

WASHINGTON COUNTY

Want a green roof? Try slate

France puts on 50 times as much slate each year as the whole United States

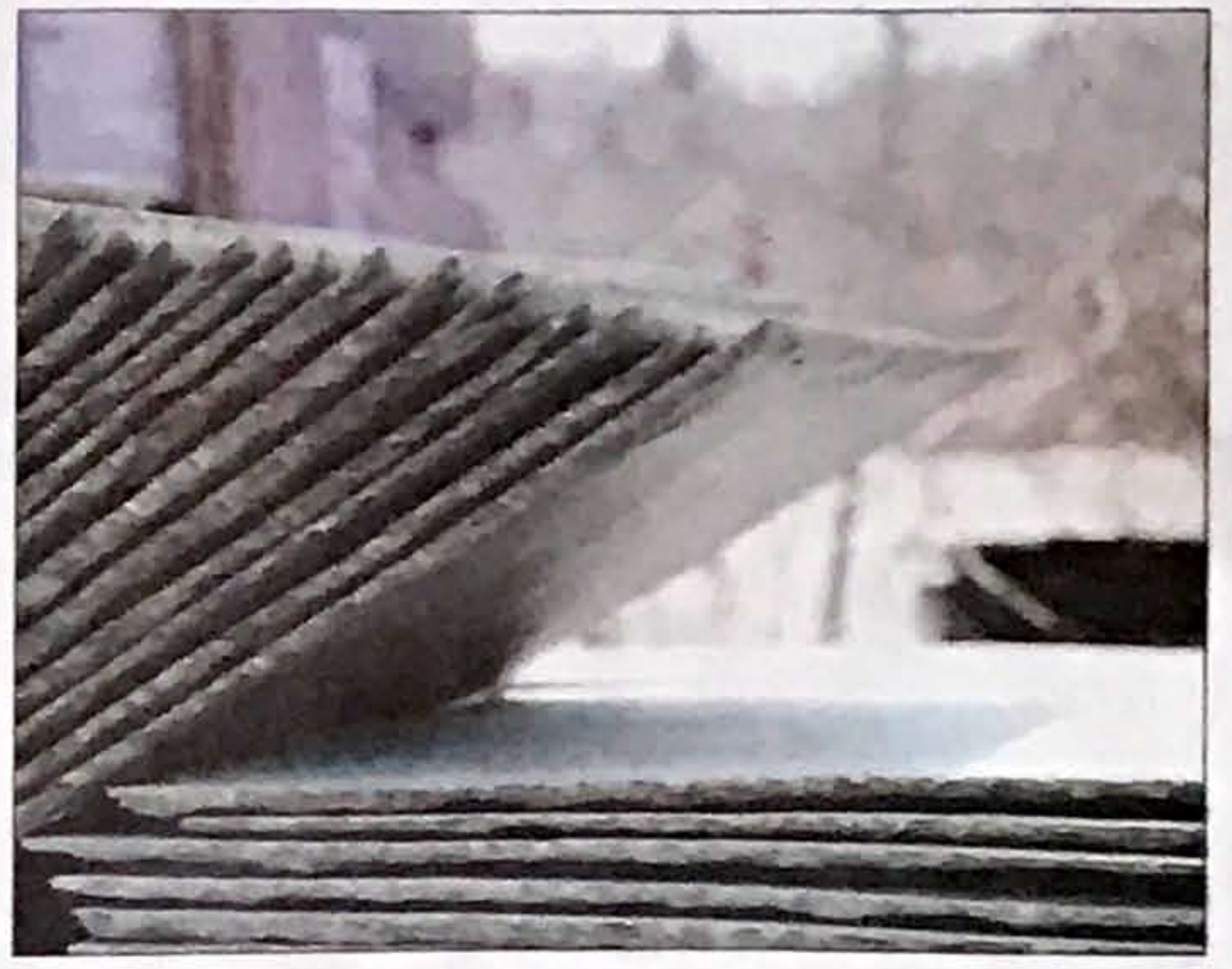


PHOTO PROVIDED BY VSQA

A worker hones a slate countertop at one of the businesses in the Slate Valley, on the New York/Vermont border.

BY KAREN BJORNLAND
Gazette Reporter

Across the globe, green-minded homeowners and builders are choosing slate for roofing instead of asphalt.

And one of the best places in the world to get high-grade slate that's not just gray or black, but vibrant shades of purple, green and red, is the Slate Valley, a narrow band of deposits that straddles the New York-Vermont border.

Granville, a village in eastern Washington County, 40 miles north of Saratoga Springs, is the center of the industry.

