

# HISTORIC ROOTS

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# THE SLATE VALLEY

By CLARE O'BRIEN

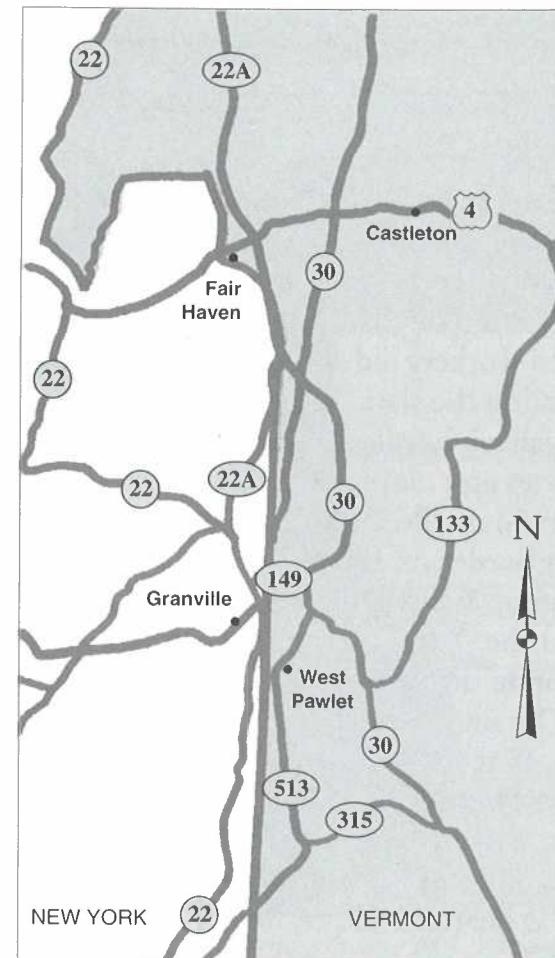
In a small, narrow valley along the New York-Vermont border, lies one of the world's great deposits of slate. This valley is less than 30 miles long and 6 miles wide. It runs from Granville, New York and West Pawlet, Vermont, north to Castleton and Fair Haven in Vermont.

Not only does the ground contain large amounts of slate, this valley also is the only place in the world where you can find the rock in so many colors. Slate here comes in gray, green, black, purple, and red. To find all these colors elsewhere, you would have to look in several places. For obvious reasons, this valley is called the Slate Valley.

Slate is a beautiful stone that has been used over the centuries as building material and in monuments. Waste slate is now also crushed and used in paving material and landscaping.

Slate is very durable. When, in 1848, a farmer wanted to use it to roof his barn, people discouraged him. It would not last, they said. The barn would never take the weight. More than 150 years later, the barn is still there. So is the original slate roof.

Slate was discovered in Fair Haven in 1839, but no one in the valley knew much about how to quarry it. So quarry owners hired



*The Slate Valley.*

skilled workers from Wales to open and work the deposits.

But the slate was too heavy to ship on the wagons that were available at the time. The market did not develop until the coming of a railroad spur into the Valley in the 1860s. Then slate production grew, and orders were shipped all over the country. By the 1890s, there were hundreds of Welshmen working there.

Other immigrants were also working in the slate quarries. They came from Ireland, Italy, and the countries of eastern Europe. New workers began in the pits. They blasted and hoisted the slate out of the ground. More skilled workers did such jobs as splitting and trimming the slate. Everyone worked hard. In the Valley's heyday, around 1900, there were 64 quarries and more than 3,000 workers.

In Granville, New York, just over the Vermont border on Route 149, is The Slate Valley Museum. It was built in 1995 to educate people about the slate industry and to honor and celebrate the people who made it thrive.

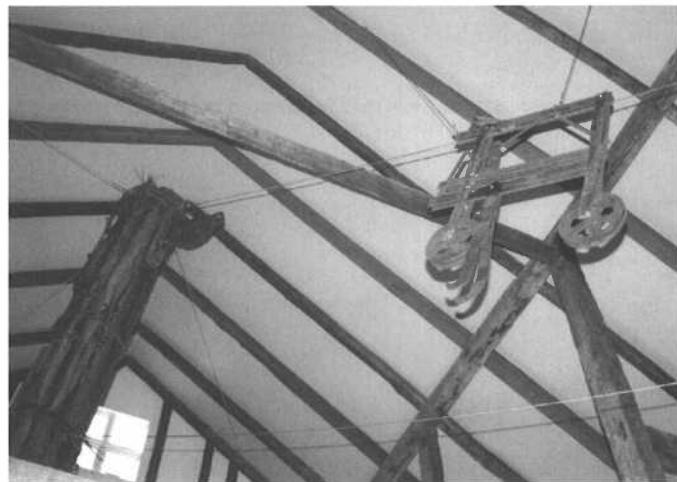
The museum is housed in an 18th-century barn. In it are photographs of miners and their work. There is a large mural, painted in 1939 by an artist from Woodstock, New York. There are exhibits of tools and a video showing how slate is quarried and crafted. There are also exhibits on the lives of the immigrant workers.

The museum also houses replicas of a



*The base of the museum's replica quarry stick, encased in slate. Real sticks stood as tall as 90 feet.*

Slate Valley Museum



Slate Valley Museum

Pulleys on the quarry stick helped carry men and materials into and out of the quarry.

quarry stick and a shanty. A quarry stick operated with pulleys and a bucket and carriage. It was used to get men and material in and out of the quarry. Early sticks were horse-powered. Later ones had steam engines. The replica quarry stick is 30 feet high, although actual sticks were as high as 90 feet.

The shanty is a small hut. In it worked the splitter, the trimmer, and the puncher with their machinery. These men prepared the slate for market. It was noisy and crowded inside, but those workers were lucky: everyone else worked outside, all year round.

The slate industry is still one of the largest employers in the Slate Valley. Almost forty slate companies remain in operation. Several of



Slate Valley Museum

*This mural shows the quarrying process in 1939.*

them are owned by descendants of immigrants from eastern Europe, who came to the Valley about 100 years ago. Other descendants of slate workers have also remained in the Valley. Their cultures have become an important part of Valley life.



Slate Valley Museum

*A view of machinery inside the shanty.*

## Rooting Around

The Slate Valley Museum is open on Tuesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays, year round. Special programs are available for schools and groups. In summer, there are quarry tours. Call 518-642-1417 for more information.

If you can't get there in person, the museum web site shows many of the exhibits. It even has recipes! You can visit the website at:  
<http://www.slatevalleymuseum.org>.



State Valley Museum

*The Slate Valley Museum is housed in a New World Dutch barn that was built in the 1700s.*