Arlington Man Watches Over Unsung Monuments to D.C.'s Origins

That stone, he told Vanessa, once marked the western boundary of a new country's new capital.

The first stone Stephen drove to on the recent outing joined on his fourth annual pilgrimage by his brother Michael, his cousin Jim Gilmartin, friend Mike Chapman and me.

Stephen had planned the day with an engineer's precision. His aim was to hurry to each stone, jump out of the van, briefly inspect the stone's condition, take a photo, then drive to the next one.

"They actually did the survey in about 34 days, I believe," Stephen said. "The "they" who mapped out the border were Andrew Elliott and his brother Joseph. The first stone, the south corner stone, was laid at Jones Point in Alexandria with help from Benjamin Banneker, a free black man who was an astronomer and mathematician.

Then the Elliotts and their team moved clockwise around the perimeter. The time-consuming part came next: placing the stones and cutting a 40-foot swath along the border — 20 feet wide on each side. That took almost two years.

"It was basically a logging party," Stephen said. Also on the crew was a stonemason, there to engrave each stone when it was in place, marking one face with the year the stone was laid — 1761 or 1792 — one with the magnetic north compass reading of the location, another with either "Maryland" or "Virginia," and the opposite facing the war-time purpose of the expedition: "Jurisdiction of the United States."

The Elliott team moved through forests and farmers' fields. We were moving through the uneasy border of suburbia and suburbia.

"The next three are in people's yards," Stephen said as we left the west corner stone. "We're not going to sit around talking at them. It's zing-zag, in-out."

We hustled up a driveway on Fowhatan Street in Arlington, two dogs barking at us from a deck. ("You see why I let people know ahead of time," said Stephen, who serves on the Nation's Capital spot.

SE #4 was missing for a while. It surfaced in 1981 when a crew from the Maryland Society of Surveyors was scouring Southern Avenue for it. A man emerged from the Kings Crossing apartments and told the crew, "I knew you'd come." A truck had knocked the stone down a few years earlier, and the man had moved it into the boiler room for safekeeping. It's in a surveyor's garage in Colesville.

SE #5 is a replica that sits near a concrete pipe in weeds near the D.C. impond lot at Blue Plains. SW #2 in Alexandria is marked by a replica, the original long gone.

But the rest are the real things, tangible reminders of Washington's earliest days, silent sentinels of the city's growth.

The hardest stone to get to was SE #9. Stephen parked along Interstate 295. We hopped the guardrail, slid down an embankment, crossed a muddy plain and plunged into the woods, branches slapping us in our faces, vines tugging at our legs. We walked along a rise and then, at the foot of a hill, we saw it.

We gathered around the rock, glad to have found it, our own little Stonehenge.

To see photos of the stones, go to www.washingtonpost.com/metro. More information is at www.boundarystones.org. And join me tomorrow at noon for an online chat: www.washingtonpost.com/discussions. My guest will be stone guru Stephen Powers.