

The onramp from Desert Rd in Freeport to the southbound lanes of I-295 slices diagonally down a hill from the surface road to the interstate, leaving an odd triangle of leftover land between the highway and the access road. Zigzagging across this little gore is a small but stately stone wall that comes up about as high as my knees. It runs south for a few dozen feet, cuts sharply to the left, turns right after parting for what must have been a gate, doubles back again, and comes matter-of-factly to a stop near where the island peters out into a drainage and the ramp meets the freeway.

I took a somewhat unexplainable interest in the stone wall at Exit 20 towards the end of December of last year, and fell into the habit of pulling over on Desert Road, darting gingerly across the onramp, and wandering around the little tract of land that holds it. For a spot so obviously not meant for pedestrians, it's an oddly pleasant place: on the land transected by the wall, majestic white pines and a handful of oak and hemlock trees rise majestically above a needle-carpeted forest floor. Beyond them, past the remnants of a decaying metal fence, a second and much younger grove of evenly spaced, carefully planted pine trees speckles a small bluff that probably formed from excess debris when the freeway was grade-separated from the surface road. Because of the thick evergreen canopy, there is hardly any underbrush. Several times that month, with winter light shining brightly through the pines, I would pull over and poke around the site. Walking along the jagged length of the wall or examining the two different groves of pines, I was effectively invisible to everyone in the triangle of anonymous vehicular traffic that zipped around me in all directions.

I was drawn in part to the bizarre contrast between this small, rocky, forested landscape and the huge, sweeping curves of the highway enfolding it, and struck by the surreal difference between the speed of all the cars flying past and my own as I pattered around among the trees on foot. Maybe it was the comparatively human scale of the wall, or the precision of its angles, all carefully aligned against a now-inscrutable axis, but something about it made it seem strikingly incongruous to the freeway landscape it now occupied. At some point, someone with a real relationship to this patch of land had painstakingly assembled a wall on it, with rocks he had pulled from its ground, and now it was an exclave sitting still in the middle of a different kind of place, hemmed in on all sides by new surfaces dedicated to nothing but movement. I wondered about that wall and how it got here.

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Stone walls, arguably the single most distinctive feature of the New England landscape, were not the first strategy that the region's farmers employed for marking their property, or for

keeping livestock in and wildlife out. For generations, wooden fences were the standard, but these were prone to rotting and falling apart after enduring a couple of years of New England's relentlessly rough weather. Years of working the land, however, were gradually contributing to the accretion of a new resource: deforested landscapes suddenly unprotected by trees saw their topsoil rapidly worn down by weather, exposing the rocky landscape below, and years of plowing and tilling also did their part to churn from the fields a slow, steady, and doubtlessly annoying font of mid-sized rocks. In the wake of these developments, stone fences gradually emerged as an elegant means for farmers to solve the fencing issue while simultaneously answering the question of what to do with all of these stupid rocks. (The zigzag wall at Exit 20, with its clean angles and gateway built in, is probably an example of a stone fence that had been piled around an existing wooden one, which would have used that angular shape as structural support. After the wood rotted away, the rocks remained.)

They would double as effective property markers too. While for the most part the earliest English settlements in the region, mostly along shorelines and river valleys, had not produced many stone walls at all – this was partly a consequence of the sandier geology of coastal New England and partly of Puritans' general preference for communitarian agricultural practices and their corresponding vague disinterest in the notion of private property – by the late eighteenth century, as settlers moved inland and up north, attitudes toward religion, economics, and land ownership all shifted and New Englanders quickly began to wildly outperform their countrymen in the business of carving up the land among each other. “In [these] states,” George Washington would note, “landed property is much more divided than it is in the states south of them.”

Before long, New England had grown an exoskeleton of stacked stone lines that was almost impossible in scale: by 1872, the six states together held 240,000 miles of them. By any measure, this is an absurd number; it is a greater distance than that between the earth and the moon.

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I went to the Freeport Historical Society to see what I could learn about the provenance of the stone wall on the Exit 20 highway gore, and was helpfully shown a series of old maps that identified the site over time as the property of various generations of a family called Randall. A cemetery bearing the family's name is preserved on the other side of the interstate, between another onramp and the edge of the parking lot for a supermarket. After much debate, and a lot of time spent pawing through very old deeds, it was agreed that the wall I was wondering about was probably built by a Randall, though we couldn't quite figure out which one or when. The family seemed to have farmed the land for a while, slowly calving off pieces of it for successive generations to live and work on. Those acts of subdivision may have been another reason for the wall.

An older man who turned out to have lived in Freeport all his life was in the room researching a project of his own while I was there, and he looked on bemusedly as a Historical Society employee assisted me with my highway ramp question. He had thoughts about the Randalls' wall, which, I found with satisfaction, to be pretty well in line with my own. “Would've been there for farming,” he declared immediately and matter-of-factly. “Frost heaves would've pushed up all these rocks, and you've got to clear the fields before

you can get much done. And you needed a fence to keep the animals out. Or in, as the case may be.”

