

The Granite Industry at Oak Hill in Belfast, Maine

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INTRODUCTION

This report covers the granite quarrying and finishing industry at Oak Hill, in Swanville and Belfast from its beginnings in the late 19th century through the mid-20th century. As the granite quarries were located outside of Belfast, they are not considered in detail. Markets and large customers are likewise only referenced for the impact they had on the industry located at Oak Hill and Belfast. This report does not address the monument makers in Belfast except to cite examples of their use of Oak Hill granite.

The report is organized chronologically. City Point is considered part of the city but is located approximately 2 miles northwest of the harbor, on the Belfast and Moosehead Lake Railroad, and on the Passagassawakeag River which provided access to Penobscot Bay and the Atlantic Ocean. Oak Hill is located about four miles northwest of City Point.

Activities in Belfast and at City Point consisted of cutting paving stones, constructing monuments, shipping both rough and finished granite by railroad and sea, sculpting memorials, and finishing granite blocks from quarries located around Penobscot Bay, its islands, and near its coast. Major sites that supplied Belfast included the quarries on Mount Desert Island, Lincolnville, Northport, and Oak Hill in Swanville. In addition, the Belfast Foundry supplied many of the tools and machinery used in all phases of the granite industry.

THE GRANITE

The Oak Hill granite was described by T. Nelson Dale in his 1923 United States Geological Bulletin 738, "The Commercial Granites of New England" as being a dark gray, "bluish", fine-grained rock that took a "very fine" polish.

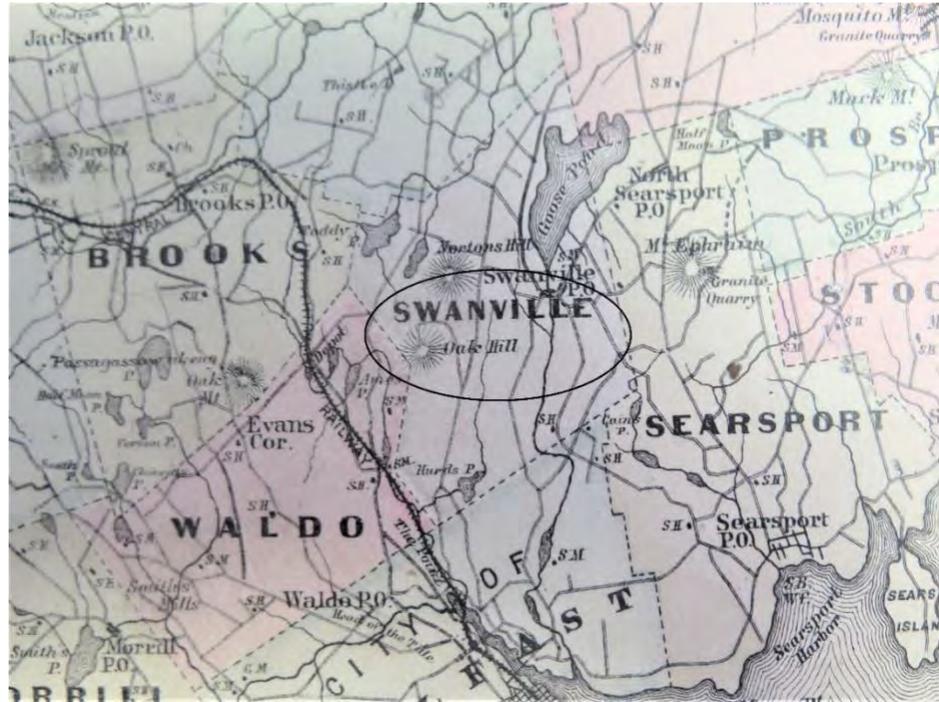
John R. Rand agreed with his description and classified it as a biotite granite in his "Maine Granite Quarries and Prospects", published by the Maine Geological Survey in 1958.

According to several sources, the mineral composition and fine grain also made the rock more expensive to work and polish. However, those same characteristics made it an excellent choice for paving stones and curbing. It should be noted that the term "monuments" includes headstones, grave markers, memorials, commemorative markers, and statues. Many of the

monuments made of Maine granite were made to memorialize actions and participants in the American Civil War.

EARLY HISTORY

Local stone was used extensively beginning with the earliest settlement of New England by Europeans. As stones were cleared from fields or removed to make cellars, they were used for walls, building foundations, retaining walls, etc. Early quarrying, primarily from islands



Location of Oak Hill and Swanville.

