

## **A Cobblestone Gathers No Moss: A History of Nantucket's Cobble Paving**

By Hillary Hedges Rayport

Nantucket loves its cobblestone Main Street. But this wasn't always the case – 100 years ago this year, Nantucket town resolved to pave Main Street with concrete, citing the pace of progress and the triumph of sensibility over sentiment. Few today would argue against the cobbles, and yet the road is now in extreme disrepair. Remedies on the table to fix it include a modern asphalt base, an idea that is stirring debate on Nantucket. As with all good old things that have lasted, the history, material, and function of this road lies at the root of the question. While favor for cobbles has waxed and waned, the record shows that from the 1930s through to the 1970s, Nantucket celebrated her cobblestone streets as “virtually maintenance free” and less expensive to maintain than blacktop. Prominent leaders – including the superintendent of streets – sought MORE cobblestone streets, not fewer. But since 1993, cobblestone Main Street has been a maintenance headache. The Nantucket Department of Public works is now seeking public comment regarding how best to fix it.

How did a maintenance-free street become a source of roadworker angst? A close read of our history reveals the story of a time-tested skill that was lost, then found, then lost again. Can we bring it back?

### **The Cobblestone Myth**

Main Street and its surroundings were originally paved with cobblestones beginning in 1836, or possibly as early as 1834. Nantucket was a bustling and wealthy town, awash in commerce and able to afford the best materials of the time. While tour guides love to tell the beguiling tale that cobblestones came to Nantucket from Europe as ballast stones, this romantic story is an urban legend. Ships traversed the Atlantic filled with tradable goods, and most arrived in Salem or Gloucester before finding their way to Nantucket. Nantucket's cobblestones are in fact a geologic match to New England glacial “erratics” – stones and boulders dropped in place as glaciers retreated. Stones selected for paving had an oblong shape and flat tops. They may have been gathered from Tuckernuck, where similar stones can still be found today. They may have been a by-product from years of processing sand, which was collected and dumped over Nantucket's muddy roads before they were paved. They also might have been brought in, purchased from Gloucester or similar locations.

Whatever their origins, once they were laid down on Nantucket's Main Street, they didn't stay in place long. Rapidly modernizing Nantucket was constantly digging. Sewers – first brick and then, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, modern vitrified pipe – went in underneath the stones over successive years. Multiple excavations left the road with pits and divots -- Nantucket's Department of Sewerage put the road back together, but by the 1910s, the original architects of cobblestone Main Street were onto more lucrative pursuits, mainly building asphalt roads. Paving with cobblestones had become a neglected, if not a lost, profession.

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### **The Pace of Progress**

As the cobblestone road conditions worsened, and buttery-smooth bituminous concrete beckoned, the pressure of progress was steady. One by one roads were being covered over – first Liberty, then India, Center, Federal, and Orange Street all were paved with asphalt. In 1919, the town proposed to lay asphalt over the wide, commercial section of Main Street, known as “Main Street Square.” The outcry was swift and determined. The Civic League and a group of concerned summer residents opposed a 1920s initiative to pave Main Street with concrete.

The activists won the right to re-cobble the street, as long as it was on their own nickel and with their own labor. They were kindly permitted to use the town's tools. As no island contractors would bid on the controversial project, the group engaged a team from Brockton, Massachusetts. The workman discharged their duties expertly, but victory was fleeting. With Nantucket's modernization and growing appeal as a vacation destination, the cobbles were torn up repeatedly to make way for expanded gas, water, and sewer lines. A major excavation in 1926 did not proceed well. Cobbles were set in frozen ground that was poorly graded from the outset. In the end, there were hollows in the street. Many wondered if Main Street would ever be the same again.

As the hollows and bumps deepened, a few proposals to concrete the road came and went. But by this time, the downside of asphalt was being discovered – the black-top wore through to the cobbles or dirt below quickly, and expensive repairs were constant. Plus, after living with asphalt for a decade, the town was falling in love with the few beautiful cobblestone roads that remained.

