

The Stone Commons

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Freedom of the commons brings ruin to all! This was the conclusion drawn by the ecologist Garrett Hardin, in his legendary 1968 essay "The Tragedy of the Commons," which had major impact on the disciplines of economics, political science, and management. Any commons, he argued -- whether a town "green" in 17th century New England or the global atmosphere of today -- will, inevitably, be overused in a free society. It's simply human nature.

The stage is now set for a more local "Tragedy of the Commons," the piecemeal sale of New England's grid of abandoned stone walls, which simultaneously grace and glue our rural scenery together. The real estate sector of the economy is booming. As the demand for housing accelerates, so does the demand for landscaping stone. Owning a wall composed of old weather-beaten stone can help harried suburbanites alleviate the electronic urgency their days. However, every new fieldstone wall is matched by the loss of one from some old farm, one that might have been torn down, dug up, and carted away, even under the stealth of darkness.

Perhaps you have seen one disappear, and lamented its loss. Perhaps you have commissioned one's destruction, without even knowing it. There is nothing tragic about the loss of a wall or two, here and there, now and then. For centuries, property owners -- from struggling farmers to the owners of grand country estates -- have bought and sold stone without giving it much thought. But something more insidious is taking place now, not at the physical level of private property, but at the psychological level of regional identity. Just as the owner of an old house might discover significant termite damage beneath its fall ade, New Englanders are discovering that the signatures of their landscape are being erased, one stone wall at a time. They are discovering that the fabric of their back-country landscapes are being unraveled, one thread at a time.

I am no tree-hugging alarmist. Actually, I'm a rather sober professor who lives in a town laced "hither and thither" by stone walls, and who studies them professionally. As the great-grandson of an immigrant, homesteading farmer, I respect the right of other private landowners to buy and sell their stone as much as I resent the unnecessary intrusion of government into their lives. HoweverÉ my laissez faire attitude about walls changed abruptly in September, when I received a postcard that had been bulk-mailed to residents of an adjacent, scenic, rather poor town in the heart of what Connecticut calls its "Quiet Corner." The anonymous mailing came from the owner of an out-of-state trucking and fieldstone supply company who wanted to purchase "large quantities of stone from your area," and who's seemingly harmless postcard entreated its potential customers (or victims) with the statement that "your stone walls could be worth thousands of dollars!" A similar advertisement was mailed to residents of Foster, Rhode Island.

Left unsaid in such requests is that the property-owner's short-term financial gain from selling stone would, in a few years, be offset by the long-term loss in value for property denuded of its walls. Also left unsaid was that quarrying the wall for its stone was, quite literally, strip-mining the land of its character, its habitats, icons—Even ghosts from the past. I would no more sell the "dryland" walls around my otherwise unspectacular home than I would sell the small "wetland" upon it.

This wetland -- which fills my night air with the sounds of spring peepers, which gives the raccoons and wild turkeys a place to drink, and from which song-birds sing -- would have been drained in an earlier era, when the hidden value of wetland habitat went undetected. Yet it is on the stone "dryland" wall that my daughter chases chipmunks, blissfully unaware of the efforts of those who built not only her tumbled-down playscape, but the American nation as well. To watch this wall be loaded onto pallets and shipped to the garden center of a big-box superstore, or to the stone-free prairies of the Midwest, would break my heart; not only for my daughter's sake, but for the sake of my neighborhood, town, state, and region, as well.

As a region, we must find an equitable solution that will safeguard the property rights of individuals while simultaneously stopping the hemorrhage of stone walls from the countryside. We must make it financially worthwhile for struggling landowners to resist seductive overtures from the nearest trucking company. There's plenty of stone to be quarried from rock outcrops. It just takes a little time in the sun, wind, and rain to develop the weather-beaten, lichen-crusting look that we crave.

There is a final irony in all this. It was the distinctly American notion of private property -- in the form of self-reliant, independent family farms -- that bequeathed to us what is now a collective cultural heritage. Yet, it is that same notion that most threatens stone walls today. Somewhere in all this is a compromise, one that will prevent the tragedy of the commons from playing itself out, one stone wall at a time.