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Pool and Village, Great Gott
Island, c. 1900. George A. Neal
Collection. *Courtesy of the Southwest
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Good Fences Don't Make Good Neighbors

by John Gillis

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.

Robert Frost, "Mending Wall"

"Something there is that doesn't love a wall," writes Frost. Nature cannot abide them; animals give them no heed. The natural world has always had boundaries, but walls are a different matter. A boundary connects, while a wall separates. Boundaries function as vital interface without which life, social as well as biological, would be impossible. The smallest of them, that of the cell, is a place in its own right, often larger than the interior of the cell itself. They come in all sizes and shapes, maintaining and nurturing families, communities, and nations because they facilitate movement, communication, and change.



Remains of a nineteenth-century rock wall on Gotts Island. *Courtesy of the author*

But walls are the work of man, and belong to history rather than nature. They control movement and inhibit social and biological interaction. There have always been more boundaries than walls, but, of late, it seems that walls are proliferating. Sometimes they coincide with old boundaries in the way that road construction often overlays ancient paths. But the fit is rarely exact, and the tensions are often extreme.

New Englanders have come to love the same stone walls that in the nineteenth century they damned as obstacles to agricultural progress. They place them under protection orders on the pretext that they are part of the region's endangered cultural legacy. And where they do not exist, they build them to meet tourist expectations, even attributing to them the status of natural features. For those built by Andy Goldsworthy and Robert Smithson, the wall is itself a work of art.

The keeping of an expanding population of domestic animals was a primary reason for fencing in earlier times. Fences now, however, do not exist just for practical purposes. Their symbolic functions are no less compelling and seem to be increasing in intensity. Fences express feelings, something we have experienced on our small island in Maine for the past few summers.

It all began when my wife and I decided, after almost fifty years of living on island without benefits of walls or fences, that it was time to know just where our land ended and our neighbor's began. We even convinced ourselves that a re-survey would be to his benefit as much as ours, for he had developed the bad habit of mowing and planting raspberries on our side of our unfenced boundary. There was no wall to mend and we had no intention of building a fence, for there were no animals to be kept in or out. Had we been reading our Robert Frost on the etiquette of boundaries, we would have known that such an act "would like to give offense." And it did.

Things began to go from bad to worse when our surveyors arrived. Our neighbor first confronted our surveyors, and then us. He objected not just to the placement of stakes, but the stakes themselves. His language was abusive and communication came to an abrupt halt. He asked that we send him the survey, but failed to respond with a counter survey of his own. Being summer islanders, we let the matter lapse over the winter. But, on our return, I summoned up my courage to discuss the matter. In the course of our tense conversation, I discovered that my neighbor did not believe in fences, except those that keep animals out of his well-tended garden. He took our surveys as a personal insult, a lack of neighborly trust on our part. As far as he was concerned, no amount of surveying could, or should, ever establish exact lines of demarcation. Our neighbor recognized that there lay a boundary between his land and ours, but he had no time for walls or fences, and reacted violently to the very idea of a visible border.

Natural boundaries are soft, fuzzy and porous. Man-made borders are often hard-edged and impenetrable. In the past, people rarely built right up to the edge of their land. Communities were defined by margins that were broadly defined. The boundaries of towns were spacious buffers. Generous gaps pertained between territories. *Marge* originally meant

the edge of a stream or lake. It lent itself to the more modern term "margin," an empty space around a page of text that facilitated reading and annotation, and was anything but useless. Geographical margins also provided leeway for movement that modern walled borders do not. In short, margins were anything but marginal. They were vital to trade, communication, and politics. The margin was the place where disputes could be settled before getting out of hand. Frost and his neighbor settled things by walking a wall, each on his own side. It was the place of negotiation.

The Ruth Moore archaeological site on Gotts shows Indians to have been summer rather than year-round inhabitants long before Europeans arrived. As far as we can tell, they erected no fences or walls on Gotts, though they may have built weir-like structures to trap fish in the channel that divides Great from Little Gott Islands. This practice continued into the modern era, the stone remnants of which are still visible at low tide.

Gotts Island was not settled by Europeans until the end of the eighteenth century. Its population expanded and property was divided among children. House lots ran along a path on a ridge that afforded safe distance from the sea but a good view of the water. Even as they fronted on the commons of the sea from which they made their living, Gotts people shared another commons of woodlands and meadows to the rear in the interior of the island.

Property lines as such were never fenced. In fact, they were never properly

surveyed. Deeds indicate a corner here and there by a stone or a tree, but the lines between were never established by specific procedures performed by a professional surveyor. The modern surveyor's line is essentially an abstraction, which unlike the boundaries of old, is not a notable feature of the terrain, such as a ditch, hedge, or tree. During the centuries when boundaries were visible land forms rather than marks on paper or digital inscriptions, they were embedded in individual and social memory by ritualized performances such as the ancient tradition of "beating the bounds." Robert Frost's poem "Mending Wall" evokes ancient practice, now reduced to a private transaction between two neighbors.

Photographs of nineteenth century Great Gott Island show an open landscape dotted with freestanding houses. In early America, there was so much land that properties rarely abutted one another, and, when they did, fences were not used to mark legal boundaries. Rather they were used to keep animals in or out. The first thing Gott's settlers did was clear the dense forest, making use of the lumber to build houses and barns. The rest, until the entire island was cleared, was cash crop.

These islanders were commercial fishermen as well as subsistence farmers. Mainers still refer to their plots as "gardens," an indication of their small scale. Milk cows, horses, and oxen were kept near the house. Their tendency to break loose and invade neighbors' gardens led to disputes, to temporary fencing, but few permanent structures. The more invasive species, hogs and

sheep, real troublemakers, were exiled to nearby uninhabited isles. The sea was their fencing.

Fences were the product of the kind of complex agriculture, involving husbandry, brought to North America by Europeans. As famously noted by John Winthrop, Native Americans hunted animals but did not keep them. They had no tradition of fencing; in fact, it was the whites who forced Indians to fence their own cornfields as protection from English cows, hogs, and horses. Having already taken from the Indians their rights to clam beds, berry fields, and fishing waters, whites considered the fenced-in cornfields a means of keeping the peace.

The practice of complex agriculture also produced conflict among the settlers themselves. Fence laws were introduced to keep animals out of the gardens on which communal survival initially depended. It was communal rather than private interests that produced the first New England fences. What is seen today as a matter of individual rights and obligations was then a public duty. As early as 1674 the office of "fence-viewer" was introduced in New England towns. Fence-viewers were charged with enforcing the laws on which food and intra-communal relations depended. Boundaries between towns were also enforced by invoking the ancient English custom of "beating the bounds," annual perambulations that involved entire communities.

As late as the 1840s it was assumed that fences intended to control animals would prevent disputes among neighbors. But already there were those who saw the fence law as a burden. In clinging to its small enclosures, New Englanders were unable to compete with midwestern farmers who enjoyed larger acreage and greater crop yields. To critics, too many walls protected too little land. At the point that walls became an impediment to economic progress they could be seen as eyesores. A century later, when Robert Frost and his neighbor agreed to walk their adjoining wall, mending it as they





The cemetery fence at Gotts Island after renewal by island residents. *Photograph by Peter Gillis Armstrong*