

# Exploring...

## Walking the Boundary Stones Around the Original District of Columbia

Story and photos by Russ Norfleet

In the fall of 2017, Jean Everitt, Sustaining Guild Certified Master Guide, and I agreed we would walk and see the boundary stones set in 1791 and 1792 by Andrew Ellicott and his team to mark the survey lines of the District of Columbia. We scheduled times to meet and walk and by the end of 2018, we had walked to and seen all the boundary stones, except for the 40<sup>th</sup> stone, which has access challenges. (I will tell you more about that adventure later).

We started at Jones Point on the Potomac River south of Alexandria and walked the boundary stones northwest, northeast, southeast, and southwest just as the survey lines were established and the stones set. Jean and I had a delightful time. We hope our enjoyable experience locating and walking along the boundary stones will inspire you to take the time to look at, show off, and speak up for the preservation of the stones, which are the first federal monuments in the nation's capital. I intend to lead Sierra Club hikes along the boundary stones, a segment at the time.

A brief history of the boundary stones:

The Residence Act of July 16, 1790, authorized President George Washington to select a site not to exceed 10 miles square for the nation's capital on the Potomac River between Connogocheague Creek (near Williamsport, Maryland) and the Eastern Branch (now the Anacostia River). Washington selected a site that included the Eastern Branch and Georgetown in Maryland and Alexandria in Virginia. An amendment to the Residence Act was required to include the land south of the Potomac River.

Andrew Ellicott was hired to survey the federal territory and a three-member commission was appointed to administer the development of the capital city. Ellicott hired

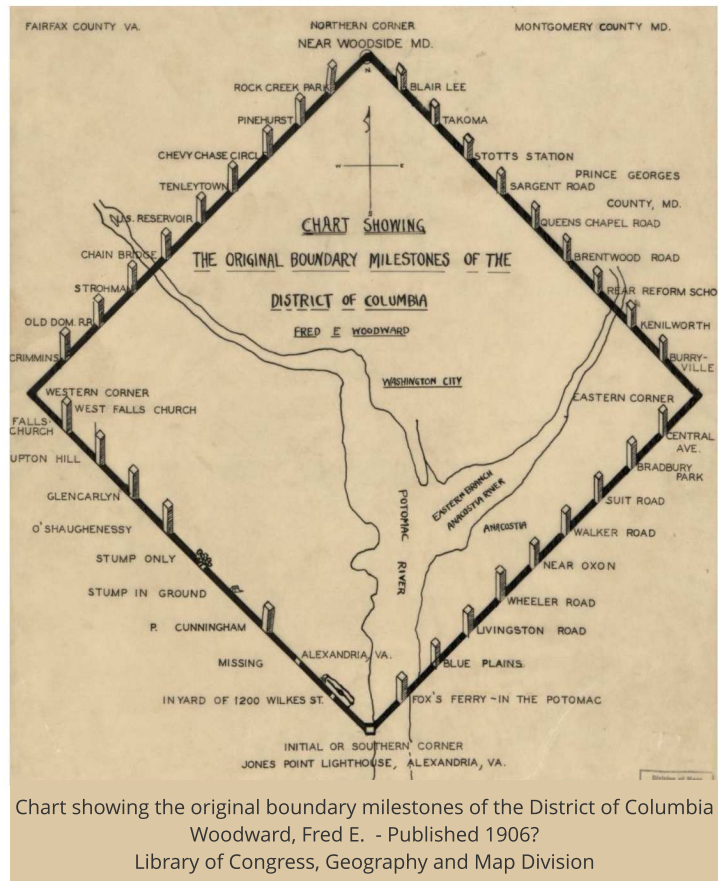


Chart showing the original boundary milestones of the District of Columbia  
Woodward, Fred E. - Published 1906?  
Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division

Benjamin Banneker, a free black mathematician and astronomer from Maryland, to make the astronomical observations and calculations necessary to establish the south corner of the federal territory at Jones Point. From there, Elliott laid out the boundary lines of the 10-mile square federal territory. Elliott began his survey February 11, 1791 and completed it in April 1791.

