An Essay on Losing Stone Walls

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STONE WALLS DISAPPEARING

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From the time the Puritans chiseled their first grave marker in the early 17th century, to the time of New England's 19th century agricultural demise, farmers and foresters culled billions of tons of stone from the region's glacial soil and stacked it up. The result, based on a fencing census in 1871, was as much as 240,000 miles of stone wall east of the Hudson River. This was enough stone wall to encircle the earth 10 times, or enough to reach to the moon. No one knows precisely how many miles of these walls remain, but I suspect that the length is about half of the original.

Between the epoch of wall building and the epoch of building with concrete and asphalt, thousands of farm walls, especially those near roads or in the middle of small fields, were converted to other uses. Back then, wall stone was seen principally as a material resource to be crushed for road beds or to be used to build bridges; now it is seen principally as an aesthetic and environmental resource. Today stone walls are being built nearly everywhere in New England. But where does that stone come from?

That is a good question, one that anyone working with stone should ask repeatedly. Much of it comes from antique stone walls, which are being cannibalized by diesel-powered yellow machines, loaded into pallets for shipment on flatbed trucks, and rebuilt as ornamental walls in upscale real estate developments where the supply of money exceeds the supply of stone, and where the addition of stone is some how supposed to mitigate the absence of authenticity. In the process, segment after segment of rustic, tumbled down, lichen-stained, knee-high, half-buried walls are being converted into shorter segments of beautiful, head-high barriers surrounding ostentatious homes, somewhere in Fakeville.

Meanwhile, acre after acre of sprawling stone habitat for untold creatures is being converted into private habitat for the nouveau riche.

Such strip-mining is, of course, perfectly legal. But that doesn't make it right. This strip mining of stone walls for other uses really had no starting point because the conversion of old walls into something newer has been an accepted practice for centuries. What makes it so noticeable (alarming is a better word) today is the combination of two opposing trends. First, the importance of walls as cultural resources – rather than material resource

– has spiked dramatically. Second, the real estate boom since the mid 1980s has dramatically raised the demand for time-tarnished fieldstone, relative to its freshly-quarried counterpart. Stone dealers who used to scavenge old rock piles and pastures, have begun to send out bulk mailings to solicit the sale of old stone walls for out of state export. Sadly, many people take the dealers up on their offer, netting a temporary fix of cash in exchange for a long term devaluation of their properties. A growing illegal trade takes many forms: the poaching of walls a few stones at a time, raids to remote summer properties when their owners are out of state, and the sale of common boundary walls. I don't know of anyone who has hard quantitative data on the transfer of stone today. But many of us have heard plenty of heart-breaking anecdotes.

There was nothing wrong with destroying walls in an era when industrial and engineering hegemony were broadly celebrated and when conservation was a most unusual word. This is no longer the case. We now live in a hectic epoch in which our material needs are met primarily by synthetics, whether petroleum based plastics and polymers, or concrete-based artificial stone. Today, we use fieldstone principally to satisfy our craving for authenticity, and for helping us create a personal link to the past. We have become consumers of stone, not for its material properties, but for its messages.

Building stone walls is a New England tradition. Like weaving, it blends materials slowly. It is an unnecessary skill in today's hectic, electric society, and yet it persists, urging us to touch the past as we think about it deeply and slowly. As our muscles, hands and fingers work together, whether with stone or yarn, we learn that history accumulates event by event, thread by thread, and stone by stone. All walls, both ancient or modern, are woven stone by stone, course by course, tier by tier, and segment by segment. Given a good dry weave, a wall will flex with the random swelling and shrinking of the soil, whether due to wetting and drying, freezing and thawing, or to the ebb and flow of underground life – roots, voles, grubs, ants, worms, and microbes. In contrast, a mortared wall acts like a rigid, but weak, bar on the otherwise flexible landscape, staying intact only until the soil moves, which it must in order to remain alive. A dry laid wall is a stout stone rope. A mortared wall is a weak stone bolt.

The millions of stone walls built by New England culture over the last four centuries have since become woven into the physical landscape. They are actual land forms enmeshed within the terrain rather than artifacts placed above it. Freestanding fences catch the soil that creeps down hillsides everywhere, transforming themselves into retaining walls, which hold soil that would otherwise creep quickly down to our streams. Many walls inadvertently have become low, stone-faced dams, impounding the wetlands we protect so vigilantly. In abandoned tillage fields, buried walls become drains, drying out the land above them. In alluvial lowlands, walls buried by floodplain mud become "natural" springs where the water they carry seeps to the surface. Other walls have accidentally changed the courses of small streams. In larger brooks, washed-out stone causeways and cattle fords have become riffles, below which are accidental trout pools. On flat, gravelly terraces, more than a few walls have trapped enough blowing sand to create dunes. Rarely, stone walls below coastal bluffs are nearly drowned by rising sea level, becoming accidental piers and groins, upon which seagulls perch. Every wall in

every town stands like a low stone ridge in an otherwise softer world. Much more abundant than ledges and cliffs, stone walls are the dry land complement to wetlands. Each wall, especially one sunken with age, is a local, two-way conductor for heat and moisture, depending on season and circumstance; sometimes forcing water downward, sometimes wicking it out, sometimes chilling the soil, sometimes warming it. The grid of walls has transformed what would otherwise have been more homogeneous woodland into thousands of parcels, each with its own special microclimates. Each and every creeping thing responds, whether by reaching (roots, rhizomes, tubers, hyphae), or by movement (wriggling, walking, and burrowing). Sun or shade, hot or cold, snow-covered or exposed, dew-covered or lichen-dry, windward or leeward, stone walls give woodland species plenty of choices.

