

Weaving the Landscape

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Stone walling is a New England tradition. It's a lot like weaving. Neither is necessary in today's hectic, electric society. Yet they persist, 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. As we work to produce something of beauty and lasting value, we also work our way back through time.

Weaving is done indoors. We blend soft materials in an ambience of hearth and home. Stone walling is done outdoors. We blend hard materials in an ambience of fresh air and the sensual physicality of muscular motion. Indeed, all walls, either ancient or modern, are woven stone by stone, 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. A dry laid wall is a stout stone rope. A mortared wall is weak stone bolt.

At a larger scale, the millions of walls built by New England culture over the last four centuries have since become woven into the physical landscape. They are actual landforms, 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 have inadvertently become low, stone-faced dams, impounding the wetlands we protect so vigilantly, especially for the habitat they provide. 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 sit. Every wall in every town stands like a low stone ridge in an otherwise softer, world.

Much more abundant than "natural" ledges and cliffs, they are the dry land complement to wetlands. Each wall, especially those 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. Well guess what lies between the corridors and the dots? It's the stone walls present almost everywhere, often 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.

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 for all to see and appreciate. The result was as much as 240,000 miles of stone wall east of the Hudson River (based on a census of fencing published in 1871); enough stone walls to encircle the earth ten times; enough to reach to the moon. No one knows precisely how many of these walls remain, but I suspect it's only about half the original amount. Thousands of farmstead walls, especially those adjacent to roads or in the middle of overly small agricultural fields, were converted to other uses prior to the epoch of concrete and bituminous pavement. Back then, stone was seen principally as a material resource to be crushed for road material or to be used to build bridges; now it is seen principally as an aesthetic and environmental resource. Clearly, there was nothing wrong with destroying walls in an era when industrial and engineering hegemony were broadly celebrated, rather than conservation. This is no longer the case. Today, we live in a hectic, information-based 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 natural 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.

As a result, stone walls are being built nearly everywhere in New England. But where does that stone come from? Mostly, 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 somehow supposed to mitigate the absence of authenticity. Segment after segment of rustic, tumbled down, lichen-stained, knee-high, half-buried walls are converted into shorter segments of beautiful, head-high barriers surrounding ostentatious homes, somewhere in Fakeville, U.S.A. Meanwhile, lot after lot 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.

New England's namesake fish, the Atlantic Cod, was initially so abundant that they 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 fishmarket 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 gated communities, or exclusive ones under video surveillance. What's to be done? First, proceed with caution. Any attempt to interfere with New England's tradition of stone walling would be like taking a tiger by the tail. One might as well try to stop New England's literary tradition, a place with more poets and philosophers per square mile, per decade, than any other region in America. Hence, any call for stronger stone wall regulations cannot simultaneously be a call to prevent a private landowner's right to work with stone on their properties.

The tradition of stone weaving must continue, for it allows us to remain connected to the past. Without that connection, we will spin into cultural chaos. Personally, I would like to see less regulation, and more incentives to leave old stone walls in place. But some restrictions are inevitable, especially those that would prevent the strip mining of old walls for commercial purposes, especially those along property boundaries and roadsides. I would also argue that some walls justify protection based solely on their archaeological and habitat value. 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. It is the members of such groups who are now raising the first questions at local meetings, who are making that first phone call to a state representative, and who are writing letters and newsletters for local media. If warranted, state-level regulation would have to be enabling legislation, by which I mean laws that give power to those who care the most in towns and villages. 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.

The latter, of course is that sea-faring old salt, that rugged individualist from a fishing family, whose legacy is now in jeopardy because the ability to capture cod (and other fin fish) greatly exceeded the supply of it, forcing the passage of onerous regulations. 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 discovered New England stone at their local greenhouse. Their 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 -- as with the case of the cod -- 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 stone from hillsides. 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 unfortunately legally.

Now what?