On April 15, 1791, the Alexandria Masonic Lodge placed a small stone at the south corner of the federal territory in a ceremony attended by Ellicott, district commissioners, and other dignitaries. Newspapers announced the beginning of the creation of the nation's capital on the Potomac River. (In 1794, the ceremonial stone at Jones Point was replaced by a large stone with the inscription "The beginning of the Territory of Columbia" on one side.)

Ellicott and his team then began clearing twenty feet of land on both sides of the boundary line and placing stones made of Aquia Creek sandstone at one-mile intervals. On each stone, the side facing the federal territory was inscribed with "Jurisdiction of the United States" and a mile number from the corner stone. The opposite side was inscribed with either "Virginia" or "Maryland," as appropriate. The third and fourth sides were inscribed with the year in which the stone was placed (1791 for the 14 Virginia stones and 1792 for the 26 Maryland stones) and the magnetic compass variance at that location. Stones along the northwest Maryland boundary also displayed the number of miles they fell from NW4, the first stone placed in Maryland. Stones placed at intervals of more than a mile due to natural features, such as streams, rock, and ravines, included that extra distance measured in poles.

Although several stones have been moved or severely damaged, thirty-six stones from the 1790s are in, or near, their original locations, including the boundary stones on the land returned to Virginia in the 1846 retrocession. Three locations have substitute stones, and one location is marked by a bronze plaque.

In Virginia, the boundary stones and land on which the stones are located are owned by the land owner. In the District of Columbia, ownership of the boundary stones and the land is fragmented. The DC Department of Transportation ostensibly owns the boundary stones, and the National Park Service owns the land on which the stones are. Some of the boundary stones are on private property, and some are on public property.

In 1915, the Washington, DC chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) voluntarily assumed responsibility for protecting the boundary stones by erecting tall iron fences around each stone when permitted to do so by the land owner. DAR members periodically visit the boundary stones to perform maintenance and monitor conditions.

By the late 1990s, all the boundary stones, except for NE1 (7847 Eastern Avenue, Silver Spring), SE4 (3101 Southern Avenue, Temple Hills), and SE8 (behind the Blue Plains Auto Impoundment Lot, 5001 Shepherd Parkway SW), where the original stones were missing, were listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Over the years, Boy Scouts and others have repaired and painted the protective fences, cut back vegetation, and cleaned up debris around the boundary stones. In 2012 – 14, a project was implemented by the District Department of Transportation to clean, repair,

and stabilize the boundary stones between the District of Columbia and Maryland. At the same time, the DAR repaired some stones and repainted fences. The National Park Service; DC Office of Planning; District Department of Transportation; DAR; Alexandria, Arlington, Falls Church, and Fairfax County governments; and historical societies and professional organizations have all been involved in efforts to protect the boundary stones.

I will share a few highlights of our tour of the boundary stones.

Our first walk was from the South boundary stone to Kenmore Middle School at Route 50 and Carlin Springs Road, Arlington.



The South cornerstone is under a glass cover in the seawall at the lighthouse at Jones Point Park. The stone is worn, and the inscriptions are mostly illegible. Parking, restrooms, water fountains, and picnic tables are available in the park. Markers show the boundary lines of Virginia, the District of Columbia, and Maryland. Interpretive signs explain the human and natural history of the area. Did you know there was a shipyard here at the end of World War I that employed more than 1,000 workers? Something else we learned - in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the park property was owned by Margaret Brent, an English colonist with savvy business, legal, and political skills, who campaigned vigorously for women's rights in British North America.

From Jones Point, we walked north on the Mount Vernon Trail into Old Town Alexandria and west on residential streets to SW1 at the southeast corner of Wilkes and Payne streets. What is interesting about this boundary stone is that the stone was moved around 1904 and when the stone was reset, it was rotated so that the sides of the stone marked "Virginia" and "Jurisdiction of the United States" no longer face their respective jurisdictions. The stone is worn, but the inscriptions are mostly legible.

We continued our walk to SW2 on the east side of Russell Road, north of King Street. The stone is a replacement boundary stone located .35 miles southeast of its original location. The original stone was missing as of the late 1800s. The current stone was placed at this location in 1920. The stone is in the Russell Road right of way in front of a line of brick row houses.

