

Bluestone in Ulster County: A Self-Guided Tour

This self-guided tour is intended to guide you to some significant or representative examples of bluestone and its mining in Kingston and Ulster County, New York. We suspect and hope that, as you drive this tour, you'll begin to notice bluestone just about everywhere and (a further hope) that you'll begin to share our own view of bluestone as a unique and valuable component of our local landscape that deserves preserving.

A few facts:

- Bluestone is typically bluish-gray in color (though it often has casts of purple, brown, and even yellow).
- It is a densely compressed sandstone from the Upper Devonian era, about 360-385 million years old.
- Its density and other properties (doesn't get slippery with age, wear, or wetness) make it ideal for sidewalks.
- Bluestone is found predominantly in eastern New York State and northeastern Pennsylvania. Most of it is found in Ulster County.
- Beginning in about 1830, bluestone began to be shipped from Ulster County up and down the Eastern seaboard and beyond. The industry employed as many as 10,000 people in its heyday. In time, Portland cement greatly diminished the demand for bluestone but not before it had become part of the material fabric of streets and buildings in many American cities and towns.

Since Ulster County has been the nation's largest supplier of bluestone, it is not surprising that you'll find a lot of it today all over Ulster and neighboring counties and the Hudson Valley in general. In towns, it was commonly used for sidewalks and curbstones. In the country, it can be seen in many forms of walls and fences, formal and rough. Sometimes, shaped into blocks, it was used as the main material in a building; more often, it was used in foundations. Some people chipped out the insides of a piece of bluestone to make a birdbath or a water trough for chickens or hogs. Bluestone became hitching posts, gates, capstones, chimney caps, well covers, cornerstones, grindstones, and tombstones.

This tour is divided into four parts: Downtown Kingston, West Chestnut Street, Uptown Kingston, and Ulster County outside of Kingston. Although the sites can be visited in any order, we've provided a sequence that we think will work well for anyone starting from the Heritage Area Visitor's Center in the Rondout area of Kingston at 20 Broadway. The driving tour takes about three hours to complete. There is also an optional one-hour hike to an old quarry off Route 28.

Downtown Kingston

Before 1825, Rondout (now downtown Kingston) was farmland with a nearby dock for several Hudson River sloops that carried local produce. With the arrival of the Delaware and Hudson Canal, Rondout rapidly developed into a thriving village in the same period that bluestone mining was becoming an industry. By mid-century, bluestone had become a substantial part of its commercial and residential buildings and the Rondout Creek had become the largest distribution point for bluestone.

1. Start the tour at the Visitor's Center at 20 Broadway. In the 19th century commercial buildings across the street, you see examples of stairs, window pediments, and other details made of bluestone that was brought to Rondout Creek, dressed in local sheds and yards, and then shipped up and down the Hudson to cities all along the Eastern seaboard. In the Visitor's Center, you can learn more about the bluestone industry.

Thomas Chamber's marker. In the little park outside the Visitor's Center, notice a small pear tree planted by Friends of Rondout to replace one said to have marked the original grave of Thomas Chambers, an English carpenter who helped settle Kingston in 1652. Near the pear tree is a small bluestone marker to represent his grave. The carving in it replicates the carving in the original stone, now in the Senate House.

2. Bus-stop bench. At the nearby bus-stop, try out the park bench that the Friends of Rondout erected with several heavy slabs of early curbstone. Many of Kingston's streets are still lined with similar curbstone. (If you have been walking, at this point get back in your car and drive up Broadway two blocks to Union Street and turn left.)

3. 4 West Union Street. Pause to note the large blocks of bluestone used as building and doorway sills, another notable use of bluestone. Drive two blocks to Wurts Street and turn right up the hill.

4. 67 Wurts Street. Go two blocks to Spring Street, where you'll see on your right the imposing bluestone home of James J. Sweeney, one of the most prominent dealers in bluestone during the late 19th century and the owner of over a thousand acres of quarries in Ulster County. Sweeney bluestone is said to have been used in the base of the Washington Monument. Notice across the street the...

5. Cornell entrance and retaining wall. Across the street from the Sweeneys lived Thomas Cornell and his family. Cornell barges carried bluestone as well as coal from the Delaware and Hudson Canal up to Albany and down to New York and other destinations during the latter part of the 19th century. The site of Cornell's house is now a vacant lot and small city park but the retaining wall and entrance are still evident. They're not of bluestone, however: they provide an example of another local material that has been popular since the area was first settled in the mid-1600s – the local limestone, which our official Soil Survey describes as “Onondaga limestone.”

