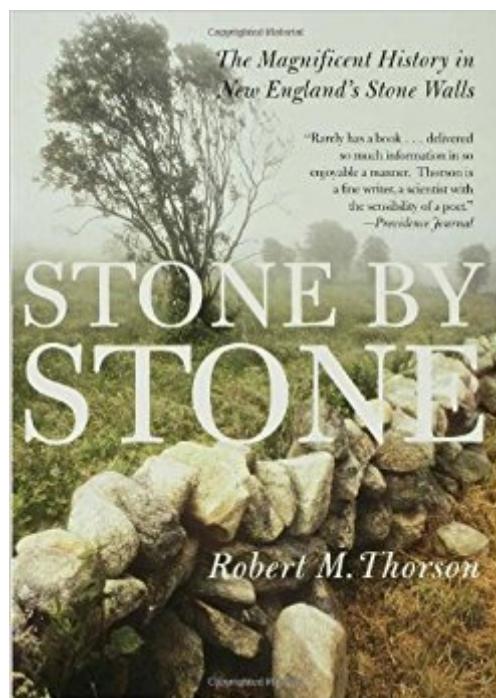


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# Stone By Stone: The Magnificent History In New England's Stone Walls



## Synopsis

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—about the geothermal forces that formed their stones, the tectonic movements that brought them to the surface, the glacial tide that broke them apart, the earth that held them for so long, and about the humans who built them. Stone walls tell nothing less than the story of how New England was formed, and in Robert Thorson's hands they live and breathe. "The stone wall is the key that links the natural history and human history of New England," Thorson writes. Millions of years ago, New England's stones belonged to ancient mountains thrust up by prehistoric collisions between continents. During the Ice Age, pieces were cleaved off by glaciers and deposited—often hundreds of miles away—when the glaciers melted. Buried again over centuries by forest and soil buildup, the stones gradually worked their way back to the surface, only to become impediments to the farmers cultivating the land in the eighteenth century, who piled them into "linear landfills," a place to hold the stones. Usually the biggest investment on a farm, often exceeding that of the land and buildings combined, stone walls became a defining element of the Northeast's landscape, and a symbol of the shift to an agricultural economy. Stone walls layer time like Russian dolls, their smallest elements reflecting the longest spans, and Thorson urges us to study them, for each stone has its own story. Linking geological history to the early American experience, *Stone by Stone* presents a fascinating picture of the land the Pilgrims settled, allowing us to see and understand it with new eyes.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"To know New England well, one must know its stone walls," writes the author of this authoritative paean to the structures he calls the "signatures of rural New England." There were once approximately 240,000 miles of stone walls in New England, and Thorson, a professor of geology and geophysics at the University of Connecticut, combines natural history and human history as he tells the story of the walls and how they were built. In his geo-archeological study, he begins by exploring how the stones, formed deep within the earth, were shaped and scattered by glaciation, buried under forest and soil buildup, brought to the surface after the New England pioneers cut down the trees and exposed the soil to frost heave, and tossed to the sides of their fields by early farmers clearing the land. He finds these tossed walls, which make up the majority of stone walls in New England, as aesthetically pleasing as the carefully constructed walls that came later. Every type of stone wall fascinates him. He extols their color, form and texture, the sounds they make, the shelter they provide for animals, their beauty as they disintegrate. As agriculture declined in the region, the walls were neglected, and today they are "almost as sad as they are simple," he says, for they are evidence of a lost Yankee culture. Now most of the walls have been abandoned, and their stones have become a cash crop to be sold and often carried far away from their original locations, which Thorson considers an "environmental tragedy." His book covers much technical material, but his enthusiasm for the subject brings it to life. Copious notes, extensive bibliography and an appendix with geologic time lines are included. Illus. not seen by PW. Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

