

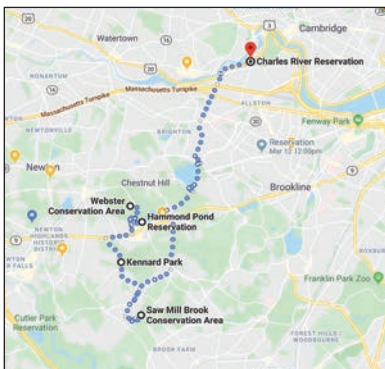
Old Stone Walls Tell of Newton's Agricultural History

Richard B. Primack is a long-time Newton resident and a biology professor at Boston University.

Editor's Note: This article is an expansion of an article originally written in the *Newton TAB*. Also, see Professor Primack's walk scheduled for March 28th in the listing of walks at the end of this newsletter.

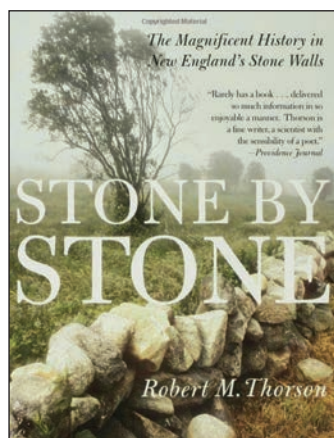


Stone wall in Kennard Park



Google Maps shows various stone wall locations in this article.

in the Saw Mill Brook Conservation Area off Vine Street, and in the Charles River Reservation starting at the ends of Wiswall Road and Saw Mill Brook Parkway. They reflect a time during the 1700s and 1800s when much of the town's land was used for farming, growing cereal, vegetable crops, and fruit for local residents and people in Boston, and for keeping domestic animals, such as cattle, sheep, goats, and pigs.



According to Robert Thorson, author of *Stone by Stone*, a book about New England's old stone walls, "the original property boundaries were likely wooden fences, with stones placed under and along the fences as farmers worked their fields." Only in the early 19th century, when wood started to become scarce, did farmers begin to use the stones to build

boundary walls. Soon after, in the years before and after the Civil War in the 1860s, farmers began to abandon their fields as better farmlands opened up in the Midwest, and Newton returned to forest.

In Newton, our stone walls are mostly about two feet high and straight. They often precisely follow boundaries shown on old city maps. One exception is in the Saw Mill Brook area, where a stone wall curves along an old track paralleling a swamp. Another exception is a stone wall that runs along the Brandeis Road fence opposite Newton South High School, paralleling what was previously a wetland. In our parks, straight old stone walls stop when they are about to cross swamps, streams, and other wetlands; although a stone wall does run through Bare Pond, a large vernal pool in the Webster Woods. Stone walls also do not run up and down steep slopes, presumably because the walls would be too unstable.



A neatly stacked stone wall takes a right angle turn in the Kennard Park. Note the stone post which marks the border between Newton and Brookline.

Newton's stone walls were built by hand with the materials at hand, sometimes with the help of oxen. In Kennard Park, angular stones are carefully stacked 2, 3 or 4 stones high to a consistent height and width, giving them a classic stone wall appearance.

In the Saw Mill Brook area, some walls consist of piles of large roundish rocks placed in irregular lines. In the Webster and Hammond Woods and the Charles River Reservation, large stones,

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some weighing more than a thousand pounds, are arranged in straight lines. Such large stones were almost certainly set in place with teams of oxen and experienced farm workers.

Little mysteries



PHOTO: RICHARD PRIMACK

Massive stones form a wall, one at a time, in the Webster Woods.

It is fun to guess at what the stone walls might tell us about the past. Halfway along the main stone wall in Kennard Park sits a four-sided enclosure about 100 feet on a side, following the contours of the sloping ground and with a 40-foot gap. Perhaps this was a corral for domestic animals such as sheep, with a gate to close the gap.

In the Charles River Reservation, a wall makes a right-angle turn at a raised rectangular, flattened surface

about 25 feet wide and 100 feet long. On one side, the stone wall acts a retaining wall to keep the filled in soil in place. Was this the site of a corral or barn? The raised structure also marks the end of an old earthen wall, roughly 6 feet high and 20 feet wide at the base, that runs for several hundred yards through a swamp and ends near of the corner of Saw Mill Brook Parkway and Walsh Road. Was this a dam for a mill pond? Another earthen dam, probably for a mill pond, sits along Saw Mill Brook near Temple Beth Avodah, just above what was probably the old saw mill site.