SW3, SW4, and SW5 are along King Street. SW3 is in the north end of a parking lot at First Baptist Church (2932 King Street). SW4 is on the east side of King Street between South Wakefield Street and I-395, along a fence that separates the South Fairlington neighborhood from King Street. The top is broken off, and the stone has sunk low in the ground. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century reports on the condition of the boundary stones state the top was destroyed by farm plows. SW5 is on the north side of Walter Reed Drive 100 feet north

of King Street. Only the stump of the stone remains. Walking along King Street between Wakefield Street and Walter Reed Drive was dicey--mostly no sidewalks and heavy street traffic.

SW6 is in the median strip of Jefferson Street between Leesburg Pike and Columbia Pike. The stone has been repositioned several times. It was hit by a car in the 1960s and cemented back together. An Arlington County historical marker provides a brief history of the boundary stones.

From SW6, we walked to my car, which was parked at Kenmore Middle School, went to Jones Point Park to pick up Jean's car, and had dinner at Royal Restaurant in Old Town. The Royal is a good place to eat and people watch. It is a family restaurant that serves tasty home-style American, Greek, and Italian food. The restaurant has a bar and good desserts. Having dinner and drinks at Royal was a pleasant end to the day.

Our next walk was from Carlin Springs Elementary School to the Chain Bridge.

SW7 is west of the parking lot at Carlin Springs Elementary School, adjacent to a fence. We saw the boundary stone, crossed Route 50, and walked through Bluemont Park and along Wilson Boulevard to Patrick Henry Apartments at the corner of Wilson Boulevard and John Marshall Drive. SW8 is 100 feet south of a water tower on the property. An Arlington County historical marker provides a brief history of the boundary stones. We continued our walk through residential neighborhoods to SW9 in Benjamin Banneker Park, green open space with trees, along Four Mile Run. The W&OD and Custis trails pass through the park.

We continued our walk through residential neighborhoods to the West cornerstone where the northwest and the northeast boundary lines intersect. The stone is in Andrew Ellicott Park, a small neighborhood park maintained by the city of Falls Church and the counties of Arlington and Fairfax. The stone marks where the three jurisdictions meet.

NW1 (3607 Powhatan Street) is in a back yard. We could not see the stone from the street. NW2 (3298 Old Dominion Drive) is behind two houses on a bluff above Old Dominion Drive. I had to shimmy up a steep bank to see this stone. NW3 is behind a residence at 4013 North Tazewell Street. The homeowner was working in the back yard. He saw us looking at the boundary stone from the street and invited us onto the property to see it. He said often people come by to see the stone. We walked out of the neighborhood to Jean's car and went to dinner at Cowboy Café on Lee Highway in Arlington. Good, reasonably priced bar food--entrees, salads, soups, sandwiches, and burgers. Daily specials on food and drinks. Monday night is trivia night. Usually on Friday and Saturday nights there is live music. Another enjoyable day exploring.

Our third walk was from MacArthur Boulevard and Loughboro Road to Rock Creek Park.

NW 4 and NW5 are on the Dalecarlia Water Treatment Plant grounds. NW4 can be seen from the Capital Crescent Trail, 100 feet east of the Montgomery County sign. We tried seeing NW5 by walking through the woods and along a boundary fence, but it was not possible to see the stone. Supposedly you can schedule a visit to view the boundary stones at Dalecarlia by contacting the Army Corps of Engineers/Washington Aqueduct. I called but did not receive a response to my request.

There is no sidewalk along Dalecarlia Parkway, so we walked along the edge of the roadway. NW6 - NW9 are along Western Avenue. NW6 is in a small park on the west side of Western at Fessenden Street. NW7 is in the front yard of a large brick colonial residence (5600 Western Avenue, Chevy Chase). A DAR plaque identifies the stone as a boundary stone, but there is no protective fence. NW8 is in the landscaped area of a semicircular driveway at a Dutch colonial residence (6422 Western Avenue, Chevy Chase). There is no protective fence around the stone. NW9 is west of Western Avenue behind a house at 2701 Daniel Road, Chevy Chase. We could see the boundary stone from the street.

