

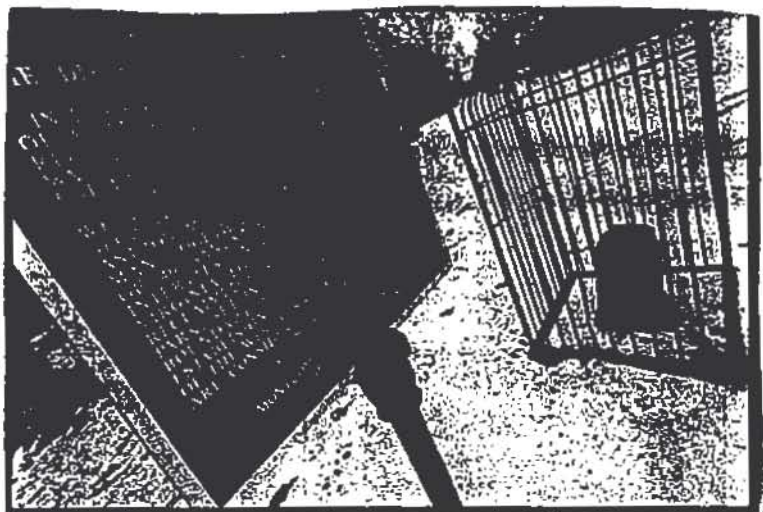
WASHINGTONIAN DIVISION
District of Columbia Public Library



On the Border line

BILL GIFFORD *grabs
the District by its
boundary stones.*

CITY PAPER MARCH 12-18, 1993



TWO CENTURIES AGO, Andrew Ellicott marked the District line with milestones. Ever since, the border has collected weird scraps of the city's past, present, and future.

BY BILL GIFFORD • PHOTOGRAPHS BY DARROW MONTGOMERY

Washington's oldest monument stands by itself on a sloping, wooded lawn behind a row of postwar brick colonial houses. It is nothing more than a small pillar of gray sandstone, knee-high and a foot square, imprisoned in a wrought-iron cage whose inward-curving spikes could stop Hannibal Lecter himself. One side says "Maryland," while its opposite reads "Jurisdiction of the United States." A third bears the marker's date: 1792.

There's nary a Tourmobile nor an explanatory plaque in sight. No tourists, either, because the stone lies several miles out MacArthur Boulevard from Georgetown, tucked away in the Dalecarlia compound of the Washington Aqueduct Division of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, behind an 8-foot fence and a locked gate.

Photographer Darrow Montgomery is under strict orders from aqueduct chief Perry Costas to snap no panoramic shots that a vandal might find useful. "Nothing that could give an idea of the lay of the land," Costas instructed. Escorting us, perhaps to enforce his dictum, are security chief Margaret Miller, resident in Top-Siders, jeans, and purple nail polish, and a loquacious older guard named Leonard.

The stone at which we gape represents the federal government's first act in the capital: Like a new dog on the block, it marked its territory, trotting around the periphery and lifting its leg at strategic places. Every mile along the District's four 10-mile boundary lines, it deposited a hunk of sandstone like this one, fresh from its Aquia, Va., quarries. Two centuries later, 39 of the original 40 are still upright, though a couple are buried and one now stands in someone's garage.

From the stone, the invisible boundary runs southeast across the lawn, leaping the fence and the old CSX railroad tracks before descending through woods to the Clara Barton Memorial Parkway, the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal, and the Potomac River not far above Chain Bridge. To the northwest, it zips across the lawn past the side porch of the last brick house before running into a concrete pumping structure.

Looking at the boundary stone, which appears especially forlorn on this slushy February morning, you would think that it doesn't divide much, and you would be wrong.

In the lexicon of Rush Limbaugh, the Beltway divides Washington from that which is not Washington. The 66-mile circumferential highway has become the inside-out Bastille

...only the good guys are outside, suffering terribly at the hands of the ruling cabal within. We inside the ring road sometimes wish its engineers had constructed an alligator-filled moat instead of a highway, the better to protect us from the barbarous hordes and their virulent, ill-informed "common sense."

But the reality doesn't quite live up to the myth. The numbing suburban landscape just inside the Beltway is indistinguishable from the numbing suburban landscape just outside it. Same state, same state of mind. The truly important boundary in these parts—indeed, the organizing fact of the entire region—is not the 29-year-old Beltway, but the District line, which passed its 200th birthday on Jan. 1.

"It bugs the hell out of me when people talk about the 'inside the Beltway mentality,'" says D.C. statehood activist Sam Smith. "There are really two distinct mentalities inside the Beltway: There's the inside-the-Beltway-but-outside-the-District-line mentality, and the inside-the-District-line mentality."

Perhaps this is a bit complicated for the average talk-radio listener. But the District line is a peculiar artifact. It divides as no state line does. To drive along Western Avenue, with comfortable suburban rambles on either side, is to tightrope between state and territory, federalism and quasi-colonial rule. Congress meets inside the District, but District residents have no full-fledged congressional representation. The people who live on the Maryland side of Western Avenue have senators; their D.C. neighbors have Jesse Jackson. Maryland makes its own laws; D.C.'s are subject to congressional veto. Maryland can tax D.C. residents who work in the state; Marylanders who work in D.C. are congressionally exempt from District taxes.

Inside the line, gun ownership is severely restricted but gun murders take place almost daily. Inside the line, confiscatory income taxes support one government worker per six taxpayers, yet the local government is notoriously unresponsive when not downright hostile. Most regional employment and business is inside the line, but per capita income in the District is lower than in surrounding counties. So is the median value of a home. Inside the line, people talk about moving the way prisoners discuss escape plans, to flee hopeless schools, urinating drunks, and car-radio thieves.