In 1930, after the installation of a new water main, Water Company president Frank Gifford was in a position to fix Main Street right and he was not content to do it once over lightly. When all the island contractors declined the job, Gifford remarked that laying cobbles was a “lost art.” Despite public pressure from disgruntled shop owners, whose customers entered their stores through piles of cobblestones the water company had left stacked down the side of the street, Gifford held firm – the cobbles would not be reset until he could source the right “expert paver” to come to Nantucket and do the job correctly and finally. His long laid plans were upset when the mason, scheduled to arrive the next day, failed to show up and ultimately refused the work. Ever self-reliant, Gifford and the selectmen decided it was time to bring the lost art of cobblestone work back to Nantucket. There was one company to look to: The John C. Ring Construction Company. John C. Ring was the largest road builder on Nantucket, but he had exited the cobblestone business decades before. There was more and easier money laying out new roads and covering the old with concrete and tar. But Nantucket had made the King of Concrete a very wealthy man, and now they demanded the cobbled streets be repaired. Employee Antone F. Sylvia stepped up.

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### **The Cobblestone Renaissance**

Antone Sylvia was born in the Azores Islands and came to Nantucket at age 16 in 1882. After stints on the old paddle-boat "Island Home" and the Nantucket-Siasconset Railway, he settled into a career with John Ring Construction, where he worked for more than 50 years. Why Antone was chosen to be Nantucket's future expert mason is unknown, but we can speculate that his childhood memories may have had something to do with it. Most know about the strong connection between Nantucket and the Azores because of a common history of whaling – but there is another thing the two islands have in common – cobblestones.

However it happened, Antone Sylvia became a skilled mason, and quickly. In 1930s Nantucket, with the growing tourist trade, a cobblestone could never rest. They were up again in 1931, to make way for new utilities. Antone laid them back down. And in 1937, there was major sewer work. Antone laid them back down, and the *Inquirer and Mirror* reported "he promises he layed [sic] them right side up." Antone lived to be 95, and at his death in 1961, his obituary read, "Mr. Sylvia helped plan and had charge of building most of the present roads on the island. He was particularly proud of a project he performed that is very much in evidence today, the laying of the cobblestones of Main Street." You can drop in to Sylvia Antiques at the foot of Main Street today and say hello to his great-grandson, antique dealer John Sylvia.

### **The Cobblestone Team**

In the special skill of laying cobblestones, Antone was joined by Thomas McGrath Sr., also a wash-ashore. McGrath came to Nantucket from County Cork, Ireland, in 1924 at age 29. Thomas passed the skill onto his son, Tom Jr., and thereby the golden age of cobbles on Nantucket continued. For over 40 years, from 1931 until 1973, there was nary a complaint about hollows and holes on Main Street, other than an expected need for routine maintenance. The town appropriated modest funds in 1947 and 1957 for repair of cobblestones on Main Street – a grand total of \$1,500 over the two years. By comparison, the bituminous concrete paving of McKinley Avenue in Siasconset in 1947 alone cost the town \$2,500.

With the maintenance of cobbles no longer a lost art, the streets remained in good repair and fondness for cobblestones only increased. Though automobiles were rattling across Nantucket, its cobblestone streets were an oft-cited symbol of a quieter time in America. Visitors, wash-ashores, and natives alike came to thank the Civic League and the group of wise summer residents who, in 1921, had raised \$2,500 and saved the cobbles of Main Street.

The preservation movement gained momentum and in 1955 the selectmen voted to establish Nantucket Town as a protected Historic District. The argument was won based on economics: tourism carried the day, and cobblestone streets and grey

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shingled cottages were "Our Gold Mine," as described by preservationist Everett U. Crosby in the pamphlet of the same title. By 1967, Nantucket was a leading authority on the practical work of maintaining historic cobblestone streets. A reporter for *The Charleston Evening Post* interviewed mason Tom McGrath and Superintendent of Streets Michael Driscoll in an article that year called "Yankees Conquer Cobblestones."

