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JOHN KELLY'S WASHINGTON

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

The stones abide. There were once 40 of them, identical rectangles of Aquia Creek sandstone, one foot wide and four feet long, the lower half rough and unfinished, the upper half smooth, like a blank piece of paper awaiting a calligrapher's pen.

They were inserted into the earth more than 200 years ago, placed along the 40-mile perimeter that once framed the diamond-shaped District of Columbia.

And that is where the stones have pretty much stayed, even after Virginia took back its part of the District. The markers are obsolete in the age of Global Positioning System devices but exert a certain power over a few people.

People such as **Stephen Powers**, who got up early one recent rainy Sunday to visit every single boundary stone.

"This should take us somewhere [around] seven hours," Stephen said as he steered his Honda minivan down a wet Arlington County street. "The quickest I've ever done it is six hours, 34 minutes; the longest is seven hours and 45 minutes."

Stephen, 45, is a civil engineer and lives in Arlington. His infatuation with the stones started when his daughter **Vanessa** was in second grade. She had to provide a "fun fact" about Arlington for school. Stephen gave her one: Arlington used to be part of Washington. To prove it, he took her to a park not far from their house, where the worn nub of a stone sat inside a black metal fence.

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

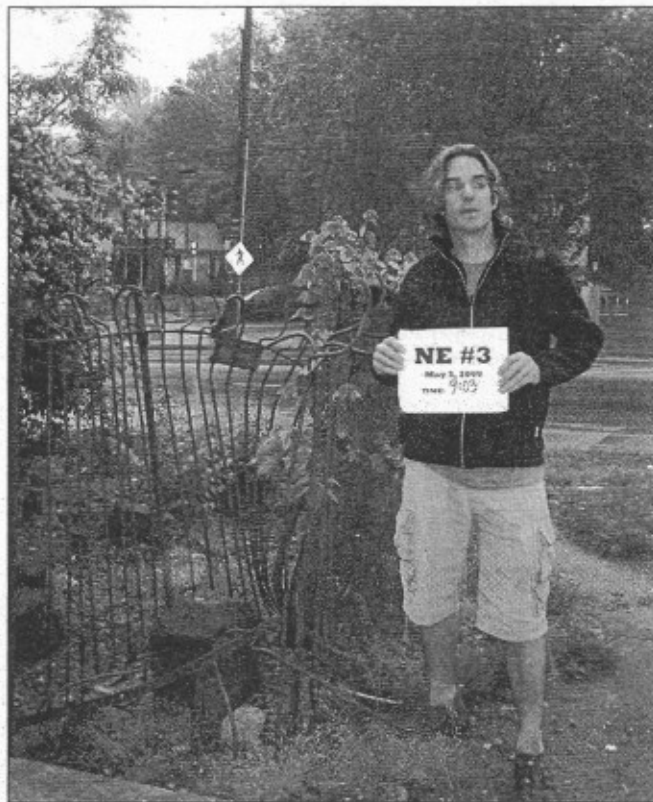
That was the first stone Stephen drove to on the recent outing, joined on his fourth annual pilgrimage by his brother **Michael**, his cousin **Jim Gilmartin**, friend **Mike Chapman** and me.

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 Ellicott** and his brother **Joseph**. The first stone, the south cornerstone, was laid at Jones Point in Alexandria with help from **Benjamin Banneker**, a free black man who was an astronomer and mathematician.

Then the Ellicotts 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 — 1791 or 1792 — one with the magnetic north compass reading of the location, another with either "Maryland" or "Virginia," and the opposite face hinting at the purpose of the expedition: "Jurisdiction of the



United States."

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

"The next three are in people's yards," Stephen said as we left the west cornerstone. "We're not going

to sit around talking at them. It's zing-zang, in-out."

We hustled up a driveway on Powhatan 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



PHOTOS BY JOHN KELLY — THE WASHINGTON POST

Stephen Powers visits the stones that outlined the District's original borders, including one on Eastern Avenue. The stones are engraved with the year they were placed.

Boundary Stones Committee.) We scrambled up an embankment on Old Dominion Drive. We let ourselves into a back yard on North Tazewell Street to see a stone in front of a swing set.

Over the course of seven hours — six hours, 36 minutes, to be precise — I saw areas I'd never seen. I saw a stone in a cemetery and a stone in a median strip and a stone in a church parking lot. I saw a stone across from a liquor store on the northeast border: NE #3, on Eastern Avenue near New Hampshire. The fence around that stone — the Daughters of the American Revolution installed fences around the stones years ago — was twisted. The stone was covered with a vandal's red paint.

Four of the stones are gone. NE #1 should be outside the Tiramisu cafe and bakery on Eastern Avenue in Silver Spring, but it was knocked down by a construction vehicle in 1952 and lost. A plaque marks the

spot.

SE #4 was missing for a while. It surfaced in 1991 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 #8 is a replica that sits near a concrete pipe in weeds near the D.C. impound 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.