As Thorson writes in his introduction, "Abandoned stone walls are the signatures of rural New England." The only national fencing census, made in 1871, estimated that there were approximately 240,000 miles of these "signatures." In telling their story, Thorson (geology and geophysics, Univ. of Connecticut) weaves together cultural and environmental histories with geography and natural science. With explanations written for a general rather than an academic readership, the author describes how the size, shape, and color of stones indicate how and where they were formed. These stones, as a natural resource of New England, shaped the culture of the region, beginning with the soil movement that yielded the stones from the ground. The resulting walls created

microclimates and supported plant life while delineating property boundaries of the small family farms. Thorson traces the growth and decline of the farms and discusses the technological changes that resulted in the transition from an agricultural to an industrial nation. The author knows his subject thoroughly and communicates his enthusiasm. His intriguing book is best suited to public libraries and essential for libraries in New England. Denise Hamilton, Franklin Pierce Coll. Lib., Rindge, NH Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Since I returned "home" to Connecticut, I have become fascinated by the stone walls to be found everywhere here and throughout New England. I've been especially intrigued seeing the old walls running through the forests by the sides of highways. After just finishing Robert Thorson's interesting and clearly written book *Stone By Stone*, I realize my fascination and intrigue are well-founded. Dr. Thorson, a geology professor at the University of Connecticut, is recognized as New England's leading authority on the region's historic stone walls. In this book, he takes us far back in time to the earth's cooling, the continents' splitting apart and the glaciers' icy grip on the land to show how rocks and stones were formed. He brings us on a journey up through history to the present, showing why the time and tools were finally right in the early to mid-19th century to construct the tens of thousands of miles of stone walls found throughout New England. He explains why these walls are such a special feature of New England's history and New Englanders' sense of ourselves as people who belong to a distinct and distinctive place. And he argues eloquently for preserving these walls against those who are selling and plundering them, literally carting off stone walls that took decades to build simply to lend faux gravitas and authenticity to new construction in areas that are "stone-poor," as he puts it. As he says, archeology is being sacrificed to become mere architecture and, in the process, what should be viewed as sacred pieces of our heritage are being lost forever. Anyone interested in stone walls and in what makes New England the unique place it is should read this excellent book.

As an ex-north east resident this was a nice historical read on how and why the stone walls were created that I had never heard in the time I had lived there!

a terrific document on stone walls, beginning with ancient geo history. I'd had the book before and loaned it with no return so was happy to find it on .

I live in the northeast where I have observed these fences. I had no idea I could find such an informed book about them. Now when I see them I know how and why they are there. Good research explained for the non-geologists among us.

Our house that we had built 10 years ago is surrounded by a stone wall and I have always wondered how it came about. While it doesn't talk specifically about our property, it does answer where the stone walls in NH came from and it is so interesting to read. I am so glad he did the research and wrote this book, because I think we take these walls for granted by them just always being there. I appreciate them so much more now.

Very interesting history book. Since I had family in the Jamestown Colony and Mass Bay Colony, it also reminded me of the back breaking work necessary to make a field to raise animals and hay on.

Great book.

"The stone walls of New England stand guard against a future that seems to be coming too quickly. They urge us to slow down and to recall the past." This is only one of the many observations that Professor Thorson concludes his marvelous book with. I must admit that his final, summarizing chapter actually brought a tear to my eye - hardly to be expected from a book on geology and regional history mixed with, amongst other topics, some anthropology. In other words this book has enough of everything to satisfy every curiosity you might have about those tumbled down rows of stones found in just about every New England forest and suburb. A surprising wealth of information on numerous topics. Fascinating scientific and cultural and historical background - far more than one would ever expect to encounter considering the topic. And Professor Thorson's writing style is commendably clear and readable, with a poet's affection for his topic. Quite simply one of the best nonfiction books I think I have ever read (and I read quite a lot), for its perfect fusion of research, understanding and sentiment. Almost an answer to my prayers during so many long, wandering and wondering forest walks. I encourage you to read this book.

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