Tom McGrath...tells me that the proper bed for cobblestones is 3 to 4 inches of "dirty sand" i.e. sand with sufficient fine powdered material so that it will hold together when squeezed, but the mixture should not become muddy when wet...Driscoll says they have no problems with freezes. Water drains right through the sand before it freezes. The only problem is occasionally a motorist spinning a wheel and flipping out a stone. He says, however, that it is no more than a 15 minute job to replace a few like that and really the only trick is to put the most pointed end down. In other words, get the stone sunk as deep as possible into the dirty sand base with a relatively small area of each stone on the surface. This he says is much better than skimping on stones and having the largest side lying flat on top of the ground.

Under Tom's steady mallet, the cobblestone streetscape not only stayed put, it spread. Vulcanized tires and improvements in automobile suspension helped quell the chief complaints about cobblestones – that they were noisy and rough on cars. In 1966, the town voted to continue the cobbles all the way down Main Street to the waterfront. Water Street was repaved with Belgian block. A tar strip across Main Street at Pine Street was peeled up and restored. Cobblestone streets were beautiful, durable, low maintenance, and part of what made Nantucket Nantucket.

### **From Blessing to Bane**

It's often the case that you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone, and islanders likely did not know the true gift they had in Tom McGrath Jr. and his fellow masons. When McGrath suffered an untimely death from a heart attack in 1972, he had not apprenticed a successor and there was no one with the skill to maintain Nantucket's roads. This was fine for a while, but the cobbles were not truly maintenance free – not with the water, electrical, gas, sewer, and now cable companies poking holes in them every few years. The patches continued to hollow out over time, and soon the streets needed attention. When time came to fill the hollows the DPW contracted with Cape Cod & Island Construction for cobblestone repair. Work was minor enough and sufficiently reassuring that the enthusiasm for cobbles endured. Edouard A. Stackpole, president of the NHA, pushed mightily to convert more streets to cobble. As ever, there were advocates on both sides of the question – passionately in favor of cobbles for their beauty and durability, and passionately against, for their uneven surface. By the late 1970s, paving with bituminous

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concrete was fast and efficient, and skilled masons were hard to find. Ultimately, the argument for keeping the paved streets in blacktop won out. As selectman Roger Young said: "the new machine just heats the tar that's there and puts in new tar." The fact that it buckled and needed constant patching seemed less important when you had a steady supply of materials and labor to get the job done.

### **A Last Stand for More Cobbles**

Nantucket enjoyed the cobbles it had, but when a multi-year, \$2 million road improvement project was launched in 1980, the selectmen saw an opportunity for the long-contemplated return to cobblestones, and engaged island contractor Walter Glowacki. North Water Street was re-paved with Belgian block; India Street and South Water Street from India to Main were cobbled. But the entire road project was fraught. Selectmen were yelling at contractors. The lead engineer was raked over the coals multiple times. Townspeople were pulling their hair out with traffic problems. A backhoe nearly ran over a car. The Belgian block was laid all wrong, people weren't paid, new consulting engineers were brought in. The town breathed a sigh of relief when the project was deemed complete, and no one wanted to talk about downtown roads, let alone cobblestones, for a while.

The next major project was in 1993, when all of Main Street was dug up to lay powerlines underneath. The primary motivation for this was aesthetic – people wanted to recreate the vision of Main Street as it was in the old photos, before power lines were strung overhead (how much was practical in this – no more downed powerlines) and they approved a rate increase to pay for it. But even at the time residents complained about the pitted surface, and the superintendent of the job reported the challenge of laying the stones in the frozen earth that chilly March. The problems on Main Street only built from there.

Today, the Department of Public Works is recommending historic Main Street be rebuilt, and exploring laying asphalt underneath the cobbles to support ever more traffic and ever heavier trucks. Those who oppose this idea are concerned with aesthetics, sustainability, the effects of excavation on 200-year-old houses, and the health of towering century-old American Elms. They advocate for setting the cobbles closely packed and well buried in gritty porous sand, as is traditional. Is cobblestone paving a lost art that can be found again, or was the editor of the *Inquirer and Mirror* correct back in 1919, when he wrote, "It may not be next year, or the year after, or the year after that, but it will be smoothed over some year – when the time arrives that common sense takes precedence over sentiment." 100 years later, sentiment is still holding out.