Beyond the border, city streets widen into four-lane divided highways to an Oz of end-to-end strip shopping centers and drive-thru liquor stores; interchanges infinitum and rezoned pastures for lease; single-family townhomes from the low 120s, Wal-Mart, and the upturned earth of construction sites now owned by the Resolution Trust Corp.

Beyond it, blue signs placed by the state of Maryland purr: "Please Drive Gently."

For all its demographic and legal import, though, the precise location of the District line remains rather uncertain. This

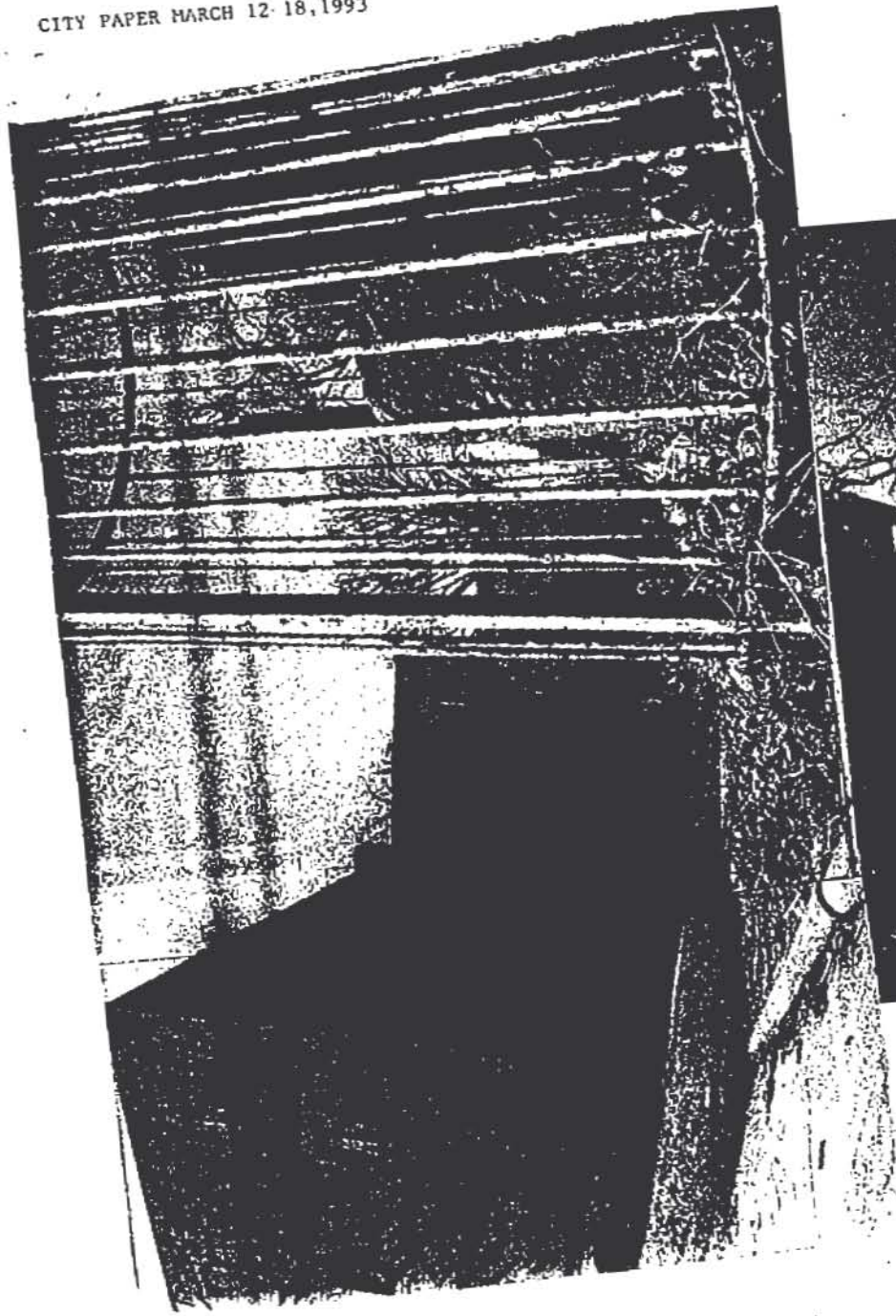
is due, in part, to the state of surveying technology circa 1792, but it also results from a confusing tussle between George Washington and Congress.

Washington and Thomas Jefferson's notion of a new city on the Potomac, free of the corrupting influence of established centers of commerce, must have seemed awfully PC. After all, what politician in his right mind would move to a rustic swamp when he could enjoy the decadent pleasures of Philadelphia?

The invented or relocated capital is a 20th-century commonplace—think of Ottawa, Canberra, or Rabat. In the 18th century, a nation's most economically powerful city (London, Paris) tended to be its capital. Choosing a new capital is a risky enterprise, more so when political considerations override the basic question of whether anyone would actually want to live there. Turkey, for example, moved its capital in the 1920s from Byzantine, imperial Constantinople to Ankara, a dusty, windswept Muncie of the Mediterranean. Brazil, like the U.S. a confederation of disparate regions, invented a capital city called Brasilia in 1960; parts of the government *still* haven't relocated.

Capital-making was a risky proposition in 1790, too. After we Yanks whacked the Brits, several established cities vied for capital honors, including New York, Philadelphia, Germantown, Pa., and even Baltimore(!). Debate raged, but Washington prevailed on Congress to let him choose a site on the Potomac "not exceeding 10 miles square," between the Anacostia River and the Conogocheague, which joins the Potomac about 100 miles upstream. A capital on the Potomac, he argued, would be equidistant from Northern and Southern states. an-





Plunked down in wilderness 200 years ago, Andrew Ellicott's boundary stones have witnessed the random growth of the District. The border now splits suburban Takoma Park (the apartment building is in D.C., the white house in Maryland); a Jewish cemetery in Southeast (far left, top); AU Park (left, bottom); and the top-secret woods at Dalecarlia Reservoir (below), where not much has changed since Ellicott's day.

creasing Southern fears of Northeastern domination. Also, he happened to live nearby. After the president planned the city, Congress would get to run it.

