



Deerpark Diary

Town of Deerpark 1863 School House Museum

Town of Deerpark Historian, P. O. Box 621, Huguenot, New York 12746

845-856-2702—www.1863schoolhouse.org

March, 2014

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History of Stone Walls

by Lynn Burns

Stone walls, we see them everywhere snaking through the woods and we take them for granted. They are the telltale sign of a farming age gone by. Silently these seemingly meandering piles of stone trace a history that goes back millennia to the age of the glaciers. Geologists claim there



Old Stone Wall in Winter

were four distinct glaciations, the last being the Wisconsin from about 12-14,000 years ago. During these events the massive ice sheets scraped along the earth's crust. The resulting stones then moved

along and became rounded as they tumbled in the melt water streams. The stones were deposited all over New England, New York and northern New Jersey providing an abundance of material for farmers to clear from their fields and to build into stone walls.

The earliest settlers in our area no doubt disdained their Native American neighbors' preference for the more "haphazard" look of their gardens, choosing the colonial neatness of straight rows. The practice of communal herding and common land enclosures, that were popular in Europe, fell by the wayside.



Pig Yard and Pen

Farmers sought ways to create property boundaries, protect their gardens and enclose their animals to avoid a marauding cow from eating the crops. The job of Fence Viewer was created. He was charged with the responsibility of seeing to it that boundaries were correct, fences were maintained and kept at proper heights. He was vital in settling disputes. Minutes taken from Deerpark town meetings, as far back as 1774,

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indicate that Benjamin De Puy held such a position, as did Jacob Stanton in 1798.

It has been estimated that there are more than 250,000 miles of stone walls in New England and New York, with 4% in Pennsylvania's northeast counties of Wayne and Susquehanna.

Fields were created by clearing the dense forest. Earliest fences were those tree stumps that were laboriously dug out, laid on their sides with brush inserted to fill the gaps. Zig Zag or worm fencing became a very popular alternative, but the style had its drawbacks. The demand for wood quickly caused deforestation as rotting rails needed frequent replacement. Certainly there was an inexhaustible supply of field stone that the farmers could utilize as an alternative material for fencing.

Building these walls were rarely given a lot of thought, but were seen as a menial form of routine farm work which involved all members of the family. Occasionally a man would hire out to dig, haul and build these walls in exchange for wheat or a labor swap with a neighbor. Later a well-constructed and maintained fence was an index of a well-ordered farm. It was a measure of a farmer's worth and capabilities and proved a man's intention to improve his lot. Stone structures

included house foundations, bases for outbuildings, wells, and root cellars.

Roofless animal pounds were common in towns as a place to corral local livestock that ran astray. Deerpark Poundkeepers, whose job it was to tend strays and collect fines, included DePuy, Stanton, and Vail Wheeler.



1809 Animal Pound

Before silos, field root cellars, oriented south and east to prevent freezing and rot, were built to store a winter supply of animal food. The best walls were usually found around cemeteries.



*Knight Cemetery
Town of Deerpark*

The construction of stone walls was hard work indeed. They were usually built thigh high as this is the optimal height for a human to lift. Stout wooden sleds called stone boats were built to haul stone. As these boats dragged along they actually aided in maintaining road surfaces. Most often these boats were pulled by the unsung hero of early farming—the oxen who

also pulled stumps, plowed fields and hitched to wagons carried the family to church and market. Their use started to fade after the 1850's when newer farming implements were invented. Tools in the stone-wall building process included a crowbar, mason's hammer, pick and shovel or spade. Occasional use of dynamite and gunpowder, which were readily available in the general stores, helped the work along.

