

Good Neighbors Make Good Fences

by Tim Matson



For many people, poet Robert Frost captured the essence of fences when he wrote “good fences make good neighbors.” But in the case of an historic fence restoration at the Morrill Homestead in Strafford, Vt., it turned out that good neighbors make good fences. Blake Spencer, a builder living close to the homestead, passed by the decomposing homestead fence almost every day on his way to work, to the post office, or to the town hall. And he developed an itch to rebuild it.

The remains of the 120-year-old fence flank two sides of the homestead, a Gothic Revival-style cottage that was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1960. Although partially rebuilt in the '60s, the fence had not held up well. In 1990, the state allotted funds to completely replace the fence, and put out a call for bids.

Spencer compiled an estimate taking into account the limited state budget as well as the need to create, for the first time, a truly durable structure. “We were trying to get the same look without the same problems,” Spencer said. Historic photographs showed Spencer

that the original sections were built from one piece of wood and cantilevered five feet. “It wouldn’t surprise me,” he said, “to find out the gate broke the first day they hung it.”

In addition to old photographs, the restoration team modeled the fence on Morrill’s own drawings, dating back over a century, as well as on rotting fence sections and a broken gate post stored in the barn.

The fence consists of 16 solid panels, supported on main posts and intermediate granite pilings, and four elaborate gates. Originally built of white pine and then painted, the fence did not withstand the northern winters very well. The new specs called for clear western red cedar for better durability. After the cedar was delivered to the shop, it was air dried, cross cut, and sent to a pre-stain factory for a first coat of solid body stain. The second coat was applied after construction.

Spencer redesigned the post boxes for weather resistance and strength, emphasizing pragmatism over historical accuracy. “The state wanted the look of

the original fence,” he said, “but it would have cost more to do it. And after all, the original design didn’t work.” Morrill’s boxes had only three sides, exposing the granite posts on the inside. It was a design especially vulnerable to weather damage. Spencer chose to enclose the granite posts completely and butt the panels into the boxes.

For Spencer and crew, one of the biggest challenges of the fence restoration was bringing the two fence sections together at the main gate. Due to changes in the ground level over the years, the curved panels flanking the gates did not meet properly. Because the homestead is an historic site, no trees could be cut and little regrading could be done. The solution was to build one of the curved panels with a slight taper.



The entrance gates feature swooping curves and handmade iron hinges.

Spencer recalls walking by the curved panel not long after the job was finished and finding a cache of pine cones piled up behind it. He thinks that village children must have started to play there, stashing the cones in their own fantasy fortress.

“In architecture, that’s the kind of thing you can never plan. That’s where the magic is.” ■

Tim Matson writes on pond construction and other topics from his home in Strafford, Vt.



Builder Blake Spencer used historical photos to work out the details of the historic fence restoration at the Morrill Homestead in Strafford, Vt. The main gate is the kind you would imagine passing through on the way to meet St. Peter. Or Walt Disney.