That was the deal, anyway. What Congress got was not a square, not 10 miles to a side, and not all of it lay upstream of the Anacostia.

Washington did reconnoiter the upper Potomac valley, where he was wined and dined by eager landowners, but the geological fix was in. A line drawn from Richmond through Baltimore, Wilmington, and Philadelphia parallels the fall line. Rivers crossing the fall line tend to celebrate by plunging over waterfalls, which are difficult to sail up and over. So the major East Coast cities tended to develop at the line, the upper limit of navigation. If the founders had put the capital upriver, say, near Hagerstown, we'd be driving around in pickup trucks with shotguns in the window, and looking forward to a dinner of possum cutlets.

So, the federal city straddled the fall line, which happened to pass just west of the port of Georgetown. Washington and Jefferson quietly convinced Congress to amend the bill, to include in the federal district the east bank of the Anacostia as well as Alexandria, four miles south.

Even then, Jefferson wasn't satisfied. Just before Congress was to vote on the final boundaries of the District in 1791, amid much grumbling and second thoughts, he urged Washington to tip the D.C. diamond, so as to include Bladensburg, too. Washington rebuffed Jefferson's request, informing him that to do so would "have occasioned the exclusion of more important objects." Not incidentally, it would have greatly reduced the value of Washington's 1,200 acres



on Four Mile Run.

The job of surveying the new territory fell to one Andrew Ellicott, the top surveyor of the time—and the one with the fanciest instruments. Ellicott had shown his mettle by drawing the western border of Pennsylvania, then a true wilderness haunted by Indians and disgruntled French trappers. Defining the District might have seemed like a tea waltz compared to this, but the task would tax his abilities.

At 3 in the afternoon of April 15, 1791, the commissioners of the new capital, the mayor of Alexandria, Ellicott, and various town bigwigs gathered at an Alexandria tavern, where they downed a few glasses of wine before stumbling across town to Jones' Point, near the present-day Woodrow Wilson Bridge. That was where Ellicott's assistant, the black astronomer Benjamin Banneker, had calculated that the southern cornerstone should lie.

The stone was heaved into place by the assembled Freemasons (attention, conspiracy theorists!), "after which a deposit of corn, wine, and oil was made upon it," reported the *Alexandria Gazette*, to signify nourishment, refreshment, and peace. That done, "the following observations were delivered by the Rev. Muir: 'Of America it may be said as it was of Judea of old, that it is a good land and large, O America...'"

Yadda yadda yadda.

The dignitaries staggered home, and Banneker retired to his upstate Maryland farm, leaving poor Ellicott to do the dirty job himself. Ellicott's job description was straightforward: one line due northwest 10 miles from Jones' Point, 10 miles northeast, south-east and then southwest the same distance,

back to Jones' Point. But what had begun with such pomp and circumstance, not to say libatory excess, swiftly devolved into a squalid trek through the wilderness.

The District line was drawn in blood and sweat. Working northwest from Alexandria, Ellicott took eight agonizing months to reach Little Falls.

"I have found the weather in this country extremely hot," he complained to his wife in a letter only two months into the job. "The country thro' which we are now cutting one of the ten-mile lines is very poor; I think for near seven miles on it there is not one House that has any floor except the earth; and what is more strange, it is in the neighborhood of Alexandria, and George-Town.... We find but little Fruit, except Huckel berries, and live in our Camp.... Labouring hands in this Country can scarcely be had at any rate... this scarcity of hands will lengthen out the time much beyond what I intended."

Ellicott further confided, "As the president is so much attached to this country, I would not be willing that he should know my real sentiments about it." His frustration has a familiar ring to modern travelers through this area, now known as Shirlington.

Still, he was being handsomely paid, with expenses, so Ellicott kept most of his grumbling to himself. During the week, he lived in camps along the city perimeter, as his workmen hacked their way through the forest, scurried up and down steep-sided ravines, and waded through miasmatic lowlands.

According to an account in Silvio Bedini's *The Life of Benjamin Banneker*, Ellicott's crew measured every inch of the border using a 66-foot length of chain attached to two



On the Borderline

poles, like the contraption football officials use to measure first downs. Every mile, more or less (measures and weights hadn't been standardized yet), they plunked down a sandstone boundary marker declaring one side Maryland or Virginia, and placing the other under the "Jurisdiction of the United States."

To sight his lines, his crew cleared 40-foot swaths through the forest. Falling trees posed a constant hazard. "I have had a number of men killed this summer," he wrote his wife, "one of whom was a worthy, ingenious, and truly valuable character, [who] has left a wife and three small children to lament his untimely fate."

The greedy commissioners hardly cared about Ellicott's damn boundary stones or a few dead saw-jockeys. They were more interested in the other half of his job, which was to divvy up the city blocks of L'Enfant's plan into salable lots. So Ellicott spent his weekends drawing the lot-lines. As George Washington was the father of his country, Ellicott was the father of Washington real estate. But his important work, he knew, was the boundary survey, to which he devoted extraordinary care.