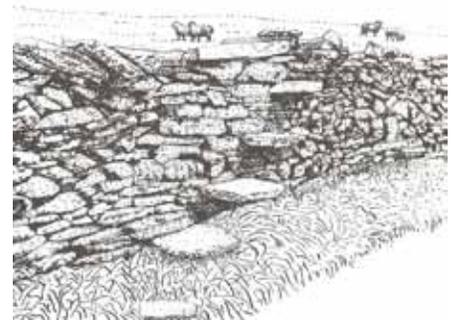
Low walls were topped with wooden rails strung with barbed wire after the 1870's. Most walls were known as rubble walls, built with no real plan, but just piled-up stone dug while clearing a field for plowing. If there were a large number of smaller stones in this style of wall it likely meant that the field was planted in root crops such as potatoes or beets. There were stacked walls, simply one stone on top of another. Double walls which were two or more stones wide. The center was filled in with smaller stone. Compound fences were stone on the bottom and rails on top. Retaining walls were built wider at the bottom and leaned in to stabilize soil. Most of the early walls were mortar free.



Anatomy of a Retaining Wall

Finer walls had capstones and more thought into how the stones were placed. These laid up wider walls indicated prosperity and wealth, things of beauty and pride.

There were as many styles of stone walls as there were builders.



Stile with stone steps

Other features built into these walls included stiles which were often protruding stone steps for easy access over the wall to get from field to field. Bar ways were created wide enough so the farmer could pass through with a wagon. Wooden rails were set in place to close the opening. A true gate was designed with more care and attention to detail and was wide enough for a man to pass through.

By the 1870's barbed wire became the fencing material of choice. As farming implements became more sophisticated; tractors, large plows, harrows and horse teams, the smaller walled in plots proved inefficient. Walls were dismantled and buried as dairy farms became more widespread. The fields were now needed for cattle pastures. As farming in general faded from use, the stone walls suffered from lack of maintenance, uprooted by frost, damaged by falling trees, and development. Stones were repurposed. Many of the stone walls along the road from Cahoonzie to Rio were used by the State of New York to form a base when Route 42 was built between Port Jervis and Monticello in the 1910s.

Still miles of old walls can

be seen standing in the middle of the woods where the land was once cleared. Over the years through natural succession of tree varieties, the fields have become forests and the stone walls are home to small animals. As you drive or walk along our country roads, take closer notice of these sentinels of our heritage. Appreciate their age and patina and certainly all the back breaking labor that went into their construction.



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Memories of Early Stone Wall Building
By Norma Schadt

In 1941 my father bought the Kattermann farm on Prospect Hill Road, Cuddebackville. The Kattermanns used the main house and 850 acres as a retreat for their family. They owned a large silk mill in Paterson, New Jersey as well as the Port Jervis Silk Mill. The family came to Cuddebackville during the summer months and at holidays for recreation; hunting, fishing, hiking, and relaxation. There was another house on the property for the caretaker who made sure that everything was kept in order for the family's visits.

Although there was a stone cow barn, large pig sty, hen house,

horse stable and saw mill, the Kattermanns did not farm the land. My father decided that he would use the property as a farm. The old fields were overgrown so that there was little pasture land for the cows. Much of work needed to be done before a farm could be established.



*Hoefgen Stone Barn--1942
Prospect Hill Road
Cuddebackville, New York*

I was a child and remember how hard my father and his helpers worked to recreate the necessary fields. Early every morning the men would go to cut trees from the areas that would eventually be hay fields or pastureland. It was World War II, therefore horses (no gasoline for tractors) were used to pull a plow to turn the earth. Lo and behold there was always a crop of rocks. They had to go. Surrounding the original fields were stone walls which were at least 100 years old. They were created with the same methods that my father and his workers used.



Stone Boat

There was an old stone boat in the horse stable that was hitched to the horses to make it

easier to drag the stones from the fields to be deposited on to the old stone walls. Day in and day out the men removed the stones from the fields and added them to the old stone walls. The stones were not placed in any particular way. Walls were just a place to get rid of the stones. In the winter months my father returned to these walls and reset the stones in an orderly fashion. He came from Germany where everything had to be neat so he felt he had to neaten up the stone walls on his farm. Throughout his life my father loved building stone walls. He built both free standing and retaining walls.

Today we see many walls in wooded areas. If you look carefully you will notice that at one time these walls surrounded fields. Some are still in good condition.

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How to Build a Stone Wall

Do you dream of adding a stone wall to your garden? If so, then maybe you should consider erecting a dry stone wall by yourself. A stone wall is easily built.

