

STRIP-MINING HISTORY

Reprinted from the New York Times

“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,” Robert Frost wrote a century ago. The poet speculated that frozen soil, or perhaps elves, were to blame for the upset stones he encountered on his walk. Recently, however, I’ve concluded that the biggest threat to old stone walls is people. This is especially true of people who work for landscaping businesses that function as cultural strip-mining operations, soliciting the sale of stone walls from old farmsteads and then carting away the past. One such company mined a 26-acre farm in Lisbon, Connecticut earlier this year.

For too long, I have witnessed old walls being dug up, read solicitations for their sale and joined in the laments of those who have lost one in their neighborhood. Communities west of the Hudson River once copied New England church steeples when their founders emigrated from these Puritan locales. Now it’s the shattered residue of our ancestral glaciers that is heading west on pallets.

I suspect that at this very moment, somewhere nearby, a piece of New England’s cultural commons is being pilfered or mined for profit. In some cases, the skyrocketing price of stone has tempted citizens to steal it in bulk from remote properties, as if they were covertly denuding a forest. Pettier theft is also a concern, especially the rustling of flat capstones from roadside walls. One woman I know covered her stone wall in old rugs and plastic sheeting to keep it from disappearing into the night.

To mitigate this slow-motion disaster, earlier this year the town of Harwinton, Connecticut passed the so-called “stone wall ordinance.” The law requires a town permit to excavate, dismantle or otherwise sunder a stone wall. And if the wall must be changed, to make way for a driveway, for example, the original position must be clearly marked with granite, an added disincentive.

I often meet with community groups, heritage trusts, town officials and others seeking advice about protecting stone walls. In the past, I

suggested that they sort their walls into categories and develop a plan for each type: Abandoned walls should be left as archaeology and woodland habitat; heritage walls should be inventoried and maintained; and recent and rebuilt walls should use original stone in a manner that respects local tradition. Since Harwinton passed its law, however, I have simply advised town leaders to review this trend-setting ordinance and adapt it for local use.

The town of Harwinton should be congratulated for creating a model ordinance on stone walls. Now it's time for others to follow suit. Indeed, every New England town, the six New England states and the federal government should develop plans for conserving this unique cultural resource. Walls on public land are currently managed by a patchwork of laws and regulations. Those on private parcels are essentially up for grabs. They would be best managed through town regulations, especially when they are reinforced by state laws guarding against thievery, insensitive modification, and the latest form of mining.

New England's stone walls are vital pieces of our heritage, links in history's chain. Left in place, they frame our spaces and measure our lives against the centuries. Let New England's signature landforms be preserved, unmolested, among us.