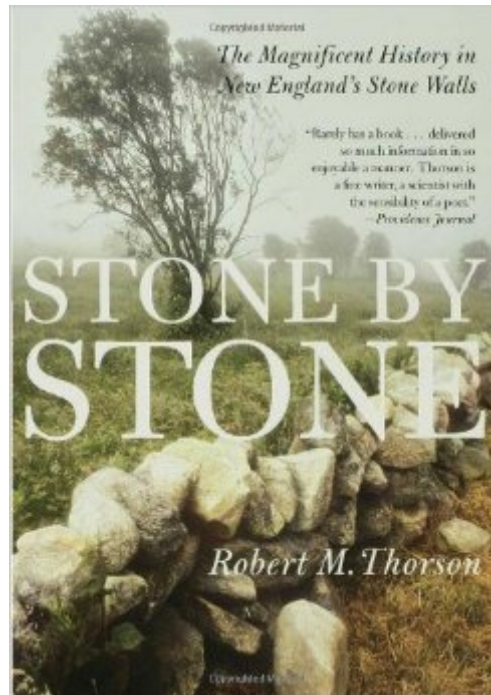


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Stone By Stone: The Magnificent History In New England's Stone Walls



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.

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Customer Reviews

When I picked up this book I thought: "How can an entire book be written about stone walls?" As it turns out the author did not write an entire book about stone walls. The author gives us the history of stone walls starting with the formation of the earth, through formation of rocks, the ice age and finally American history. There is actually more about geology than stone walls themselves, although the author tried mightily to write a few hundred pages about them. The geology and history is well-written and interesting. I learned quite a bit about when walls were generally built and how the stones came to be that comprised them. However, the last third or so of the book - that part devoted to the walls themselves was often redundant. It seemed the author was searching for words to fill the pages and stretching - like the last pages of a term paper you know should be eight pages but you have to make the assigned ten pages. A chapter on builders and technique would have been more useful than the stretched parts. There are pearls of interesting history and I am not sorry I read the book. I just wished it had been shorter by an excision of the redundancies and "stretches".

"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.

This is a book that I would like to give 5 stars, but then what would I give a book like *Brothers Karamazov*? Although written by a geologist, this is not a textbook for Physical Geology 101. In addition to the obligatory couple of chapters on formation of the rocks, which are exceptionally

well-written, this book describes the cultural history and settlement of New England from the Pilgrims to the present day with interesting sidebars on ecology, agriculture, the environment, physics, and even poetry and painting. A geologist has the remarkable ability to take small outcrop and reconstruct an intricate and detailed geologic history, often rich with mountains, volcanoes, former ocean basins, earthquakes, extinct creatures, and the like. Thorson applies this storytelling ability, which combines art and science, to stonewalls, but he never strays so far from the facts that any of his conjectures become unbelievable. As a farmer, I am impressed with Thorson's thorough and accurate understanding of agriculture from the past up to the present day. This is important since agricultural development was the reason that the stones became so abundant and the walls were built. The book also contains some interesting discussions on urban versus rural life, including the recent development of "rurbia", a blend of the suburbs and country that is taking over rural New England (including the town in which I live).

Thorson's discussion of frost heave is so wonderful I no longer resent picking those damn rocks out of the garden. Well, I still don't like those damn cobbles and pebbles but at least now it makes sense. I lived on sand in Schenectady, NY for awhile and I almost forgot how easy mending that lawn was, you could dig without a shovel, but New England called me home and alas this is a land of rocks, but walking through the woods here in Massachusetts with its stranded rock walls, whose existence in trackless woods makes one wonder who built them, so long ago that the trees surrounding them are well over 100 feet high, humbles one, such a long history, so many generations gone, you can feel the hard labor that must have gone into hauling these tons of rock, these walls that run up and down hillsides through woods that haven't seen farming in over 150 years. I loved the soil talk, the geology, the history lesson, this is real history, the story of the people, explaining the reasons for the individual decisions of the many; the big history moves are the result of the many many little historical imperatives. If you live in New England or any other glaciated terrain, you should read this book, you will find your surroundings, your own neighborhood woods, a source of new fascination.

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