

NEWS July 1, 2025

# One man's quiet war to save New England's oldest landmarks

*'We don't strip mine history': A town's stand for its silent sentinels*



**Jack Perry**

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- Stone wall expert Robert Thorson will lead a roundtable discussion, workshop, and public lecture in Little Compton, Rhode Island on July 2.
- Thorson advocates for the preservation of New England's stone walls, highlighting their historical, geological, and environmental significance.
- Little Compton and Westport, Massachusetts, potentially boast the highest concentration of stone walls in New England.

LITTLE COMPTON – As a child growing up on a Little Compton dairy farm, Carolyn Montgomery loved playing on the stone walls near her home, although her father fretted that she might damage the walls, or worse, fall and hurt herself.

Now 95, Montgomery has lived most of her life in Little Compton, admiring the character and beauty of the walls woven across so much of the land in her community, and she wants to ensure future generations can appreciate them, too.

Montgomery was the catalyst for an effort that should help town residents and officials learn more about the significance of their stone walls, the threats to their existence and ways to preserve them. On

July 2, the [Sogkonate Garden Club](#) is bringing in stone walls expert Robert Thorson for a roundtable discussion, workshop and public discussion.



## **Expert says New England's stone walls are a threatened resource**

Thorson, an Earth Science professor at the University of Connecticut, has written books, including "[Stone by Stone](#)," and articles on the historical and geological significance of New England's stone walls. He says their existence is threatened by people who want to mine the stones, but the walls don't have the protections worthy of such important assets.

"You need a permit to dig sand and gravel. You need a permit to do work on wetlands," Thorson said in an interview. "You can go and strip mine stone walls any time you want."

"I became a stump evangelist for stone wall conservation," Thorson said. "We don't strip mine history."

Thorson's visit is funded by proceeds from the club's garden tour and is part of [Little Compton's 350th anniversary celebration](#), according to Donna Pilkington, the garden club's first vice president and chair of its program committee. That's appropriate since Little Compton and adjacent Westport, Massachusetts, might have the highest concentration of stone walls in all of New England, according to Thorson.

"We know Rhode Island had the highest concentration of stone walls in New England in 1871," Thorson said. "It may be that the Little Compton and Westport area has the highest concentration in New England [now]. It's certainly among the highest."

New England once had 240,000 miles of stone walls, enough to wrap around the Earth 10 times, according to Thorson.

As a coastal community, Little Compton got an early start as a settlement and on building stone walls. As farmers felled trees and cleared land for agriculture, they would pile the stones along the edges, eventually crafting them into walls that contained animals and defined borders.

"It's an art," Montgomery said. "I enjoy seeing them. They mean a lot to me."

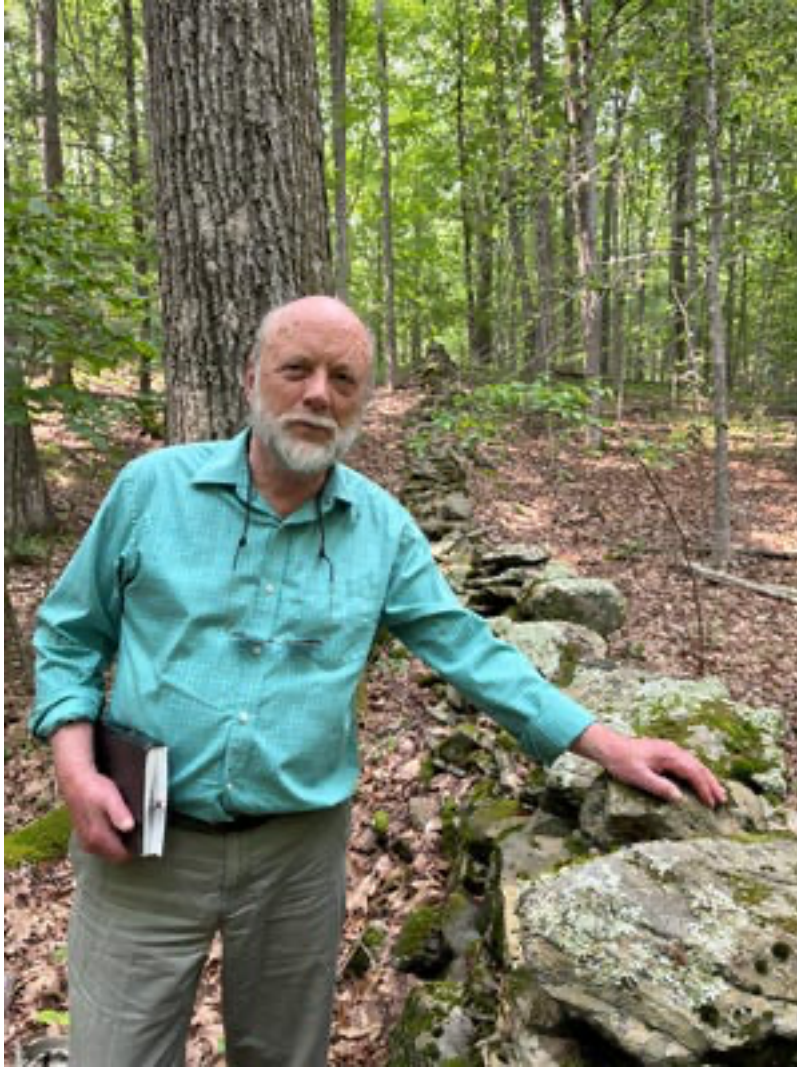
"It's part of my life," she said. "It goes back to being a young girl."

