

## Stone Walls

by Winfield "Binny" Clark

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Stone walls symbolize rural New Hampshire for both residents and visitors. They present a clear record of where early farms, pastures and roads were located. They also provide habitat and protection for wildlife, establish clear ecological boundaries, and gently remind us of New Boston's early history.

We tend to take them for granted, though, and they are more fragile than commonly supposed. Developers often regard them as obstacles, as happens when a road is proposed for widening to upgrade it from Class VI to Class V (so that the town will maintain it.) Salvage dealers buy and remove walls for fieldstone fireplaces, etc. – closer to major cities, some towns have lost most of their walls in this way. And of course, tree roots, windstorms, gravity and erosion are constantly working to bring stone walls down: "Something there is that doesn't love a wall."

Stone walls on private land are not protected. Several state ordinances do treat specific cases: RSA 472:6 (as amended) says that if a stone wall serves as the boundary between two owners' properties, both owners must consent to its removal. Removing stone walls along designated scenic roads is discouraged. It can only be done with the consent of the planning board [RSA 231:158 (as amended)]. Scenic road designation requires a petition of 10 residents along a road.

The stones which form the estimated 429 miles of walls in New Boston were brought here by the last glacier, the Laurentide Ice Sheet, which at its peak 20,000 years ago was more than 2 miles thick in this area. As it receded, it deposited sand, gravel, stones and boulders as described in the Natural Resources chapter. The early settlers found that the glacial till hilltops (drumlins) were the best for farming. When first cleared, such fields had as much as two feet of well-drained, rock-free topsoil, deposited by thousands of years of forestation.

But the act of clearing the land exposed the soil to erosion and frost action: within a few decades, each winter's freezing and thawing brought a crop of stones up from the glacial till beneath the topsoil, which had to be cleared each spring. The early wooden fences began to be replaced by stone walls. These were mostly built over several generations, from the time of the Revolution up to about 1830. Farms which survived after the Civil War had much less of a problem with rocks: the underlying till had only a finite number of stones to heave up to the surface.

The standard "Three Rod Roads" of the early days also tended to produce their own stone walls. Erosion and wagon wheel ruts uncovered stones which had to be hauled to the roadside. These gave rise to the familiar parallel walls which skirt the old roadways.

Most stone walls were built to show property lines, and to get stones out of fields and pastures. By themselves, stone walls were not intended to fence in livestock: they were not high enough to keep any self-respecting cow or sheep confined. So wooden fencerails were added on top. There is no evidence of these fences today, since as fields were abandoned the wood quickly rotted away. Only the stone walls that had supported them remain. After 1874, barbed wire was often strung above existing stone walls where livestock was kept.

There were several kinds of walls. Most common were the “tossed” walls, which were simply rocks piled at random along the edge of a field or pasture. More elaborate were the “laid” walls, which involved a good bit of skill in placing rocks so they would bear several layers and remain standing for years. These could be either single laid walls, which mostly surrounded hayfields or pastures, or double walls with smaller stones filled in between them, which usually surrounded cultivated land.

Over time, well-maintained stone walls became a point of pride among farmers and often show a great sense of design. New Boston has examples of many types of walls. Since the oldest farms tended to be on the hilltops, some fine walls are to be found on Cochran, Clark, Bunker, South, Meetinghouse and Hooper hills. The same skilled stone masonry produced the dams at Tucker Mill and near the Monastery. The wild stone walls found in the middle of almost any forest here show how much of New Boston’s land was cleared at one time. All of these walls are historical artifacts which need to be preserved whenever possible. Stone walls bind us to our past.

*Stone walls run through these forests  
Like the lines in a face;  
Each rock means a back was bent  
To fit it into place.  
And a man stood here  
With fields to clear;  
A team of oxen  
And an axe was all he owned.  
Now his fields are overgrown.*

*- Winfield Shaw Clark*

### **Recommendations:**

Whenever possible, the Planning Board should encourage the preservation of stone walls as a valuable town resource. The blister rust maps of the 1930’s serve as an inventory of the walls that stood at that time.

When driveways are planned, the use of existing gateways or natural breaks through walls should be the first choices.

If roads with walls on each side must be widened, the stone wall on at least one side should remain intact.

Property owners should be encouraged to maintain their walls, and in particular their boundary walls – “good fences make good neighbors.”

The Stone Wall Initiative is a non-profit organization intended to help increase the appreciation, investigation, and preservation of stone walls. It solicits participation through a web-site, <http://stonewall.uconn.edu/>.