"Those old cornerstones are considered to mark the boundaries of Washington," con-

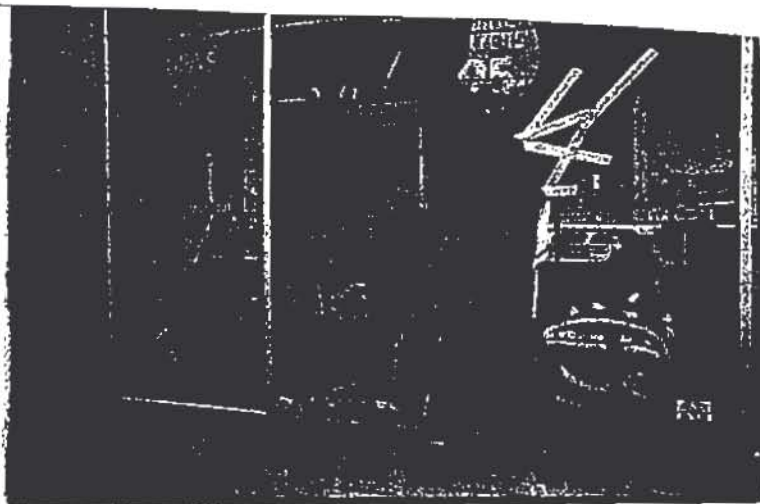
firms the current occupant of Ellicott's office, acting D.C. Surveyor Charles Northem.

But are they in the right places? "Some of them are," he allows. "And some of them aren't."

Ellicott came close to inscribing a perfect 10-mile square on the raw wilderness that was Washington in 1792, but, inevitably perhaps, given that this was a federal property-grab, he took a little more. All his lines exceed 10 miles, and the northeastern edge is quite a bit longer than the southwestern. Banneker biographer Bedini diplomatically describes the resulting quadrilateral as "more in the nature of a trapezoid."

The jury's still out on Ellicott and his lines. "There has never been a systematic attempt to locate the boundary stones, both physically in the ground and mathematically," says David Doyle of the National Geodetic Survey, the federal agency responsible for establishing latitude, longitude, and altitude coordinates for the U.S. In other words, we still don't know precisely where the District ends and Maryland begins.

Doyle and a group of local surveyors are currently retracing Ellicott's work, using satellite-based Global Positioning System (GPS) techniques. By the standards of the satellite age, Ellicott's lines are "not terribly straight," admits Doyle. Some stones vary from the straight line by several meters, and the cornerstones are imperfectly aligned, according to the three-quarters-finished GPS survey. But Doyle adds: "It was quite an undertaking, given the state of technology in 1792."



Politics and technology conspired against the best-laid plans: Having mandated a square, Congress settled for a squiggly trapezoid, thus establishing an unfortunate precedent.

The District is no longer a trapezoid, the southern one-third having been ceded back to Virginia in 1846. Alexandria, D.C., became Alexandria, Va., and the rest became Arlington. A similar secession movement by Georgetown failed, leaving 26 miles of Ellicott's original, meandering perimeter as the District line, which now squiggles through eight taxi zones and all four quadrants of the city—a journey as diverse and strange as it was in Ellicott's day.

Ellicott took nearly two years to make his way around the square, but he had to chop down trees and take astral readings as he went. Today, thanks to the twin miracles of asphalt and internal combustion, Ellicott's journey can be accomplished in a single, very long and aggravating day.

"It's quite a big city, actually, when you get down to it," muses geodesist Doyle.

It is in the nature of borders that one side tends to reflect hidden desires of the other, and not always subtly. Porn emporia and strip bars flourish in Covington, Ky., just across the Ohio River from buttoned-up Cincinnati. Tijuana, the quintessential border town, caters to *norteamericano* vices on the cheap. Surrounded by the Warsaw Pact, West Berliners indulged in an orgy of capitalist decadence.

There are local examples. Until relatively recently, Waldorf, Md.—just across the

What a difference a state line makes. Immigrant capitalism thrives in Maryland (left), while only a glass merchant could love the D.C. side of Eastern Avenue.

Charles County line from Prince George's and a short drive from Capitol Hill—thrived on gambling, illegal booze, and prostitution.

The District line lacks such lurid attractions. Neat, suburban

homes line both sides of Western Avenue; working around the square, the bulked-up manors of Chevy Chase on Western Avenue yield to the asbestos shingles and modest colonials of Takoma and Chillum on Eastern Avenue, to the frame bungalows and garden apartments along Southern Avenue. The foreign land known as Maryland has small businesses and actual shopping centers. The D.C. side bristles with liquor stores, because booze is cheaper—despite the steeper sales tax. The border zone has a bleak, pulled-away-from quality, as though it separated two officially friendly but culturally mistrustful nations, like France and Germany.

Don't be fooled by Washington's secure, stately federal core. Along the District line may be found such marginal institutions as reform schools, military bases, and cemeteries—weird scraps of the city's history.

We picked the gloomiest of all possible mornings to retrace Ellicott's steps. Darrow's cowboy boots are absorbing slush like Bounty paper towels, and we have only begun to ramble. Luckily, our two friendly federal agents agree to drive us to the next marker, located in a remote section

WASHINGTONIAN DIVISION
District of Columbia Public Library

on the watercarria compound.

Unluckily, their chosen vehicle is a feeble-looking Plymouth Horizon with government tags. The four of us cram in, with Leonard at the wheel, and we zigzag out one gate, along MacArthur Boulevard into Maryland ("Please Drive Gently"), through another open gate, past a building ominously marked THREATCON, through a locked gate, along a sloppy, rutted road to yet another locked gate, past a control structure, beside a brimming inlet, then around the edge of the reservoir itself.

The slush conceals many a sharp rock in the road. Whenever one thinks the underside of the car, Leonard murmurs, "If it hits that oil pan...."

The second boundary stone stands deep in woods, where the snow hasn't yet melted. It's not clear as we make our approach whether we're in Maryland or the District—jurisdiction of the United States—until we crouch down to read the stone. I think of the final scene of *Rules of the Game*, where German soldiers refuse to shoot prisoners crouching across a snow-covered field, because the field lies just inside neutral Switzerland.

