

The Brownstone of the West-Park Presbyterian Church

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March 2003

According to J.C. Smock, the West Park Presbyterian Church is composed of East Longmeadow (Massachusetts) and Lake Superior (Michigan) sandstones. East Longmeadow, which is part of the Triassic formation that includes the well-known Connecticut and New Jersey brownstones, was used in the rock-face ashlar walls. The Lake Superior stone, from the Portage quarries on Keweenaw Point, was used for the trim and ornamental details. The use of these particular stones is possibly one of the earliest in New York City.

The Norcross Brothers, who owned the East Longmeadow quarries, expanded operations when the Connecticut Central Railroad opened a station in East Longmeadow in 1876. The East Longmeadow stone was used extensively, almost exclusively, by Henry Hobson Richardson, who first used the material in Boston's North Congregational Church.

The East Longmeadow stone is a fine-grained stone, and typically of a bright brick-red color. George Merrill wrote that the Longmeadow stone "on account of its warmth of color can be used with very pleasing effects in a variety of combinations." Oliver Norcross described the stone as being "unique, in that there is almost no stratification whatever to the stone. It is a 'massive' stone. It will split almost equally well in any direction and...it is not necessary to lay the Longmeadow sandstone upon its natural bed, either for good appearance or for enduring qualities." Extant New York City buildings employing East Longmeadow brownstone are St. George's Church Parish Building at 207 E. 16th Street (also designed by Leopold Eidlitz), and The Osborne Apartments at 205 W. 57th Street.

The Lake Superior brownstone is from the Portage Entry quarry on the Keweenaw Peninsula in Northern Michigan. This quarry was perhaps the most famous and lucrative of all Lake Superior quarries owing to its superb quality and favorable location on Keweenaw Bay, which facilitated shipment by water to ports throughout the Great Lakes region and into centers of railroad transport and commerce like Chicago and Marquette. Quarry operations began in 1883, which would fall in line with construction of the West Park Presbyterian Church. This sandstone, which was found in a compact, massive layer twelve feet thick, is from the Potsdam formation. It is uniform in color, generally reddish or a shade of reddish-brown, and of excellent texture. J.C. Smock commended the stone for "Its deep rich color, homogeneous structure, the ease with which it can be cut and dressed, and the large size of blocks obtainable."

Reflecting on the architectural purpose and integrity of brownstone T. C. Hopkins said, "From the standpoint of color, brownstone is one of the best of building stones, not only because of the wide range of shades to select from, but from the inherent beauty and richness of many of the shades, and what is of great importance in architecture, the

permanency of the color.” Brownstone was building material chosen to represent the Romantic movement’s ideal that architecture should harmonize with the forms and colors of the natural landscape, and H. H. Richardson was the principal proponent of American romanticism. The West Park Presbyterian Church is an exemplary building of the period that Lewis Mumford refers to as the “Brown Decades” (the 1870’s through 1880’s) where the Richardsonian Romanesque style of heavy masonry with delicate sculptural details prevailed in architectural forms of richly colored bright brick red to dark purplish brown stones.

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