Source: Colby Atlas, c. 1890, Belfast Historical Museum Archives.

in Penobscot Bay, had little impact on Belfast but around 1870, Cyrus J. Hall, a Belfast native and entrepreneur anticipated the increased demand for Maine granite and became very prominent in the industry as described in "The Granite Empire of C. J. Hall", also published by the Belfast History Museum (link below).

Much of the information below was taken from the article "A Hopeful Hill of Granite" by Jay Davis and Tim Hughes, in the Waldo Independent, July 2, 1998. The article was based upon interviews with Mr. Allan Mollinson who worked at the quarries in the 1920s and 1930s and later purchased them.

In the 1840s, Oak Hill was owned by Gov. James Sullivan of Boston. Mr. Rufus B. Allyn a Belfast attorney working for the governor, noticed "compass deviations" on the property and, from this, he deduced that minerals were likely present and purchased the property. In 1849 his

prospecting found no valuable minerals, only granite. However, he opened a quarry and produced the granite used to build the "Granite Block" on the north side of Main Street in Belfast. That building is still there and partly occupied by The Good Table store.

Despite this success, no further large-scale quarrying is recorded and the property was sold to Mr. Elisha Parsons for \$100. Mr. Robert Russ then acquired the property and, in 1863, sold it to Mr. Leon Woodcock. Business picked up when the Belfast and Moosehead Lake Railroad purchased granite blocks from Oak Hill in 1868-1870 to build bridge abutments at City Point, and possibly other points along its line. The rock's beauty and hardness attracted attention and inquiries as to its source were made by masons and architects.

THE PRODUCTIVE YEARS

In 1871 or 1872, 200 acres of the hill were purchased by five residents of the Belfast area who formed the Oak Hill Granite Company: Samuel Otis, George B. Ferguson, Eben Newell,



Oak Hill Quarry, Undated. Source: Belfast Historical Society Museum Archives.

Ebenezer Littlefield, and Albert Gammons. They built a "good road" to the hill and opened 2 quarries to meet the demands for stone created by a large fire in Boston. It was reported that \$20,000 worth of granite was shipped in their first year of

operation. By September of 1873, there were 40 men working at their quarries.

Quarrying continued in 1874 with the company reporting in June that it had completed 3 of 9 large granite blocks for the Philadelphia Safety Deposit Company, each was 20.5 feet long, 9 feet wide, and a foot thick. Each block weighed approximately 15 tons and cost \$700.

According to an article in The Republican Journal in October 1950, in 1876 Mrs. Isaac Burgess had several pieces of Oak Hill granite cut and shipped to Boston to construct a memorial to her late husband to be erected in Grove Cemetery, Belfast. This was the first reported use of Oak Hill granite for a monument. (A search of cemetery records could not confirm this, however.)

By 1877, Oak Hill Granite Company had offices in Belfast and employed 30 teams of oxen to haul granite blocks to the harbor at Belfast.

In 1882, the company employed 30 men at its quarries producing stones that were used almost exclusively for monuments, according to the Maine Industrial Journal of January 5, 1883. Belfast monument companies even specified using "Oak Hill Granite" in their advertisements.

1883 brought the organization of the Granite Cutters Union to the Oak Hill quarries as well as the opening of a new quarry by Cyrus J. Hall, who purchased 60 acres on the east side of the hill and began preparing the property for operations. Stone from this quarry would be shipped to Belfast for final finishing at his newly-opened stone yard on the harbor, adjacent to his Belfast foundry.

In that year, New England Granite Company of Westerly, Rhode Island leased the works of

the Oak Hill Granite Company. The new lessee then built a shed 210 x 19 feet for its stone cutters near the railroad depot at City Point. They also built a blacksmith shop nearby. These works allowed

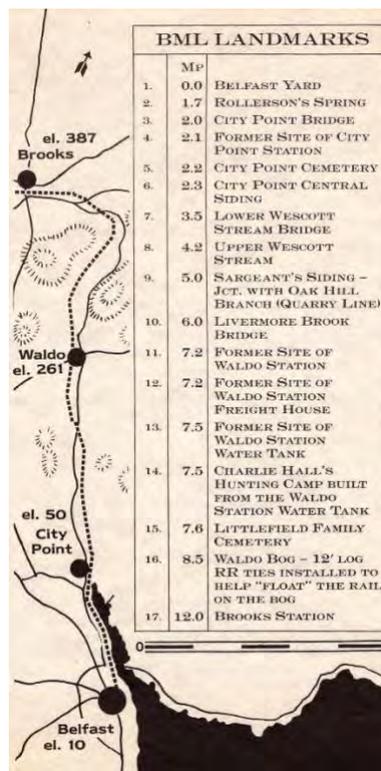


Granite Loading Facility at City Point, Undated. Source Joe Feero Photograph, Belfast Historical Society Museum Archives.

them to haul the granite by rail from Sargents Siding near Waldo, finish the stones for building or

monument construction at City Point, and ship them to customers by either sea or rail. The largest stones reported to be handled were 9 X 15 feet and of various thicknesses. Operations there started in August and the first "manufactured" stones were shipped in December. The company's activities were well-reported in the Maine Industry Journal and the Republican Journal which helped draw attention to the burst of activity at Oak Hill and City Point.