The landscape here probably hasn't changed much since Ellicott's time, despite the man-made lake nearby, the townhouses, the fences, and whatever top-secret stuff

Local surveyors are retracing the District lines using satellite-based Global Positioning System (GPS) techniques. By the standards of the satellite age, the lines are "not terribly straight," admits David Doyle. In other words, we still don't know where Maryland ends and the District begins.

we're not supposed to photograph. Deer tracks crisscross the road, leading from the woods to the water's edge, but we don't see any whitetails. Miller says a herd of 22 or more roams the 400-acre fenced enclosure. Leonard is of the opinion that they stayed "in their beds" this morning. Miller adds, "I can't tell you how many times I've heard guns over here." When the police arrive, the hunters are always long gone.

In summertime, Leonard's days are spent chasing neighborhood kids who jump the fence to swim in the reservoir, unaware that its placid waters conceal deadly intake pipes. "Leonard" turns out to be Leonard's last name; his given name is Laverne, as in a certain '70s sitcom.

"My wife's name is Shirley," Leonard says.

The Plymouth rounds a corner, startling a large hawk in the act of dismembering its roadside meal. The bird takes to the air, clutching a limp mass of fur, but the dead animal—possum?—proves too heavy. Dropping its lunch, the hawk escapes, enormous wings beating, over the lake.

As we jounce through this snowy paradise, we couldn't agree more with the sentiments of one Fred B. Woodward, who in 1905 made the first recorded tour of the District boundary. In a pamphlet titled "A Ramble Along the Boundary Stones of the District of Columbia With a Camera," Woodward related his observations of the border and the characters he met there, from the woodlands and estates of Chevy Chase to the truck farms of Southeast. He found this boundary stone, officially known as Northwest No. 5,

the way we did, "hidden away in the fastness of an ancient wood not far from the receiving reservoir of the water supply of the city of Washington."

"The inspiration which comes with true communion with nature entered into our hearts here," Woodward effused, "as we searched through wooded dells over bracken and fern, under oak and chestnut, with the smell of the pine in our nostrils mingled with the aroma of wild flowers."

A half-mile due northwest, the aroma of diesel exhaust mingles in our nostrils with that wormy, fishy smell that rises from the sidewalk after a particularly sour rainfall. We take our nostrils into Snix Snax, a tiny kiosk at Friendship Heights that sells Maryland lottery tickets, South American coffee, and Israeli newspapers. Only two-and-a-half miles into our boundary rumble, we're already suffering from wealth fatigue.

Above the reservoir in the District, a new sign heralds the Spring Valley development of "luxury townhomes," the sort of thing one finds in Potomac or deepest Fairfax, with humongous houses squeezed onto tiny lots around treeless cul-de-sacs. Inspiration enters our hearts as we contemplate this fabulous ghetto for the rich. One after another of these half-finished tract mansions sports a "Sold!" sign, but it's not clear how many of

On the Borderline

them were Sold! after workers discovered World War I poison-gas shells buried nearby.

Why, we wonder, would anyone pay a half-mil for a bloated, ostentatious home just inside the District, when the same money could buy a bloated, ostentatious home on a full acre in Potomac or Reston?

To make a statement: *We live in the District —because we can afford to.*

Many of the older houses nearby are really quite modest, not too different from what Darrow and I would see on the opposite side of town. But even the smallest, drabest, crummiest of Cape Cods starts at around \$250,000, simply because it is a drab and crummy Cape in Ward 3, the richest and whitest of the city's eight wards. In the neighborhoods along Southern Avenue SE, they'd be too expensive at half the price. The key variable is race: In the District, the average white-owned house is worth \$343,000; black-owned homes average \$118,000.

Over the last decade, new money has flooded into Ward 3, transforming its last middle-class enclaves into the exclusive domain of high-income professionals. The cash tide has washed over the oldest businesses around—even the Western Market, a neighborhood grocery store on the Maryland side of Western Avenue. The tiny store, which hadn't changed much since it opened in the '40s, was taken over and "upscaled" four years ago, with gourmet preserves and fancy pastas replacing such fare as canned soup and Wonder bread.

Old Fred Woodward saw this coming, of



course, way back in 1905. A new subdivision was taking form nearby, named American University Park, "although it is more than a mile from the site of the university," Woodward noted. The outskirts of the District were largely rural at the time, with the Bannockburn Golf Club and the adjacent English Cricket Club occupying much of the land near AU Park. By the time Woodward reached what is now Pinchurst Circle, where workmen were preparing to extend Boundary Avenue (now Western Avenue) into the woods, he could no longer contain himself.

"To this secluded spot have now come the surveyors with transit and steel tape," he lamented, "and they, followed by the axe men, have carved a broad lane through the massive woods....Too soon, alas! will the change come for the true lover of nature,

which ushers in the days of 'boom subdivisions,' garish cottages and doubtful joys, and drives him still further afield if he wishes to commune with nature."

As we continue toward the nether reaches of Western Avenue, it becomes clear that nature took it on the chin here. The houses get newer and smaller, their promised joys ever more doubtful, until Western (Boundary) Avenue dead-ends at Daniel Road and Oregon Avenue, next to Rock Creek Park.

A footpath leads down a steep hillside into the park, over the old Boundary Bridge, and meanders through the woods, now in Maryland, now in the District. This is second-growth forest, and overgrown roads and fallen power poles suggest a time when the surrounding neighborhoods were open pasture and gristmills lined the creek. Now un-

der the jurisdiction of the National Park Service, this wooded valley is itself a boundary between mostly white Ward 3 and the rest of the city.

