

A Ruin Revived

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One of the thrills of amateur archaeology is stumbling across a heap of stones somewhere in the woods. If you should do so, I advise you to tread very carefully. When in the spring of 2014 I found such a heap in my own woodlot, there was an open well in the undergrowth close by, inviting any passing creature to fall in.

After hastily covering the well with logs, I started examining the stones. They were not really a “heap” but level with the ground, and trees had grown up among them. However, the well was the clue that this was the remains of somebody’s home. The four corners defined a rectangle of 24 by 20 feet, within which the building had apparently collapsed, or been pushed inwards into its foundation. I decided then and there to get to the bottom of it.

After cutting away the undergrowth, I set to work removing the stones from inside the rectangle. On the very first day, out came a stone naturally formed like a bird, which I regarded as a favorable omen (Illustration 1). The trees growing in the middle and close to the edges were too large for me to fell safely, so this was the one task I assigned to a professional. But what was to be done with the stones as I removed them? Rather than cluttering the area with other heaps, I chose the tidier solution of continuing the foundation upward in the same style, with dry-stone walls.

Illustration 2 shows the North corner at an early stage and explains the methodology. At the back of the photograph, the original foundation is gradually being revealed from ground level downwards. In the foreground is the unexcavated rubble, including a stone that was too large for me to lift. On the right the new wall has risen about eighteen inches above the foundation.



Figure 1. Stone “bird” found at site.

The heaving of the ground over many winters, with help from tree roots, had caused the Northeast foundation to bend in the middle, and there was no choice but to follow its curve (Illustration 3). The next year (2015) I was keen to find how deep this foundation really went, so concentrated on the East corner (Illustration 4). I had a little experience in wall-building, having once made low garden walls from the remains of an old barn. I knew that in a certain frame of mind, each stone seems to know how it is to fit in, or else it prefers to wait until a later opportunity. These were



Figure 2. North corner at early stage of excavation.



Figure 3. Northeast wall showing bend, with a scythe found at site.



Figure 4. East entrance with ladder. Madison County Road 71 in background, a continuation of Foster Road in Smyrna.

friendly stones to deal with: flat shale and sandstone of every size up to the biggest I could handle, mixed with a few glacial pebbles from apple to pumpkin size. I put some of these aside, later using them for a discreet decorative motif in the Northwest wall and the surround of the well.

As I dug down further, I discovered that the Northeast foundation not only bowed, but was overhanging inwards, and the stonework towards the bottom of the “basement” was in poor shape. Clearly I could not simply uncover it, because with the supporting rubble removed and the added weight of my wall, it would be in danger of collapse. I reinforced it with a sort of buttress: a rare example of building downwards instead of upwards!

By 2016 I had touched bottom, four feet below ground level, and my walls were reaching a similar height above it. I had built two stairs, a hair-pin one from the front entrance and a straight one from the back, which also served to reinforce the lowest courses. The Southeast wall alone was in good enough condition as to need no reinforcement, and thus to display all the original stonework (Illustration 5).

The stone-lined well was never dry. The water surface fluctuated with



Figure 5. Southeast wall revealed to its base, with author.

the rainfall from about four feet to one foot below ground level. I sounded it with a rod down to about nine feet, the lowest two feet being difficult to penetrate, presumably containing the mud of a century of fallen leaves. A wrought-iron grille, commissioned long ago for another purpose, now covers the mouth of the well and is the only imported article on the site (Illustration 6).



Figure 6. Well in back of house with imported wrought iron grate.

While clearing the foundation I found no sign of a fireplace or of room divisions. There is no clue to how the building was roofed, or where the doors and windows were. At the lowest level, which is also the water table for much of the year, were broken bricks, ashes, and charred pieces of wood, suggesting that it had burned down. The only buried treasures were some deeply rusted fragments identifiable as scythes, a Norfolk latch, a faucet, a horse-shoe, a leather-cutter, a spokeshave, a barrel hoop, old-style barbed wire, cut nails, and bits of a stove (Illustration 7). One piece of glass the size of a matchbook and an even smaller shard of china were the sole indications of domestic life.

This project has combined outdoor exercise, investigation, and creativity. Illustration 8 shows its current state. The monster stone seen in the first illustration has not moved very far! The reinforcements of the base form a sort of bench surrounding three sides, inviting one to hold a party or a pow-wow. I do not believe that the floor was originally paved, but in the wet summer of 2017, when I finally removed all the loose stone and soil, it became so muddy, and there were so many stones to spare, that I covered it up.



Figure 7. Northwest wall with historical artifacts found at site.

The quantity of stones excavated, including all the extra ones I used for the stairs, floor, reinforcements, and the myriad small ones that I discarded, would probably allow for solid walls at least two feet higher. This would make a total height from the dirt floor of about ten feet. Gaps for windows might yield enough stone for another six inches, bringing the walls up to about six and a half feet above the ground. Tree branches and bark or shingles would have furnished material for a roof. And this was not necessarily the whole dwelling: there could also have been wooden structures



Figure 8. Interior view looking northwest, present state.

of which nothing remains. However, to invent anything further would be spurious, and I have no wish to move into my ruin, or even camp out in it.

Even though the original dwelling is lost for ever, I wanted to make something that would do justice to the considerable efforts of its builder (imagine digging that well!), and, more generally, a small monument to the early settlers of the region bounded by Smyrna, Otselic, Lebanon, and Beaver Meadow. The result looks to me a little like the ruins of Pompeii, or New Hampshire's Mystery Hill, and I have left it at that, as a puzzle for future generations unless they happen to read this account. But as I finished my physical labors, I discovered a historical dimension that gave me a different sort of thrill, as the reader will see in the following article.