

Brick and Stone Pavements to be Added To National Register

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Have you ever heard that the stones that pave N. 10th and N. 11th arrived here as ship's ballast? Or perhaps you've heard them called "cobblestones" or that they were laid by Chinese laborers before the expulsion in 1888? None of that's true, but the real story is more fascinating.

By 1900 Tacoma faced a serious problem that was growing worse by the day: its streets were a mess. Some things never change! The problem then was Tacoma's mostly unpaved streets. The population was booming, and new houses were going up everywhere in the city's "streetcar suburbs" like the North Slope. More people meant more wagons and carriages, and even a few of those fancy horseless carriages. The city's streets, however, were a morass of mud, especially during the winter and spring rains. The steep streets were often impassible, becoming little more than gullies during the rainy months. Timber planks and blocks were tried, but they didn't last long. A locally-fired brick had crumbled quickly. So, the city's Public Works department looked for other remedies.

The great solution was thought to be macadam, coarse gravel mixed with a small amount of tar or asphalt.

In 1901, St. Helens and North I streets were paved with macadam. It worked well, but the ride was very rough. Riding over a macadam country road today in a car with a good suspension and rubber tires is teeth rattling at best. Imagine what it was like with iron-bound wagon wheels. Moreover, it didn't help much with hoof traction on the steep streets.

In 1904, the city tried a new asphalt, similar to what we have today, on N. Yakima to great success. It provided a smooth ride and was quickly used to pave parts of I, J and K streets. This asphalt was far too slick for horses and mules on the steep streets. There was simply no traction.



Meanwhile, Denny Clay Brickworks in Seattle developed a hard brick that could withstand hooves. In 1905, it was used to pave Pacific Avenue as well a number of other streets, including sections of N. 3rd through N. 9th here in the North Slope. At this time, the city made the brick-lined street gutters we see in the District a standard. But again brick did not provide enough traction for horses pulling heavy loads on the steep streets.

In 1907, the city contracted with T. J. Cannon for a solution. Doing similar work in Seattle, Cannon used hand-carved blocks or setts from the local Wilkeson Sandstone Quarry. The blocks were roughly the same size, and each was given slightly curving top.

Being larger than bricks and having more surface contour, hooves could get traction on a slope. Cannon was the sole contractor for a half million dollar contract, huge for its time, to lay these sandstone blocks from S. 9th to S. 23rd and other locations along major streetcar lines, including N. 10th and N. 11th. Cannon found that local brick masons lacked the skill to deal with the various- sized stone blocks, and so he recruited stone masons from New Orleans, Charleston, Baltimore and Quebec. The pay rate was an astounding \$6/day when the usual rate for such skilled labor was \$2 to \$2.50/day.

Automobiles didn't appear in Tacoma in large numbers until after World War I. By 1925, they would make up the majority of Tacoma's street traffic, though you would still see horses and mules into the 1950s. As cars and trucks took over, Tacoma's brick and sandstone block streets began to be paved over with asphalt. Now only a few portions of streets and alleys remain uncovered and many of those are badly patched.

The North Slope Historic District now has some of the largest remaining contiguous sections of brick and block streets in the city. While briefly noted in our district's 2002 National Register nomination, they were not discussed in any detail. We have recently requested an amendment to that nomination calling them out specifically and adding this additional history to our unique neighborhood.

