



STATE OF VERMONT

AGENCY OF DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNITY AFFAIRS

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY (802) 828-3211

MONTPELIER, VERMONT 05602

DEPARTMENTS OF:

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Vermont Travel Division 828-3236  
Vermont Life Magazine 828-3241

May 7, 1981

Mrs. Elizabeth Hutchinson  
Director, Essex Green  
Townhouse Association  
B-6, Essex Green  
Essex Junction, Vermont 05452

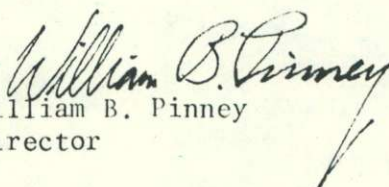
Dear Mrs. Hutchinson:

As you probably know, stump fences were once common throughout the Champlain Valley. It appears that when the early settlers first cleared the land there were very large virgin cedar trees which had broad, flat root systems. When the stumps were turned on their side, they formed a flat, nearly impenetrable wall of roots several feet high. As the settlers cleared the land, they automatically produced the material for very effective fencing around the area which they cleared.

There are still a number of stump fences to be seen in Addison County on the farms bordering Lake Champlain. In most cases they have now been supplemented with modern barbed wire. If you wish to obtain old stumps to replace stolen sections of your fence at Essex Green, you may find the material available in the Addison area. As preserving the fences, they usually last almost indefinitely if they are left alone. In your case, it might help to erect a sign noting the origin and history of the fence requesting the cooperation of all viewers in refraining from removing the stumps.

Sincerely,

DIVISION FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION

  
William B. Pinney  
Director

WBP/cjd

B-6, Essex Green  
Essex Junction, Vermont 05452

May 1, 1981

Mr. William B. Pinney  
Director for Historic Preservation  
Charlotte, Vermont 05445

Dear Mr. Pinney:

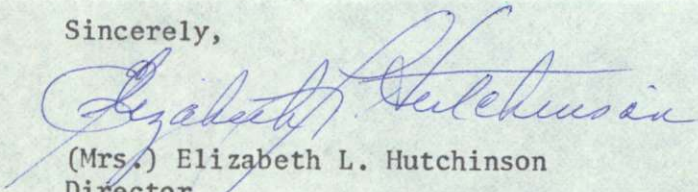
The Essex Green Townhouse Association has on their property an historic stump fence, which we understand is a rarity in Vermont. For historic and aesthetic values, we are most desirous of protecting this fence, but are not knowledgeable in this area.

Under our Land Use Permit from the State of Vermont, dated June 28, 1973, Condition No. 4 states "The stump fence shall be retained on the site in its natural condition". Unfortunately, parts of the fence have already been taken by persons other than the Townhouse residents, and from what we understand, have been used for coffee tables, firewood, etc. We are most disturbed by this matter as we feel this fence must be preserved.

We would be most appreciative of gleaning any information you might supply to start us in the right direction for this preservation.

Thank you for your kind consideration of our request.