Woodward found the north cornerstone standing "erect in an open field." Now it is about a dozen feet from the hurly-burly of East-West Highway, sunk in mud to within a foot of its soot-blackened crown. The next northernmost object in the District of Columbia, at this moment, is a plastic soda bottle. Through the woods we glimpse the Portal Estates neighborhood, an isolated enclave of the District where Mayor Sharon Pratt Kelly lives—smack against the commuter Maryland that she so often reviles, and practically in the shadow of Silver Spring skyscrapers.

There actually was a silver spring here when Woodward rambled through. "Silver Spring on the Seventh Street Road [now Georgia Avenue] is among the landmarks of this section," he wrote, "being a beautiful spring of living water flowing through the finest of sand."

Both spring and sand were paved long ago, and the new town's landmarks testify to the continuing dubiousification of life's pleasures. Dingy high-rise apartment complexes bear the names of grand Montgomery Office mansions such as Falklands and Blair. Office towers rise 20 stories and more, unfettered by building-height limitations. The verdant village of Woodward's time is now a gritty, bustling hub, busy all day with loading and unloading and reloading in the warehouses. Kiss-and-riding at the subway station. On the border with Washington, the micro economy is sustained by booze, lottery tickets, and porn.

On the D.C. side of Eastern Avenue, near Georgia, a stringy-haired man is calmly sweeping hunks of plate glass off the sidewalk in front of his store. Behind the shattered glass of his storefront, dozens of personal computers and monitors sit within at

easy arm's reach. The good stuff has already been stolen, we surmise, his small business ruined, a personal tragedy ignored by a callous world.

"Nah," the man says. "This stuff's so esoteric, anybody who'd break in wouldn't know what to steal." He thinks the window just broke. "See how it was all taped together?" The local street guys, milling around State Line Liquors cadging change, would never have broken in, he says. He often hires them for odd jobs, and they buy lottery tickets from him, too; he knows them.

Well, then, to whom does he sell this stuff, that isn't worth stealing? "The government, mostly."

Faded lettering above the window advertises "Lamps \$9." I need a lamp. But he has no lamps for sale.

Across the street, a small truck is attempting a three-point turn in the driveway of a restaurant. Unfortunately, the driver miscalculated the height of his vehicle relative to that of the restaurant's pagoda-wooden gate, which collapses in splinters. The driver completes the maneuver and drives away, looking sheepish.

On the Maryland side, small businesses include: Royce's TV and Video; a West Indian market that sells goat meat; a bustling copy stand; and a newsstand whose offerings span from *Foreign Affairs* to this month's edition of *Smooth Shaved Prissy*, and a stuffed gorilla stands guard by the front door, menacing any who would mess off with the shop's inventory of Washington Monument souvenirs, tricycles, wicked-looking brass knuckles and switchblades, and whatever is displayed in the back room.

The owner, a stocky man with shoulder-length hair, emerges from his office upstairs and invites us to tour the back room, so long as Darrow caps his fish-eye lens. He gives his name as Chris. The forbidden chamber is separated from the front by a flimsy plywood wall and a black curtain tacked to the

"To this secluded spot have now come the surveyors with transit and steel tape," lamented Fred Woodward, tromping past Pinehurst Circle in 1905, "and they, followed by the axe men, have carved a broad lane through the massive woods.... Too soon, alas! will the change come... which ushers in the days of 'boom subdivisions,' garish cottages and doubtful joys."

ceiling. The privilege of entry costs a dollar, according to a hand-lettered sign on the swinging door, "refunded with purchase."

The small, brightly lit room is absolutely buzzing with pornography. Hundreds of magazine covers garishly tout every permutation of sexual taste, and a platoon of dildos stands at attention in a locked case. A lone customer peruses the merchandise without enthusiasm. But having paid a dollar, he seems reluctant to leave.

A sorority of inflatable dolls hovers overhead, mouths and orifices agape. Anyone who has read James Joyce's smutty letters to his wife can imagine what the great modernist might have done with one of these; I silently thank the gods of literature that Joyce didn't squander his inspiration on a latex companion.

This is a family business, founded by Chris' father. They moved to this location when another porn shop here folded. "They were doing things that didn't make the community happy," he says, without elaboration. "We have a clean business here."

Since the old store was already zoned to sell porn, Chris and his father took over the lease and their shop was thus grandfathered under newer, stricter anti-porn regulations; opening a new shop here, or anywhere, would be just about impossible.

The highlight of the inventory is a com-

plete archive of *Playboy*, running back to 1959. "I deal a lot with collectors," explains Chris. He pulls out a few ancient issues, which seem tasteful and subdued in these lurid surroundings. "Sinatra Speaks His Mind" declares the February 1963 cover; an issue from 1968 features a demure, red-stockinged girl on a swing. Chris unwraps a copy of *Adam*, a '60s *Playboy* competitor that billed itself "The Man's Home Companion" and featured slinky beatnik babes.

Among the divided cities of the world, the Beirut and the Berlins, Takoma Park never ranked very high on the scale of geopolitical significance (despite its numerous forays into foreign policy, such as declaring itself a "nuclear-free zone"), but the sense of division is palpable nonetheless.

Eastern Avenue runs right through town. On the D.C. side, parking enforcement is remorseless. The shopping district, the tofu carry-outs and ethnic clothing boutiques of Carroll Avenue, lie on the Maryland side. So does the post office. The grand turn-of-the-century mansions of Takoma, D.C., tend to have more peeling paint than their turn-of-the-century neighbors in Takoma Park, Md.

This was contested ground during the Civil War, if only briefly. In the summer of 1864, Confederate troops under Gen. Jubal Early forded the Potomac and rampaged

through the Montgomery County countryside toward the capital. Washingtonians sweated in fear as Union troops massed at Fort Stevens, Fort Totten, and Fort Bayard.

