

Working

In

Stone

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BASALT AND  
SCHIST INSPIRED  
CENTURIES OF  
NEW ENGLAND  
GRUMBLING—AND  
ARTISTRY. BUT  
WORKED WITH  
STEEL, MUSCLE  
AND HEART,  
ROUGH-HEWN  
ROCK CAN ALSO  
BECOME A GIFT.

Roy

To build a bench, the author placed each hand-shaped stone, then trimmed away the excess mortar.

**When I was growing up in New England,** it seemed there was always a rock lurking just below the ground's surface. It frustrated the smallest job, like driving a tent peg, and often sabotaged larger projects, from digging a posthole to planting a shrub. Wherever this schist and basalt surfaced like a shark fin, it ruined everything that touched it, whether that was a mower blade or your shin. The only good way to deal with a rock, in my opinion, is to pry it out of the ground and use it to build something. That's how you get even with it—put it to work.

I learned that lesson early at my dad's side. He was an engineer, a born builder. We had just moved to rural Connecticut in the late 1960s, and our furniture was barely out of the moving van when he started digging up rocks and extending the house's retaining walls.

We also made rock, after a fashion. Mixing and placing concrete, my father, my brothers and I

built walks and made foundation slabs. Some of my first memories go back to mixing concrete with my dad, when I was so small all I could do was pretend to help. In the 1960s and '70s, fathers and sons had time for these things.

My dad, a widower, still lives in the house where I was raised, surrounded by our construction projects—among them a walkway, a patio and a shed I built when I was 16. When he turned 85 recently, there wasn't much I could buy him, so I decided to build something as a gift. That would be fitting.

### Laying a Foundation

*I've always been fascinated by stonework,* from elegant limestone-clad office buildings to Pennsylvania farmhouses with walls neatly laid up with rock from the fields nearby. But, oddly enough, I've hardly constructed anything from stone since I was a kid—concrete block and brick, sure, but not natural stone. My first thought was to build my dad an outdoor stone fireplace that I found in an old issue of *POPULAR MECHANICS*. But the more I studied the drawing, the more I realized how out of place it would look in his backyard. It was massive, suited to big, late-night barbecue parties. The yard was a contemplative spot, shaggy with shrubs that my father had planted when I was a boy. Besides, he already had a small charcoal grill that he was quite happy with. A rustic stone bench would be more appropriate, I thought.

I took my dad out to a local diner to discuss the idea—it was the same place where we'd hashed out long-ago plans over plates of meatloaf. He sat across from me, quietly surveying the menu. "You know," he mused, "this place makes the best whiskey sour around." After a pause, he asked, "So tell me, what do you want to build?" "Simple," I said. "A stone bench. Two pillars and a seat." "Sounds good," he replied. Permission granted.

On an unusually cool summer morning, I drove out to Swenson Granite Works in Newtown, Conn. When I was a kid, you bought stone at a quarry or a masonry yard, places with a massive truck scale outside the office window. Dust devils would swirl by as you shouted above the roar of rock crushers and front-end loaders. The Swenson yard was neat and quiet. I struck up a conversation with John Doherty, the assistant manager. "This is nice stuff," I said, admiring a silver-flecked

slab of granite trucked down from Barre, Vermont. "It's the only permanent building material," he said. "It'll be here long after we're gone." The beautiful slabs were cut with a furniture-like precision and crisply stacked. Flanking them were pallets of fieldstone wrapped in wire.

I had already decided to build the legs, or pillars, with rustic stone reminiscent of the stone walls that trace the hills of southern New England. Now, for the seat, I had to choose between the granite and less-formal blue stone. I decided the blue stone would be more in keeping with my dad's yard, and

### the MAKING OF A BENCH

**1.** The bench's foundation is a pair of 4-inch-thick concrete footings. I penciled each pillar's square footprint onto a footing. Then came mortar and, finally, the first rock, carefully pressed into place.

**2.** Rocks can be cut to shape with a tracer. The tool cuts a line across a rock's face, and then the rock is split along the line. The next rock that abuts it may fit

unaltered, or it may need to be cut to shape. The process creates a pile of stone chips and debris. Useful pieces, stored in a bucket, can be employed later as the pillar rises. **3.** Masons keep a torpedo level in their back pocket and pull it out frequently to check their work. Rock is irregular, and it's easy for a pillar to go out of plumb in the course of construction.





