

Early Types of Fencing

[Text contained within brackets such as these explain obsolete word usage.]

Before discussing Colebrook's fencing, let us first read the 1769 laws as established by the Colony of Connecticut on the subject:

"All common fields shall be sufficiently fenced and that all 5 rail fence, and stone wall 4 feet high, and being well, and substantially erected; [these two types are the standard.] and all other fence, either of rails, boards, hedge, ditch, brooks, rivers, creeks, etc., which in the judgment of the fence viewers [This was a town office, just as that of tax collector.] shall be equivalent to the said 5 rail fence, shall be adjudged sufficient fence. And that such quick-set-fence [I think this means the worm, or zig-zag.] as shall be accounted sufficient in the judgment of the fence viewers to fence against ruly horses, [Today, we only use the opposite meaning, or "unruly".] neat cattle, [cows] and sheep, shall be judged, and accounted sufficient fence."

The laws go on to describe how fences are to be erected: "In setting of posts and rails, boards or hedge-fence, there shall be liberty for either party, [adjacent landowners] of 12 inches from the dividend line, [boundary line] to break the ground to set the posts and stakes in, but the posts and stakes shall be set in the dividend line. And for the making of stone wall or other fence, there shall be liberty of either party bordering on each other, to set one half of the width of such stone wall or other fence, on each side of the dividend line, provided it exceed not one foot and a half from said line on the neighbor's land.

And there shall be a liberty of 4 feet allowed for a ditch from the dividend line; except in fencing house or home lots for either of the bordering parties where the proportion of fence belongs to them respectively, provided the party making the ditch lay the bank thereof upon his land."

Now to resume the discussion of Colebrook fences:

No reference has been found in Colebrook histories concerning stump fences. [Made from pulled-up tree stumps.] Indeed, the term "fence", although used often enough, is seldom if ever defined. Colebrook being the last township to be created from undivided, or virgin lands, benefited by being surrounded by townships that had acquired some of the amenities of an established community such as sawmills, gristmills, improved roads having bridges and fewer stumps and boulders, which facilitated moving timber and lumber for the construction of buildings. Colebrook was thus spared some of the rigors that most pioneering peoples were faced with.

Probably our first fences were the "worm", or "zig-zag"; a portable rail fence requiring neither posts nor holes. They were built of split rails that were laid in a zig-zag fashion, usually resting on a rock placed on the surface of the ground, with their ends intersecting at a 60-degree angle. It has been in use in New England since at least 1685, because the minutes of the Town of Salem, Mass. that year record the construction of a "new worm fence about the meeting house at Alloway's Creek."*

*Sermons in Stone – The Stone Walls of New England and New York. Susan Allport, p. 37.

In 1871, the year the U. S. Department of Agriculture conducted a fencing survey, 60% of all fencing in the U. S. was zig-zag.

A man skilled in the use of an ax and a wedge could cut 150-200 10-foot rails in one day, and a man adept at erecting fences could lay 200 yards per day. A two-man team laying a stone wall could be expected to erect 10 feet per day.

It has been postulated that had not the forests been essentially eliminated, that our stone walls might well not have been built at all, but I would argue that at least in our corner of Litchfield County, the stone walls were absolutely essential, not just to establish boundaries, but to rid potentially arable lands of stones so that they could be plowed and harrowed.

The removal of stones from arable land prior to the early years of the 19th century was essential because the only plow in use was the un-wieldy, heavy-beamed wooden plow. It was not a type to remove stones and boulders when it hooked on to them. “Bees” used to be held at which men and boys and yokes of oxen turned out to help a neighbor clear off a field of rocks which were afterwards built into stone walls. A heavy, two-tined iron tool with teeth 10 inches or so long, unearthed on Beech Hill, seems to have been invented for the removal of stones having a diameter of 6 to 10 inches. The beam plow, so easily damaged by stones, would not have been adversely affected by smaller stones, and larger ones were removed by crowbars or shovels. Bear in mind that in the early years farmers seldom plowed deeper than 6 inches. What surprises us is that no other examples of this tool have come to light.

Split rail fences prevailed until about the time of the War of Independence, when they began to be replaced by stone walls. The general belief in New England at this time was that small fields produce better than large fields. For stony, hilly Colebrook, small fields, at least those used for agriculture, were the choice because it utilized the stone that had to be removed for cultivation. The volume was such that either the enclosed field was relatively small (1 – 3 acres) with stone walls averaging 3 feet high and with about the same width, or walls were considerably wider and higher, really not an option due to time and manpower constraints.

While we might question how our forefathers could possibly have moved some of the larger boulders, a farmer named Asa Sheldon, writing in 1862, relates how he was able to move stones weighing 5 tons by spreading good, straight rye straw crosswise on the path using one yoke of oxen. *

**Sermons in Stone, chapter 6.*

