

The Garden Wall at Beekman Farm



By Michael Whaling
Photography by Leila Durkin

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↔ THE ARGIAN PRESS ↔

19 Tilton Avenue, Oneonta, New York 13820 USA

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ISBN 978-0-9820821-6-4

This book has been typeset in Goudy

Typesetting and design by Sir David Hayes

Printed in Shenzhen, China by Jessie Yan Zhang and Maykin X. Wen

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

—PHOTOGRAPHY—

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—STONE—

Robert Loucks

Fred Santillo

Paul Larkin

—STONE MANAGEMENT—

Frank Rowlison

—PATIENCE—

Brent Ridge

Josh Kilmer-Purcell

—PUTTING THIS BOOK TOGETHER—

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INTRODUCTION

Stone walls have always held a certain fascination. There’s the unspoken promise that somewhere inside that border is a Secret Garden, a Tarabithia, a Hogwarts, a Brigadoon, a magic princess, even a Hobbit or two.

Stone walls can be seen on virtually any country drive through upstate New York. Often little more than linear piles of stone, many of these “walls” were erected by tossing field stones along the property borders as new spaces were cleared and plowed. The perimeters of the hay fields at Beekman Farm were demarcated in this manner over 200 years ago.

When we installed the heirloom vegetable and herb garden, we knew we wanted to make our own permanent contribution to the landscape, so we asked our friend and neighbor, artist Michael Whaling, to construct a stone wall.

The wall had to be more than beautiful. It had to be functional and, like all works of art, there had to be something unexpected. You can see for yourselves that this was done.

No matter where you take up residence, you always leave a bit of yourself behind. Having watched the wall slowly emerge from a gigantic pile of stones over the last year, we were reminded that “built to last” is not an easy accomplishment.

We love the wall. It looks as if it has always been here. And you can’t get better than that.

BRENT RIDGE AND JOSH KILMER-PURCELL

Sharon Springs, New York

October 2010

AUTHOR’S PREFACE: PRODUCTION AND AESTHETICS—THE BALANCE

A friend who happens to be a builder of stairs and railings of high order told me when I asked his advice on a difficult woodworking project to “make it nice, but not too nice.”

Building with stone is a task involving constant problem solving. Much of the laying of a wall is like a multiple choice test—there is no perfect answer, only the best available from given choices.

Achieving a decent level of production while adding aesthetic interest is the trick in wall building. It is good to know when to stop fussing. “Nice, but not too nice.”

In November of 2008, Dr. Brent Ridge and Josh Kilmer-Purcell and I first discussed building a stone wall in the shape of an L around their heirloom vegetable garden at the Beekman Farm.

For the this wall, we had the advantage of a great nearby source of native limestone, and two local farmers who generously gave us permission to pull random chunks of granite from piles of stone in their hedgerows to mix with the limestone. (No stone walls were disassembled during the making of this project.) This added contrast to the grey of the limestone and enhanced the vertical and horizontal patterns in the wall. This practice also followed traditional stonework of the early 19th century when a variety of material was used, based on what was at hand.

Wedging the granite into the limestone wall was accomplished with the use of thin stone clips, flat pieces chiseled to fit the top and bottom edges of the granite that hooks them into the wall. Both sides are woven together for support. The weight of the additional stone on top holds the entire installation in place. Texture is enhanced by the variety of stone.

Our limestone originated in the Devonian geologic age, about 360 million years ago, and is made of glacier-pressed seabed material, so it often contains marine fossils. Granite contains a variety of mineral colors ranging from dark green to red and orange.

As you travel Route 10 through our Village of Sharon Springs, you pass several old limestone quarries and homes built from this stone. Since these quarries have been closed for over a hundred years, we had to search elsewhere for limestone, and a lot of it. We found a source in Cherry Valley, eleven miles away. Construction began in October 2009.

The result is a wall running 100 feet east to west and another 100 feet north to south. It is 24 inches high at the junction of the two sections, 22 inches high at the east end, and 36 inches high at the south end where the grade is lower. The entire wall is 30 inches wide and sits on a base of gravel and stonedust 18 inches deep.

In the summer of 2010, a group of about 30 people visited the Beekman Farm and asked me about the wall and its construction. This was an impromptu visit, and they were curious about the mix of stones and their sources. “Why do you put those irregular big stones in with the flat ones?” Without giving it much thought, I replied “because it is more fun to look at a quilt than a piece of corduroy.”

This project used 340 tons of limestone and an undetermined quantity of granite. The stones left over, about 35 tons, were used to build a Climbing Alp for the goats in their pasture behind the barn.

This process takes time. I had patient employers.

The project was completed in October 2010.

MICHAEL WHALING
Sharon Springs, New York
November 2010

DISCLAIMER FOR WHAT FOLLOWS:

The last thing I wanted to do was write some crunchy, esoteric, quasi-Zen blathering book about stone.

It creeps in here and there, but I did my best.

MICHAEL WHALING



Stone.

For stacking, climbing,

Seeing and knowing.



The source.



Working with stone is an experience unique
to each person doing it.

If four people were given
the same pile of 1,000 stones...

It would result in four different walls.