Directly across Brandeis Road from Newton South High School and just into the woods is a precisely leveled section of ground, about 100 feet on a side next to a stone wall. The structure is carefully flattened and lacks enclosing walls, so it was probably not a corral. Two hundred years ago, was it a garden plot?

And why are there are no stone walls in other parks? Was Cold Spring Park too swampy? Did Edmands Park lack stones big enough to make walls?

Other stone walls

There are some old non-agricultural stone walls in Newton, such as border walls along Dudley Road, Cypress Street, and Jackson Street, and retaining walls in Hemlock Gorge and the East Parish Cemetery on Center Street. Newton also has many more recent stone walls, built after the Civil War as Newton changed from an agricultural economy to



PHOTO: RICHARD PRIMACK

Old stone walls border a house along Jackson Street.

an industrial and then a suburban community. These more modern walls are built with cement and relatively uniform, cut stones.

For example, the walls

along Beacon Street just west of Hammond Pond Parkway are too neat to be agricultural walls. Very tall stone walls start at the end of Bow Road and run between Ridge Avenue and Cypress Street, but these walls are not old; they are over 4 feet tall and made of rocks, such as white quartz, not found locally and with sharp angles, suggesting the rocks were broken by people.

Next steps



PHOTO: RICHARD PRIMACK

An irregular wall formed from piles of more rounded stones along Saw Mill Brook.

Many of Newton's stone walls, such as those in the Hammond/Webster Woods, are missing from Newton Conservators maps. Others, such as walls in the Saw

Mill Brook Conservation Area and Kennard Park, have been partially mapped. These old stone walls add to the enjoyment of walks in these parks and should be highlighted on maps.

The Newton Conservators could join with the Newton Historical Society and other groups to survey the stone walls in Newton's parks and add them to city maps. Interested volunteers and high school environmental clubs could help.

This project could be expanded in several ways as time and resources allow. Surveys and maps could include old stone walls that occur on undeveloped parcels of land, small forest fragments, and along the borders of residences, businesses,



PHOTO: MARGARET MALLORY

Hemlock Gorge, site of old retaining walls.

and historical roads. The project could later add old retaining walls, such as are found in Hemlock Gorge in Newton Upper Falls and in the cemetery on Centre Street. And it could include old stone buildings, particularly where the structures

are off main roads, such as the ruined stone structures on Moody Street, off Route 9.

Maps of old stone walls could be supplemented with descriptions of their features and the structures they likely supported, such as old corrals, gardens, and mill ponds. Descriptions of the walls could be informed by historical documents that describe Newton's past land use.

Although much of Newton's history has been obliterated as the town has developed, the old stone walls offer an opportunity to remember and learn about Newton's agricultural past. When walking in the woods, it is worthwhile to observe and appreciate them and to contemplate the mysteries they hint at. ♦

Sam Jaffe, Conservators' Annual Meeting Dinner Speaker

May 6, 2020



Sam Jaffe with Cecropia Moth

At the Newton Conservators' annual meeting on May 6, 2020, Sam Jaffe, Director of The Caterpillar Lab, will present a talk called "Caterpillars: The Whole Story." He will explore backyard pollinators, plants, parasitoids, and the many caterpillars that are positioned at the center of it all. He will also discuss his work growing the Caterpillar Lab from its roots in Newton's Cold Spring Park to its present-day region-wide activity and influence. To tell the story, Sam will bring a variety of caterpillars found during this season, microscopes, and other insect-related excitement! His perspective on natural history study and appreciation just might make you reconsider an herbivore's place in our world and our town.

Sam is a New England based naturalist, photographer, and educator who has been working with native insects since a very early age. He grew up in Newton chasing birds, mucking through ponds, and turning over leaves. For the last 12 years he has been photographing and filming caterpillars to promote these special creatures to the public. In 2013, he founded The Caterpillar Lab (thecaterpillarlab.org), a non-profit educational outreach organization in Marlborough, NH, and he now travels across the country working with museums, nature centers, schools, and individual teachers, helping native insects find their place in our everyday lives. When he is not behind the camera or tending his zoo of caterpillars, you can invariably find Sam up to his waist in vegetation.



PHOTO: SAM JAFFE



PHOTO: SAM JAFFE

Yellow-necked Caterpillar (left) and Red-humped Caterpillar (right)