

# If Walls Could Talk

Stonewall Stories About Portsmouth, Rhode Island

by Gloria H. Schmidt







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**Images and text by Gloria Schmidt**

***An Introduction***

**Portsmouth, Rhode Island celebrated the 375th Anniversary of its founding in 2013. While working on a pamphlet of historic locations in the town, I began to notice the stone walls around each one of these sites. I know that stone walls routinely break down and are moved or rebuilt, but vintage maps and photographs show that many of the walls have been in those locations for a hundred years or more. I wondered what stories these walls could tell if they had a voice. This picture book is my attempt to write in the voice of the walls.**





Wall lining Frank Coelho Drive.

I know you have passed by us, but you rarely notice us. We are everywhere. We are humble walls of stones. Some are us are simple farmers' walls in your backyard or the earth hugging retaining walls or the lonely walls left in the woods as a sign a farm was once there. There are hundreds of miles of us in the town. You drive by walls that are nearly as old as the Town of Portsmouth itself. Do you know how much history we have witnessed in the years we have stood and watched? We have stories to tell you if you listen.





Lossely stacked stones at Glen Ridge Farm

There was a time when there were no walls here. Oh my rocks were here, buried deep in the soil. Ancient glaciers moved across the island and left behind my stones: gray-green slate, shale that breaks apart, puddingstone with pebbles cemented together, white quartz and granite.

The Wampanoags and Narraganset peoples who made their summer camps on our island cleared some of my stones as they prepared the soil to plant their “Three Sisters Gardens” of corn, beans and squash. Some rocks were mounded around the fields, but no real fences were needed for these native peoples came and went with the seasons.





My stones rose up out of the ground as the settlers cleared and planted their fields. They struggled to clear the land of trees and stumps and then dig up my rocks to be able to plant. Each year a new crop of stones would appear as the winter frosts pushed up fresh new layers of stone. Thomas Cook was the first settler to work this land. He and his sons wove the stones they dug up while clearing fields into solid stone walls that stand today. At first they just piled the stones around the field. In the winter they would put together the puzzle of my dry stone wall. They dug a trench to hold my larger foundation stones and then balanced rows of stones ending with the large flat capstones that finished my wall.

Clearing land took time and animals needed to graze so the Cooks ferried animals across the river to Fogland daily.

Wall lining Frank Coelho Drive.





Wall on Hedley St. side of Friends Meeting House

From colonial times my wall has stood at one of Portsmouth's busiest corners. Perched on Quaker Hill, I've always had one of the best views of our town and the neighboring town of Tiverton across the river. The traffic used to be walkers and riders headed along the East Path to take the ferry to Tiverton. Sometimes it was farmers with wagons bringing their corn to be ground at the windmill across the way.

My wall protects the south side of the Friends Meeting House. For over three hundred years I have seen the worshippers come and go on a Sunday morning. This has been a peaceful place most of the time, except when the enemy took the building to house their soldiers. There were plenty of fortifications here because it is a high spot. Through peace and war I have stood firm on this high ground.



## Wall lining Linden Lane.

With time all walls need mending and through the years many hands have rebuilt my stones into something solid again. Cook Wilcox, great-grandson of Thomas Cook, had to take the time to carefully rearrange the puzzle of my stones.

My wall, like all of Portsmouth, suffered during the British occupation of the island during the American Revolution. Cook and the other Portsmouth militia men were outnumbered. I watched as enemy soldiers marched up the East Path. The beautiful trees that gave me shade were chopped down for fire wood. Hessian soldiers marched by as they headed down towards their encampment by the river. American forces used my wall as a hiding place to snipe at enemy forces as they tried to take the island back from the invaders.

It took time for Cook Wilcox and the people of Portsmouth to rebuild their walls and their farm fields after the war. My rebuilt wall now lines the recreation fields where Portsmouth children come to play.



Wall by Oevering House near  
Prescott Farm

I have a story to tell of brave men who hid behind my great wall as they prepared to capture an enemy general. I saw the British general come to the fine home of the Oevering family. I could see the guard house attached to the great house. The guards were at their station that July night. They didn't hear the Americans as they landed on the shore and followed a gully up to the house. I watched as they crept along my wall up to the house. Col. Barton, their leader, bravely talked his way past the guard and took control of the guardhouse so no alarm was sounded that night. Within minutes the Americans were hurrying the General and his aide down to the gully. Not a shot was fired. Can't you just picture the General in his nightclothes being dragged away pass my wall?







