

FENCES

It is the stone fences of Grand Marais that have the greatest level of public recognition, and appeal to visitors. The set of three fences along Grand Marais Boulevard, within three blocks of each other, each of strikingly different design and aesthetic, are probably the best known architectural features of the community. But there are three more (one only a remnant), and the whole collection is presented here to ensure greater recognition of this legacy. It is notable that we are not clear on whether other stone fences once stood in front of other cottages – there are anecdotal reports of at least 20 more; we await information on that as a result of this booklet.

These six fences are significant not only because they are formidable and attractive. Not only because they appear to be, as a collection, unique in Manitoba. They are important because they have become a focus for so many stories, and claims. We will attempt to get to the facts, and also to describe these via their distinct architectural characters.

We have arranged these six sites in an order that begins at the south-most and finishes with the most northerly – for a sort of walking tour. But before that, we offer a bit of a primer on stone fence history, and construction.

The construction of a stone fence would seem to be not particularly challenging in a structural or architectural sense – at one level there appears to be not much more required than getting the stones to the site and then putting them into a pile that stays in place. Gravity and compression do the rest. But of course there is more to it than that. There is considerable skill required in selecting and placing the stones, not only to attain structural stability but often also for aesthetic effect. And the mixing and deployment of the mortar required to hold the stones in place is a skill in itself.



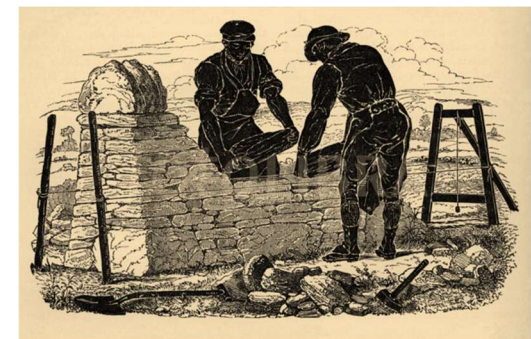
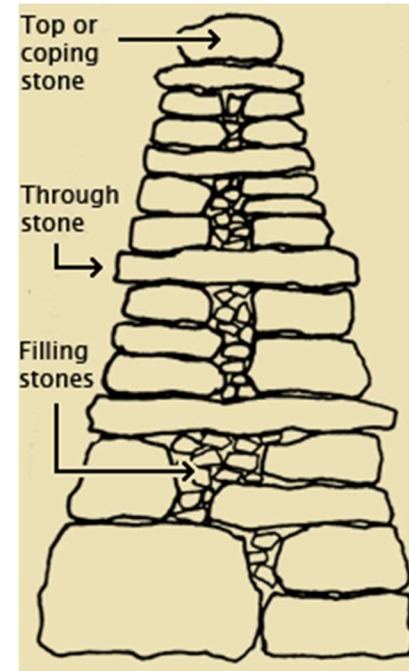
The stone fences of Grand Marais owe their form and feel to the centuries-old stone fences that separated fields and roads in Great Britain. This example, from North Yorkshire, suggests the inheritance.

The images at right suggest the basic form (top, with a few technical terms noted) and then below of a scene showing a stone fence taking shape.

There are many stories and even myths that have grown up over the years about the Grand Marais fences: that they were built by convicts from Stony Mountain Penitentiary; that they were built by World War I draft dodgers; that they were built during the 1919 General Strike by men who were stranded at Grand Marais by the shutting of rail traffic.

So what is the truth? Well, it is still hard to know, given the passage of time and the transfer of so many properties to new owners. It would seem from conversations with current owners, and from other local research (which is sometimes contradictory) that at least some of the remaining fences were built by Fred Orvis and a Mr. Gillis. Mr. Orvis (1883-1975) was well known as a farmer, fisherman, railway worker, boat builder, carpenter and stone mason. It appears that he was certainly much involved in local stone work – foundations and steps. And it also appears that he was a stone-fence builder; although it is not entirely clear which ones – the key one usually credited to him (see the entry for the W.I. Isaac Fence) is also attributed to the “Taylor boys.” It is known that the fence at 190 Grand Marais Boulevard was built by owners Dave and Pearl Mulligan.

