



Crystal Lake Historic Preservation Commission



Columbus Wallace House

36 North Virginia Street

Built circa 1851

Crystal Lake's oldest standing home was constructed by stonemason Andrew Simons (1829-1892) for Columbus Wallace (1812-1907) and his wife Hannah Beardsley (1818-1894). It is one of two surviving

cobble stone houses attributed to Mr. Simons. The smooth stones came all the way from the shores of Lake Michigan. Grain was shipped to Waukegan by ox cart, and the stones were brought back on the return trip. It was a three-day journey round-trip.

The second remaining cobble stone home is the Walkup House, which was built in 1856. A third house, the J.T. Pierson residence, was torn down in 1960 in order to build the telephone company building on Virginia Street. Mr. Simons' own home was of conventional wood-framed construction. Legend has it that he had intended to build a masonry home for himself, but he left town to fight in the Civil War and returned to find his materials stolen. Mr. Simons' well-worn masonry trowel is now in the possession of the McHenry County Historical Society. His other works include two other cobble stone foundations in Crystal Lake: the Tarpley House and the landmarked Colonel Palmer house, which is on the National Register of Historic Places.

The foot-thick masonry walls of the Wallace house help keep the interior cool in the summer and warm in the winter. The stones were carefully set in lime mortar (ingredients: 8 or 9 bushels coarse sand to one bushel lime) so that all stones show approximately the same profile. Originally, the house was heated by stoves rather than a fireplace. Also noteworthy are the floor joists exposed in the basement, which were hand-hewn rather than saw-cut and are fastened with wrought iron spikes rather than cut steel or wire nails.

Cobblestone houses were originally built in the United States in New York in the 1830s and 1840s. Masonry skills brought by English laborers, who immigrated to work on the Erie Canal, and plentiful round stones left by glaciers in the region, combined into this folk-art tradition of building. There are approximately 700 cobble stone houses in New York State. The second largest concentration of this construction type is found along the Illinois and Wisconsin border. Emigration between the two regions and similar glacial deposits explain this second concentration. Generally, as the availability of manufactured brick increased, there was a corresponding decline in the construction of cobble stone homes. As a result, cobble stone homes were rare to begin with, and Crystal Lake is fortunate to have one landmarked for preservation.