

Pennsylvania Flowstone and Fall Colors by Dave Lines



On the last Saturday in October 2016, no less than 21 rockhounds from the Mid-Atlantic area met at the National Limestone quarry at Mt. Pleasant Mills, PA. The clubs attending included the organizing club Montgomery County, plus Northern Virginia, Southern Maryland, Delaware and Northern New Jersey. Quarry owner Eric Stahl, during his safety brief and Christian testimony, mentioned that our group was the last of 20 straight Saturdays groups who have come to his private quarry this year. He said North Carolina was the most distant club that had visited.



At about 9:30 a.m., we divided into 2 groups and one went to the quarry at Middleburg about five miles away and the rest of us (Dave, Jim W. and Tim F.) remained at Mt. Pleasant Mills where we again divided – half going to the wavellite site on the back side of the ridge and the other half going to the main quarry pit.

Our three from So. MD. (Dave, Jim W. and Tim F.), plus some others, started in the main pit searching for calcite crystals, purple fluorite and strontianite. We found some of each mineral, but no outstanding pieces as the calcite was scarce and small while the fluorite was found very scattered all over the quarry area in limestone rocks with veins of massive white calcite. In addition, Jim found a very interesting fossil of coral with clearly visible individual cells. Tim found numerous fossils including brachiopods while he spent most of the morning looking through his loupe. I found purple fluorite, some pink dolomite, small calcite crystals in clusters in vugs and cracks and a mud-covered slab of flowstone covered with round bumps resembling wavellite crystals. Other participants found similar minerals.



At 11:30, our group of three split --- Tim remained in the main pit, while Jim and I shifted to the wavellite area. But first we drove up to the upper bench on the north portion of the quarry to take some pictures of the beautiful fall colors in the valley below. Very pretty.

At the “wavellite holes” on the back side of the quarry property, a gent was in the first one placing rocks in his pick up truck – I did not see his specimens, but he seemed happy. At the second area, there were 4 vehicles parked and no one had found much as the owner had (with an excavator) previously moved at least 2 feet of over-burden onto the area where we dug last year because the area pretty much had been dug out. The back of the “pit” was the most likely place to find some good wavellite, but most of the group had not wanted to invest several hours of hard work digging down through 3 feet of weathered limestone and sandstone to reach the layer containing the wavellite. Tom from Delaware was the exception. He had been digging continuously for 2-1/2 hours when we arrived to watch him. At about 12:15 p.m., sweating profusely, yet still smiling and in good humor, Tom hit bedrock at the bottom of his 3' by 2' hole which was at least 3 feet deep. Undaunted, Tom pounded into the bedrock layer with heavy tools and broke through with great effort. In a couple of minutes he began bringing up rock with a one inch thick vein of light green wavellite --- mostly massive. He nearly filled an old plastic crate, before he finally found a chunk with a beautiful 3 inch vug of beautiful, untouched balls of 1/2 inch diameter wavellite crystals. His dedication, sweat equity and great faith that the layer was down there, had finally paid off. Well done --- but he sure earned it. Incidentally, I began examining rocks while I watched Tom --- turning each one 360 degrees to check all sides for wavellite. My efforts paid off by finding a pretty decent specimen with light green wavellite bumps. Jim said it was better than anything he had ever collected there. Sometimes it is better to be lucky, I guess. Also several good fossil specimens of brachiopods were found.



At about 12:35 p.m., Jim and I left --- Jim skillfully backed his truck out the entire length of the narrow one lane dirt road --- over 300 yards. We met with the rest of the group from the main quarry pit and we all caravanned over to the Middleburg quarry about 5 miles to the west. Immediately upon arrival there, we all spread out looking for specimens. We had already debriefed the group that had visited the Middleburg quarry in the morning --- they had found small calcite crystals and lots of flowstone as well as purple fluorite. We did about the same.

FYI, flowstone is basically water dissolved calcite that had precipitated out in layers in the form of stalagmites millions of years ago in underground limestone caves. One such small cave had been blasted into during their normal quarry operations and the quarry owner had saved the flowstone for visiting rockhounds. Very large boulders of flowstone were piled in a row along the southern edge of the quarry. Some of the boulders were huge. With chisels, hammers and sledges, we broke off many pieces of this material to take home.

“Travertine” is the distinctly banded portions of this flowstone and --- although relatively soft --- is very suitable for making handsome polished spheres, bookends, carvings and even cabs. We found very strongly patterned travertine with nice curving lines of many shades of brownish-yellow.

Overall, we were very pleased with our finds and all of us departed around 3:30 p.m. for our long drives back home.