It is also not clear if the various proposed dates of construction are accurate. As noted above there is some suggestion of 1919 for some of them, with others suggesting activity for all of them in the early 1920s through the 1930s. All seem reasonable, making this collection quite aged –nearing 100 years old –and also quite fragile: this current project confirms that all of these fences are showing their age, and that all will require major remedial action if they are to survive another 100 years.



Stone construction details and activity.

There are few old photographs of the Grand Marais stone fences, to give us a sense of their original character. These two, from the Pearl Mulligan Collection, suggest some of the qualities.



Two views of the entrance of the Mulligan Fence. In the image above, from around 1927 (showing a young Valera Mulligan) the present curved central features were infilled with a timber frame facade feature painted white. The lower image, ca. 1969, shows the curved addition and wooden gate.



Isaac Fence

The W.I. Isaac Fence is probably the best known fence, and the best known architectural site in Grand Marais. Built ca. 1928, the fence is distinguished by stout posts and gently curved intermediate sections, giving the fence a delicate; Victorian feel. The fence actually was built using wooden forms (and reinforcing of iron bars), which apparently are still around – stored under a secondary cottage on the site.







Gair Fence

This visually striking fence was built in 1919 during the Winnipeg General Strike, by the current owners' great-grandfather and his brother. With its bristly "Gothic" appearance, this grand fence is a notable site on Grand Marais Boulevard.

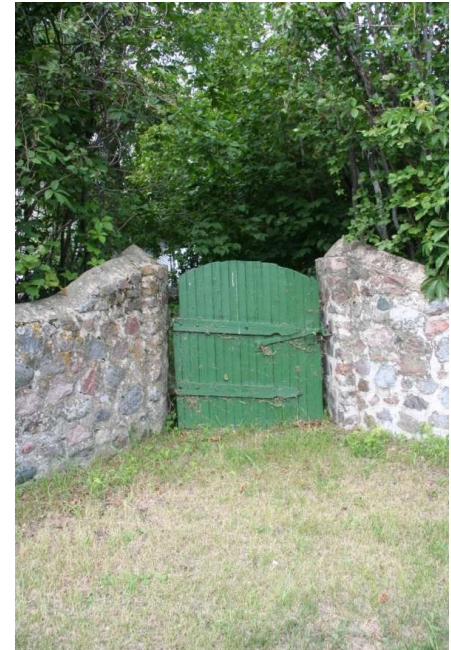






Mulligan Fence

Built ca. 1928 by owners David and Pearl Mulligan, this fence has the feeling of an ancient Norman wall – monolithic, strong, impregnable, but with a dainty wooden gate in the centre. At 80 feet in length, this is a major feature along Grand Marais Boulevard.







Summerhill (Taylor) Fence

This very long fence dates to approximately 1928. Later the Taylors took major steps to preserve this Central Avenue landmark. Like the Garrioch / Barnfather Fence, this fence (with three gates) has a “Gothic” feel to it – with pointed stones bristling along the top.







Denardi Fence

Only the tall main gate posts—six feet six inches tall—and four shorter infill posts remain of what must have been a handsome fence, likely from the 1920s. It is thought that, like the Isaac Fence, this structure also had looping infill sections built up of small stones.





Lanken Fence

Certainly the “longest” fence at Grand Marais, this amazing assemblage encircles a whole compound at the intersection of Grand Beach Road and Lakeview. Shorter than the other five examples—at about three feet in most places—the fence has linear dimensions along its three sides of 122 feet, 125 feet and 175 feet— for a total of 422 feet!



CONCLUSION

The great 19th century English writer and historian, John Ruskin, observed about the subject of architectural heritage:

“Old buildings are not ours. They belong to those who built them, and partly to the generations who are to follow us. What we ourselves have built, we are at liberty to throw down. But what other men gave their strength, and wealth and life to accomplish, their right over it does not pass away with their death.

It is with this thought in mind that we remind the current residents of Grand Marais that the many remaining stone construction features that still grace scores of local cabins are valuable, but also inherently fragile. They will need attention so that this inheritance—this legacy—is not lost and forgotten. These distinctive stone features need to be acknowledged, appreciated, and where possible preserved.

And as they are preserved, we will also acknowledge the people who built them, during the short summer seasons so many years ago – hard-working people of few financial means, but of great determination and creativity.

We owe it to them.