"France puts on 50 times as much slate each year as the whole United States," says Bob Williams, a director of the Vermont Slate Quarry Association, a nonprofit group of quarry owners and slate-related businesses that promotes and preserves the area's slate heritage and industry.

Slate, a metamorphic rock, is "eco-friendly," Williams says. "Filling up our landfills with this asphalt product really doesn't make a lot of sense. We're not doing Mother Earth much good by doing this. In Europe and a lot of the other parts of the world, they have come to this realization."

In Europe, stone and slate, which lasts more than a century, is a popular building material.

"They build a home and they expect it to pass on for generations. We come from a different perspective. We build our starter homes and we go to



More online

◆ For more info, visit the Vermont Slate Quarry Association's website at www.vsqa.org, where you can watch a video about the slate industry, or www.slatevalleymuseum.org.

the next home, and then we do the next one and then maybe we downsize."

Because a slate roof has a long life, it can be cost-effective, Williams says.

"If you do one slate roof, it outlasts two or three asphalt roofs. By the time you strip off an old asphalt roof, take it to a landfill, and do that two times, you save money."

ROOFING DEMAND

In the Slate Valley, slabs of slate are removed from the ground with bulldozers and backhoes, then hand-split by workers.

"Eighty percent is going into roofing," says Williams. "Another 10 or 15 percent is going into structural elements: facades, kitchen countertops. Another 5 percent is floor and wall tiles."

Twenty-four miles long and six miles wide, the Slate Valley has been mined for more than 150 years, and its population reflects the waves of immigrants — from Wales,

Ireland, Poland and Czechoslovakia — who settled there because of the quarries.

In the early 1800s, the industry was driven by immigrants from Wales, where quarry workers went on strike for three years after their wages were cut in half.

Business was brisk, as government buildings, universities and homes being built around the country needed slate roofing.

"After World War II, there was kind of a decline in the roofing part of it," says Williams. "It went more toward tile. And that lasted for about 25 years."

Around 1976, the industry was jump-started with America's Bicentennial and an interest in restoring buildings.

"Now the roofing end of it has been the predominant product for the last 25, 30 years," he says.

While roofing is now still the strongest product, future growth is expected in cladding (exterior wall covering).

"In Europe, it's already taken off," Williams says.

"It's fireproof. It's low-maintenance. Obviously, you don't paint it. And just like any stone product, the longer it's on your house, the better it looks. It kind of ages like an old cathedral or a castle, rather than deteriorating like wood or plastic or the things they are using."

In the Slate Valley, the most prolific slate is green in color.

"The green tends to split easier. It's an easier stone to work. That was the stone that was produced during the halcyon days when our

production was at its highest," Williams says.

"The red is something that's unique to this area. There is really no other hard red slate available anywhere else in the world. But it's a difficult stone to quarry."

The deposits of red and purple are also smaller.

"So red tends to be three times as expensive as your greens and grays."

Right now, the most popular colors are the grays and the blacks.

"I think that follows the fashion trend, with architects, designers," Williams says. "If you look at the women's fashion, black and dark colors seem to predominate in our culture."

'CLEAN INDUSTRY'

There are about two dozen mines in the Slate Valley, but it's difficult to estimate how many residents are employed in the industry.

"If we're talking just within the quarries, I would say maybe 400 to 500," says Williams.

There are many related businesses, like trucking, automotive shops that provide machinery parts, even blacksmiths that make the chisels to split the stone.

Slate mining is "a clean industry," Williams says, because unlike other mining, the material is close to the surface and the piles of rock that surround the quarries are "not a dangerous waste."

"These piles that, as you know, surround Granville, at some point get covered with trees and they almost become part of the landscape. I remember when I was a kid, climbing up on them, build-

ing forts on them."

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

As part of its mission, the Vermont Slate Quarry Association connects with Vermont and New York residents by offering tours of the quarries, providing scholarships at local schools, sponsoring highway cleanup days and donating quarry waste for highways and to farmers.

"Community support is very important," says Williams.

Slate Valley residents are a "tightknit group," says Krista Rupe, executive director of the Slate Valley Museum in Granville.

"They founded our museum 20 years ago and keep it going," Rupe says.

"We try to connect people to history through what's going on culturally. We hold a lot of music and food events. People seem to want to connect in that way."

The museum hosts an annual Community Slate Day, a Soup and Bread Night, with soups from around the world, and live Celtic music on St. Patrick's Day.

"We also host a 'Sip and Paint on Slate,' using slate instead of canvas, which is very popular," she says.

Rupe grew up in Poultney, Vermont, near the New York border, and her grandfather, Michael Rupe, owned a slate-quarry that's now run by her uncle.

"When I was a child I loved trips to the quarry. I liked exploring the forest around the quarry and looking out over the view of Lake Saint Catherine."