

# Rock, Gravity, Friction

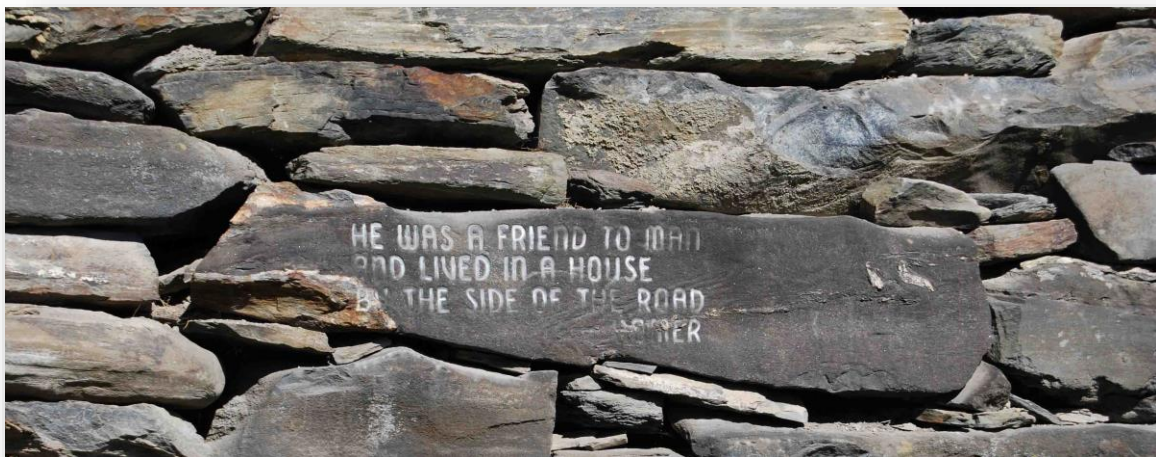
## A Rubble of Thoughts in Praise of Vermont's Ubiquitous Fieldstone Walls