Well, not everyone sweated, for authorities seized a half-finished Confederate flag from a secessionist enclave in Georgetown. But the onslaught never came. Confederate and Union snipers traded a few desultory shots before Early's army fled back across the Potomac. True Virginians, the retreating Rebs looted farmhouses of women's underthings and scribbled obscene pictures on the walls.

In this section of the border, on the long northeastern edge of Ellicott's square, Fred Woodward tromped through truck farms and met rural eccentrics like Mr. Norman Kidwell, "who kindly piloted us to the [boundary] stone and entertained us at the same time with a résumé of his various matrimonial experiences," and offered Woodward fresh raw turnips from his garden. Now black after block of two-story brick houses occupy the turnip patches of yore, all the way to where Eastern dead-ends high on a hilltop, at Fort Lincoln New Town.

The air is filled with the smoke and growl of heavy machinery biting into the woods and meadows of the long-vacant tract. In one of the last major development projects the city will see, townhouses and condos are going up on this former site of the U.S. National Reformatory, a sprawling juvenile detention center whose name was later euphemized to the "National Training School for Boys." The change fooled nobody. "Whenever we drove by it, the car would get real quiet," recalls Prince George's County native Michael Dolan. "That was where they sent bad boys." Bad girls were sent to a girls' reformatory over on Western Avenue.

One legendary local bad boy, Prohibition-era nightclub owner James La Fontaine, used the nearby border to great advantage. His club sat just inside the District line, but it was accessible only by a private road from Maryland. The entire club was surrounded

On the Borderline

by a tall fence. Maryland cops couldn't raid the place because any illegal activities were taking place in the District. But District authorities were deterred from charging down the driveway because the driveway was in Maryland. When D.C. police wanted to raid Fontaine's, they had to pull down the fence and enter from the District, which gave revelers plenty of advance notice. The city wearied of tearing down Fontaine's fence, finding nothing, and then having to replace it, so Fontaine's wasn't raided often, which suited the politicians and police officials who patronized it just fine.

The old reform school shares a border with another marginal establishment, Fort Lincoln Cemetery, just on the Maryland side of the line. We drive through the gate—gently, of course—and navigate its winding roads, through older, crowded sections to more sparsely settled regions with hardly any grave markers. In the outlying section, one intersection is dominated by a massive black memorial to a council who haven't yet

died. According to the birthdates inscribed on their tombs, they're barely in their 40s.

They certainly think ahead: Theirs is the only grave in this remote region of the cemetery. Beyond it, the raw land hasn't been graded or sodded or even mowed, like an unfinished subdivision for the dead. Near the far edge of the tract, empty cement sarcophagi stand in rows, awaiting their eternal occupants.

Near a mausoleum, on the outskirts of the cemetery, Darrow and I spot flowers growing by the fence that marks the District line. Spring already! We trudge toward the flowers only to discover they're plastic, marking a freshly filled grave right next to the fence, within crawling distance of D.C. worms. Ten yards to the right of this eerie scene, the top of one of Ellicott's stones peeps from the muck. Through the fence, at Fort Lincoln New Town, we watch construction machinery marching slowly toward the District line.

This anonymous final resting place commands a magnificent view of the Anacostia River valley, the traffic snaking along its highways and smoke puffing from stacks in places like Cheverly and Bladensburg. Just down the hill are the old dueling grounds, where 19th-century Washington politicians came to settle their differences in ways prohibited in the federal territory.

Like Rock Creek Park, the Anacostia partitions the District in a way no political boundary could, at least not since legal segregation. The substantial chunk of the city east of the river is poorer and blacker than the rest, but the difference goes beyond statistics to character. This part of Washington remained rural as the rest of the city urbanized; frame farmhouses now sit alongside cheaply constructed garden apartments. Once racially mixed, east-of-the-river is now almost totally black.

Even in Woodward's day, east-of-the-river was poor and neglected. "Elsewhere in our travels we have found the District roads in good condition, usually macadamized or gravelled, and succeeded by a poor country road," he wrote. "Here the conditions are reversed." And when the road-builders finally arrived east of the river, the area's bluffs and hollows distorted L'Enfant's grid beyond recognition. Streets meander and twist confusingly, and the outsider can easily get lost.

The river also presents a physical obstacle; to cross it from Fort Lincoln necessitates a drive of several miles.

Eastern Avenue picks up again at Kenilworth, passing through the turn-of-the-century subdivision of Deanwood—contemporary with Takoma Park, but for blacks only. Not far from its tidy bungalows and small,

neat lawns, in the woods near the river, Darrow and I some months ago discovered the Bicycle Man living in a plywood and tarpaper shack, right next to one of Ellicott's stones. Woodward mentioned a nearby pool hall that was the subject of scandal, but its doorkeeper "assured us with a convincing smile that this was not a pool room, but a branch of the 'Maryland Telegraph Office.'"

There don't seem to be many synagogues around, or Jewish neighbors strolling the streets, so we are all the more surprised to read Hebrew lettering on the headstones of a small cemetery off Southern Avenue. The cemetery occupies a small hilltop with a large, spreading oak and a commanding view of the federal city across the Anacostia. Gazing at the tombstones, some of which date from the '20s, I sense something missing. Aha—no flowers. But small pebbles rest atop many of the stones.

The buncyard is guarded, inappropriately, by a Doberman, which strains at its tether as we knock at the door of the caretaker's house.

"WHO IS IT?" a woman hollers.

Uh, reporters, ma'am. An upstairs window is flung open, and a head appears. "Talk to that man in the van," she says, and slams the window shut. The Doberman watches us trudge up the hill, where a green van idles. Its occupant is wrestling with the

Sunday crossword. He rolls down the window. His cap says "Retired." Is he the caretaker? "I been around here." He doesn't know too much.