To remove such walls from the landscape – whether for sale or for rebuilding elsewhere -– is like pulling threads out of the fabric of our woodland landscape. Pull one out, and the effects are local; little is likely to happen. Pull several out, and you might begin to notice a change, perhaps in the species composition of small mammals scurrying about, or the concentration of wild lilies. Pull dozens out, and the broader landscape becomes transformed, the fabric unraveled, and the land more boring, at least aesthetically. The cultural landscape in which we live in our minds, and the one that brings in tourist dollars, encompasses us at an even larger scale. New England has more than its fair share of historic districts, villages, battlefields, cemeteries, special buildings, and houses, each with its own special charm and tourist cachet.

Regardless of how many such sites there are, however, they form little more than a collection of dots on the much broader, forest-green canvas called New England. Sometimes, the dots line up along rivers, coastlines, and important roads, producing heritage corridors. But, even along such corridors, most of New England is still open space, at least with respect to the presence or absence of historic and architectural focal points. Between the corridors and dots lie the stone walls, in such abundance that we tend not to see them at all. Yet without them, our “heritage” landscape wouldn’t be a fabric; it would be the simple sum of dots and lines.

Because they are humble and ubiquitous, stone walls are seldom thought of as cultural sites. But they are cultural threads. They are collectively responsible for binding our heritage places into a single fabric.

New England’s namesake fish, the Atlantic Cod, was initially so abundant that it could have been dip-netted blindfold into boats. Nobody then could have imagined them ever in short supply. Now, however, there are so few cod left that its market price is close to that of lobster, and the fishery is strictly regulated. Like the cod, the seemingly superabundant stone walls of New England are also disappearing, one at a time, almost too slowly to notice. Most are not yet leaving the region. Instead they are being uprooted from our rural landscape and increasingly concentrated in exclusive neighborhoods.

What should be done? First, proceed with caution. If we strengthen regulations to protect stone walls, we should not prevent a property owner from building new walls. The

tradition of stone weaving must continue, for it allows us – in fact, it forces us – to remain connected to the past. But some restrictions would prevent the strip mining of old walls for commercial purposes, especially those along property boundaries and the sides of roads. I would also argue that we should protect some walls solely on their archaeological and habitat value. Grassroots wall-saving Any restrictions on stone walling, however, cannot be imposed from the top down. They must come from the bottom up, beginning with small, generally conservation minded groups: foresters, park associations, town planners and conservation commissions, museums, land trusts, heritage properties, outdoor education centers – who have begun to notice their lands being degraded by a cash-driven, market for weather-beaten stone. If warranted, state-level regulation would have to be enabling legislation, by which I mean laws that give power to towns and villages to decide what is best for them.

In the worst case scenario – one that borders on science fiction – the New England stone mason just might go the way of the New England fisherman. What made the supply of cod disappear was not a few boats, lines, and nets, but fishing at the scale of supertankers and campus-sized, bottom-scraping trawlers. If the tradition of New England stone mason goes the way of the old fisherman, it will not be because a few old farmers traded stones or made deals with stone masons. It will be because we, as a society, allowed the industrial-scale strip-mining and export of our stone to places like San Jose, California; Dallas, Texas; and Seattle, Washington; places where my informants have seen New England stone at their local greenhouse. The discovery of such far-traveled materials make me wonder if I might find some sequoia timber at the local lumber yard, or a few little pieces of the Alamo adobe at the landscape supplier. I also wonder what New England fieldstone might be worth when it becomes scarce.

Perhaps the solution will be to do what the glacier did so well before us. Quarry more from hillsides. Stone suppliers could then brag that their stone did not come at the cost of damage somewhere else. In my dreams, stone masons make the same claim that the manufacturers of fiber goods do: "Made with 100 percent new material." But if the suppliers insist on treating old walls as abandoned quarries, then perhaps consumers can learn to ask, "Where did the stone come from, and at what non-monetary cost?"

New England, geologically, ecologically, and culturally, is a landscape fabric woven from stone. The weave of each wall is one stone-on-two, then two-on-one, layer after layer. The weave within our woodlands is stone wall by stone wall, criss-crossing each other to produce a widely spaced grid. The weave of our abandoned heritage landscape is farmstead by farmstead, the walls of which connect the dots of otherwise notable places. The whole thing – larger than any quilt one might imagine – still looks beautiful, but it is beginning to unravel – slowly, insidiously, and legally.

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