Wall on Butts Hill

Hidden and lonely, my wall stands as a reminder of important battles. Because this is high ground, the local militia began to move the soil around me into to earthen work forts. I watched as they pushed dirt, dead leaves and twigs together and then patted them down into a sloping wall. These forts were soon abandoned when the British troops began to pour onto the island. The British took over the dirt fort and made it stronger and larger. It was a lively place here with housing for two hundred soldiers inside. After holding this site for three years, the British decided to pull out and head south. I saw them stuff old red uniforms with straw to fool the Americans, but the patriots came over and occupied the fort and the north end of Portsmouth. Dark days lay ahead. Patriot troops dwindled, the French allies left with damaged ships, so the Americans abandoned these earthen works and began their retreat. The English and Hessians advanced hoping to crush the Americans. The gallant soldiers held them off, crouching behind stonewalls to ambush and stall the enemy until the Americans were safely off the island. But that is not the end of my story. French flags flew on my hill as Rochambeau's men held this high ground when the British left.



## Retaining Wall by Glen Mill Pond

Once my retaining wall overlooked a busy mill pond, but now the pond is gone and only the trickle of a brook remains. Water power turned the wheels of the first grist mill grinding corn. Millstones gave way to carding and fulling machines to process wool when Joseph Cundall started his mill around the pond. I sadly watched as Cundall's son lost his life in a Christmas Eve blizzard on his way home. My joy came watching picnickers enjoy a day by the mill pond. They brought their paints, their journals, and their picnic baskets to enjoy a day in nature. At the end of the day they headed toward Mrs. Durfee's Tea House. Her griddle cakes were made from the same type of corn meal ground at the old grist mill a hundred years before.







Wall by the Portsmouth Historical Society on the corner of Union St. and East Main Road.

I've watched all the travelers making their way along the East Path, joining ferry and the town of Newport. Students used to hurry past my wall on the way to Southermost School across Union Street. Now I have the school back near me after moves through the years. Patriots hid behind my wall to ambush British soldiers trying to thwart the American retreat from the island.

My wall was the boundary for the Union Church property. I watched the new congregation build one church and years later construct an even bigger church. William Ellery Channing used to walk over from his beloved summer home. He enjoyed talking to the farmers who came here to worship. Julia Ward Howe would come by to preach. Her home is just down Union Street. I could see them all, the humble church members, the travelers, and the Vanderbilts who had their farm across the way.





Wall by Leonard Brown House  
on Linden Lane

Over a hundred and fifty years ago I watched this house being built. It was a sturdy and spacious home to hold the growing family of farmer Leonard Brown. Standing firm by the old farmhouse, I saw the busy Yankee Farmer raising his prize pigs, working as a blacksmith and wheelwright. Years later Glen Farm workers raised their families here. Their children climbed up on my capstones when they saw the man in the Cadillac. They knew he would give them a quarter if they just got down off my wall.





## Stone Bridge

I am a wall of stone and I have been built up, destroyed and rebuilt for over two hundred years. My stones didn't just come out of the ground. They were carefully cut out of quarries by skilled craftsmen. My structure has had a mighty job to do, so my stones have been cemented together in a pattern designed for strength. I'm a ruin, now, but I remember the excitement of holding the weight of a busy bridge. Some of my stones were in the first bridge built two centuries ago. Travellers would walk or ride over me on the way to Tiverton or back. The currents around my foundations are very strong and storm winds, swift waters and collisions with boats have made it difficult for any bridge to stand. In my best days I felt the weight of horse-drawn carriages, buses, cars and even trolley cars making their way to Island Park's rides. My bridge has not been alone all these years. I had the company of a railroad bridge to the north, and an old metal bridge by it took my travelers when I was no longer able to carry them. It is more peaceful here now as I notice the boats moving through my ruins and I enjoy the company of the fishermen.



## Glen Farm

Can you see the ragged edge of stone on my wall? I am a special wall, built high to hold livestock in and my sharp vertical stones keep the animals from jumping out. Stone barns surround me - Glen Farm dairy barns, horse barns, and bull pens. A hundred years ago this farm was the pride of the Taylor family and their workers. It was the home of champion Guernseys, Percheron Horses and Horned Dorset Sheep. Today my walls still hold horses and the barns are still full of horsemen lovingly caring for their own horses.







### Bristol Ferry

My sturdy retaining wall protects this point from the waters of the bay. Through hundreds of years I saw travelers make their way to and from the island on ferries, trains, stage coaches, trolleys and steam boats. Nearby Bristol Ferry Common was bustling with animals gathered to be transported off the island. During the Revolutionary War this was a dangerous spot with enemy ships firing canons toward my shore.

Nearly a hundred years ago the bridge over there opened with parades and ceremony. And then my busy point became a quiet and forgotten place.



The stones in my wall were dug out by the earliest settlers. Through the years the stones were built into useful walls for Glen farmers and their animals. In Glen Farm days my stones were reset to surround the sheep fields and the chicken pens.

Now my wall surrounds the soccer fields and picnic area of Glen Park.

I have company during the spring, summer and fall. Children sit on my wall as they cheer on the soccer players. Families come to enjoy a picnic supper. The community gathers for the 4H Fair, horse shows and special events. I'm a useful wall - even to this day.

Wall at Glen Park by the soccer fields and picnic area.