6. Hight bluestone retaining wall. Continue driving up Wurts to McEntee where you must turn left or right. Turn right, go through the next traffic light, and notice the wall on your left as you turn up the hill. It's patched here and there with our local limestone. Prepare to make a sharp left just after Broadway swings to the left on to West Chestnut Street.

7. Corner of West Chestnut and Broadway. Just before turning left, notice on the right and ahead of you the low bluestone retaining wall on Broadway with the "1993" in it. That year the State of New York started to erect a concrete block wall here to replace a 19th century bluestone wall. Local residents objected and this wall of new bluestone is the result.

West Chestnut Street in Kingston

This street was once the home of Rondout's more prosperous citizens, who yet lived close enough to business to be able to walk down to work. Off and on for fifty years (1850 to 1900), horse-drawn wagons would occasionally bring in new bluestone for sidewalks, curbs, well covers, and other purposes. On the left going up the hill (fourth house up just past the split-level), look at....

8. 32 West Chestnut. This imposing Italianate building is built entirely of dressed bluestone. In 1858, Henry Samson, who made a fortune in leather tanning, built this home on property purchased from James McEntee, resident engineer for the D&H Canal Company .

9. 55 West Chestnut. This four-square Colonial Revival home built in 1899 is typical of many turn-of-the-century residences in the Hudson Valley. Like many, it has a bluestone foundation, large bluestone slabs leading up to the house, and a bluestone public sidewalk. Note the "55" chiseled into the steps by the sidewalk.

10. 80 West Chestnut. In front of this modest house from the early 1960s, notice two rounded pieces of bluestone by the sidewalk and two slabs of rutted bluestone along the curb. These mark the original carriageway entrance to the fortress-like home of Samuel and Mary Coykendall, heirs to the Cornell Steamboat Company. Their mansion was replaced by this small development. The developer courteously left these stones in place.

11. Coykendall Coach Houses. Drive one block past the intersection with Orchard Street to Augusta Street and make a slight detour to see three buildings, two coach houses and a chauffeur's house, that served the Coykendall family. The foundations are of bluestone and so are the paving stones in front. The building nearest to Chestnut serves as home for the Coach House Players, a local theatrical group. Then go back to Broadway and continue on to...

12. The turnaround at the western end of West Chestnut. Find the bluestone cornerstone with the date “1873” on it, partly hidden by foliage. Once the cornerstone of the First Presbyterian Church at Abeel and Wurts Streets (now the site of a gas station), the stone was rescued and put here in 1973 by several homeowners who live at the turnaround.

13. Two bluestone hitching posts. Opposite from the cornerstone, notice two bluestone hitching posts (not original to this site, but representative of many bluestone hitching posts that don’t exist any more). Drive back to Montrepose past...

14. The Number 2 School. Coming back from the turnaround at the end of the block on the right, observe the bluestone foundation, steps, and sills common to many such public buildings in Ulster County prior to 1900. This school building is soon destined to be converted into loft-style condominiums, some with blackboards.

Turn right on Montrepose just past the school and take another right on Hudson Street all the way down to Abeel Street, which runs along the creek.

15. Fitch Building. In about half a mile shortly after passing under a railroad bridge you’ll come to an unusual 1870 mansard-roofed cupola-adorned building on your left by the creek. This cut bluestone building at 540 Abeel was the office for the Simeon and William B. Fitch Bluestone Company and a monumental advertisement for its use as a building stone. The yard beyond the building once contained thousands of well-organized slabs waiting shipment to points north and south.

16. Where the bluestone road ended. You have to imagine this site, but it’s probably in or close to the Fitch bluestone yard and may have extended along Abeel to other yards, such as Sweeney’s. It was a set of bluestone tracks that supported the wagon loads of bluestone that came down from the West Hurley and other nearby areas. The tracks were set in place as needed and possibly the entire stretch of about 18 miles between Olive Branch beyond West Hurley all the way to the creek here at Wilbur. Pieces of the often deep-rutted track can be seen near the Frog Alley ruin in uptown Kingston and in the yard outside the Hudson River Maritime Museum near the small bandstand. Now let’s head up Wilbur Avenue, where the last part of the tracks ran, to the beginning of the bluestone road out under the Ashokan Reservoir.