Our fourth walk was from the North cornerstone at Silver Spring to Fort Lincoln Cemetery.

I misread the directions, and we wandered around the parking lots of apartment and condo buildings on the north side of East-West Highway looking for the North cornerstone. Once we crossed to the highway, we quickly found the boundary stone.



North Cornerstone

A plaque in the sidewalk in front of the Tiramisu Bakery Cafe (7847 Eastern Avenue, Silver Spring) has replaced the original NE1 boundary stone, which was accidentally bulldozed and removed during the construction of the storefront in 1952. NE2 is in the front yard of an apartment building at 6980 Maple Avenue, Takoma Park.

We had lunch in a neighborhood restaurant in Takoma Park---Mark's Kitchen. It has a diverse menu with American comfort, vegetarian and Asian food. I had a sandwich, and Jean had a noodle dish. Both were very good.

Continuing our walk down Eastern Avenue, we located NE3 south of a shopping center at the southeast corner of New Hampshire and Eastern avenues next to an apartment complex. NE4 is in the side yard of a residence at 5400 Sargent Road, Hyattsville. NE5 is in the front yard of a brick Cape Cod residence at 4609 Eastern Avenue, Mount Rainer. NE6 is in the front yard of a two-story residence at 3601 Eastern Avenue, Mount Rainer.

NE7 is along the south boundary fence in Fort Lincoln Cemetery. The cracked stone was repaired and then rededicated by the DAR in 2013. Unknown to us at the time, the remains of Dick Gregory, comedian and social activist; Dorothy Height, social reformer and matriarch of the 20<sup>th</sup> century civil rights movement; and Shirley Horne, jazz musician, are in the cemetery. A lot of significant historic events occurred in the area. Disputes between "gentlemen" in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century were sometimes settled at the Bladensburg Dueling Grounds, including the dispute between Stephen Decatur and James Barron, which cost Decatur his life. Commodore Joshua Barney and his contingent of Marines and sailors fought a rear-guard action on the high ground in what is now the cemetery in 1814 to deflect the British from their invasion of Washington. He was not successful. The remains of Battery Jameson, part of the Civil War Defenses of Washington, is on the cemetery property. Near the battery is a springhouse and the stump of an ancient oak tree under which President Lincoln allegedly sipped water and conducted war strategy with military officers.

Our 5<sup>th</sup> walk started at the Deanwood Metro Station and ended at the Southern Avenue Metro Station.

NE8 was another boundary stone that was tricky to find. It is in an undeveloped area southeast of Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens and north of the Eastland Gardens neighborhood. The first trail we tried did not get us to the boundary stone, so we chose another route behind the apartments on the north side of Quarles Road. We followed the GPS map through the marsh and woods until we found the stone.



East Cornerstone

NE9 is in the front yard of a residence at 919 Eastern Ave, Fairmont Heights.

The East cornerstone is in a quiet wooded area 100 feet south of the intersection of Eastern and Southern avenues.

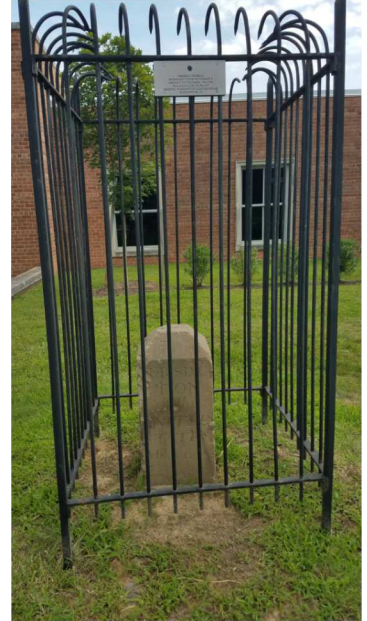
SE1 – SE5 are along Southern Avenue. SE1 is just south of the intersection of Southern and D Streets, close to the National Capitol Hebrew Cemetery. SE2 is in the front yard of a two-story brick residence at 4345 Southern Avenue, Capitol Heights. SE3 is in front of Capital Crossing Apartments, across the street from 3908 Southern Avenue. SE4 is in front of Kings Crossing Condominiums, 3101 Southern Avenue, Temple Hills. This stone is a replica placed in 2016 about 20 yards southwest of its original location. When a truck knocked the stone out of place in 1985, the manager of a nearby apartment building moved it into the boiler room for safekeeping. In 1991, the building manager gave the stone to the bicentennial resurveying team, who transferred it to the DC Office of the Surveyor, where it is displayed. SE5 is northeast of the northernmost intersection of Southern Avenue and Valley Terrace, north of the entrance into the Southern Avenue Metro Station.