Also in 1883, the Republican Journal reported in October that Leon Woodcock "...gained control of the quarries" and used his influence with the Maine Central Railroad to have a gravity-controlled spur line built from Sargents Siding to within a quarter-mile of the quarries. (Others recalled the siding as being constructed earlier, in 1871, as the United States Geological Survey recorded in Bulletin 738, published in 1923. It is unclear which date is correct, nor how long the line was in use. It should be noted that the museum has an undated ticket stub from the Belfast & Moosehead Lake Railroad that lists "Sargents Siding - Jct. with Oak Hill Branch (Quarry Line)" at milepost 5.0 from Belfast.)



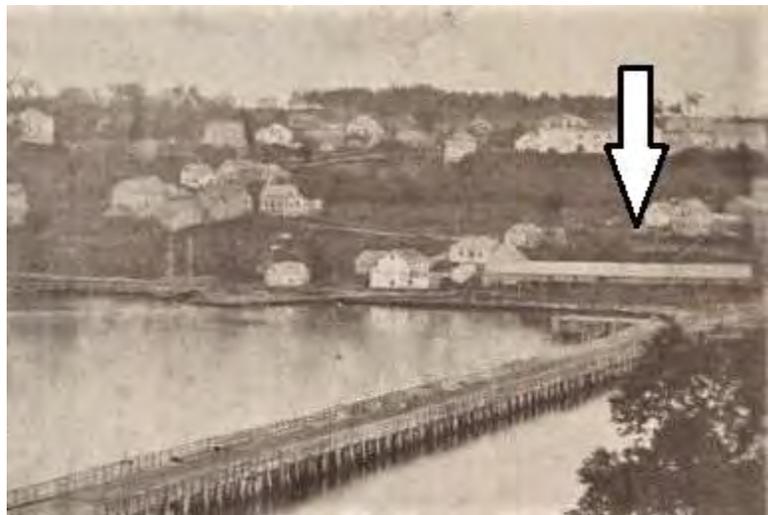
*Belfast & Moosehead Lake Railroad Ticket, Reverse side showing landmarks, 1940s.
Source: Belfast Historical Society Museum Archives.*

In 1883 the Maine Industry Journal (July 6) reported that the Adams Oak Hill Granite Company had been formed by five men including Joseph Kaler of City Point. Their quarry was opened to supply 800,000 paving stones for the city of Boston. The group erected a blacksmith shop on the site and planned to build a finishing shed on Mr. Kaler's mill privilege between City Point and Upper Bridge. It is unknown whether the finishing shed was constructed, but the company began shipping paving stones. According to the Republican Journal of September 20, the company also won a contract to supply "a cargo or two" of granite to customers in Quincy, Massachusetts, necessitating the hiring of more men.

New England Granite was busy cutting and finishing granite with 25 workers in its shed at City Point in January, 1883, and 15 in February. The company shipped three carloads of cut granite to Saint Louis in March, probably marking the end of the extended season.

1884 saw the consortium of granite cutters that had formed "Bay View Granite" in 1883 moved their operations from the west end of the Lower Bridge in Belfast to City Point and specialized in using Oak Hill stone.

In addition to the Saint Louis market, other monuments of Oak Hill granite were being shipped from George Mayo's yard in



Bayview Granite Co. sheds at Lower Bridge, stereographic photo, c. 1892. Source: Belfast Historical Society Museum Archives.

Belfast to Ohio, Indiana, and Tennessee as well as being used locally. Mr. Mayo reportedly needed four cutters to keep up with the demand in October.

By the end of the year, The Republican Journal reported that the New England Granite Company had completed its contract and temporarily removed its workers from City Point, leaving Bay View Granite as the only granite finishing business there. Oak Hill Granite continued to ship rough stones from their quarry while the Fernald Brothers and George Mayo had increased sales from their Belfast yards.

Business appears to have continued apace in 1885. Oak Hill Granite reported shipping three 16-ton stones to Quincy, Massachusetts (probably for cutting into smaller pieces for finishing.) and receiving an order for 150,000 paving stones from Pawtucket, Rhode Island.