## **What makes stone walls special?**

Poet Robert Frost wrote about stone walls in "[Mending Wall](#)," and they "were of tremendous importance to impressionist painters" who brushed them into their landscapes, according to Thorson.

Stone walls reveal geology and history; they provide habitat for plants and animals, according to Thorson. Stone walls were even important militarily, he said, as New England colonists used them for cover fighting the British. Thorson noted these lines from "[Paul Revere's Ride](#)" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: "How the farmers gave them ball for ball. From behind each fence and farm-yard wall."





**Thorson has traveled thousands of miles across New England, trekking across fields and through the woods to see, study and appreciate the walls**

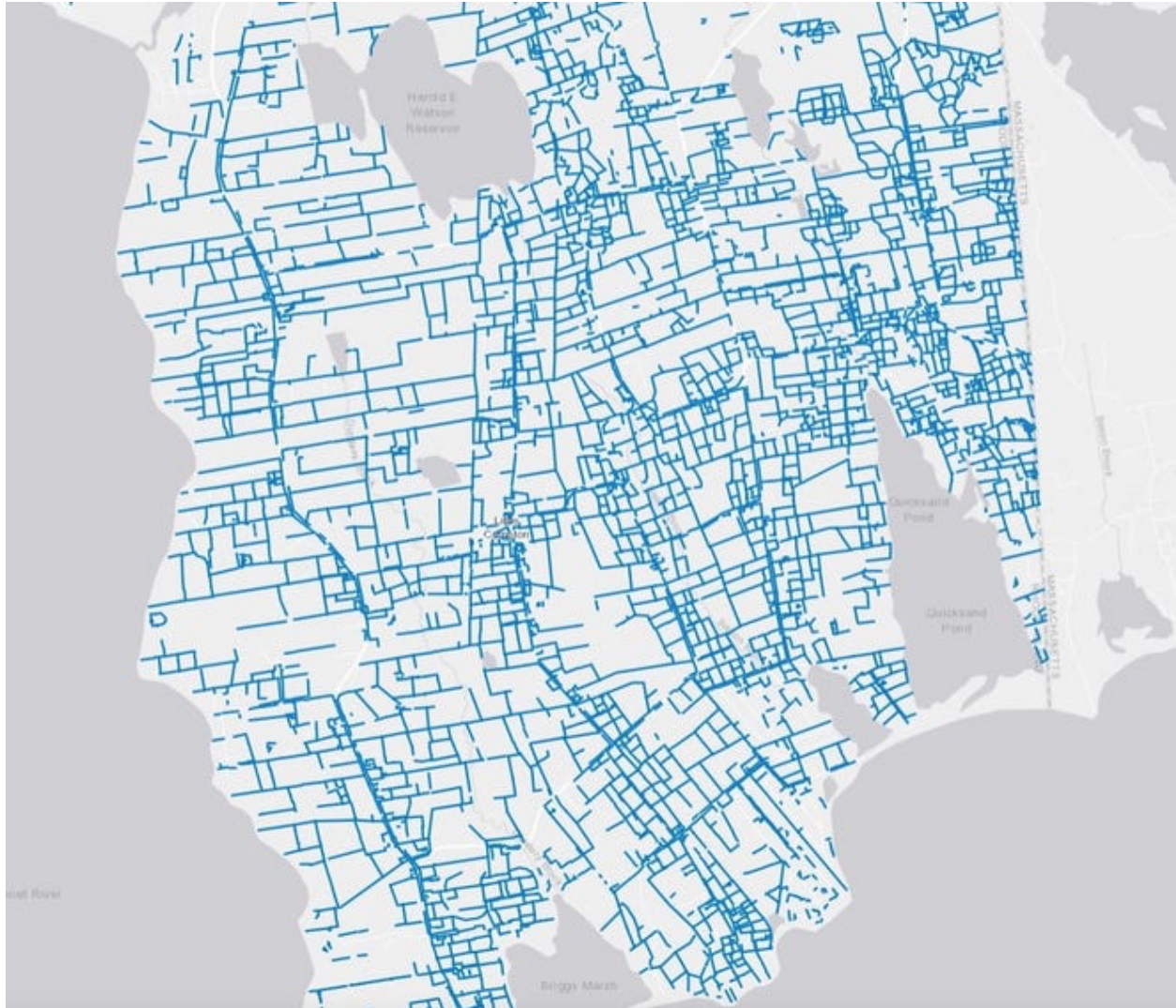
"Wall-watching is better than birdwatching," he said. "They don't fly away on you."