I explained a concurrent interest I'd been developing in the origins of the interstate itself – I had found it hard to imagine this part of Maine without it – and he remembered that when they designed and built that highway in the 1950s, it “mostly went across old farm land that wasn't being used anymore.” This checks out; as with most interstate projects during that initial wave of construction, the state acquired land by asserting its right of eminent domain. While big highways frequently wrought misery where their construction displaced people and property in dense urban areas, the land requisitioned to carry interstates across rural areas tended to proceed along paths of relatively light resistance, like across fallow farmland.

“A lot of the gravel for it came from up in Topsham,” he went on. “And North Yarmouth, I suppose. All around here. Point being, it was good work. I remember one fellow down the road bought six dump trucks to work on the highway. Took them a long time to do the work but they did it.” It didn't seem to him that the construction of this enormous road was much of an inconvenience to the people in town, with the exception of the people whose property was bisected by the new freeway and now had to travel a considerable and inconvenient distance to get to the different parts of their land. From what I was able to learn, the Randall property would have long fallen out of active use by then, but would certainly have been among those bifurcated tracts.

I tried to explain to him and to the Historical Society worker why this particular site seemed so subtly strange to me. It's relatively uncommon for onramps to be forested, for instance; big trees so near to fast roads present significant liabilities, and so on. But I also thought it was weird that these old trees – and significantly, this stone wall – had been so well-preserved despite having survived the famously destructive process of laying out an interstate highway. While today, new highway projects are compelled to perform extensive assessments of the archeological and ecological significance of the sites they will build on, this was not the case in the fifties. Why hadn't the trees and the wall been buried in debris or knocked over to improve visibility? Or simply to remove a potentially hazardous obstacle?

“I don't think they would have made an effort to preserve it,” the Historical Society employee said of the stone wall, after thinking for a minute. “Normally, there was very little concern for preserving historic sites, particularly in those days.” The older man nodded and laughed. “You want to know the truth, I'm sure they were just looking at the track they wanted to build on and it just wasn't in their way.”

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Stone walls, left to molder in a field-turned-forest, eventually become part of the environment around them. Centuries of winters and summers cause them to shift and shudder and collapse; things grow on them and up through them, and gradually they take on the characteristics of the landscape that holds them. Ultimately they wind up an inextricable part of it.

“Out of a ruin,” wrote the landscape scholar J.B. Jackson, “a new symbol emerges, and a landscape finds form and comes alive.” I have only been around for the last thirty years, and

so my instinctive feeling about stone walls is that they are purely things that one stumbles upon in the woods. They do not make me think of farming, or property lines, or even of people. As someone who grew up in an environment lousy with the things, they have never seemed to me anything but an utterly natural feature of the landscape, as basic and essential as a mountain stream or an erratic boulder. Whenever I'm back in New England after spending time away, stone walls are familiar; an unconscious cue to the fact that I'm back in the forests in which I grew up.

And like stone walls, highways like I-295 won't be relevant forever. The generation I belong to has struck fear into the hearts of auto manufacturers with our demonstrated ambivalence about car ownership. Within my lifetime, self-driving cars are likely to massively reshape the way people think about distance, commuting, and geographic space. The roads we need now are not necessarily the roads we will need in twenty or fifty or a hundred years. Think of the many miles of decommissioned rail beds around New England that are now paths for recreational cyclists, pedestrians, or snow machine users, and imagine what we will do with 46,876 miles of the U.S. Interstate system once we've moved beyond our current, and still relatively new, car-centric moment.

Stone walls tend to be about thigh-high because of the mechanics of human movement; that's about as high as a mid-sized man can put a big rock down after lifting it up. Whatever Randall – if indeed it was a Randall – built my stone wall by pulling rocks from the ground and stacking them on top of each other, maybe his actions weren't so dissimilar to those of the man from Freeport who bought six dump trucks to help build a new, gigantic road out of gravel from North Yarmouth on the same site. These things, so necessary for a moment, will inevitably remain in the landscape for long after their intended purpose is served out or forgotten. We walk among ruins whose meaning we're constantly reevaluating, reimagining, and reinterpreting, and a landscape like Maine's, so wrought with layers and skeletons, is at any given moment a palimpsest of all these symbols at once.

I think this is why I was so compelled by the sight of part of a stone wall stranded on an island hemmed in by the trappings of an interstate highway. The world we navigate today is stacked with the remnants of past and present means of framing the landscape for ourselves: roads and fences, cellar holes and train tracks, buildings and walls. Their shapes are meaningful and instructive even when they've outlasted their original function: they add up to a broad and intricate tapestry of awkwardly interlaced lines on the land, each marking out the vectors and dimensions of long-forgotten ways of moving through and being in the world.