You will need stones of various sizes: large ones for the base; medium-sized stones for the mid-section; long narrow stones to be used as ties in the wall; small fist-sized rubble for fill; and large flat stones to be used as capstones. A batter frame is an excellent guide to keep your wall of uniform size and height. A wheel barrow, digging or pry bar, shovel, heavy-duty plank and five-gallon buckets are helpful tools to have

on hand while building your wall.

The most common wall for our area is called a “Double” wall. It is constructed by placing two rows of stones along the boundary to be walled. If this is a new wall, dig down into the earth about a foot to lay a good foundation of rubble. If you are rebuilding an old stone wall, this is not necessary. The base of the old wall is a good foundation. You can also re-use the stones from the old wall to make your new wall.

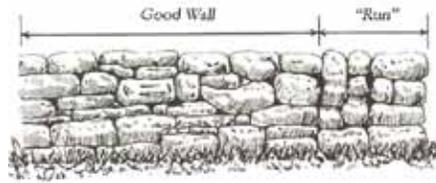
Before you begin, sort the stones by size: large (base); large (flat for capstones); medium; small (used to fill spaces between medium stones); rubble (fill five gallon buckets to make it easy to fill the space between the two walls). A plank is helpful as a ramp to roll heavy stones up onto the wall. The pry bar helps to push the heavy base stones into place. Build a batter frame to the desired size (height and width) of your wall using scrap 2x4 boards. This will be used as your guide. (see photo)



Double Wall with Batter Frame

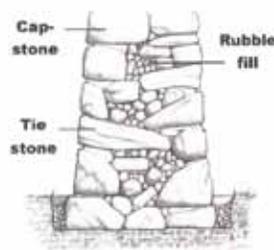
To begin, place large stones in parallel rows to form the base. Fill the space between the two rows with small stones and rubble. Using medium sized stones, continue building the walls

up to the desired height course-by-course. When adding each course, the rocks should be placed so that each stone overlies the joint between two stones from the lower layer.



Note How Each Course Overlap the Two Stones in the Course Below

Each higher course is placed an inch or so toward the center creating a continuous back-leaning face so that the wall is narrower at the top than at the base. At intervals, large tie-stones or through-stones are placed spanning both faces of the wall. These have the effect of bonding what would otherwise be two thin walls leaning against each other. The tie-stones greatly increase the strength of the wall. The final top layer of the wall consists of large flat stones called capstones. As with the tie stones, the cap stones span the entire width of the wall and prevent it from breaking apart.



Anatomy of a Stone Wall

The beauty of a dry-stone wall is that it is an extremely durable structure that withstands frost, weathering and movements. This is evident by the many stone walls that were built in our area years ago and are still standing. Not only do stone walls make an

interesting background for your garden, they can mark the boundaries of your property.

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2014 Deerpark Museum Program Schedule

April 12, 10am to 5pm & April 13, noon to 6pm—Tri-State Historical Exhibition, Riverview Inn, Matamoras, PA The exhibition brings together the rich history of the Tri-State area.

May 18, 3pm—Local Geology Program presented by Larry O’Brian, a SUNY, Orange professor—1863 Schoolhouse, Huguenot, NY

June 1, 3pm—“Coalboat” Booksigning by Cliff Robinson, author and CEO of the D & H Conservancy—1863 Schoolhouse, Huguenot, NY

July 19, 8am--11:30am—Joseph Brant Bus Tour—Reservations are necessary. Additional information will be in the June issue of the “Deerpark Diary” Sparrowbush Fire House, Sparrowbush, NY

Sept. 28, 11am to 4pm—Open House—local history displays, photos, demonstrations, music and much more—1863 Schoolhouse & Grange, Grange Rd, Huguenot, NY

Oct. 19, 3pm—John Roebling & Neversink Bridges presented by Bill Clark, Matamoras Historian and Norma Schadt, Deerpark Historian—1863 Schoolhouse, Huguenot, NY

Additional Program information is available on the website: www.1863schoolhouse.org