

Unraveling the Stone Quilt

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What would you do if an American cultural relic was being endangered? Would you look the other way as someone rough-handled the U.S. Constitution? Would you leave George Washington's portrait to be burned by the British? Would you toss Dorothy's ruby-red shoes into a musty closet?

No! You would place them under lock and key. You would guard them safely while simultaneously keeping them visible for all to see and appreciate.

New England's fabled stone walls belong in the same category as these aforementioned American originals. The authentic, tumbled down, lichen-crusted walls that criss-cross every wooded village and town are also cultural relics. Indeed, they legally belong to the individuals and government agencies with deeds to the property on which they rest. But they also belong to each and every citizen of America. They belong to you and me.

Two years ago, just before 9/11, we watched in horror as the Taliban in Afghanistan destroyed – with bullets, mortars, and missiles -- the giant Buddahs at Bayaman, colossal statues hundreds of feet tall, and carved in stone by the forgotten people of an earlier millennia. We don't own those statues, nor are most of us Buddhist. Yet, those of us aware of the destruction were angered and saddened by the deliberate erasure of the cultural past. Why? Because those statues belonged not only to the Islamic zealots in power at that moment, but also to the entire world, which, the last time I checked, included you and me.

Something much less dramatic, yet far more insidious, is taking place in the woods of New England, sometimes under the cover of darkness. Abandoned stone walls are being bulldozed up, tossed into trucks and hauled away – often out of state – to regional stone-supply and construction companies. Essentially, the landscape we see on our way to work, to school, to run errands, or to visit friends, is being strip-mined for its stone. Fieldstone is now such a valuable commodity for the construction industry that it is even being pilfered and poached along remote country roads. Trucking companies have actually used bulk mailings to solicit the sale of stone walls from residents of poor towns, offering cash in exchange for the right to haul them away to some unknown fate.

Left unsaid in these solicitations is that the properties denuded of stone walls stone will be devalued (and in my mind, degraded). Also left unsaid is that wealthy towns do not receive the same requests; their residents are less desperate for short-term cash.

Each time an old stone wall is taken down, we lose a cultural relic, one that cannot be re-gained when the wall is rebuilt somewhere else. Nor is a historic lighthouse regained when its stone is used to build a new one. The abandoned stone walls being torn down are not the signatures of an entitled few who signed the U.S. Constitution. Instead, they are the signatures of ordinary farm families who, acting together, built our nation. What right do we have to erase their signatures, just because they are too large to be placed under lock and key?

When African elephants were abundant, no one thought much about slaughtering them for ivory. But now that they are endangered, each one is monitored and protected in some way. This is because the entire world realizes it has a moral obligation to maintain biodiversity, because the countries comprising the savanna have (in spite of their differences) a common mandate to protect this cultural icon, and because the individual communities know that eco-tourism is good for the bottom line.

Imagine New England tourism without stone walls, especially in foliage season, or after Christmas snows, or during the daffodil days of spring. Imagine its forested ecosystem of chipmunks and ferns without the stone habitat. Imagine its children learning about early America without the lessons informed by stone walls.

There are laws against unnecessary losses of natural resources such as the indiscriminate cutting of old-growth trees, the export of soil, the encroachment of wetlands and the diversion of streams. Likewise, there ought to be a law against the thoughtless destruction of stone walls for nothing more than the stone they contain. Such a law would have to be simultaneously mindful of the rights of individual property owners, the needs of the landscaping industry, and for the right of all Americans to experience, viscerally, the stone ruins that so define the soul of New England.

Such laws and regulations do exist, although they cover only a tiny fraction of our stone "commons." Additionally, they usually recommend preservation, rather than require it, and are piecemeal in their coverage. What is needed at this stage -- now that less than half of the original farmstead walls remain -- is to enact a strong statewide policy against the indiscriminate dismantling of our stone wall heritage, one accompanied by stiff penalties for wrongdoing.

Otherwise, the fabric of the landscape in which we live – the patchwork quilt of abandoned farmsteads – will unravel, one stone wall at a time.

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