As we walk back down, a well-dressed man emerges from the house, putting on his hat as he climbs into his truck and roars out the driveway.

More helpful is Moishe Teichman of the Beth Shalom synagogue, who explains that the National Capital Hebrew Cemetery is one of the city's oldest Jewish cemeteries. Beth Shalom is one of seven congregations that still use it. Adjacent to the cemetery are two other small Jewish burial grounds, the Keshet Israel cemetery and one called Chessed Shel Emet, a Jewish potter's field. It became cemeteries because "the land was cheap and it was available," Teichman says.

The mysterious pebbles represent an ancient custom, imported from the Middle East, where gravesites are marked only with small, anonymous piles of stones. Family and friends are supposed to bring extra stones when they visit, to help maintain the grave; now the ritual signifies remembrance.

As we continue south on Southern Avenue, we begin to appreciate the sheer size of out-of-the-river. The road goes on and on, past carryouts and liquor stores on the D.C. side, shopping plazas and pawn shops and high-rises in Maryland. On a quick swing into P.G. county, we resist the temptation of Branch Ave. Liquors' drive-thru window, open until 3 a.m. (Ah, civilization!)

We're looking for a boundary stone at Southern and Naylor Road, one of the oldest roads through this part of town. This stone has had an especially tough career. An old resident told Woodward that bored soldiers at nearby Civil War forts used it for target practice; their bullets chipped off its identifying marks. Today, searching around a small apartment building, we find no trace of it.

The D.C. line was challenged only once, by Confederate Gen. Jubal Early, whose troops managed to squeeze off a few shots at Fort Stevens before turning tail. True Virginians, the retreating Rebs looted farmhouses of women's underthings and scribbled obscene pictures on the walls.

Not long ago, David Doyle and his surveying colleagues were looking for the same stone, also to no avail, until a local homeowner volunteered that it was sitting in his basement. The stone had been hit by a car; it now reposes in Doyle's garage, where it will stay until the satellite survey informs him of its proper position.

Driving around these streets, I recall that ex-Mayor-for-Life Marion Barry Anwar Amal used to live around here, which might explain Mayor-for-the-Next-Two-Years Kelly's choice of neighborhood: She lives as far from Barry as it's possible to get without leaving the District.

With dusk approaching, Darrow and I decide to motor ahead to Oxon Cove, our last stop—where we expect to find our ninth and last boundary stone in the District. Woodward discovered it half-submerged in the Potomac mud-flats, near the landing of Fox's Ferry, the Woodrow Wilson Bridge of its time. The ferry wasn't working, so he got "a hermit named Burrage," who lived in a hut in the woods—much like the Bicycle Man at Kenilworth—to row him across to Alexandria.

The ferry and Burrage are both long gone, and I've heard the stone was moved. Still, we decide to try to find it, starting at Oxon Hill Farm, now operated by the National Park Service. A narrow lane winds down to a plowed patch of bottomland. Farm implements rust picturesquely in wooden sheds.

The lane ends, we park and get out and follow a promising footpath, only to get cut off at I-295. There is a condom on the ground—maybe we are in D.C. after all.

We slog back through the woods. Somewhere across the river, Alexandria's harbor-masters built a lighthouse atop the last boundary marker. And as for the portion of Ellicott's survey that now divides Arlington and Fairfax, well, it's just another county line. Arlington has been not-the-District for longer than it was the District, and barring collective insanity on the part of the Virginia delegation, it won't ever be the District again.

A bike path disappears around the far edge of Oxon Cove, away from where the stone is supposed to be. In the distance, the sunset gold-leafs the grim architecture of D.C. Village, once the city's orphanage. Just then, we spot two figures pushing bicycles through the woods, stumbling over roots and crunching through the ankle-deep trash.

One of them falls over his bike with a crash, swearing, before they emerge, two old men in olive drab, with fishing rods strapped to their bicycles. A green net protrudes from the rubberized canvas bag strapped to the leader's bike. He is friendly, with an enormous, smooth oval face and tremendous hands. His companion mutters a few disparaging remarks about Darrow's canvas sneakers, and then turns his back on us.

The friendly man's name is Tucker Thomas, and he gives his age, after a reflective pause, as 65. Thomas is taking the holiday off from jury duty at D.C. Superior Court. "God, I hate that," he says. "I want to be out here fishin' so bad I can feel it in my nuts." He crouches down in mock agony.

"Instead, I got to stay in that room listening to bullshit. We got 17 charges, and we're only through four of 'em."

We are far from Superior Court; there's not a Metrobus for miles. Thomas lives a long way from Superior Court, too, and complains that jurors don't receive parking privileges. Not even "my nephew, the chief" could swing Thomas a parking spot, it seems. The chief? Metropolitan Police Department Chief Fred Thomas, of course. Chief or no chief, Tucker Thomas is bound for the jury room tomorrow.

"This is what I do. I'm always here. I catch the white perch, the yellow perch, the crappie." Tufts of gray hair peek out from under his knit cap. The canvas bag doesn't seem to contain any fish. It's not the best fishing around, Thomas allows, but it's his spot.

"I bought me a 1956 Pontiac in 1956," he says, "before you were born. Used to park it right there," he says, indicating the space occupied by my red Honda. "I met the white lady who lives up top of the hill—June 13, 1956. She come down and give me a seat to sit on." Thomas relishes the memory. The farm must look the way it did in 1956, the fields ready for plowing as the expanding city gobbled neighboring farms and the doubtful pleasures of suburban life closed in on all sides.

But his friend has already disappeared around the bend of the bike path, and it's time for him to get going, too. His long day over, Tucker Thomas bestrides his rusty blue Peugeot, waders squeaking, and pedals away, wobbling down the asphalt path in the general direction of the District of Columbia.