

“Joliet Limestone: The Rise and Fall of a Nineteenth Century Building Material and Its Architectural Impact on the Joliet, Illinois Area.” *Quarterly Publication*. Lockport, Ill.: Will County Historical Society, Winter 1997.

JOLIET LIMESTONE:
The Rise and Fall of a Nineteenth Century
Building Material and Its Architectural Impact
on the Joliet, Illinois, Area

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itself.⁶ In the quarry the upper layers of rock were thinner and the stone was used for sidewalks and vaulting over cellars. The lower levels of a quarry produced thicker veins which were used for dimensional stone in buildings, and in the 1870s and thereafter these dimensional stones were carved for various building features.⁷

It seems that most of the stone commercially quarried before the Civil War was used for foundations, lintels, water tables, and sills. The most significant project was the State Penitentiary in Joliet. The site for this project had plenty of accessible stone, so it could be used for construction, and it was later quarried by prison labor for sale.

Until the late 1860s most, if not all, of the quarrying was for stone to be used locally. After 1867, that changed, and the quarrying industry became so active it could scarcely keep up with the demand. The change occurred largely because of the construction of the Rock Island Arsenal in Illinois. The director of this project, Col. Rodman, decided after making tests of various Midwestern stone to use the Joliet limestone particularly from H. H. Steel's quarry, located just north of Joliet.⁸ This project required a huge amount of stone to be shipped, basically by railroad. In 1869 alone 29,925 railroad carloads were transported for the project. The demand soon eclipsed the capabilities of Joliet's quarries, and Lemont quarries subsequently entered into contracts with the Army.⁹ The result was that demand for the dolomitic limestone from the Des Plaines Valley expanded not only from the quarrying, but also from the use of the stone for public buildings in Illinois (among them the new State Capitol building), as well as in buildings in Iowa and Madison, Wisconsin. W. A. Steele, the mayor of Joliet, besides being a leader in the stone industry, noted that by 1871 from 550 to 750 men were working in the quarries at Joliet, and more quarries were being opened.¹⁰

By 1884 it is reported that the quarries were open nine months of the year, and they employed 700 to 1,000 men, and they shipped about 3,000 carloads per month. The stone was in demand not only because of its strength, but also because it was cheaper than brownstone, marble or granite.¹¹ It was shipped by railroad as well as by the I & M Canal, as there were many quarries located on the banks of this waterway. Quarries such as the Joliet Stone Co. had steam-driven saws, polishers, and rubbing blocks so that it was possible for the stone to

addition, the local limestone served as an ideal aggregate when crushed for use in the new cement. Crushed rock quarrying was less labor-intensive than block quarrying. In the 1890s this type of mining made its appearance, and it continues at a high level of activity even today.¹³

3. The third cause of this decline was, in my opinion, the consolidation of the quarries in the 1890s. This, in part, was a response to the strikes and labor conflicts in 1885. These troubles caused the consolidation of quarries along the Des Plaines by companies such as the Western Stone Co. The cut stone still being produced at that time was flagstone for vaults over basement entrances for coal storage. Also, rubble stone was being produced for foundations in residences. But most of all, the production was crushed stone.¹⁴

The mining of this local product produced over the 19th century a variety of architectural styles that gave a distinctive appearance to the Joliet streetscape. Although the first structure built of the material was the Demmond

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