

## Stone Wall Protection – Boon or Bust?

Recent actions by several Rhode Island towns to enact ordinances to protect stone walls are seen as an important tool to protect our colonial heritage from being destroyed by developers and miners. For certain, there is a problem out there in certain instances when an old wall is destroyed for the sake of a few dollars. But don't some folks think the same of timber harvesting??

Let's take a look at the issue. First of all, there is a website at the University of Connecticut run by Professor Bob Thorson, who has written three books on the origin and meaning of New England's stone wall heritage. The site, [www.stonewall.uconn.edu](http://www.stonewall.uconn.edu), advocates for the protection of these walls, as are many conservation organizations. Professor Thorson recently addressed the Scituate Conservation Commission's annual meeting, where he described New England's stone walls as our "pyramids", in that the cumulative effort it took to build all these walls should be honored by their protection.

Existing protection of stone boundary walls is indirectly provided under Chapter 34-10 of the RI General Laws, where a stone wall property boundary is considered a fence. Towns are now incorporating stone wall protection in their subdivision review process, with varying degrees of success, and several towns have passed protection ordinances for walls along public ways and those of historic value in the community.

The potential controversy surrounding additional protection involves private property rights. Should the government regulate the removal of walls within your property? Is timber harvesting next on the list? The Board of Directors of RIFCO have had some discussions about this issue, and we'd like to hear from our membership. Please contact us at [info@rifco.org](mailto:info@rifco.org) if you've got an opinion on the matter.

Following is an excerpt from the UCONN stonewall website:

There is a strong, growing, and recent trend towards greater protection of stone walls, especially in New England where they are signatures of the rural landscape. The movement is supported at all levels by individuals, nonprofit organizations, and local governments. Specific actions are often *ad hoc*, and are not yet coordinated by regional planning agencies and state governments.

### GOVERNMENT

Government is involved at many levels. The best place to start would be to contact your designated Town Planner. They can be reached through the town manager's office or through the blue pages in the phone book. The typical way in which towns are dealing with the issue is summarized below.

- Protection is usually implemented through amendment and revisions of planning and zoning documents, or through a town's official plan of development. The revisions usually involve subdivision regulations, building codes, and various ordinances.
- The revisions take the form of including stone walls into the previous list of criteria (or planning elements) that must be looked as part of routine environmental assessment prior to development. For example, subdivision regulations usually require that attention be given to special historic landmarks, archaeological sites, wetlands, aquifers and other factors. Stone walls are gradually being incorporated as a distinct criterion in such assessments.
- Residents and towns are also asking their state reps to sponsor enabling legislation, which would allow towns to back up their land use protection with respect to stone walls.
- Because stone walls often coincide with legal property boundaries, surveying regulations are increasingly recommends their protection.

The majority of walls will fall easily into one of the three basic types: **Abandoned Walls**, **Heritage Walls**, and **Recent & Rebuilt Walls**. This typology is based more on gut instinct and local history than on anything simple and objective like height, width, or ornamentation. For a more rigorous stone wall taxonomy based on field criteria, refer to Chapter 9 - Classification in *Exploring Stone Walls* by Bob Thorson of the University of Connecticut.

### ABANDONED

More affectionately known as "wild walls," this type is usually fairly old; farmstead walls walls that have since tumbled and become unkempt. Very few of these (especially the oddest-shaped constructions) may be pre-European in age. Regardless of their original origin, all have since become ruins.

## HERITAGE

More commonly called "historic walls," these are important to local culture and history, the walls where, if a stone falls down, someone puts it back in place. Perhaps they surround an old church yard. Perhaps their local stories are well known. Perhaps they are monuments unto themselves. For clues, look for walls that are:

- Often moderately well built.
- Often contain quarried stone, or large capstones not composed of quarried rock.
- Are the foundations of former buildings, known to have existed in the past.
- Surround known estates or land tracts.
- There would be public opposition if the wall were scheduled for demolition.
- Grace old roads, especially Yankee-era turnpikes.

## RECENT AND REBUILT :

This broad category contains two basic subtypes. Most common are those walls where an old, tumbled-down wall on a formerly derelict property have been rebuilt, usually in the same place, usually by the landowner or a mason hired to do the job under their supervision. Almost just as common are generally shorter sections of "new" wall built on properties, usually with important stone.

## MANAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Abandoned Walls:**
  - Leave them be. They are busy being habitat and stabilizing surface soils, including wetlands.
  - Minimize the number of cuts made through them for driveways, roads, gates.
  - When possible, align property lines of new subdivisions along these old lines.
  - Do not use them as stripmines for other walls.
- **Heritage Walls**
  - Identify and occurrences (especially old foundations). This is equivalent to finding an archaeological site.
  - Inventory based on some naming protocols (Try the taxonomy in Exploring Stone Walls.)
  - Develop an understanding regarding who is responsible for each item on the inventory (some are on historic site properties)
  - Develop a plan for maintaining and protecting them that includes base-line photos and descriptions.
  - Contact the Office of the State Archaeologist.
- **Recent & Rebuilt**
  - For new walls,
    - Recommend against the importation of stone stripmined from old walls.
    - Recommend building them following local folk-art traditions
    - Encourage use of dry stone techniques.
    - Discourage odd, turreted, or otherwise unusual walls that might be seen as garish or ostentatious.
  - For walls being rebuilt on site,
    - Encourage rebuilding one section at a time to maintain drystone habitat