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HEADLINE; OLDER HOME FOUNDATIONS

This week we continue on with what to look for in a century home and we shall discuss foundations. The very early homes were built on the ground, literally, the walls were set upon wood timbers called mudsills. The next stage is called dry stack. Here the stones were fitted and piled together without the use of any mortar and I have seen this used for an out building as late as the mid 1800's. The use of the original lime mortar mix for what we call rubble stone foundations began and these make up the vast majority of foundations from the late 1700's right thru to the turn of the 20th century in some areas. One of the earliest stone buildings in Canada is the Powder Magazine at Port Royal in Annapolis, Nova Scotia. It was constructed around 1709. The introduction of ashlar stone foundations by the mid 1800's created a more defined and consistent foundation, but even they were a veneer of sorts and the interior walls were often rubble stone. Foundation walls of 12-18 inches thick were not uncommon. Ashlar stone is dressed stone, cut by a stonemason to large rectangular units and then laid in a coursed fashion, not unlike bricks are laid today. By the turn of the century concrete blocks were coming into use as developments in concrete progressed. Early blocks were manufactured to look like the ashlar stone foundations with the rough tooled surface. A home with an ashlar foundation was considered a well built home in its day.

What do you look for in an older foundation? Water is the largest enemy of older foundations or any foundation for that matter but rubble stone foundations can be more susceptible to continued water activity. Their saving grace is often their thickness and the fact that many stone foundations leak, taking away the pressure of the water. At the time of construction our forefathers did not understand drainage as we do today and below grade drainage was rare. Walk around the exterior of the century home and pay special attention to the grades around the home and if evertrough is installed, where does it discharge. Evertrough is not a modern invention, it goes back to the middle ages and some very distinctive homes had hidden trough built into the eave edge of the roof, copper evertrough was also used at one point. If the landscape allows the ground water to flow to the home in certain areas, when you go into the cellar pay attention to these parts of the foundation. Take a good flashlight and review the area where the wall and the floor intersect. If there is considerable mortar missing or small piles of sandy or light grey material on the floor, this should be investigated. Go to the end of the wall and sight down the wall to see how straight it is. Do not be surprised if the wall appears to be slightly angled from the base to the floor beams or joists, this was how they were built. If however it is bowed or cupped, this is commonly a sign of significant structural activity and further investigation is needed here too. The freeze-thaw cycle is also a considerable contributor of stone foundation deterioration. I have seen this create a large crack in more than one ashlar stone foundation.

When I see evertrough that is improperly discharged or a driveway that has an aggressive slope to the building, these are areas to investigate. You can expect that the driveway has been cleared of snow and ice and then salted and sanded over the years, go looking at this wall. The salt will affect an older stone foundation over time. Corners of older rubble stone foundations, especially where evertrough are not correctly discharged, commonly have deterioration and water conditions. Make careful notes about what you find and then contact a reputable heritage mason or a home inspector that specializes in Heritage Buildings. There are more and more of these inspectors around. Discuss your findings with the Mason or Inspector and if possible have them do an inspection. Stone foundations are not to be guessed at. I have seen many cases where what appears to be a small issue is serious and vice-versa. Plan on attending the inspection, you will learn a lot. Many times I have seen cases where a foundation does not look healthy, when in actual fact all that is needed is some repoint and stone replacement. There is a fine line here and an experienced eye is your best advice. Stone foundations are very expensive to fix if it turns out that more than maintenance is needed.

Lastly if you are buying an older home you can expect that it will have a damp or wet cellar, 99% of the

century homes I see do. It often can be redirected or managed but the chances you will ever stop it is slim at best. High water table and spring run-off are the peak times for older cellars. Coupled with climatic extremities it can make the use of a cellar in an older home limited to elevated storage, but other than the preserves, that is all our forefathers meant them for!

Now the answer to last weeks question, what is a panel board? The answer was A) a centre for electrical circuits encased in a metal box. Now this week's question. What is a Quarter? Is it A) a method of grading lumber B) the Olde English term for a wooden stud C) a tool used for preparing/levelling floor beams in century homes D) A style of decorative 1800's window. The answer in next week's column.

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