**Preservation Conversations, Episode 13: New England Stone Walls**

**Follow Up Questions from Robert Thorson**

**New England Stone Wall Questions:**

Overall, is there a timeframe when the majority of stone walls in New England were made?

Statistically, and averaged over the whole population, yes, though this is based on anecdotal integrations without hard numbers. Things really opened up after the revolutionary war, and began to close with the Erie Canal. This half-century, rounded off from 1775-1825, was the peak for many reasons outlined *in Stone by Stone*.

Your book has various geological regions of New England. Have you found variations in construction based upon stone type?

The book *Exploring Stone Walls* is very explicit about these regional variations. I call them provinces.

How can people learn more about their own historic stone walls?

By starting with the deed records in town halls. Next, use the interpretive techniques laid out like a textbook in *Exploring Stone Walls*, which was written for that purpose.

Did stone walls have wooden fencing on top when they were needed to contain livestock?

Yes, and no. The wood is gone. Even at peak fencing, most of the fences in New England were made of wood. Very few stone walls were high enough to qualify as a legal fence. The low ones often had wood above them, but usually this is a surmise, rather than based on actual evidence. Most commonly, and A-frame of short poles was laid against the roughly triangular shape of single walls, with longer rails and poles running parallel to the wall. Sometimes, solid double walls have post holes, indicating fence on fence. Historically, an initial wooden fence becomes a dumping ground for stone, which replaces the lower rails with stone, meaning it is a wooden fence with a stone bottom, rather than a stone wall with a wooden topping. Timothy Dwight agreed with this based on direct observation.

Can a town fence viewer present the dismantling of an old stone wall?

I don't know. Such positions are now mainly titular and nominal. I think this is a great suggestion for someone to explore.

I love the old, colloquial reference to "two-man" or "three-man' walls. If a farmer's family and/or number of farmhands were not large enough to manage walls with large stones, was this a neighbor/community activity, like barn raising?

Yes, this is particularly true for what I call "broad walls," or what the British call "consumption walls," those built mainly to hold stone. These represent one-time events of capital improvement, likely done as a group, rather than the piecemeal growth so common with standard walls.

Does every town, locality have surface ledge quarries - can they be documented as historic assets?

Yes, they are historic assets, and they likely can be identified and inventoried, using clues. I've seen hundreds of local quarries, many of which were previously unknown.

Keep in mind that large glacial erratics of good granite were often used as quarries, and they are now gone. Ralph Waldo Emerson said as much about Concord., MA.

Could you tell us some more about your wall inventory methodology?

This is an old version of what I have updated and am submitting to the scholarly journal Historical Archaeology.

<https://stonewall.uconn.edu/investigation/classification/>

Can you comment on stonewall chambers?

All are idiosyncratic. Some likely have non-utilitarian significance analogous to kivas. But unless proven otherwise, the vast majority are likely sites for storage, external root cellars if you like.

<https://stonewall.uconn.edu/investigation/pre-european-contact/>

In areas that were once farmed but are now unmaintained forest, how deep into the ground does the typical New England stone wall go?

In general, this question lacks a vertical frame of reference. Most walls were placed on the ground, perhaps after raking some of the surface duff away. Very few farm walls were excavated into the ground initially, this may have happened later when the wall was rebuilt and restored when more labor/money was around to justify it as architecture. If they go "into the ground" this is often due to the combined factors of subsidence due to the weight, and the rising of the soil against the wall owing to soil development processes. I've see walls built on soft substrates (glacial marine clay of southern Maine) sink down to ground level, such that the whole thing is buried.

A 13-acre steep and craggy field in Newton (with stone walls) has contains seemingly random rock piles with rocks the size of a bowling ball or smaller (that could be moved by hand). Any idea what it could be?

These are what you call them, piles. In many cases, especially in areas of pioneering farmsteads preceding the established farm stage *(Exploring Stone Walls),* piles were the pre-coursers of walls in the same way that leaves used to be raked into piles before being hauled outward to the edge.