Uptown Kingston

Described as a sleepy country village in the early 1800s, as the century progressed, Kingston began to develop a few of its own industries (such as coach-making) while it shared in the growth of nearby Rondout. Kingston could hardly fail to notice the wagonloads of bluestone being carried through the middle of its main commercial street and, inevitably, bluestone became the material it turned to for curbs, sidewalks, and a number of building uses.

17. 110 Fair Street. From Wilbur, follow Wilbur Avenue for 1.2 miles to Greenkill, turn left on Greenkill for two blocks, and then 45 degrees right at the big intersection onto Wall Street, roughly following the route of the old bluestone road. Go three blocks and, at St. James, turn right, then right again at the end of the block onto Fair Street. Further down the block at 110 Fair Street is the former home of Hewlitt Boice and his family. Like Sweeney, Fitch, and others, Boice became rich in the bluestone business and then lost most or all of it, usually in developing unproductive quarries. When he was rich, he had his name chiseled in the carriage stone by the curb. Also note the hitching post and urn bases.

18. The Old Dutch Church. Turn right for one block over to Wall Street again and drive into the uptown area. The bluestone road ran down Wall Street exactly on the path you're driving (if you were in a time warp, you could actually collide with a wagonload of bluestone!). At the corner of Wall and Main Street, the Dutch Reformed Church, known locally as the "Old Dutch Church," is home to the area's first church congregation (1659). The present church, designed by Minard Lefever, was built in 1850-52 of local bluestone at a time when bluestone had become a much-admired, yet locally accessible building material. The church allows us to see how different it can look in randomly laid, dressed and adorned building blocks than it does flat on the ground as sidewalk flagstones.

19. Large slabs of the original uptown sidewalk. In the block beyond Main Street after passing the Old Dutch Church, notice the large slabs of bluestone in front of Schneider's Jewelry and adjacent buildings and also across the street, probably part of the original bluestone sidewalk. Much of the uptown sidewalk has been redone using newer and thinner bluestone.

Ulster County

Old West Hurley Quarries and the Ashokan Reservoir

Near the latter part of the 19th and in the beginning of the 20th century, the largest number of quarries were found in the vicinity of the hamlets of the original West Hurley, Olive Bridge, and several other small hamlets that, since 1915, have been buried under the Ashokan Reservoir. To continue our tour, we're going to drive out near the Reservoir and also explore Phoenicia, another bluestone mining neighborhood at the turn of the century.

20. The beginning of the bluestone road. Continuing down Wall Street, turn left at North Front Street, then three blocks to Washington Avenue and turn right. You're still following the path of the early bluestone road. Drive .5 miles through two lights straight to and around the traffic circle, exiting onto Route 28. (The original path was somewhere to your left and later to your right. The present Route 28 is a modern variation of the original Delaware Turnpike along which the bluestone tracks were laid.)

Drive 5.1 miles to the stop light at Zena Road. Turn left onto Basin Road and then left again under a railroad overpass. In .7 miles (after passing the Reservoir Inn), branch right onto Dike Road. In a short way, you'll see the reservoir on your right. Continue on Dike Road (you're now crossing the top of the Woodstock and West Hurley dikes) and park your car off the road on the far side (it's too narrow to park on the side of the road itself). Walk back onto the dike and look west across the reservoir. About a hundred yards out, now buried by water, is the site of the original West Hurley (its inhabitants were moved to today's West Hurley). The next hamlet beyond, a little farther up the reservoir looking westward is Olive Bridge, the town in which the bluestone road started. Later, bluestone was conveyed to the creek on flat cars on the Delaware and Hudson Railroad, which was routed through the bluestone villages just for that purpose. During periods of drought when the water level gets low enough in the reservoir, a stretch of the bluestone tracks is said to become visible.

21. Abandoned Quarries. In this vicinity and elsewhere around the reservoir are a number of quarries, many abandoned since the 19th century. These can be found back in the woods but are not that accessible for most of us since the property is owned by someone. However, there is a good quarry example in the neighborhood, close to 28-A. To find it, turn right off of Dike Road onto 28-A and follow 28-A for 5.6 miles until you pass the spillway (sometimes water is spilling over it, but not always). Take the Stony Church Road branch to the right at the spillway for .3 miles (if you get to Blue Heron Drive, you've gone a bit too far). Park your car and walk into the trees slightly on the left (south) side of the road and you'll see the quarry. (This is New York City land and you should get permission of the reservoir police to park here.) Notice that under the leaves as you scuff them up, the very ground is bluestone here. Below the cliffs, the quarry is now a stagnant pond, dammed up by beavers.

