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DEVON HEFFERON, GREGORY LOMBARDI DESIGN

Good Fences

As lines of demarcation, they began with purpose and have evolved to have style, too

WRITTEN BY BRUCE IRVING

In the beginning, good New England fences weren't about making good neighbors. Far from it. They were three-dimensional declarations of a new way of dividing up the land. The Native Americans hadn't needed them: The animals they hunted roamed freely, and their concept of ownership was more about the right to use a piece of land for a time — for habitation or farming, usually seasonally, and sometimes only once. When the English arrived, they brought with them the European concept of private and perpetual possession, with specific areas allotted to individuals, and each plot subdivided into different uses.

In *Changes in the Land*, his classic 1983 work about how the colonists changed the ecology of New England, author William Cronon devotes many pages to the practical and symbolic power of fences. Before they could be built, however, Cronon writes: "Land was allocated to inhabitants using the same biblical philosophy that had justified taking it from the Indians in the first place: individuals should

ROBUST YET REFINED, this fence by Gregory Lombardi Design adds a contemporary note to historic Brattle Street in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Its wood and stone replace a dilapidated split-rail predecessor and echo the materials of the recently restored 19th-century house it surrounds.



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THE FENCE IN front of Salem's Samuel Cook house is considered the finest original-condition example of the work of renowned woodcarver and architect Samuel McIntire, a master of the Federal style. The elaborate urns and delicate reliefs on the posts echo details outside as well as inside the house.

only possess as much land as they were able to subdue and make productive." All that subduing took a lot of time and effort, so the first fences were long on easily obtained material and short on labor as the settlers stacked logs in a zigzag pattern. With foraging livestock constantly destroying crops and triggering conflict among citizens, good fences were mandatory in many Massachusetts towns. "Fence viewers" were officially appointed; their job, as described in a period document Cronon found, was "to see that the fence be sett in good repaire, or else complaine of it."

As time passed, zigzag "worm" fences gave way to picketed and rail versions. Though less profligate in their use of wood, they tended to rot out in less than 10 years, necessitating more labor to replace them and, considering the long runs needed to enclose pastures and crops, imposing a real drag on productivity. Help, such as it was, came soon enough, as the plowed fields began to offer up a yearly crop of frost-heaved rocks ideal for long-lasting walls.



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Still, wood fences lent a proper dressiness to houses and towns that piles of stones could not, and fencing styles grew in sophistication alongside the region’s architecture. Neat pickets went well with salt-boxes and Capes, while Georgian houses often featured elaborate enclosures with sweeping curves and Grecian urns atop their posts. Samuel McIntire, the renowned woodcarver and architect, fronted the Federal-style houses he designed in Salem, Massachusetts, with suitably handsome fences and gates. The Samuel Cook house at 142 Federal Street retains its McIntire fence in substantially original condition, the deeply carved urns gracing square posts whose decorative reliefs echo those on and inside the house.

By the late 1800s, cities, towns, universities, and well-to-do homeowners began to embrace the possibilities of cast-iron fencing. Factory-made, durable, and often highly decorative, it was the perfect match for exuberant Victorian buildings and streetscapes. Mated to granite curbs and posts, miles of black iron fencing lent an almost European elegance to many New England downtowns. Boston surrounded both its Common and Public Garden with cast iron, the latter’s more ornate version marking its stature as a truly formal outdoor space.

Yet, even iron doesn’t last forever, and by the late 1980s, much of Boston’s metal fencing was in dire need of repair. Kieran O’Shaughnessy is a fence maker and restorer at ViewPoint Architectural Metals in Northborough, Massachusetts. His iron-working roots run deep — his grandfather sits on the far left of the girder dangling 800

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ICON



KELLY LUFTON

BY THE LATE 1980s, the exquisite 100-year-old cast-iron fence at Boston's Public Garden began to show its age. Craftsmen worked to repair, and when necessary replace, its clever structure and detailed decoration — at a cost of around \$1,500 a lineal foot. Gregory Lombardi Design's fence on Brattle Street (FACING PAGE AND PAGE 84) reflects the house's tailored architecture.

feet up in the iconic 1932 photograph *Lunch atop a Skyscraper* — and he has worked on some of the city's most famous fences, including those at Boston Common, the Public Garden, the Commonwealth Avenue Mall, and the cemeteries at Copp's Hill, the Granary, and King's Chapel. Each time, he's been struck by the sheer ingenuity of the original craftsmen. "They were smart and cared about quality, which is why these fences lasted a century before failing," he says. "To anchor the posts, they secured rods in granite with molten lead, hid them inside beautiful paneled posts, and tightened down the whole assembly with a nut disguised as a gorgeous finial." Part of his repair work involved making replica castings: liquid rubber is poured on a surviving piece; peeled off and filled with plaster,

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it provides a positive that is pressed into molding sand, and the resulting impression accepts the liquid iron.

Nowadays, most New England fences are made of cedar, their telltale detail the 8-foot sections that ship easily from the factory. Historic wood fences were mostly custom built on-site, with long runs supported by hidden posts and punctuated only at corners, ends, and gates. Such elegant looks can still be had but require similar custom work. An example can be seen at 121 Brattle Street in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where spindled stretches are skirted not in wood but in Azek, a rotproof PVC product that's ideal for use next to the ground.

All of Brattle Street presents one of the country's greatest collections of fences, no less remarkable than the mansions behind them. From the elegant Chippendale geometrics at the National Park Service's Longfellow House to 1970s-style shadow boxes to the urn-topped masterpiece in front of the Ruggles-Fayerweather House, it's a veritable fence museum. Adding something to the collection can be a bit daunting, as landscape architect Gregory Lombardi of Gregory Lombardi Design in



ERIC ROTH

Cambridge discovered when he devised a new granite-and-cedar fence to replace an anomalous split-rail number at the corner of Brattle and Appleton streets. "There's a pretty high bar on that street, and the best fences really complement the architecture of the houses behind them," he says. "We spent a lot of time making sure the granite posts were edged, faced, and tapered just so, and the cedar pickets' cutouts had the right proportions — we wanted the fence to hold its own with the brawny, baronial house." Fence viewers of today should take a stroll and see for themselves. ■



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