

Seven Good Reasons

Article by Robert M. Thorson, reprinted from Connecticut Preservation News

GO WEST! OLD STONE

On a dreary January day last year I was stuck in traffic heading westbound on Interstate 84 near Hartford, Connecticut. In the lane beside me was a large flatbed truck, an eighteen-wheeler with New York plates, loaded with twelve open-air wooden crates. Within each crate was more than a thousand pounds of fieldstone. Some of the stones were lichen covered; others were yellowish brown, the color of subsoil. Their lithology indicated a source from the eastern highlands of Connecticut, perhaps Hampton, Scotland or Canterbury. Watching part of eastern Connecticut head west was sad enough. Even sadder was watching part of our common heritage head west as well. Something felt terribly wrong. Clearly, someone had owned the stone and had sold it. Clearly, someone had wanted the stone and bought it, perhaps for what will turn out to be a beautiful garden. I don't question an individual property owner's rights to sell or buy stone. I love stone as much as anyone. I also love the fact that others love stone enough to buy it at substantial cost. But, at the same time, I have no doubt that tearing old walls down to make new ones is something like taking apart antique furniture simply to use the wood. It's not that we will run out of stone, because we can always get it stone from quarries, rather than from ancient walls. But we may run out of a woodland walls, the closest thing we have to classical ruins in New England.

RATIONALE

I can think of seven good reasons to leave old stone walls intact -- habitat, cultural heritage, landforms, human ecology, aesthetics, education, and sense of place.

Habitat: Anyone who has seen a chipmunk scurry into the recesses of a wall understands. The same is true for the hiker who might notice wild lilies on one side of the wall but not the other. Consider the parallel with wetlands. After centuries of being treated with contempt or indifference, wetlands now have substantial protections, even on private property. This is because society now recognizes the less obvious values of wetlands for habitat, scenery, water quality, flood mitigation, open-space, and education. We have yet to do the same with drylands, which is what stone walls actually are, at least with respect to the woodland habitat. In many places, stone walls provide substantially more dryland habitat than do natural ledges and cliffs. Their commonness combines with their microclimates, to make than a vital part of the woodland ecosystem.

Cultural Heritage: An even better reason to protect old stone walls is that they are part of our collective cultural heritage. When a landowner sells the stones off his land for export,

all of us experience a loss of common culture. If drystone walls are the signatures written upon the rural New England landscape, then exporting them from the region or consolidating them in new suburban developments is like erasing the original signatures on an important historic document. Tourism suffers as well. Stone walls do have legal protection in specially designated historic districts and highways, state and town parks, and land trusts. They also have de facto protection on large privately owned parcels where the owners are not strapped for cash. Elsewhere throughout New England, stone walls have no more protection than the soil on which they rest.

Landforms: Stone walls are so well integrated into the rural landscape of New England that they can rightfully be considered landforms. Some walls have become drains for otherwise wet soil. Others have led to the formation of hillside terraces, or have established the course of small streams. A few dunes I have encountered were caught and held by stone. Abandoned bridge abutments, mill dams, and cattle fords assert control over the form and flow of countless streams, creating pools and riffles, places where trout can live and be caught. Like the caves of Kentucky or the lakes of Minnesota, stone walls are so tightly enmeshed to the landscape that they are now part of it, rather than being placed upon it.

Human Ecology: Stone walls exist because the agricultural society that built them preceded the power of petroleum. Farmers, using their livestock, had enough power to move the stone but not enough to haul it away. Like the hills of ants, the stone is a secondary residue of the more important work of getting food from arable fields. Seeing stone walls -- especially the older archetypical ones -- provides a mental bridge to an era when a literate culture of European stock was still constrained by nature. They represent the middle ground with respect to energy use, less than the preceding Native Americans, but much more than those who followed with powerful tractors and trucks.

Aesthetics: Imagine New England without stone walls. Imagine the impact on tourism. The woods and fields and marshes would still be pleasing to the eye, as with the hills of the Middle Atlantic States. But without the muted grays, ashy browns, and rusty reds of the stones in our walls, New England wouldn't look as nice. In addition, there is the primitive pleasure we experience when seeing and touching stone, one that has remained with us since the Paleolithic. From rounded boulder to straight-edged square, stones add shape to the otherwise amorphous geometry of the woods. From crusty lichens to velvety mosses, the stones add textures as well, that would otherwise be absent.

Education: Each wall is a rock collection. Each gives us a chance to learn about what's underground: how the glacier behaved; where lichens like to grow; which way trees fall; and where the soils heave and subside. Additionally, each wall tells the story about why it was built, and exhibits the style of its builder. I never met a school-aged child that didn't ask questions about a wall.

Sense of Place: A painter might recoil at the sight of a Cubist Picasso in an exhibit of French Impressionist works. For a musician, the inclusion of a march by Sousa in an otherwise classical program might be equally jarring. To someone closely attuned to the

natural landscape, the sight of a stone wall on Long Island built from Connecticut stone might cause an equivalent reaction, a subjective "out of place" feeling. Big-box chain superstores like Wal-Mart and look-alike fast food franchises are already homogenizing the New England landscape. We need not do the same with the stones.