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Stone Age

Rediscovering the stones marking Washington, D.C.'s boundaries

While many associate our nation's capital with the landmarks that adorn the National Mall, its oldest federal monuments literally surround the District of Columbia. The city's original boundary stones provide a crucial link to our nation's establishment and, aided by the DAR and others, these tangible connections to our Founders endure today.

In 1790, the First Congress created a permanent seat for the new capital, and Virginia and Maryland together ceded 100 total square miles of land for the new federal city. President George Washington made sure the best surveyor in the business would outline the new capital: Andrew Ellicott, whose lines would ultimately define the shapes of 11 states and the District of Columbia.

Beginning in February 1791, Ellicott and his team surveyed the boundaries of what would become the federal city, laying the first stone that April. The city was outlined as a tilted square, with each side a straight 10-mile line. According to Stephen Powers, a civil engineer who visits the stones each year, it took until the end of 1792 to complete the process. Crews had to clear the unsettled land at the boundaries, cutting a swath 40 feet wide along the new border

so the lines could be visibly marked with stones.

Forty boundary stones were needed to outline the city—a cornerstone for each compass direction and nine stones placed at one-mile intervals along each side. The stones were quarried out of sandstone from Aquia Creek, a subsidiary of the Potomac River that also became the source for the original stones of the White House and the U.S. Capitol. Each boundary marker was 4 feet tall and 12



Southwest No. 6 boundary marker sits in a median of a road in Northern Virginia. It was dedicated in 1916 and rededicated in 1965 by the Fairfax County Chapter, Vienna, Va. The stone is original, but it has been repositioned a few times. It was once hit by a car and cemented back together, according to Mark Kennedy at www.boundarystones.org.

inches square. The team buried 2 feet of the marker underground, leaving 2 feet above ground. A “square frustum,” a triangular pyramid with the top cut off, capped each marker.

Identifying information was engraved on each stone on-site. The words “Jurisdiction of the United States” labeled the side facing the federal city, and the opposite side of the stone denoted whether it faced Maryland or Virginia. The other two sides listed the stone's placement year and the compass variance from magnetic north at that location.

Ellicott completed his survey and presented the final map to Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson on January 1, 1793, but the city's shape changed after Congress returned the entire area southwest of the Potomac River to Virginia in 1846. After the retrocession, 14 of the original boundary stone locations became part of the commonwealth of Virginia, but the markers remained.

Today, 36 of the original 40 stones still dot the original federal city boundary. Despite their fragility, several boast readable, original engravings. “Some stones are in lower areas where water would often cover them, adding to their erosion,” Powers says. “But a few are in pristine condition, especially those on top of hills or elevated areas.”

The stones' longevity is, in large part, thanks to DAR. In 1915, at the annual D.C. DAR State Conference, the D.C. DAR Committee on Preservation of Historic Spots and Records decided that reclaiming the



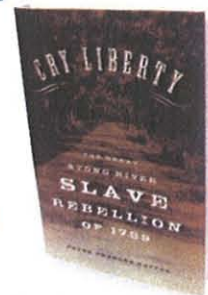
Andrew Ellicott Park in Falls Church, Va., sits in the middle of a quiet neighborhood and is the home of the Original West Cornerstone of the federal city. According to the signs on the fence, it was dedicated in 1952 and rededicated in 1989 and 2000 by the Falls Church Chapter, Falls Church, Va. The engraving of the year "1791" is still visible on one side of the stone, along with some other original engravings from Ellicott's survey.

Revisiting a Rebellion

In *Cry Liberty: The Great Stono River Slave Rebellion* (Oxford University Press, 2010), author Peter Charles Hoffer, distinguished research professor at the University of Georgia, provides a well-researched account of the only large-scale slave rebellion in the British North American Colonies. It occurred on a single day, September 9, 1739, along a road near the Stono River close to Charleston, S.C.

Hoffer draws on new sources to re-examine the dramatic day—and the violent cost of slavery. The original story claims that recently imported slaves, who were warriors in training in Africa, learned of an impending war between England and Spain. As a result, the slaves, seeking freedom from their English rulers, decided to plan a full-scale revolt and escape to the Spanish colony of Florida. About 20 white Carolinians and more than 40 slaves were killed before the rebellion was suppressed.

However, Hoffer concludes that the Stono Rebellion may have not been what historians originally thought. This was not a well-crafted revolt: The slaves, while on their way to Florida, were simply breaking into a store to take what they thought was theirs, and chance events escalated the violence. Through investigation of legislative and legal records, land surveys and firsthand accounts from the period to identify where the fighting began, Hoffer reveals a far less heroic, but far more heartbreaking tragedy with deeper significance than first believed.



boundary stones would be its project for the year. The group began preservation and protection of the boundary stones by erecting iron fences around each one. DAR member Gayle Harris, who wrote a complete history of the boundary stones in 2001, notes that the preservation effort became a permanent project of the D.C. DAR.

"Without their efforts, there is no doubt these stones would have never survived," Powers says. Today, almost 100 years later, 34 fences continue to protect the stones, and the DAR is still actively involved in their maintenance. In fact, the D.C. DAR just commemorated the 220th anniversary of the

laying of the boundary stones with a ceremony on April 9. Other groups, including the D.C. Children of the American Revolution, Takoma Park (Maryland) Historical Association and the American Society of Civil Engineers, also take time to make sure they are preserved.

Some stones are more prominent than others. The Original West Cornerstone is in Andrew Ellicott Park, straddling the boundary between present-day Falls Church and Arlington, Va. Another stone lies a mile away in Benjamin Banneker Park, named for the self-taught astronomer and free African-American who assisted Ellicott with part of his survey. Other stones can be found in road medians, alongside busy highways, in residential neighborhoods, in a water treatment plant and even in a cemetery.

Local resident Mark Kennedy created www.boundarystones.org to allow anyone to see the stones in person or appreciate them from afar. The site has photos of all existing stones, information on all 40 original locations and a list of resources. The D.C. DAR website has additional information at www.dcdar.org/BoundaryStones.htm.

—Cherilyn Crowe



Southwest No. 9 marker is in Benjamin Banneker Park and was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1980. The Falls Church Chapter dedicated it in 1916 and rededicated it in 1989. You can read "Virginia" on one side of the stone and part of the lettering for "Jurisdiction of the United States" on the other.

What About the Missing Stones?

The reasons for the missing stones vary. One has been missing since at least 1891 and is suspected to be a casualty of the Civil War. Two stones were lost to construction projects in the 1950s. The fourth was displaced when it was hit by a car in the mid-1980s, but no one at the scene knew what to do with it. A local resident kept it and, when a survey crew came looking for the stone in 1991, he returned it to them. There are efforts under way to restore it to its original location.