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Gettysburg's Stone Walls: Restoration or Rehabilitation?

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Abstract

This post is part of a series featuring behind-the-scenes dispatches from our [Pohanka Interns](#) on the front lines of history this summer as interpreters, archivists, and preservationists. See [here](#) for the introduction to the series.

They are as simple as a pile of rocks, as utilitarian as a fence, and at times, exemplars of the kinds of debate that occurs at National Parks. Dry-laid stone walls are both a vital and ubiquitous feature of many battlefield landscapes. Solely constructed of large and small stones, these walls have the potential to last hundreds of years, without any binding agent apart from gravity. Hadrian's Wall is one of the most famous of these stone walls, built in the year 122 A.D. to provide for the defense of Roman Britain; portions of the wall are still standing today. These walls are known for their strength and longevity, and in tribute, Confederate soldiers during the American Civil War even christened one of their leaders "Stonewall" for his steadfastness during battle. [excerpt]

Keywords

A Look at the Past, Pohanka Internship, Thinking Historically

Disciplines

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Comments

This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Gettysburg's Stone Walls: Restoration or Rehabilitation?

By Kevin Aughinbaugh '18

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Dry-laid stone walls were common in the Gettysburg area during the 19th century, as they provided a durable and economical way to enclose crops and livestock on a farm. Due to the local geology, diabase, or "Gettysburg Granite," is found close to the surface of farm fields, and was frequently brought up by farmers during plowing and tilling. Putting these stones to use as fencing provided a long lasting alternative to wood fencing such as Virginia worm or post and rail fencing. For the local Adams County farmer, these stone walls were nothing more than a utilitarian tool. Used for demarcating property and field boundaries, protecting crops from large roaming herbivores, and providing a strong enclosure for various farm animals, these walls were regarded as an important tool in normal farming practice.

As June 1863 turned into July, the clouds of war began to converge on Gettysburg, and on the morning of July 1, 1863, those clouds broke with a single carbine shot, resulting in a hailstorm of lead that inundated the town and surrounding area for three days. As the battle raged, the dry-laid stone walls that had for many years contained animals and protected crops took on a new role, containing and protecting soldiers. Re-purposed as breastwork material, these stone walls provided defensive cover at places such as Devils Den or the Angle. Additionally, these stone walls could also contain and constrain advancing soldiers by forming a hard barrier within the field of battle, wasting precious time and unduly exposing the attackers to enemy fire. For soldiers, these stone walls took on the dual meanings of protection or annihilation, based on which side of the wall they were located.

Following the battle, the stone walls on the battlefield were rebuilt as farmers began to reassemble pieces of their fractured lives. As the Gettysburg Battlefield Memorial Association (and subsequently the US War Department and US National Park Service) began to create a battlefield park, these dry-laid stone walls once again changed in their role. Rather than being simply an object *on top* of the landscape, these stone walls became critical pieces integrated *into* the early battlefield landscape by marking historic fields as well as battle positions and breastworks. By the Depression era, many of the stone walls were beginning to crumble, weakened by 70 years of weathering. As a way to simultaneously improve the national park grounds and provide employment to the unemployed, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) employed young men to restack these stone walls and undertake other battlefield improvements.



As part of the park's effort to return the battlefield to its 1863 character, dry-laid stone walls are currently being restacked in accordance with National Park Service guidelines. Photo courtesy Kevin Aughinbaugh.

After another 70 years, many of these walls are in need of repair once again. As part of the park's effort to return the battlefield to its 1863 character, stone walls are currently being restacked in accordance with National Park Service guidelines. Using historic photographs and traditional techniques, these walls are being restacked to continue their role as interpretation aids. However, this rehabilitation work is controversial, as freshly restacked dry-laid stone walls appear drastically different from the dilapidated rock piles that generations of visitors have become accustomed to. The debate over the appearance of the walls penetrates deeper, to the question of what type of battlefield is to be represented. Should park staff rebuild the walls to show the area *prior* to the battle, represent the walls as they might have looked *during* the battle,

or present the walls as they would *ideally* look? Each of these orientations carries with it different connotations and interpretations of battlefield preservation.

Under Park Service guidelines, newly constructed stone walls should conform to standards of “like character.” Simply put, a stone wall is a stone wall, no matter the specific material or color. What matters, is that visitors see where stone walls were used, as opposed to other types of fencing. Others disagree, however, arguing that the walls should be exact replicas using the same material and design to the original 1863 walls.

On the small scale, this conflict is a disagreement between the Park Service and the public about how to “properly” construct a stone wall that can serve as an interpretive tool. On the larger scale, though, this current conflict represents the ever evolving thought process regarding how to represent the landscape to the visiting public. To some, it is necessary to restore (make it exactly the same) the battlefield to 1863 conditions, to others, rehabilitation (preserving the most important features) of the battlefield is key. Using these stone walls and the current debate on their appearance would provide an excellent opportunity for Gettysburg National Military Park to engage visitors in how they go about making historic landscape decisions, and the nuances surrounding the care for the park’s character-defining resources.



Kevin Aughinbaugh has worked closely with the battlefield landscape this summer. Photo courtesy Kevin Aughinbaugh.

Sources: Gettysburg National Military Park. “National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet.” National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (NPS Form 10-900-a). 2004.