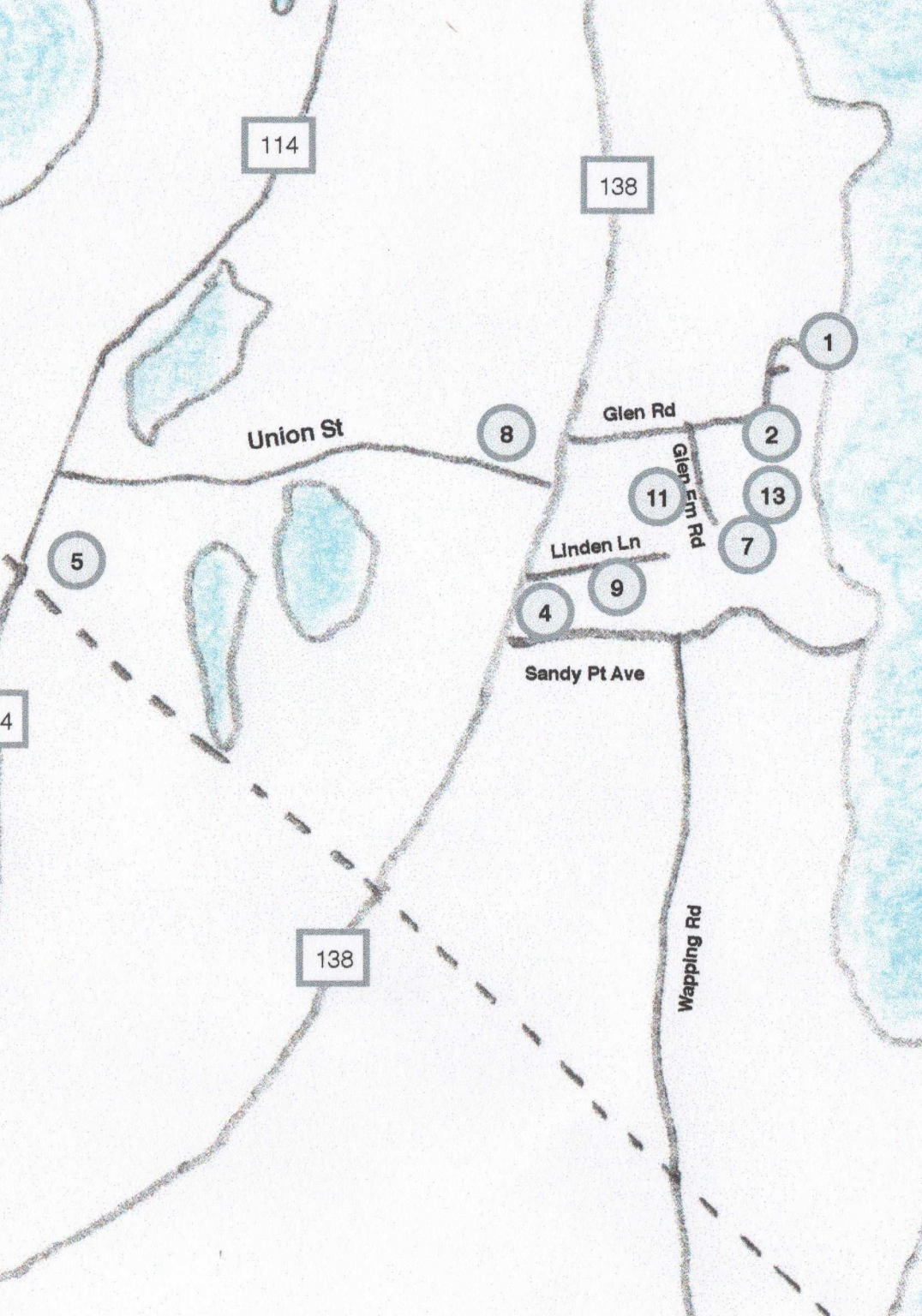


My wall hugs the border of a very quiet place. This area was where the first settlers came to gather at the brook and build their community. Founding families had their homes nearby.

Portsmouth families come here now to remember the town founders. They celebrate the proud heritage of Portsmouth and the hope for a bright future for generations to come.

Founder's Brook Park.





## TO HELP YOU FIND THE WALLS

1. Glen Ridge Alpaca Farm in back of the garage area.
2. Frank Coelho Drive on the way to Glen Manor House.
4. Linden Lane towards East Main Road.
5. This wall is by the Oevering House on Prescott Farm.
7. Off of Glen Farm Road. This area used to border a mill pond.
8. Wall by Portsmouth Historical Society.
9. In back of the Leonard Brown House on Linden Lane.
11. On the Glen Barns complex in through the arch.
13. Glen Park by the picnic shelter and soccer fields.



TO HELP YOU FIND THE WALLS

3. Hedly Street by the side of the Friends Meeting House.

6. Wall in the Butt's Fort area off of Sprague Street.

10. Stone Bridge area off of Park Avenue.

12. The old Bristol Ferry site at the tip of Bristol Ferry Road.

14. Founder's Book off Boyd's Lane.

