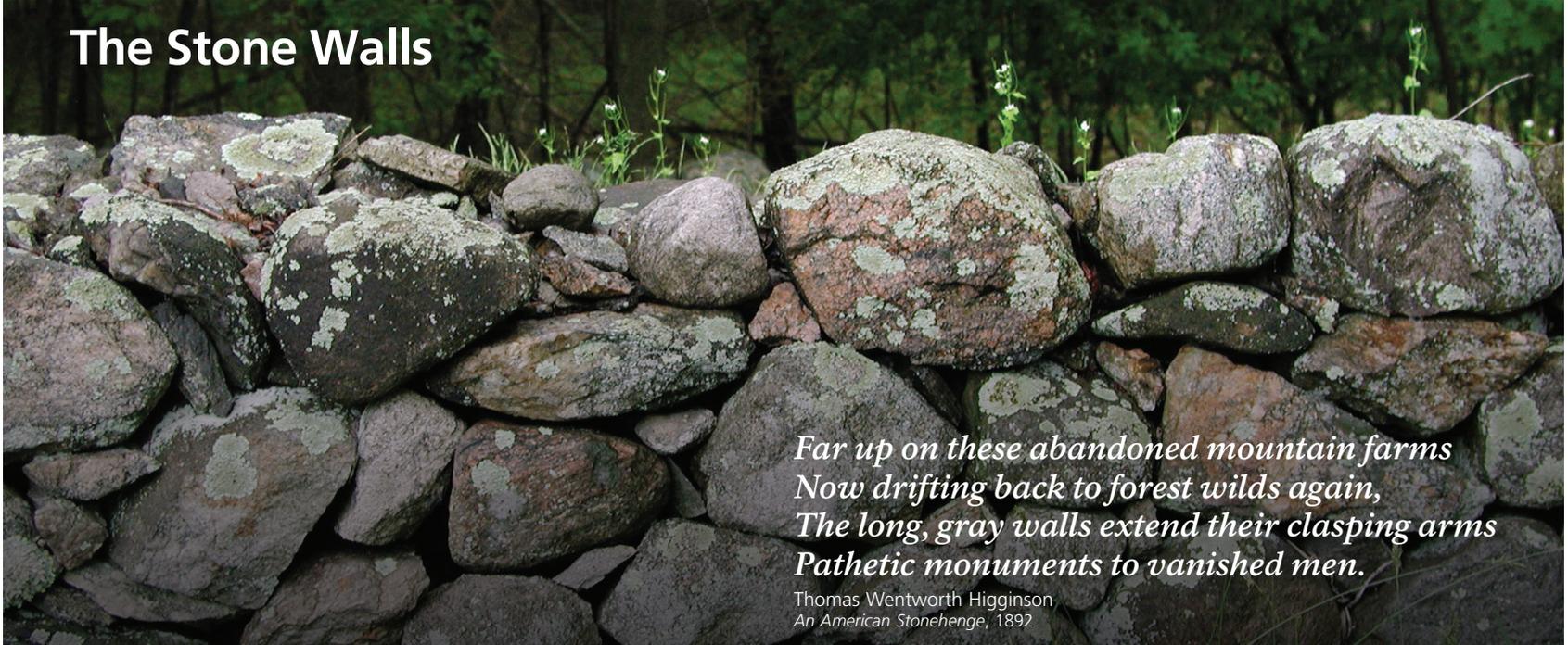




The Stone Walls



*Far up on these abandoned mountain farms
Now drifting back to forest wilds again,
The long, gray walls extend their clasping arms
Pathetic monuments to vanished men.*

Thomas Wentworth Higginson
An American Stonehenge, 1892

Stone walls are objects of mystery and fascination. Remnants of an agricultural existence that once dominated this landscape, these walls linger as the last relics of an all but vanished past. They trace fields now fallow and line roads now busy and paved, but still hint at a time when artists and farmers walked the grounds together. These walls divided property and kept animals contained, but also inspired many enduring works of art. They are both functional and beautiful. Created by craftsmen and laborers, these walls are as much art as the paintings that they inspired. They are simple and complex; stoic and elegant; both ancient and modern at once.

The Stone

True understanding of these stone walls must begin with the origin of the stone itself. Millions of years ago, great sheets of ice, over a mile thick, flowed southward over much of North America. These glacial formations exerted tremendous force upon the ground beneath them. As they progressed, they fractured, gathered and dragged stone along their path. This stone, largely granite and gneiss in this region, is referred to as glacial till. This till ranged in size from small particles to rocks the size of small

houses. This cycle of glacial erosion continued until approximately 13,000 years ago, when the frigid climate subsided. In the warmer climate, the glaciers receded and left the stone behind. The result was a landscape littered with a remarkable number of stones. Connecticut, for example, ended up with an average of ten feet of glacial till resting on top of the bedrock. This abundance of stone would prove a great obstacle for those that settled and attempted to farm in this area.