Back in your car, continuing west on 28-A for 1.3 miles, take a branch to the right, and follow Reservoir Road across the reservoir and a mile or two to where it meets Route 28 at Winchell's Corner. Turn left and drive to Phoenicia (10.2 miles).

22. Phoenicia. Bluestone was quarried up in the mountains, too, especially around Phoenicia. Bluestone slabs once stood in a yard waiting for D&H pickup at the local train station, now restored and the home of the Empire State Railway Museum. As you leave Route 28 to the right toward the village, look for Lower High Street just before the train crossing. Turn right and the Railway Museum is about one block down. On Phoenicia's main street, note the bluestone-and-brick St. Francis de Sales Church. Stop at Sweet Sue's for refreshment. Then drive out of the village at the western end past the church for .3 miles and look for a high retaining wall set back to the right from the road, built of bluestone of small boulder size. Turn around here and reset your mileage indicator.

23. Countryside Walls and Fences. By this time, you'll have become more aware than previously (perhaps) that bluestone is everywhere and some it is arranged very artfully. On many side roads, you'll find a variety of walls and fences laid using the dry keystone method (no mortar, just carefully selected and sometimes trimmed stone, with larger

stones placed strategically to provide stability). Drive 13 miles east on Route 28 and look for Du Boise Road to the left just after the Reservoir Delicatessen and Dairy. Take Du Boise Road .3 miles (past a wired-in bluestone retaining wall) and around a curve you'll see the incredibly neat dry wall that Greg Drake, a stone artisan, built by his own house. Then return to Rt. 28.

Drive about one mile past a lake on the left to Boulevard Road on the left. Take Boulevard a short way, turn left onto Boyce Road and bear left about .5 miles to a beautiful example of a multi-level series of dry keystone walls. Return to Rt. 28.

Opus 40, Quarryville, and Saugerties

The earliest quarries in Ulster County were mined in the neighborhoods of Sawkill and Saugerties in northern Ulster County. One of the quarries in this area became the source for a major work of landscape art, named...

24. Opus 40. Drive back to Kingston on Route 28 for 4.6 miles and turn left at Zena Road. In two miles, you'll come to an intersection. Zena Road continues to the left, but you should continue straight onto Joy Road for 2.6 miles to Glasco Turnpike. As you drive, notice the ubiquitous bluestone fences, many here for many years. At Glasco Turnpike, turn right for 1.6 miles to High Woods Road. Turn left for .1 mile and left again onto Fite Road, the entrance to Opus 40, a remarkable work of art that took sculptor Harvey Fite 37 years to build. In 1938, Fite bought an abandoned quarry and used the stone in it to build a drywall assemblage that covers six acres. Architectural critic Brendan Gill called it "one of the most beguiling works of art on the entire continent."

Fite's son, Tad Richards, heads the non-profit Opus 40 and tells how the sculptor bought the 13-acre property for \$150 (\$100 down), then bought a nearby barn and began to collect barn parts and quarry tools. The barn is now the Quarryman's Museum where Fite assembled the hammers, stone pliers, chains, winches, stone saws, and other antique tools in an artful display.

Opus 40 is open from Memorial Day weekend through Columbus Day weekend, Friday-Sunday, noon to 5 pm, unless reserved for special events (call ahead at 845-246-3400). There's a modest entrance fee.

25. The First Quarry in Ulster County? Turn left out of Opus 40 onto Fish Creek Road (if you find yourself on George Sickle Road, go back and exit onto the road you turned into Fite Road on). A short way down Fish Creek Road, you'll pass an extraordinary amount of large and small bluestone rubble on both sides of the road. According to Francis Wolven, a long-time resident and son and grand-son of bluestone workers, and other sources, the first bluestone in Ulster County was discovered near here in 1831 on the property of William van Valkenburgh and bought by one Silas Brainard, who began quarrying the stone. (Brainard recognized bluestone from having seen it up the Hudson near Coeyman's at the original bluestone quarry.) According to Wolven, a bluestone road was also laid from this location over to the river.

