When John Clemons and his brother arrived on Kelleys Island in 1830, they saw immediately the economic potential of the north shore’s limestone ledges that rose some 25 feet above the surface of Lake Erie. It was not long before they had built a dock at North Bay and began shipping the rock to nearby ports to be used for building stone.

Kelleys Island, like most of the islands of Lake Erie’s western basin, possesses vertical and overhanging ledges and cliffs on its north and west shores and broad shelf areas with gentle slopes on its south and east shores. The formations were created by a rise in the bedrock west of the islands. Known to geologists as the Cincinnati Arch, it gives the islands their regional slope toward the southeast.

Close on the heels of Clemons were the Kelley brothers - Datus and Irad. They too recognized that money was to be made by removing the thin layer of soil to extract the
bluish-white, nearly pure limestone that lay beneath. They quickly purchased most of the island and began quarrying and shipping building stone. Quarrying in the early years was hard, dangerous work. The Kelleys and other early operators used drills, chisels, hammers, augers, and black powder to “sledge” – hammer and blast their way through the stone. Crews loaded wagons and hauled the stone to one of several docks where it was sold by the cord and loaded onto vessels. The building stone, known as dimension stone, was shipped to Cleveland, Detroit, and Buffalo where it was used to construct churches, homes, buildings, breakwaters, piers, and, in 1875, the first American lock at Sault Ste. Marie. Quarrying came into its own on the island when the Kelley Island Lime & Transport Company acquired many of the small quarries, connected them with a rail network, and mechanized operations. To meet the demand for flux stone used in manufacturing steel, KIL&T hired local residents and then recruited laborers from Ireland, Italy, and eastern Europe. By the turn of the century, more than 500 men worked at the company’s 16 limekilns located at the North Bay quarry, the cooper shop, and on the wharf. In 1910, KIL&T constructed the West Bay stone loading dock. Shay engines built at the Lima Locomotive Works pulled carloads of stone over an elevated track to chutes that funneled stone into the holds of waiting ships. Within two years, Kelley Island Lime & Transport ships were carrying more than 500 tons of stone each year. The operations of KIL&T grew to include facilities in five states. The company became the largest limestone producer in the world. Changes in the building stone trade and the Great Depression forced Kelley Island Lime & Transport Company to eventually close it quarries. Its last loads were shipped just prior to the outbreak of World War II. But quarrying limestone continues on Kelleys Island. In 2004, La Farge of North America purchased the 200-acre Kellstone quarry that can produce more than a million tons of limestone each year. Most is shipped by barge to the Cleveland docks where it is sold as construction aggregate.