Reports in the Maine Industry Journal provide more detailed information on activities in 1886:

Oak Hill Granite re-organized in late 1885 or early 1886 with Mr. W. H. Mitchell of Quincy, Massachusetts becoming manager, and, in July, the company formally organized and issued stock worth \$53,000 naming him president. The company employed 20-30 hands and owned 300 acres at Oak Hill;

Several monument makers in Belfast worked extensively with Oak Hill granite: George Mayo shipped monuments to Chicago, Dayton, and Canton; Bay View Granite now employed 10 workers and shipped mostly to Ohio. In December, Fernald Brothers were making a polished granite slab to be shipped all the way to Oregon.

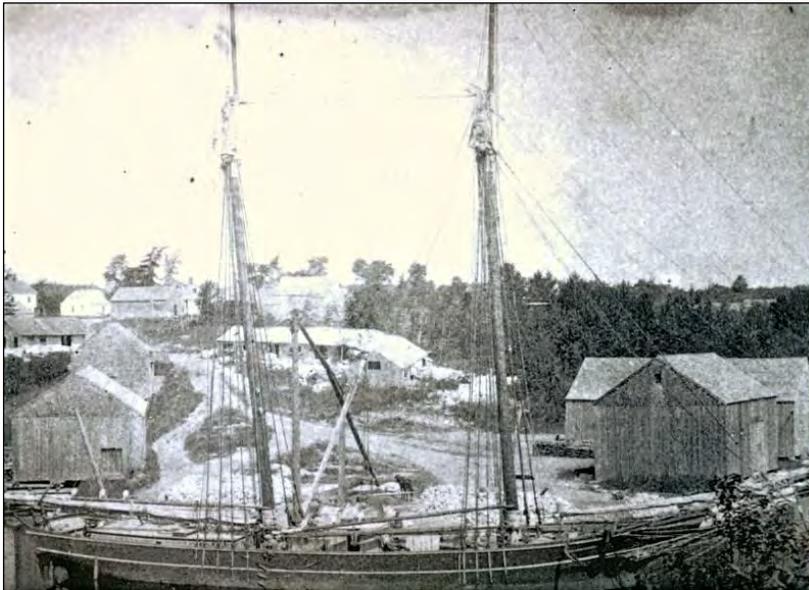
1887 saw continued activity as George Mayo now had six men working exclusively with Oak Hill granite at his Belfast yard with much of their product going to the Midwest. Fernald Brothers were contracted to build a large monument (14 feet high with a 5-foot base) for a New York client.

Meanwhile, Oak Hill Granite was awarded a contract for 190,000 paving blocks for Boston and another for stonework for an entrance to a Pittsburg cemetery that included 10,000 feet of stone and was estimated to take 6 months of work.

1888 brought more work to the quarries and City Point. In that year, the Maine Bureau of Industrial and Labor Statistics reported that stone cutters earned \$2.50/day, sharpeners \$2.25, and quarrymen & teamsters \$1.75.

By 1889, Oak Hill Granite had reopened their wharves and sheds at City Point employing 30 stone cutters and 15 quarrymen at both City Point and their quarries. Orders included monuments for Gettysburg, New Orleans, and Pittsburg. One notable order reported in the

Maine Industry Journal, was for a 20-ton granite block that required ten yoke of oxen and six horses to haul to City Point for shipment to Saint Louis.



(Schooner "Helen," Captain Fred White of Upper Bridge, loading paving blocks at City Point, c. 1890. Source: Belfast Historical Society Museum Archives.)

Also, in October, W. O. Sargent of New York City and Harry Luce and F. T. Sargent of Quincy, Massachusetts

leased the Oak Hill quarry to "get out" paving blocks "this season."

In 1890, as Allan Mollison recalled in his interview published in the July 2, 1998 Republican Journal, there were 150 Scots, Irish, Swedes, and English employed dressing and shipping "25 cargos of construction blocks annually" from City Point. A boarding house had been constructed at the foot of Oak Hill for the men who worked 9+ hours a day, six days a week.

Sargent & Company continued to lease the operation, having won a contract to supply 1,000,000 paving blocks to New York City. The company proposed

AGAIN IN THE MARKET.

OAK HILL GRANITE.

The famous Oak Hill Granite Quarries near Belfast, Maine, are again in operation and are producing granite that for monumental purposes cannot be surpassed. It is a fine grained even textured blue, suitable for the best grades of monumental work. A spur track from the Maine Central R. R., has been built directly to the quarries.

