

# Weir Farm

National Historic Site  
www.nps.gov/wefa

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



## Weir Farm Projects:

### Rustic Fence Restoration Spring 2003



#### History of the Fence

Like many of his contemporaries and friends who lived in New York City in the 1880s, J. Alden Weir felt a strong need to summer in a more rural setting. He was originally interested in making his retreat in the Adirondacks, an area of wilderness in upstate New York. However, after Weir's spontaneous acquisition of farmland in Branchville, he grew to enjoy spending time on the farm with his new wife Anna.

Weir eventually sold his property in the Adirondacks, but his appreciation for the Adirondack style is apparent in several of the changes he made to the farm in Branchville. Weir may have thought that the original white picket fence surrounding the house and dooryard was too formal expressing a rural desire to become more urban. Weir replaced it with hand-cut pickets or "palings"- an urbanite's vision of rusticity.



A young woman runs her hand along the rustic fence, c. 1905. National Park Service photograph.

#### Before the Restoration

The fence that surrounded the domestic grounds of the Weir Farmhouse was built before 1890. It was constructed in segments roughly four to six feet long, using log posts and two horizontal rails to support the wood palings. In most areas, bedrock was close to the soil surface. The builders set the posts on iron shafts with iron angle braces embedded directly into the rock.



In certain areas the iron brace supports were all that was left of the original fence material.

Early photographs indicate that the first pickets were made from split cedar saplings set very close together. These

pickets, split out of a larger log, had a somewhat triangular cross-section.



The existing fence was dilapidated and no longer looked the way it did when it was first built.

By the time of the restoration project, most of original pickets had been replaced with pickets that were semi-circular (not triangular) in shape. In fact, some of the pickets seemed to be no more than tree branches opportunely placed. Also, when placed, they were spaced farther apart than the pickets had originally been from one another. The fence had greatly deteriorated.

## Why Restore?

Awareness of our nation's artistic heritage and its relationship to the American landscape converge at Weir Farm. In order to emphasize this relationship of art and landscape, the farm's buildings and grounds are being restored so as to appear to today's visitor just as they appeared to the historic occupants. Unlike conventional museums, which display only the creative products of artists' lives, Weir Farm provides the opportunity to see the domestic, personal, and creative dimensions of the lives of Weir and his successors.

Domestic interiors will be furnished, and gardens, farm fields, and other landscape features rehabilitated to appear as they did to the farm's occupants and their guests. Because the fence was built on Weir's



Detail of *Sunrise in Fog, Branchville*, by J. Alden Weir. Private collection.

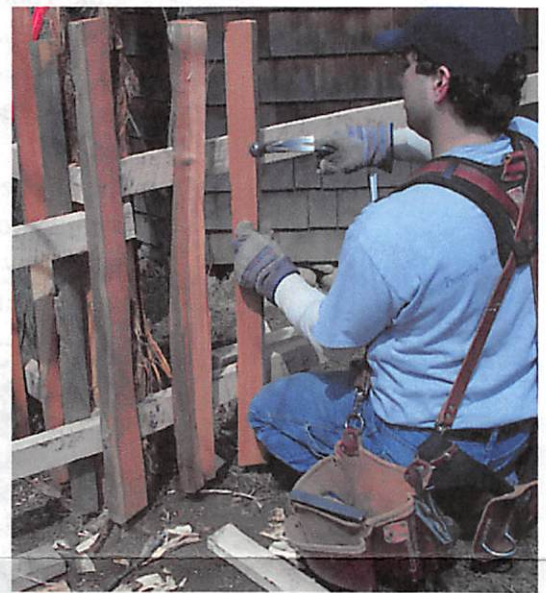
instruction and appears in many of his works and the works of his successors, its reconstruction is an important part of restoring Weir Farm.

## Restoring Weir's Fence

The fence was reconstructed using techniques as similar as possible to those originally used to build it. Since cedar native or indigenous to Connecticut is no longer readily available as a building material, the pickets are actually made of a western species of cedar. However, they were split by hand using traditional hand tools - hatchets and froes. A froe is a long metal blade fastened at a right angle to a wooden handle. The blade is placed on top of the log to be split and struck with a mallet. The froe enables workers to split pickets quickly and to exercise great control over their size.



Hand-splitting each picket using a froe and mallet creates a rustic yet controlled cut. PTEI photo.



After the oak rails are attached to the posts, the pickets are nailed into place. PTEI photo.

The fence posts were made of unmilled cedar logs from a local sawmill. In the section of fence in front of the Weir House, the original iron hardware that supports the fence posts was reused for the restoration. A local blacksmith made hardware to replace the pins and brackets that had broken over time.

The rails, pieces of wood that run horizontally between the posts, were originally made of rough-sawn oak. The restored rails are of the same material. If you look closely at the rails, you can see the marks of the enormous circular saw that the sawmill used to cut them.

## A Partnership

The National Park Service worked with the Preservation Training and Education Institute of Wakefield, Rhode Island to restore Weir's rustic fence. PTEI is dedicated to preserving America's architectural heritage through maintenance and restoration while supporting the training and education of students and craftspeople who are interested in working in the preservation trades. The organization also sponsors internships and the United States

Department of Labor certified Carpenter (Preservation) apprenticeships.

PTEI, formerly known as the Preservation Training Institute, restored the Weir Barn and Studio, corn crib and chicken coop. Together, the National Park Service and PTEI strive to preserve America's past in conjunction with trades training and education.