

The Hidden Story Behind...

New York's Stone Walls

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There once may have been 250,000 miles of stone walls in America's Northeast, stretching farther than the distance to the moon. They took three billion man-hours to build. And even though most are crumbling today, they contain a magnificent scientific and cultural story.

How did they get there? Their fascinating story is centuries old. Yes, the home you occupy in a thickly-inhabited Jewish region upstate, or the bungalow where you relax during the summer, may have once belonged to some of America's earliest European settlements.

One of the many mysteries of the New England states in general and of New York State in particular is the miles-long stone fences that decorate the entire region. These ubiquitous walls stretch in all directions, as commonplace as streets and streetlights. We are so accustomed to seeing these walls that we don't even stop to wonder how they got there.

A popular legend attributes them to the Native Americans. However, in reality, they were built by European colonists from as early as the late 1600s to the middle 1800s. The walls served as boundaries for the gardens and fields in which they planted their fruits, vegetables and grains. The fields were also used as corrals to contain their livestock. The miles and miles of stones cutting through thick woods were not originally constructed among groves of trees. They were built on open land, and the tall trees only grew up around them later in time.

There are actually historians whose sole interest is to research the source of these

old walls. Oddly, for the most part, they are not local residents. They come from other parts of the United States to visit. Unlike locals who just pass by the walls, they stop and take the time to learn the stories behind them.

Geologist Robert Thorson expressed it this way: "I was amazed. It was just like someone who spent his entire life in a desert and suddenly saw a tree. I was even more surprised by the indifference everyone showed to the walls." Thorson spent 25 years studying the walls and became the expert on their history. He published a book called *Stone by Stone* in which he described the results of his studies.

Why are these walls so prevalent in the Northeast when they are found nowhere else? The history of the fences is a lot more interesting than one might think.

History in the Stones

Our story goes back several centuries to a time when the world was simpler. There were no cars, planes or even electricity. Nothing got done without strenuous labor. People worked hard from morning till night to bring home bread for their families. (Ok, some things haven't changed.) If you wanted to eat, you had to plow and plant, reap and winnow.

When the colonists began to arrive from Europe, they came in ships. Most of them anchored off the New York harbor. The passengers disembarked carrying with them the same skills they had used in Europe. Most important was agriculture, in order to ensure a steady supply of food. They spread out across the New World, a seemingly endless expanse of land that brought new wonders and new dangers every day. They cut down entire forests, both for fuel and building supplies, as well as to clear the land for planting.

As the areas along the seashore became populated, the colonists began to settle further inland. The land stretched out before



The stone walls found in woods were originally built on open land. Pictured here is Westport, Connecticut, in 1899.

them as far as the eye could see. Boundaries were non-existent and huge stakes could be claimed with no neighbors to contest them. Settlers created vast homesteads and transformed the land into their private property.

The colonists were delighted with the land they discovered. The soil was very rich. The thick forests provided plenty of wood for building homes and furniture. In time, however, they stumbled upon one serious drawback. After a successful first season of planting, the plowing and tilling of the previous year loosened up the earth, and now the snow and rains brought an abundance of rocks to the surface. When spring arrived again, the farmers could hardly believe that they were looking at the same plot of land. It was as if the stones had grown up from the ground. Geologists say that the freezing and thawing causes the stones to rise to the surface.

To be able to plant again, the farmers were forced to spend considerable time and effort lifting the rocks and removing them from the fields. It was a very difficult task. But then, if these people had not been prepared for such hard work, they would never have become colonists in the first place. The settlers rolled back their sleeves and spent the first days or weeks of the spring lifting the heavy stones. They were loaded onto sleds or wagons and dragged by



Carefully laid stone walls have survived hundreds of New England and New York winters, even as cement walls crumbled and disappeared.



Wheel of an old wagon found recently near a stone wall.

oxen or horses to the edges of their fields. It didn't take long for a large pile of rocks to accumulate along the property's edge.

The following year the farmers returned



This stone fence surrounding a home dates back to the 1700s.



Historical stone wall in Newport, Rhode Island.