Johnny Boy Carryout, 4125 Southern Avenue, Capitol Heights, is where we decided to have lunch. It was a good choice. Menu: BBQ ribs (Carolina-style); BBQ chicken, wings, fried fish, burgers, sandwiches, subs, cakes and pies, home brewed iced tea, and homemade lemonade. I had a minced pork BBQ sandwich, lemonade, and pecan pie. The BBQ sandwich was delicious. The lemonade was refreshing, and the pecan pie was so-so. We sat in a grass area along Southern Avenue and ate our lunch.

Our next walk was from the Southern Avenue Metro Station to Martin Luther King, Jr. Avenue and Blue Plains Drive. We intended to complete the walk of the boundary stones that day, but we started late and ran out of time. From the Southern Avenue Metro Station, we walked south along Southern Avenue. SE6 is in front of a storage warehouse at 901 Southern Avenue, Oxon Hill. In 2008, a car broke the stone and destroyed the protective fence. The stone was repaired and the protective fence restored in 2014. SE7 is

just south of the intersection of Southern Avenue and Indian Head Highway, Oxon Hill.

On our final walk, we saw SE8 behind the Blue Plains Auto Impoundment Lot, and I saw SE9 along the DC/Maryland border at the Potomac River. We drove to DC Village in the far southern tip of Washington and parked. In the parking lot, we met a young couple who were also looking for the boundary stones. We walked through a city dump area to the southeast corner of a fence around the impound lot and after a bit of searching found the boundary stone. This is a replica stone that was placed here in in 2016. The original stone was removed in 1958 during construction and was either lost or stolen before it could be reset. In 1962, the DAR placed a new inscription-less stone in the same location along with the original fencing. The stone was subsequently covered with landfill. In 1991, the bicentennial resurveying team dug the boundary stone out of the ground. The team decided that the best way to preserve the stone was to put it back underground, protected by a taller pipe visible above the surface. The substitute stone was removed in 2015 and replaced in 2016 with a replica stone.



With the other couple, we walked through Oxon Hill Park and around Oxon Cove to go under the I-295 bridge to get to SE9. Large boulders line the base of the roadway and the bridge. Jean and my new friend's wife decided to pass on crossing the boulders. The fellows continued to boulder-hop under the bridge and along the roadway until we could go down to the shoreline. Using GPS, we followed the shoreline and bushwhacked until we located the boundary stone about 1,000 feet southwest of the bridge. We bushwhacked and boulder-hopped back out to meet up with the women. There was a lot of trash and plastic in the water along the shoreline of Oxon Cove.

After this adventure, Jean and I celebrated our accomplishment at Quarterdeck in Arlington---good seafood (particularly crabs), cold beer, large deck, and a lively crowd.

Footnote: Jean wanted to see SE9. Since the land route was so rough, we decided to kayak across the Potomac from Belle Haven Marina to the Maryland shore to see the boundary stone. It was very windy the day we chose to do this. We made it across the river, but landed south of our destination. It was late, and we had commitments, so we scratched continuing on and returned to Belle Haven.

My main resource to locate the boundary stones and write this article was *Boundary Stones of the District of Columbia* <http://www.boundarystones.org/>. This document provides a history of the boundary stones, information about the efforts to preserve the stones, and an interactive GPS map with photos and information about each stone. The Metro Washington, DC ADC Street and Road Map was also useful.

Please show off and speak up for the preservation of the boundary stone. They are the area's oldest federal monuments.