

A New Hampshire Treasure

Written by: Susan Poirier, UNH Cooperative Extension Master Gardener

In 1871, what was long enough to wrap around the equator 4 times? To travel to the moon at its closest point to the earth? To line the entire coast line of the United States? The answer: the dry stone walls of New England and New York. What's even more astounding about this fact is that the true heyday of stone walls had already passed when a government survey discovered these results.

Do you know the origin of the size of an acre? It was defined as the area one man alone could work in one day. No one wanted to carry stones any further than needed so a measurement was set from the center of the field. The early farmers often just picked up the stones and stockpiled them to the side of the field. Later, when sheep farming came in and more walls were needed quickly, the stones were already at hand. In fact, the majority of the walls we see today in northern New England were constructed between 1810 and 1840.

Those walls didn't look quite as they do today. It was important for farmers to keep the walls maintained. They knew, as Robert Frost wrote, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." Each year, fallen stones were picked up and put back, more were added if needed, and repairs were made that were prevented the spreading we now see.

Here is the basic principle of dry wall building: 2 over 1 or 1 over 2. In other words, never line up seams. Over one rock, place two so that the seam between them sits about on the middle of the lower one. Over two rocks, place one rock directly over the seam. Doing so creates stability for the wall. If the frost heaves up one portion of the wall, the rest of the wall will remain stable while that portion returns to its original position when the ground subsides.

There is a myth that the old stone builders dug deep trenches for their dry walls. In fact, they built the walls on top of the ground. Over time, as the soil a bit out from the walls was tilled repeatedly, that soil sank some. Stones removed from it caused more sinking. Meanwhile, wind would blow loose soil and fallen leaves against the stone wall, causing soil to build up and bury part of the wall and leaving us today with the mistaken concept of how the walls were originally constructed.

How did early farmers move large stones? There were many methods. The easiest, of course, was to roll a stone downhill. Another method was to 'walk' it using a fulcrum and lever, one corner at a time. A stone ladder was used to roll the stone up to the top of the wall. They also used stone boat, a sort of sled, or got the stone out of the ground then waited until winter when they could slip it more easily on snow and ice. They broke up the larger stones into smaller, more manageable pieces, sometimes by pouring water into crevices in the winter and letting it freeze. The really big ones were allowed to sit there while a huge hole was dug next to them. Then they were pushed into the hole and covered up!

Our dry stone walls are an important part of the history of New England, a part that needs to be maintained. If your property contains a stone wall, you are a steward for that piece of our heritage. Instead of removing stones, reflect upon the labors of the early settlers, trying to farm in our rocky soil. Appreciate and enjoy the beauty they have left for us.

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