product on the quarry site. Eventually the Masterton estate would grow to 100 acres. The Greek revival house that he built at 90 White Plains Road is still standing. The house made with a foundation of Tuckahoe marble looks much as it did in 1835.

Working in the quarries was arduous. It was not an uncommon sight to see quarrymen in Eastchester removing a block of marble 150 feet long, 8 feet thick, 7 feet wide, and weighing 33 tons. Scores of men with long, flat and pointed drills

called jumpers struck at the marble until it could be raised from its bed and hoisted from the quarry. Before the railroad, blocks of marble were hoisted from the quarry by crane and screw. It was then broken with wedges into blocks of the required size and shape.

The reason why Masterton was the most successful of the early quarry owners was that in addition to employing semi-skilled quarrymen he also employed stonecutters who were master craftsmen. Stonecutters dressed and finished the marble. These men of English, Scottish, and Scandinavian descent were in high demand. They were paid three times the salary of the quarry worker and had little trouble finding work. Once the stone was removed for the quarry by the workers, the stonecutters finished the pieces so that the stones would be ready for construction.

The quarrymen were semi-skilled workers, primarily Irish. By combining the work of the quarrymen and the stonecutters Masterton made a greater profit even though he did not take as much marble out of the ground as the owners of other quarries did.

Transporting the marble was no easy

task. The blocks of marble were placed on drays with large wheels. In the beginning, teams of oxen, horses, and mules dragged the great loads of hen marble down Marbledale Road, up Winterhill Road, and down White Plains Road five miles to Eastchester village (now Mount Vernon) and the docks of Eastchester Creek. Schooners took the marble on board and transported it to New York City or wherever it was destined.

Tuckahoe marble was known world wide for its superior beauty, strength, and durability. The country was in the midst of period of American architecture known as Greek revival and everything from prisons, banks, hotels, churches, public buildings, private houses, and customhouses were built in the style of Greek temples. Tuckahoe marble could be found in such diverse places as the Custom House in New York City, City Hall in New Orleans, and the General Post Office in Washington, D. C.

Tuckahoe Marble was here to stay. Over the next six decades the importance of Tuckahoe marble would ebb and flow with the larger currents of American history.