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| <p>Rough Stock.</p> <p>We are prepared to furnish the trade with rough stock in any sizes for building or monumental purposes. Our facilities for quarrying and shipping insure prompt attention to all orders.</p> <p>The popularity of this granite when on the market some years ago, will be remembered by many dealers. Send for price list and estimates.</p> | <p>Manufactured Work.</p> <p>All of our cut work is made at the works of Swingle & Falconer, Quincy, Mass.</p> <p>They are authorized to quote the most liberal prices on our granite, and with their improved appliances, pneumatic tools, polishing mills etc., can guarantee entire satisfaction. Write them for estimates on monumental work.</p> |
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OAK HILL GRANITE & PAVING CO.,

BELFAST, MAINE.

Advertisement, 1895, from *The Republican Journal*. Source: Belfast Historical Society Museum Archives.

to hire 300 men and ship 500,000 blocks "as soon as possible". In addition, the company was awarded a \$10,000 contract to supply stone for a new building in that city.

Business was good until May, 1892 when the granite operators locked out the granite cutters in a labor dispute. The Oak Hill quarries were shut down in 1893 and remained idle until 1926, except for finishing quarried stones for the local market. Apparently, some of these stones were quite large. In 1910, the Waldo County Herald reported that a 3,000-pound polished block of Oak Hill granite was shipped to Callao, Peru to be used to mark the grave of George W. Chase of Waldo county who had died in Peru. The block duplicated the stone erected on his father's grave in the family lot in Belfast.

In that year, 1895, the quarry and surrounding land were purchased by Edwin Mollison, W. G. Fitzgerald, and John Harkins to fulfill a contract for paving stones in New York City and to meet other demands. The partners subsequently opened two pits. Mr. Mollison brought his nephew, Allan Mollison to work as a stone cutter at the quarry. Edwin was interviewed for an article, "Oak Hill Quarry Has 101 Years of Ups and Downs" in The Republican Journal of October 5, 1950. Allan Mollison was subsequently interviewed by Jay Davis and Tim Hughes for an article in the Waldo Independent of July 2, 1998 entitled, "A Hopeful Hill of Granite". Mr. Mollison was also later interviewed by Tim Hughes for the Belfast Historical Society's Belfast History Project. A CD of that interview is in the Belfast History Museum archives.

Paving blocks were rectangular, 4 to 6 inches thick and 10 to 16 inches long by 8 to 10 inches wide, depending upon the order. A worker could produce about 140 blocks in a day, receiving 5 cents per block. The partners shipped about 45,000 blocks per week.

A narrow-gauge track was built from the top of the hill to a "grout" dump where stones unsuited for paving blocks were discarded and the rest carved into blocks for trucking to Belfast and loading on to barges for shipment from the company's dock located at the foot of Main Street, where the town dock is today.



(Oak Hill granite quarry, 1950, Source: article "A Hill of Granite" in The Republican Journal, October 5, 1950, from the Belfast Historical Society Museum Archives.)

A rock crusher was set up at the "grout" dump that crushed the discarded rocks into different sizes for local use. In 1927, it supplied crushed rock for the concrete used for the City National Bank's new vault in Belfast. Suitable blocks were also set aside for local use.

Allan Mollison lived at a 95-foot-long, three-storied boarding house on Oak Hill with about 100 other men from 1926 until 1930 when the quarry closed again for four years. It opened again briefly but closed in 1935. In

1946, a company from Quincy, Massachusetts tried to re-open the hill but failed. Around 1950, the Department of Transportation brought in a crusher and used rock from the "grout" pile to make road base for some months but that was the last use of rock from the old quarry.

Occasionally attempts have been made to re-open the quarry. In 1961, The Republican Journal reported that Clyde Holmes Senior, Clyde Holmes Jr., and Edwin Mollison had formed Oak Hill Quarries, Inc. and purchased 300 acres containing the quarries with plans to truck stones to Belfast and ship them by barge to customers. Nothing seems to have come of this effort.

Today, J. C. Stone, Inc. leases the old quarry and removes loose rocks if a customer



Tombstone of George S. Chase made of Oak Hill granite, Grove Cemetery. Source, Megan Pinette.

requests Oak Hill granite. It also owns undeveloped property on the hill but it conducts no quarrying. The granite is still there, waiting.

NOTE: Maps of the area labeled at least three hills in the vicinity of Swanville as "Oak Hill" until sometime in the mid-20th century. By 1932, the United States Geological Survey had changed its designation of this prominence to "Quarry Hill," to distinguish it from the hill nearer Waldo and the one northwest of Swan Lake.



Oak Hill in 2021, aerial photographs by Mark Kuzio

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