



Stonewall Conservation

The Scituate Conservation Commission exists to help the community and its citizens sustain their environment and quality of life while meeting their economic needs.

We are a non-regulatory, town, organization dedicated to:

- Identifying and Conserving Scituate's Important Natural Resources,
- Improving the knowledge base from which land use and natural resource decisions are made,
- Building local capacity to protect and manage natural resources as our town grows,
- Conserve our town's unique community character,
- Continuing the Town's legacy as the steward of the state's primary drinking water supply—the Scituate Reservoir.

For More Information
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“Something there is that doesn't love a wall,” Robert Frost wrote a century ago.

There is a growing trend towards greater protection of stone walls, especially in New England where they are signatures of the rural landscape. The Scituate Conservation Commission believes that our town's stonewalls are an important natural, historic and cultural resource that deserve conservation. The following information is being provided to inform Scituate's residents of steps they can take on their own to conserve this treasure.

Background

Abandoned stone walls in the woods of Scituate and across New England have a long and fascinating history. The vast majority of stone walls had been built by early American farmers using stones that had heaved up from the subsoil after being buried for millennia by organic processes. All of this took place long after the stones had been glacially plucked from the bedrock and scattered over the landscape. The ice sheets responsible for distributing the boulders were merely scraping the surface of the hard, heavily fractured rocky crust of northeastern North America, which was created during the ancient episode of mountain building responsible for the Appalachians. The rock was made of minerals that were made from elements that were made from universal matter that was captured

by our solar system during formation of planet Earth. The story of stone walls begins with the beginning of everything, and ends with the present moment.

Good Reasons to Conserve Stonewalls

Habitat: Anyone who has seen a chipmunk scurry into the recesses of a wall understands. The same is true for the hiker who might notice wild lilies on one side of the wall but not the other.

Consider the less obvious values of stonewalls for drylands woodland habitat, scenery, open-space, and education. In many places, stone walls provide substantially more dryland habitat than do natural natural ledges and cliffs and makes them a vital part of the woodland ecosystem.

Cultural Heritage: Drystone walls are part of our collective cultural and historic heritage written upon the rural New England landscape, like the original signatures on an important historic document.

Landforms: Like the caves of Kentucky or the lakes of Minnesota stone walls are so well integrated into the rural landscape of New England that they can rightfully be considered landforms.

Human Ecology: Stone walls exist because the agricultural society that built them preceded the power of petroleum. Farmers, using their livestock, had enough power to move the stone but not enough to haul it

away. Seeing stone walls – especially the older archetypical ones – provides a bridge to an era when our culture of European stock was still constrained by nature.

Aesthetics: Imagine Scituate without stone walls. The woods and fields and marshes would still be pleasing to the eye, as with the hills of the Middle Atlantic States. But without the muted grays, ashy browns, and rusty reds of the stones in our walls, New England wouldn't look as nice.

Education: Each wall is a rock collection. Each gives us a chance to learn about what's underground: how the glacier behaved; where lichens like to grow; which way trees fall; and where the soils heave and subside. Additionally, each wall tells the story about why it was built, and exhibits the style of its builder.

Sense of Place: Imagine Scituate and New England 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. The authentic, tumbled down, lichen-crusting walls that criss-cross every wooded village and town are 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's heritage.

THREATS

There are several major threats to New England stone walls.

Strip-Mining – Most damaging is the legal, wholesale strip-mining of New England's abandoned stone walls from old farm properties, followed by their commercial sale.

Theft – Stone walls are being stolen stone by stone, layer by layer. Often the capstones go missing. In

some places, however, entire walls are stolen without the owners permission.

Insensitivity – Owners of old walls may damage them with multiple breaks and cuts, some of which are unnecessary.

New Walls – The problem is that massive new walls are being constructed in a way that is judged out of place by long-term residents, or do not follow the local folk art style, being excessively ornate.

Overgrowth – In the woodland where the forest canopy has developed, walls have that familiar abandoned look. When the land is cleared and exposed to sunlight, however, such as along new roadsides and driveways, the walls develop overgrowths of plants and vines. In this case, the old wall is being exposed to a breakdown threat that didn't exist before; a decision must be made to keep the wall clear of growth or not.

What Can You Do To Help Protect Stonewalls ?

- **Become more aware** of stone walls and the stone trade.
- **Discuss the issue** with neighbors and friends
- **Urge the Town to protect walls** through amendment and revisions of planning and zoning documents, or through a town's official plan of development
- **For abandoned stonewalls** -Leave them be; 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.
- **For heritage (historic) walls**— Urge the town to inventory these walls; Develop an understanding regarding who is responsible for these walls; and Develop a plan for maintaining and protecting them.
- **For new walls:** Recommend against the importation of stone strip-mined from old walls; Recommend building them following local folk-art traditions; and Encourage the use of dry stone building techniques.