Stone walls are so important to New England's history, environment and identity Thorson considers them landforms, a word normally used to describe a naturally formed feature on Earth such as a mountain.

In the [Smithsonian Magazine](#) last year, Thorson wrote, "The fieldstone walls that were once barriers at the scale of farms have become binding threads for rural New England's regional cultural identity. 'There are old stone walls elsewhere,' I wrote two decades ago in my book [Stone by Stone](#), 'but only in New England do they rise above the level of architectural ornaments to the status of landforms. Kentucky has its caves, Florida its coral reefs, Louisiana its bayous, Arizona its canyons, Minnesota its lakes, the Pacific Northwest its volcanoes, and New England its stone walls. The landscape would simply not be the same without them.' "

## **Should these stone wall 'landforms' be protected and how?**

Protection of New England's stone walls is uneven, according to Thorson.



"Preserving structures on private property remains the main challenge owing to fierce defenses of private landholder rights in New England laws and customs, and because walls on remote, unguarded, private properties are frequently subject to theft," Thorson wrote. "Regulating on private property usually requires town ordinances, with some allowing walls to be strip-mined for profit, whereas others treat them as precious legacies."

In trying to preserve and protect stone walls, Thorson is going to garden clubs, historical societies, planners and conservationists,

delivering his message one community at a time. He's made many presentations in New England, and his Little Compton visit will have three parts.

First, he will host about 20 people for an invitation-only roundtable discussion at Pilkington's house. Invitees include members of the town's planning and historic commissions, town counsel and a town councilor, the head of the town's historical society and some interested citizens, as well as some "wallers," people who build and repair stone walls.

Thorson will then lead group members into the field to study stone walls and learn how to inventory and describe them. He will teach them how to recognize different types of walls, different types of stone and the common words to describe the different shapes and sizes of stone. For example, a "one-hander" is a stone that can be lifted with one adult human hand, while an "assisted stone" is a stone so big that it can be moved with the assistance of a tool such as a pry bar or livestock.

The University of Rhode Island has produced a map of Little Compton's stone walls using LiDAR, but maps generated that way can produce "false positives," according to Thorson, so it's important to confirm and map them on the ground level.

## **Where will Thorson speak?**

Finally, [Thorson will give a talk at 7 p.m. July 2](#) at the [Little Compton Community Center](#), where he will "discuss the unique formation,



historical significance, and threats to the existence of the many stone walls in our town," according to the garden club.

Anticipating a lot of interest and the potential for overcrowding, the garden club will also livestream Thorson's talk. To watch a livestream, go to [tinyurl.com/lcstonewalls](https://tinyurl.com/lcstonewalls).

"I'm going to have a blast," Thorson said. "I love helping people work on something they care about."

Pilkington hopes Thorson's visit leads to a greater appreciation for Little Compton's stone walls. She says visitors "always talk about about our blue hydrangeas and our stone walls," but residents sometimes take them for granted.

She also wants to ensure they're preserved. "It's like the wetlands," she said. "They'll disappear, if we don't take care of them."

According to Montgomery, some of Little Compton's stone walls are obstructed by brush and other growth. She'd like to see the growth cleared, so they can be admired.

Despite her father's concerns years ago, Montgomery isn't knocking down stone walls but helping to build them up.

And, she says, she never did fall off.

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