



**“Those who fail to learn from history
are condemned to repeat it.”
— Winston Churchill (and others)**

Meditations On Walls

There have been many instances in human history when those in authority attempted to build large-scale walls, either to keep “dangerous” people out or to keep oppressed people in. A quick look at the history of such walls might serve as a guide to those considering the merits of walls in the today’s world. First, a general comment from Robert Frost — one of America’s foremost poets and observers of human behaviors and outcomes.

Mending Wall

By Robert Frost (1914)

Something there is that doesn't love a wall
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
'Stay where you are until our backs are turned!'
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
Oh, just another kind of outdoor game,
One on a side. It comes to little more.

There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
'Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.' I could say 'Elves' to him,
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself. I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well

He says again, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'

Next, let's take a look at some famous “Walls We Have Known,” and see if there's anything we might learn from them.

Walls We Have Known — What Does History Teach Us?

There are some common outcomes in the history of relying on large-scale walls for survival.

Walls We Have Known — History suggests that things generally haven't gone well for wall builders

There are some common outcomes in the history of relying on large-scale walls for survival.

Here are some famous examples:

- [The Great Wall of China](#) took centuries to build, kept a few nomadic invaders out at several locations, but didn't prevent the large-scale invasions that actually changed the history of the region. It was 13,000 miles long, counting actual walls, trenches, hills, and rivers, and served as good lookout points. In the end, it was a moderate deterrent but not an impenetrable fortress that was intended. The famous large-scale Manchu invasion was successful because a Ming General decided to switch sides and let an army in.
- According to the story in the Old Testament, the Israelites defeated [The Wall of Jericho](#) by assembling an army of blowhards (they blew their trumpets and shouted). Prior to that failure, the natural hills surrounding Jericho were more effective. If the story is accurate, it doesn't speak well for the effectiveness of walls. If the story is an allegory, perhaps that was the intended message.
- The Sumerians' built their "[Amorite Wall](#)" during the 21st-century BCE to keep out the Amorites. It stretched over 100 miles between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in what is now Iraq. It succeeded for a few years, but after a single generation, the Amorites and Elamites defeated the wall by breaking through it in places or simply walking around it. As a result, while relying on the wall for survival, the city of Ur was destroyed around 2000 BCE and the Sumerian culture vanished from history
- Athens, one of the most powerful cities in ancient Greece, built a series of 100-mile-long barriers, known as "[The Long Walls of Athens](#)," to create a siege-proof supply-line to the harbors of Piraeus and Phalerum around 461 BCE. It worked for a while during the Peloponnesian War with Sparta, until their Navy was defeated and the Spartans dismantled it. In hindsight, it was the Athenian navy that protected the wall, rather than the other way 'round. The wall was rebuilt and the Romans destroyed it again in 86 BCE. Turns out that the attackers of these walls thrived much better than either of the civilizations that built them.
- Around 122 A.D., Emperor Hadrian ordered a stone wall to protect Roman Britain from the "barbarians" of northern England and Scotland. [Hadrian's Wall](#) was 10 feet wide, 15 feet tall, and featured a series of ditches and gates a mile apart. It enabled the flow of personnel and the collection of taxes, but ended up being mostly a symbol of Roman power, until Rome left the scene. After the departure of Rome, the "barbarians" from the north successfully overcame and dominated Britain anyway. The Wall, then, became more of a symbol of failure. Turns out that symbols can be dangerous.
- The Byzantine city of Constantinople (modern Istanbul) flourished for over a millennium thanks in part to its 14 miles of walls. The most famous, the [Theodosian Walls](#), included a moat,



a 27-foot outer wall, and a 40-foot-tall inner wall that was 15 feet thick. Troops on the ramparts rained arrows and a type of napalm called “Greek fire” on any enemy. The walls turned back attackers from the Arabs to Attila the Hun, but they were finally defeated in 1453, when the Ottoman Empire besieged the city with a new weapon—the cannon. After blasting holes in the walls, the smarter Turks poured through and captured the city, toppling the Byzantine Empire.

- [The Berlin Wall](#), modern history’s most infamous wall, was erected to separate East and West Berlin in 1961. Communist leaders claimed the barriers were designed to keep out fascists and other enemies, but their real function was to prevent East Germans from defecting to the West. More than 100 people were killed while trying to escape through the maze of 12-foot walls, guard towers, and electrified fences. Thousands more defeated the wall, tunneling underneath it, and flying over it in ultra-light aircraft and hot air balloons. The “Wall of Shame” stood for 28 years before it was opened on November 9, 1989. Berliners celebrated, and demolished the wall with jackhammers and chisels. East and West Germany were finally reunified less than a year later in October 1990. The Wall became an international motivator for those who wanted to restore freedom. As a result, both East Germany and The Soviet Union have ceased to exist. As you can see, in the long run, things typically don’t go well for wall builders and their people.

Humans have been persistent and clever in finding ways to overcome walls:

- Using common sense — that is by walking around them, digging beneath them, flying over them, or finding like-minded people on the other side to help them.
- Using technology — inventing canons, finding clever ways to pass under or through walls, crafting homemade devices to pass over walls, or using the wall builders’ own devices and plans to defeat the intent of walls.

Three: A Popular Definition Applies

Albert Einstein is generally credited for saying this, but many wise people (i.e., non-wall-builders) have figured it out:

- “The definition of insanity is doing the same things over and over again, but expecting different results.”

What Can Be Learned?

Winston Churchill (1948), quoted George Santayana (1905) when he said, “Those who fail to learn from history are condemned to repeat it.” So, those who might consider building a wall to preserve something that is important to them — either to keep something out or keep something in — might consider that building walls has a very poor track record in those efforts. History doesn’t look favorably on leaders who convince their people that walls were a good idea. Most didn’t survive to tell their story.

Perhaps there is another way ...

