

“Soapstone Quarries of Virginia”

Scientific American, Vol. LXXIV, No. 23
New York, June 6, 1896, pp. 357



This article, which begins on the next page,
is presented on the Stone Quarries and Beyond web site.

<http://quarriesandbeyond.org/>

Peggy B. Perazzo
Email: pbperazzo@comcast.net
August 2013

“Soapstone Quarries of Virginia”

Scientific American, Vol. LXXIV, No. 23
New York, June 6, 1896, pp. 357

“Albemarle County, Virginia, is the home of many industries, but perhaps the most interesting one is the soapstone quarry of Alberene. Among the foothills of the Ragged Mountains is a tract of the Ragged Mountains is a tract of 1,950 acres, fringed with woods and dotted with tidy homes, a little world in itself, its interests centering where the great derricks mark the sky and long buildings cover busy saws. Twelve years ago it was a quiet farm, but one day a horseman appeared riding slowly, with observant eyes, a man of experience, an expert in soapstone. Here he found outcropping a vein of soapstone, the finest in the world. He looked long and carefully, then he went away, but it was to form a company which bought the place. They began operations at once.

“With a force of thirty-five men and inadequate machines enough soapstone was put on the market to establish its reputation and create a demand. To-day, with a force of two hundred and twenty-five workmen and highly improved machinery, the output does not supply the demand. Extensions and improvements are constantly in progress, and the capacity of the vein is practically limitless.

“The first quarry opened showed a vein from thirty-five to forty feet wide, inclined at an angle of sixty-three degrees. Excavated to a depth of one hundred and sixty feet, it still yielded fine blocks of workable stone. At the end of six years this quarry was abandoned, and about twenty feet away another quarry was opened and worked in the same way. There are now three quarries in operation. Large Ingersoll channelers are used in them to drill out the blocks; they are run by steam, and, in spite of the hardness of the stone, cut about the sides of each block with amazing rapidity. The average block weighs nine tons, but the derricks used are capable of raising as much as twenty tons. Once out of the quarry the blocks are put on steam trucks and carried to the factory, where they are cut into slabs of varying thickness. This is done by abrasion. Gang saws swing to and fro over chilled iron globules that wear away the stone, as they are kept continually moving. Each slab is then examined and moved on its truck to be cut into the shapes for which it is best adapted. The manufactured output is about sixty-three tons per day.

“As acid has absolutely no action upon the stone, it is used to make tanks for jewelers; dissecting rooms and laboratories are fitted up with it, and, on account of its non-absorbent qualities, it is in great demand for laundry tubs and sinks. It is also used for fireplace linings and for griddles, the latter having a great advantage over the iron griddles, as they never require greasing.

“The Alberene soapstone is exported all over the world, for its smooth texture and hardness render the articles manufactured from it absolutely time-defying in their durability. Four car loads of this stone are in the laboratory at Yale; at Tiffany’s there are acid tanks; the Hahnemann Hospital, at Chicago, and the Vanderbilt Clinic, of New York, by their use testify to its merits, and the University of Mississippi has set an example which the South and West are speedily following.

“For years this soapstone was put on the market at a loss. The very quality which gives it superiority made the difficulty. No machinery could match its hardness. Machines had to be invented that could cope with it, and in the struggle raw recruits have become trained workmen. These workmen are nearly all whites of the laboring classes from the country round about. A couple of Swedes, a German or two and a Frenchman represent the foreign element, and the force of negroes who fill out the necessary quota of employes (sic) are those who, in the twelve years of the quarry’s existence, represent the survival of the fittest. Altogether, it is a thriving, bustling colony, and what was a venture is now an established business on firm footing, its success adding much to the steadily growing prosperity of Albemarle. – C. S. Coles, in The Tradesman.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Visit the links below for historical information and photographs of the Alberene soapstone quarries in Albemarle County, Virginia – located in central Virginia:

- * **“History of the Alberene Soapstone Company,”** presented on the Alberene Soapstone Co. web site
<http://www.alberenesoapstone.com/why-alberene-soapstone/history-of-alberene-soapstone-company>
- * **Present-day photographs of the Alberene Soapstone Company – old and new buildings, abandoned structures, and plenty of soapstone photos.** According to this web site, the Alberene Soapstone Company was established in 1888, and it is located in Schuyler, Virginia.
http://www.thestonestudio.biz/backsplash_blog/?y=2012&m=12
- * **Photographs of the historical New World Company Alberene soapstone quarry in and the exterior and interior of the Historic office of the Alberene Stone Company.**
<http://www.forwatershed.org/SoapstoneTour.htm>
- * **“Soapstone: An Old Rock with a New Purpose,”** by Marissa Hermanson, August 31, 2011, Central Virginia Home Magazine web site.
<http://cvhomemag.com/soapstone-an-old-rock-with-a-new-purpose/>
- * **“Alberene Soapstone Company,”** by Stacey B. Williams, on the Slippery Rock Gazette web site. (Photos courtesy of Alberene Soapstone.)
<http://slipperyrockgazette.net/index.cfm/pageId/909>
- * **“Breathing new life into American soapstone Alberene Soapstone of Schuyler, VA, is producing high-quality slabs of American soapstone,”** on the Stone World web site.
<http://www.stoneworld.com/articles/print/87449-breathing-new-life-into-american-soapstone>
- * **“Soapstone”** (Wikipedia)
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soapstone>