

Woodlawn to restore its stone walls



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Employees with the Ellsworth-based Atlantic Landscape Company work on rebuilding a rock wall along the driveway of the Black House that is home to the Woodlawn Museum in Ellsworth. The first section will provide a time and cost estimate to revive the old walls along the roads of the museum. The building was built in the 1830's. Pictured are from left: Wandick Perez, Benigno Gamez and Donald Allen. (Bangor Daily News/Gabor Degre)

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Posted July 28, 2010, at 8:38 p.m.

Last modified Jan. 29, 2011, at 12:08 p.m.

ELLSWORTH, Maine — Poet Robert Frost, a longtime resident of New England, understood the effects of time on the stone walls that form the boundaries of countless fields in the region and often surprise wanderers in the woods that have grown up around them.

The Hancock County Trustees of Public Reservations, which oversees the care of Woodlawn Museum, also has become aware of the effects of time on the stone walls that surround the Woodlawn estate. It has initiated a project to restore those walls, which date back to the early 1800s when the property was first settled.

“For 180 years, these walls have seen it all. If these walls could only talk,” said Joshua Torrance, executive director at Woodlawn. “The trees have come and gone; the property

has changed, but the walls have always been here. There's something very romantic in a way about these walls. If you spend any time around them, you can't help but get enchanted by them."

The stone walls, some 3 feet or more in width, stretch for about a mile and a half, encircling the lower 60 acres of the 180-acre Woodlawn property. Records at Woodlawn show the original owner of the property, Col. John Black, paid \$52.99 for 39³/₄ days of work building stone walls. The bill was paid in 1832, but Torrance noted that the records show the work was actually completed five years earlier in 1827.

The last recorded work on stone walls at the property was done in 1857, a year after Col. Black died, but Torrance said it was likely that succeeding owners, including George Nixon Black Jr., the last owner before the property was turned over to the trust, also had work done on the walls.

According to Torrance, the wall restoration project grew out of an early study of the Woodlawn property that showed how trees had encroached upon the field space over the years.

"Even back in 1955, the property was much more open," he said. "In some areas, the trees have spread 15 or 20 feet into the fields."

Working with a forestry company, the trustees began to reclaim those areas.

"As we began to remove some of the trees, we could see more and more of these beautiful stone walls," Torrance said.

The walls attracted the attention of a museum supporter, who worked with Woodlawn officials to secure funding to begin a project restoring the walls.

According to Torrance, the trustees believe they have enough funding to restore the walls along the two avenues at the entrance and exit to and from the property and the wall along Route 172. Those areas were the two top priorities for the trust, he said. Additional funds probably will be needed to continue the work in other areas of the property, he said.

A crew from Atlantic Landscape Construction in Ellsworth began work this week on a 150-foot section of wall along the entrance road. That will serve as a test section for the larger project.

The condition of the wall varies throughout the property. Some areas look undisturbed, while others have had serious damage over the years.

"Some sections are half buried," said Donald Allen, one of the crew members working on the wall. "You wouldn't even know it's there."

Likewise, the work varies. In some areas, the repairs are fairly easy; in others, the wall has to be completely rebuilt, he said.

The crews are using only the stone from the property. That is part of the effort to restore the walls to their original condition.

“We don’t want new walls,” Torrance said. “We want them to look like it always did. It has to look right.”

The work on the 150-foot section will set the stage for the rest of phase one of the project, Torrance said.

“We’ll see how this goes,” he said. “Once that’s done, we’ll sit down and figure out a strategy for doing the rest of it and how much time it will take.”

Torrance added that part of the mission of Woodlawn is to educate and inspire. He noted that there are some wonderful stone walls all around Hancock County that also should be restored.

“We’re hoping that this project will generate new interest in other stone walls and inspire others to start restoring some of the stone walls in Hancock County,” he said.

In conjunction with the stone wall restoration project at Woodlawn, the museum has planned a stone wall symposium in collaboration with the Grand Auditorium.

The symposium, set for Aug. 13-14, will feature professor Robert Thorson of the University of Connecticut, a leading authority on New England’s stone walls. Thorson has written extensively on the subject, including a 2003 award-winning book, “Stone by Stone: The Magnificent History in New England’s Stone Walls.”

The symposium will include a walking tour, led by Thorson, along Woodlawn’s stone walls and the Maine debut at the Grand of the documentary film “Passages of Time: The Story Behind New England’s Stone Walls,” which is based on Thorson’s book.

The goal of the symposium is to raise awareness about Woodlawn’s stone walls, raise funds for the restoration project and highlight the importance of preserving walls throughout New England.

For more information about the symposium, contact Woodlawn at 667-8671.