The Stone Walls

Before any widespread farming of this area could occur, vast amounts of stone had to be removed from the ground. Early settlers discarded this stone in linear piles that lined the edges of their fields. Over time, these irregular piles would develop into an extensive network of stone walls that still define the landscape of this area. The character of this farm, shaped by these walls, captivated J. Alden Weir, his artist friends, and the generations of artists that followed. Explore the walls of the farm on your own with the information on the other side of this guide.

Why are there stone walls in the woods?

Many of the stone walls that we see today in New England are situated in and around forests. However, this was not always the case. In fact, most of the region was cleared of trees by the early 1800s. Farming and the emerging textile industry, which required grazing areas for vast numbers of sheep, were largely responsible for the disappearance of the trees. However, after the turn of the century, this area became increasingly suburban and the return of the trees was a natural consequence of the transition from agricultural to residential use. These walls have remained in place as the land has changed around them from farmers' fields back to forests.



Man, Stone Wall and Dog by J. Alden Weir, circa 1900.

The Walls of Weir Farm National Historic Site

Thrown Wall



The most basic wall is the *thrown wall*. Lacking a formal structure or foundation, these walls do not take any experience to build. However, their lack of stability causes these walls to often lose stones, requiring farmers to constantly rebuild their initial wall to prevent it from being breached by animals.

Rubble-Filled Wall



Although a vast improvement, *laid walls* are not built to allow for the movement of soil beneath their foundations, movement that results from the freezing and thawing of water in the ground. Consequently, a third type of stone wall appeared, the *rubble-filled wall*, that combines the favorable aspects of both previous designs. These walls consist of two *laid walls* built alongside each other, with a rubble fill placed between to add greater flexibility. Basically, the outer walls hold the wall together, while the rubble fill in the center allows the wall to settle and adjust to the changing forces acting beneath it.

Laid Wall



At the turn of the century, an influx of settlers from Europe brought experienced quarrymen and masons to the area with new solutions for the farmers of New England. Soon, more formal walls of quarried or “dressed” stone appeared in the region. Built with greater interest in structure and form, these walls are known as *laid walls*. They are not only more secure and dependable, but also more elegant and formal.

The Great Wall of Cora

The *rubble-filled wall* that stretches north from the Burlingham House Visitor Center to the intersection of Nod Hill Road and Pelham Lane in front of the Weir House was built after the Great Depression.



Joe Knoche builds a Stone Wall by Mahonri Young shows the construction of Cora’s “Great Wall.”

This wall was constructed by the Knoche family for Cora Weir Burlingham, J. Alden Weir’s third daughter. This massive wall, called the “Great Wall of Cora” by her sister Dorothy, was built to mark the boundary of her property and border the fields west of Nod Hill Road. It was constructed at a time when many farmers were relocating to the Midwest. Therefore, this wall was built less as a functional wall, and more as an ornamental addition to the landscape. This design is most evident when you compare the two sides of the wall. If you look at the exterior of the wall, the stones are large and formal. On the interior, they are small and rounded. The explanation for this phenomenon is that visitors and neighbors would typically only ever see the more expensive and decorative outside of the walls, while the more common and less desirable field stone on the inside would be hidden by vegetation.

The Platt Wall

The *laid wall* that starts on the eastern side of Nod Hill Road across from the Weir House and extends north toward the Beers Cemetery was built in 1900. This wall was constructed during a larger project to expand the Weir House. Weir asked prominent architect and friend Charles Platt to design the addition to the house, and it is thought, because of his reputation as a talented landscape architect, that he may have designed this wall as well.

As the Platt Wall begins, near the house, it is very formal with large cut stones. However, as you walk north alongside the wall, away from the intersection, the formal elements of the construction begin to disappear. The large quarried stone changes slowly to smaller, more rounded field stone, the neat right angles become less ordered, and the overall shape of the wall more closely resembles that of the many *thrown walls* on the property. The primary reason

behind this unusual design is Weir’s desire to have a formal ornamental wall near the house that would also not look out of place when it connected to the other walls on the property. The result is a dramatic transformation over just a few hundred feet that is often overlooked by the casual observer.



The section of the Platt Wall next to the Weir House.