ALL THAT'S LEFT IS THE NAME; WITHOUT ITS STONE WALL, 'FIELDSTONE COMMONS' IS NOTHING OF THE SORT:

Big Y's corporate officers should be ashamed of themselves. By naming their new Tolland superstore Fieldstone Commons they are turning two of our favorite words into a double-edged marketing gimmick designed to convince us to drop money in their pockets. By using the words "fieldstone" and "commons" they are exploiting our craving for authenticity and community, respectively, even as they destroy both.

Fieldstone Road. Fieldstone Drive. Fieldstone acres. These are wonderful names for home subdivisions because they draw strength from the rock-solid authenticity of New England's most important rural icon, the lichen-crusted farmstead wall. In new housing developments, short segments of old stone wall are often cut away to make room for driveways, gates, septic drain fields and house foundations. Though chopping up such walls is sad in every case, the developers usually leave enough of the old stone walls to convey the sense of rural ambience so desperately needed in today's rush-rush society.

But the name Fieldstone Commons is too much of a stretch for me. This plastic place will be at the southbound ramp of Exit 68 off I-84, which leads down state highway 195 to the University of Connecticut. Somehow, the image of an enormous, bright red plastic Y on the building's brick and polymer facade doesn't quite match my image of the time-tarnished stone they're tearing down. Somehow, the clumpy piles of boulders being sieved out of what looks like an open-pit mine, doesn't quite match my image of stones being carried by hand from a common pasture. Somehow, acres of black asphalt pavement for parking doesn't quite match my image of a farm field.

In September, I drove by this piece of land as it was being clear-cut for development. There, on the curve of a typical rural hillside was an old stone wall, guarding the land like a sentry on behalf of centuries past. It stood proudly above the stumps and slash. Because the wall's cobbled spine had been marked with orange flagging tape, I surmised that the developers were saving the wall from demolition. In my conservation-driven imagination, this old pasture border would become a victory monument for the stone wall preservation effort. Two days later, I recommended to a magazine editor that she dispatch a photographer to document this monument-in-the-making. I went on to suggest that the magazine might want to publish the image to honor the enlightened developers who were setting such a fine example. So I thought.

One day later, I detoured my car pool there to take a picture of my own. The lichen-crusted wall was gone. The gray granite slabs were gone. In their place was a smear of yellowish-brown soil, woody debris and broken stone. In the foreground near the highway were a crushed-rock driveway and a beautiful new sign, proudly announcing an impending construction project called Fieldstone Commons. I cringed before I got mad.

Destroying rural land for shopping plazas happens all the time. Already, there are four food superstores within fifteen miles. The two closest are both within ten miles and are owned by the Big Y corporation.

Meanwhile, the new superstore is being constructed next door to a more scale-appropriate grocery store that will likely be forced out of business. I don't have to like this winner-take-all aspect of American business, even though it's perfectly legal. I don't have to like the loss of the old sentry wall, even though Big Y is free to demolish it. But I absolutely despair at the corporation having the gall to name their new development after the thing they are destroying. Two very real things -- an old stone
wall and our shared visual commons -- are being destroyed to make way for yet another shopping center operated for private interest by an out-of-state corporation.

This choice of names dishonors the early American settlers who hauled those stones from pastures and fields that may have produced food for soldiers during the American Revolution. It dishonors Yankee civic leaders who worked hard to keep shared, village-center land in the public domain. One man's bulldozer is not another man's ox team. One woman's corporate office is not another woman's town meeting. Shame. Shame. Shame.

The issues involving private property, land-use policy, material culture and community values, of course, are not quite as simple as I make them out to be. The corporation owns the land fair and square, is converting the land legally and therefore can do whatever it wants with the hillside, which in this case involves taking it down. Its investors are well-versed in the real-estate mantra "location, location, location," which in this case chants "exit ramp, exit ramp, exit ramp," echoed by "UConn, UConn, UConn." Its architects know that an anchor superstore made of asphalt paving, steel framing, brick veneer, vinyl siding, glass, PVC plumbing and co-axial cables works better than one made of stone, wood, fiber and iron, the authentic materials of our not-so-distant past. Big Y's marketing staff knows that the word "commons" -- which connotes an old village green -- will invoke feelings that are warmer and fuzzier than other subliminal development euphemisms such as plaza, mall or market.

But I don't think Big Y understands my point of view on these issues. With respect to private property, many small wetlands also lie on private property and yet are appropriately managed by citizen groups with a local interest in the land. Why not do the same for drylands, which is what stone walls are in terms of their habitat? With respect to best land-use practices, I wonder if our visual environment is better served by a patch of woodland that eases us off the highway than by yet another mini-mall consisting of an anchor store to which are attached commercial parasites. With respect to material culture and community values, I have nothing against the use of modern building materials, though I do chafe when modernity is passed off as authenticity.

Fieldstone Commons? Give me a break! What we're really talking about is more plastic above pavement on private property. What we're really talking about is an out-of-state corporation making roadside profit. My informants in Tolland -- my son lives there in a group home and would benefit from a nearby grocery store -- tell me that the developers saved the stone for use in their landscaping. That's fine, but I suspect their new wall won't look quite the same as the old one.

I don't know about you, but I've had enough of this "hands-off" attitude with respect to preserving old stone walls, which run through our lives as if they were cultural neurons, connecting us to a collective sense of place. For every authentic wall taken down, visitors will find our region a little less interesting, a little more like where they came from. For every wall taken down, I feel less like I am living someplace special.

Please take a few minutes, clip this column out of the newspaper and send it to your town planning department with a note asking what the town council is doing to protect our shared rural cultural heritage. Send them the Internet address for the Stone Wall Initiative (http://stonewall.uconn.edu), a grass-roots "virtual" organization devoted to the appreciation, investigation and preservation of stone walls. The time to act is now. Please get up, get your scissors and start cutting. Otherwise, it will be our rural heritage landscape that will die the death of a thousand cuts through the loss of old stone walls.