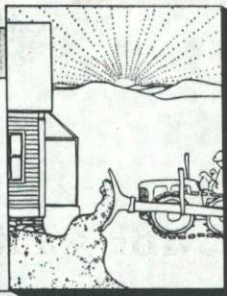
Sincerely,

  
(Mrs.) Elizabeth L. Hutchinson  
Director  
Essex Green Townhouse Association

/elh

# 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."

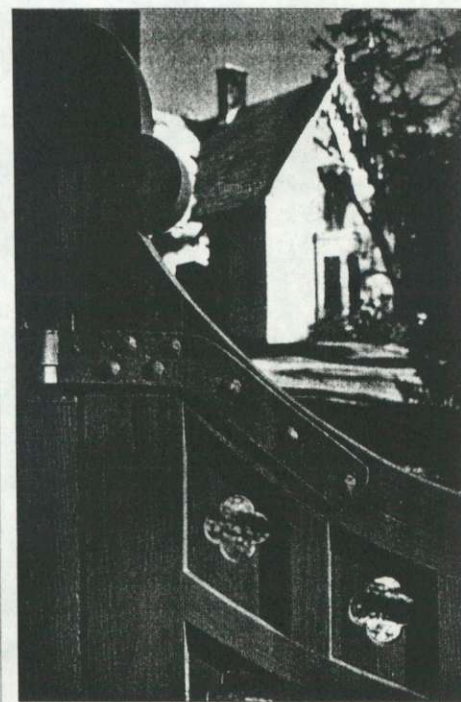
In addition to old photographs, the restoration team modeled the fence on Morrill's own drawings, dating back over a century, as well as on rotting fence sections and a broken gate post stored in the barn.

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.

## Sheldon Museum Notes

By POLLY C. DARNELL

Mary Crane Kinghorn of Cornwall recently gave us, to our delight, a copy of the reminiscences she had written for her children and grandchildren. She grew up in Middlebury next door to her grandparents on Washington Street.

In these excerpts she describes some of the highlights of winter.

"The first snow came early in December and we rarely saw the ground again until late March. It was a close family time when we seldom ventured very far afield.

"My grandparents lived next door and my grandmother made a sort of hobby of collecting old stump fences. When some enterprising farmer decided to replace one with 'new-fangled' barbed wire Gram would buy the old one and have it hauled into her woodshed. Many were the cold winter nights when we would be summoned by a loud ringing of her hand bell out the back door to go over to enjoy a stump fire in the fireplace.

"The stumps burned with lovely colors and often there would be a hollow root through which the fire would burst forth as though from a chimney. We might make popcorn over the coals or sit around and pick the kernels from the butternuts that Grandpa had cracked with a hammer on an old flat iron.

"Everyone put his car away for the winter and most travel in town was on foot or occasionally in a

sleigh. I remember walking home from Grange meeting with the whole family including Gram, with creepers firmly strapped to her overshoes lest she slip on an icy spot.

"We walked up the middle of the road in the still cold air with millions of stars twinkling overhead and the cold frosty air pinching our noses...

"Sleds! Everyone had a sled, preferably a Flexible Flyer, and sliding was our main recreation. We had several good hills nearby. The one I liked best was not very long but it had three telephone poles set out into the sidewalk which was narrow at best and dropped off steeply to the roadway.

"An added hazard was a decided slope toward the street around each pole so that arriving at the foot of the hill without an upset was a real achievement. And there were the double runners! Maybe you called them traverses or bobsleds. A few boys had them and, in a day when women's lib had not yet raised its ugly head, I was the envy of all my friends when one of the older boys taught me to drive his double runner.

"That was nothing (compared) to the Christmas when my dad's hired man made me one of my own. It was small, it only carried four, but it was my pride and joy for years.

"We skated some when we could get a spot cleared of the snow which, in retrospect at least, was

always very deep. We skied a little. Of course our skis had no bindings, just a strap to slide your foot through, and if you were unlucky enough to fall, which I always was, you usually had to wallow your way through the snow to pick up your skis at the bottom of the hill, thus ruining the surface for the rest of the crowd.

"But it didn't matter much, skiing was just a recreation for youngsters in those days...

"Some years there would be a warm spell when it would rain a bit and leave the snow with a smooth, firm crust. My dad had tried raising Belgian hares at one time, a profitless venture as it turned out, but one survivor who got away lived in the yard for years. He was very sprightly but rather small and we called him 'O.D.' because of his olive drab color.

"Two wings of our house, set at right angles, caused a large pile of snow to be deposited as it slid off the roof. After one of these rainy spells we noticed 'O.D.' scratching and scrambling his way to the top. Upon achieving his purpose he put his front feet together, gave a great push with his hind legs, and slid to the bottom with great speed and dexterity.

"He then repeated the performance several times and every day while the crust lasted we would see him out there indulging in his favorite pastime."