Patterns emerge,
the cast changes;
there is no perfect answer
when working with stone.
Only the best answer
from the available players.



It is more fun to look at a quilt than a piece of corduroy,
and more fun to make as well.



North entrance

to the

heirloom vegetable and herb garden.



The strength and durability of the wall is achieved as it is in a basket, by weaving and overlapping the seams all the way to the top.



ALARMING JOHN

Fitting the birdbath into the east section of the wall was an opportunity for some mischief.

This location turned out to be in line with the entrance to farmer John Hall's house. After the birdbath was set in the wall, I filled it with water and John came over to check it out. I mentioned to him that filling it with water was the best way to check it for level in its installation, and the best way to keep it filled was to install a float alarm that would cause a buzzer to go off in his house when the level dropped by one half inch.

I cannot remember his exact response, but I believe he said something about a sledge hammer.

Two days later I installed the contraption in this photo.

It is no longer there.



One afternoon when I had finished a section with a random pattern that was especially fun to build, I threw a bucket of water on it and enjoyed it all over again as the colors changed and became darker.





Wedged with weight.



A granite slab being lifted
from a hedgerow near Surry, Maine,
with a tripod.



Installed in the Beekman Farm garden wall.



Using a splitting hammer
to section stone.



CHAOS TO ORDER

“With the material at hand” would be the accurate finish to this title.

Our material for the major portion of this wall was native limestone from a large heap eleven miles away in Cherry Valley.



Even though the deliveries were spaced two at a time, the management of this quantity of material became another job at the farm, like tending the goats and weeding the garden. Fortunately, we have a neighbor, Frank Rowlison, who happens to be a highly competent excavating contractor to help us sort through the piles of rock as they were delivered.



Stone seats eased into the wall.





Wall stones
fitted to a
vertical
book end,
causing it to
look bent.





Waiting for the cat.



Water test.





TOOLS

The following hand tools were used in the construction of the stone wall at Beekman Farm:

- Tape measure
- Two-foot level
- Four-foot level
- Torpedo or pocket level
- Small chipping hammer



- Two-pound splitting hammer
- Two-pound sledge hammer
- Four-foot steel bar with a flattened blade at one end
- Four 2-foot long sections of 3-inch iron pipe for rolling stones
- Multiple pairs of gloves (I went through 6 pair)







As the sorting process continued

with the 17 truckloads of stone,

20 tons in each load,

I kept seeing certain stones over and over

Too large or irregular to fit in the wall.

They were too beautiful not to use.

In the end,

they became the Climbing Alp for the goats.



IF YOU WANT TO BUILD A WALL

Many excellent books are available on how to build a stone wall. The following comments are based on my experience and should provide you with a wall that you will always enjoy looking at.

1. Get the right stone. And a lot more than you think you will need. Building a wall because you happen to have a pile of rocks laying around is usually a bad idea, unless you happen to have a great mix of stones.
2. Participate in choosing the stone with the builder and ask the builder to sketch out a section of the wall you propose.
3. Avoid building a wall with small stones.
4. Build on a solid base. This usually means a ditch 18 to 24 inches deep, by whatever width you have decided on, filled with compacted gravel and stonedust.
5. Estimating the cost for labor is very difficult because each situation is different. My approach is to build the wall for three or four days, measure the progress, and base the estimate on that.
6. During construction, when you see the builder standing back from the wall, staring at it, be assured—he is working.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Whaling works in stone, wood and watercolor.

All of his work draws upon his roots in the Central New York foothills of the Adirondack Mountains, and represents the unstructured landscape that he sees.

In working with wood, Michael creates one-of-a-kind furniture constructed with applewood limbs.

He also designs and builds stairways and walls using indigenous split granite boulders, limestone and cobblestones to compose an irregular and unexpected texture.

His architectural commissions have been featured in numerous publications, including Architectural Digest.

He lives in his studio in Sharon Springs, New York.

ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHER

Leila has studied painting, sculpture and photography but kismet gave her the final nudge to pursue photography full time. Her earlier work was influenced by the Pictorialist Movement. Only recently has she begun to work in a digital format. Her intent remains to document the wonders of everyday life, those moments that are too often overlooked.

Her work has been exhibited in galleries, magazines as well as solo exhibitions. She and her husband, Philip, own the restored Village Hall Gallery in Sharon Springs. The mission of the gallery is to support contemporary art in a rural historical setting.

“I began documenting the Beekman Garden Wall when it was about halfway done. Weather, moods and the history of the stone’s origins are an integral part of the wall’s character. There is a symbiotic relationship between the hardness of the stone and the softness of the garden and hills. This is a sculptural-environmental installation. No matter which way the camera was pointed: at the goats, the wall, the hills or the garden I was struck by beauty. The magic of photography, for me, is that nothing has to be created or manipulated... one just has to be still and the image will reveal itself.”

The author and photographer offer deep thanks to the following subscribers to this book. They made it possible for our work and our documenting of it to be shared with others. We are grateful.

Elizabeth Cooper

Henry S. F. Cooper, Jr.

Tracy Huntington

Scott Lynk

Dr. Peter Cookson

Karen Cookson

Our thanks as well to David Hayes, who volunteered his own time into creating this book because he liked the story. Thank you.