In about two miles, you'll come to Route 212. Turn right for 1.6 miles to an intersection with Route 32 and turn left to Quarryville.

26. Quarryville. North of Saugerties about eight miles, just off Route 32 on old Route 32, is the only town actually named for the bluestone industry. It was another early bluestone mining center, earlier than the West Hurley quarries. From here, bluestone was carried on a stone wagon road over to Malden-on-the-Hudson, the most important bluestone shipment point prior to about 1850. Today, Quarryville, which used to boast a filling station and grocery store, is just a small collection of residential homes without a single reminder to the bluestone industry. Now: drive south again on Route 32 to the Village of Saugerties.

27. Saugerties. On Saugerties well-preserved commercial Main Street block, you'll find plenty of bluestone in foundations, lintels, and sills. At 33 West Bridge Street, there is an elaborately carved bluestone hitching post that has lost a chip or so. (Note the circa-1840 Romantic Revival barn across the street, now a real estate office.) On Partition Street, the entranceway to the restaurant next to Chris Evers' used book store is a recently-built dry keystone wall built on heavy bluestone sills that date from the 1880s when the building here housed a hotel and bar.

And that's the end of our tour. (Lucy's Kitchen across the street or nearby Oriole 9 are recommended stops for refreshment.)

Hiking Option to the Bluestone Forest Quarry

For those who would like to spend about an hour hiking to the largest of the old bluestone quarries we've seen, this can be done separately or as a diversion from the driving tour. Except for one or two possible leaps across puddles, it's an easy hike. Directions: From the Kingston traffic circle, go west on Route 28 for 4.3 miles and turn off the highway to the right into a gravel parking lot. Look for the big coffee sign on the right as a clue for when to turn off. There is also a sign that reads "Bluestone Wild Forest Ontario Lake State Forest Preserve." It would be ideal to go on this hike with a guide who knows the way but you should be able to find it on your own.

Although you can get to the quarry by driving down from the parking lot to Ontario Lake and taking trails around to the left of the lake, we suggest another route that should get you to the quarry in about 20 minutes. Leaving your car at the upper parking lot, look for a trail that runs through a little woods just behind a knoll paralleling Route 28 (or you can even hike along the edge of the road, but, if you do, watch the traffic!). In any case, you'll need to walk a short ways close to Route 28 (about a third of a mile) until you come to a small wooden bridge. Cross the bridge and walk closely to the chain-link fence on your right (you may have to duck through some foliage right next to the fence) for about 20 yards until you come out onto a gravel road. Follow the road away from Route 28 until you pass a collection of junk cars on your left, go through an open chain link gate, and emerge onto a large clearing. Take the road to the left for 50 yards and it

will take you around to a slaggy incline that leads into an old quarry that is about the size of several football fields. You'll be standing on bluestone gravel and bedrock and looking at 20 to 25-foot bluestone ledges all around you. How many curbstones and sidewalks and window pediments and door sills this site furnished, no one has calculated. Out by the clearing as you go back, notice the ghost of an elevator building that apparently carried stone down to the clearing level. Watch out for deer ticks.

Other Tours

- Cross the Kingston-Rhinecliff Bridge and turn either way at the first light onto River Road. Drive slowly, look at all the walls along the properties you pass. They reflect two centuries or more of the labor, skill, styles, and personal quirks that went into building various kinds of formal walls or rough fences.
- Visit Hudson, the former whaling port settled by Quakers from Nantucket. Perhaps the Hudson River's most affluent town by the 1850s, its well-preserved town residences and commercial building include many impressive slabs of bluestone.

Help Preserve Bluestone

If you live in the Hudson Valley, the indigenous bluestone is part of your natural heritage and a significant part of our lives: what we look at, walk on, and just think of as "stone." Distinctive and handsome in appearance, bluestone is a useful material that ages well. Yet it is not impervious to harm. Heavy use and tree roots can cause it to crack. People sometimes remove it and take it home. Public officials and city workers sometimes replace it with something seen as less costly: cement or blacktop. Yet bluestone is still available from Ulster and Delaware County quarries. Cracked bluestone can sometimes be repaired or rejoined. Help educate your fellow citizens and local legislators about the historic, aesthetic, and practical value of bluestone. Urge them to enact legislation designed to preserve it.

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If you have suggestions for improving or correcting this tour (or get lost!), please call Lowell Thing at 845-331-4985 or by e-mail at twothings@hvc.rr.com.