1. The trick to “rocking” a slab’s edge is to hold the tracer at an angle and strike it sharply with a hand sledge. One hit per cut is all it takes.
2. A trowel full of mortar went atop each pillar. The seat quickly settled into level with a few taps from the tool.
3. The bench sits between the shed and patio I worked on 30 years ago.



July 1938

This PM project reflected the era's rustic architecture.



ordered that, plus rock for the pillars. I signed on the dotted line for delivery. Then, before I left, I bought a pair of chisels—a point and a tracer, both from Trow & Holden, a legendary New England company. The point breaks off high spots and roughs stone to shape; the tracer splits more precisely.

Back at my dad's, I hammered together two forms for the pillars' concrete footings and dug them in, hitting rocks with every jab of the shovel. Next came the footings themselves. It always feels good to mix concrete. I was working over the first footing when I heard the screen door close. “Did you strike off the excess with a piece of lumber?” my father asked. “Just like you taught me when I was 12,” I replied. I remembered the lesson: Overfill the form, push the concrete down and consolidate it, then strike off the excess in a sawing motion with a 2 x 4 held on edge. Finish it with a float, which is nothing more than a piece of wood with a handle. That smooths cement paste and sand that have been worked (or floated) to the top. My dad nodded and left for a meeting of a volunteer group he chairs. He's got a lot on his plate for a guy his age.

I mixed and placed the concrete for the second footing and had just begun floating it when there was a squeal of air brakes and a backup horn from out front. If you want materials delivered, just start floating a piece of concrete. Works every time. I jogged out front to take the delivery of stone, and the driver neatly deposited the load using the truck's hydraulic arm.

### Building Pillars

The fireplace plans that inspired the bench were published in PM in 1938, when rustic architecture was popular, especially in the cabins and visitor centers built in national parks before World War II. The masonry was deceptive—seemingly untutored, actually sophisticated. Like the Arts and Crafts woodworkers of the same period, rustic builders were trying to evoke an earlier time, before the era of mass production.

That seemingly primitive look is what I was shooting for in my dad's bench. I hauled a heap of stone into the backyard, dumped each load, sorted it, wire-brushed away mud and stacked the material by size and shape. I cracked big stones in half with a stone hammer and split off lumps using the chisels. I dry-stacked the first pillar, stone by stone, pausing occasionally to look at it from various angles. When it was done, I stood back and gave it a long, hard look. It was awful.

A properly placed stone looks like it “belongs,” according to *Stonework Techniques and Projects*, a book by mason Charles McRaven that I'd been consulting. None of my stones looked like they belonged there, or anywhere.

I started over. Having learned a few things, I did better this time around. I mixed my mortar and slowly laid up the pillar. It was a bit rougher than I'd planned, but serviceable. Work on the second pillar came more easily until close to the top, when I couldn't find the right stone for a tricky corner. My father came by to check on me. “Here,” he said, handing me a stone, “try this one.” It was too small. “Too much mortar would show, dad,” I said gruffly. I felt bad as soon as I said it. “Well, try this one, then,” he offered. I was relieved I hadn't hurt his feelings. With a little chisel work, the stone made a pretty good fit, and my dad shot me a look as if to say, “See?” A few more stones and the pillar was finished. All that was left was to add the blue-stone seat, a job I'd tackle on my next visit.

Yellow leaves were mingled with the summer's foliage by the time I got back up to my dad's. Before installing the seat I wanted to chisel a bevel into its edge, using a technique known as “rocking” that leaves a more natural look. I started slow, setting the tool with two taps, then beveling with a third firm strike. After finishing one edge, I felt confident enough to flip the slab and quickly rock the other side with solid, single blows.

There was a half-bag of Type S mortar left, and I mixed up a couple of shovels' worth. The right-hand pillar was a bit shorter than the left, and from the mound of leftover rock, I found a perfectly flat shim to top it off. I placed the mortar on both pillars. Then, with a ceremonious flair, my dad pushed the shim rock into place. With the assistance of a young helper I'd enlisted, I set the seat across the two pillars. The bluestone settled nicely, and just a couple of taps with the butt of the trowel handle got it dead on. I looked over my shoulder at my dad, who was intently studying the level's bubble. “Not bad,” he said. “Not bad.”

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