by Ricka McNaughton  
Blog Entry

~~~~~

One day I plan to get a rear bumper sticker made for my car that says: I BRAKE FOR STONE WALLS. People can make of that warning what they want. The fact is, I often slow down or stop to admire a nicely laid fieldstone wall or any landscape feature artfully built of pick-your-own rocks. Turn over any new soil in Vermont and you'll find lots of rocks. Big, small and in-between. Let's say you want to prepare the ground for planting something, A field crop. A garden. You break your back taking out those rocks, and next year there will be more rocks. It's as if the ones you missed procreated like rabbits over the winter.

Vermont is famous for its many free-standing, thrown up stone walls. They border farm fields and homesteads, and they ribbon through regenerated woods where there used to be cleared fields. Some walls seem little more than piles of stone refuse. Others are laid with great skill and an eye for exacting, linear form. Because the Vermont landscape is more hilly than flat, you'll also see a lot of retaining walls set into steep banks of land to stabilize the soil behind it.



Driving the back roads of Vermont's rural Northeast Kingdom once, I chanced on a very large dry-stone retaining wall (dry-stone means no mortar was used) in front of an old farmhouse. I stopped to have a closer look at the way it was made. (*Photo above.*) I found the oft borrowed Homer quote inscribed on one the stones: *He was a friend to man and lived in a*

*house by the side of the road.* (See top photo.) Perhaps it was a lovely tribute to an individual now gone from this world. But I think that anyone who lays out such a beautiful wall by the side of a public road is a friend to all who pass by it.

For unique beauty, there's one Vermont all that tops my list. I wish I had a photo but I saw it in a time before we went nowhere without camera phones. Pitched against a high embankment in the center of a village, there is a stone retaining wall that features an array of old metal farm tools set ingeniously into the tiers of rock. They work as both supports and slightly projecting objects of art. The fully rusted patina of the tools blends nicely with seams of rust-colored stone amid bands of creams, ochers and cool smoke grays.

The wall seems to memorialize, too, the ingenuity required to work in harmony with the land here. It hints at a certain alchemy – the whole business of turning stones that are hell on backs and plow blades into something useful and beautiful.

Every stone, too, has its own creation myth. Each is rendered by some geological event involving god-like forces of heat, explosion, thrust, erosion, and pressure. Out of these cataclysmic events comes the material for the work of stonemasonry. To me, stonework built for the ages says something nice about humankind. And I'd say we're at a point in the colonization of earth when humans can sorely use some good press.

## INTO THE MYSTIC



In dry-stone work, the I see a drama between the forces of gravity and the graceful forms that resist it. The dry-stone work of Vermont stonemason **Thea Alvin** (left) is as visually arresting as any I've seen in this state. I spoke with Thea (left) recently at her home in Morrisville, Vermont.

Here she is (right) with the head-turning, three-arched wall she built that borders her property. Passers-by can glimpse it from the main road. The structure is one continuous, sinuous helix, tapered off at each end. Approach it broadside and you get a sense of something writhing and creaturely -- more mythical than mineral. For a different take, stand anywhere along its length, look left or right, and you'll behold an abstract composition worthy of its own frame.



Visitors in recent years have actually snatched small pieces of her work for souvenirs. Thea has no idea why. Possibly they ascribe some mystical powers to it. But owing to this thievery, she's had to reinforce the original dry-stacked piece with mortar. More bad press for humans.

I'd heard a rumor that media priestess Oprah Winfrey had taken an interest in Thea's work. Thea confirmed: Yes, that was so. As a matter of fact, she was expecting Oprah's TV crew in just a few days to film a segment about her work. She invited me to join them. I could, I supposed, do a story about Oprah doing a story about Thea. But I just couldn't be there on that day. [You can watch Oprah's segment on Thea here.](#) It offers glimpses into Thea's world, but it's no more than a slim shard of her story.

Thea's work extends well beyond landscape features. She once built an exquisite, backyard stone chapel for a neighbor. Smallish, but a chapel nonetheless. In July, Thea is headed to Italy to help refurbish abandoned stone houses in a historic 1600's village. [Check out Thea's blog here.](#) Her work will amaze.

## **I GIVE IT A TRY**

I had access to a lot of pick-your-own stone when I lived in Vermont. I took a class once to see if it were remotely possible for me to learn to build a small fieldstone arch as a feature of a horizontal wall. I wanted to see, at least, how such an arch comes together using only rock, gravity and friction.

At my class there were several teams of learners, each tasked with building an arch by day's end. First came instruction. Then, the build. The sun was hot and the labor hard. I confess, I left the heaviest lifting to others (by

necessity), and I took breaks to snoop on the work of other teams and report back on how they were faring. The last step of the arch building process involved removing the half-moon wooden form used to support the arch-in-progress. (See image below.) If we did the work correctly, the arch would then self-support when the form came out.

When our arch was completed, a member of our team grabbed a sledgehammer and stepped up to the structure my team had spent the better part of the day building. He tapped the form gently with the hammer, a little here, a little there, until it popped out. We held our collective breath.

There came a crescendo of solid clicks as the rocks in the arch slid into taut suspension, as they were supposed to do, pinning the keystone in the arch's highest point. And the thing held! We gave ourselves a thrilled round of applause.

And then, moments later, the whole structure collapsed into rubble.



Of the arches built by people taking the class that day, only ours immediately crashed. We learned later that the failure was not all ours. Our apologetic instructor told us afterward that it appeared to have much to do with the quality of the stone delivered to our particular site for this exercise. Many of the rocks were flat on only one side. Such stones would lack good, two-sided contact with one another. (Dry wallers will often plane rocks, using tools and skills we did not have, to achieve that necessary contact.)

I decided to rebrand the arch my team had built that day as a triumph of destructive testing. That's engineer-speak for building something to learn where, how and when it will fail. In that light, we were the top achievers of the day.

## THE PHILOSPHER'S STONE

**Another Vermont waller I contrived to meet and deeply admire is Dan Snow.** His first pictorial account of his work, *In the Company of Stone*, could stand on its own as a collection of graceful essays on living itself, as seen



through the lens of stonecrafting. Some passages in the text are as lovely as the forms in his stonework. Often he'll do large, purely sculptural installations, too. But Dan is no less a master waller. He is one of only a handful of Americans certified by the Dry Stone Walling Association of Great Britain, and spends time teaching aspiring wallers. [Here's Dan's website.](#)

### **A SON-OF-A-SON-OF A STONE INDUSTRY PIONEER**

Here's a tip for those in Central Vermont looking to get a little affordable rock work done. If you don't have budget for a celebrity stonemason, **I give high marks to professional all-around landscaper Jacob Miller of Plainfield**, a good neighbor of mine. This water fountain (below), built by Jacob, can be seen in front of Plainfield Hardware on U.S. Rt. 2. When we were talking about the stone trades recently, Jacob revealed that according to family lore, his grandfather brought over from Germany the first two circular wet-cut saws in Vermont ...or possibly in all of New England...or possibly beyond that. The Miller family stories, he allowed, are unclear on this exact point. But no doubt there is something here highly deserving of historical note.



□

*First photo of Thea by Michael Clookey. All others by Ricka McNaughton. Originally written June 2014. Last revised/expanded June 2023.*