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THE BOUNDARY MONUMENTS

OF THE

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

BY

MARCUS BAKER

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WASHINGTON  
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WEST CORNER



NORTH CORNER



SOUTH CORNER

The flag at head of steps is over the corner stone



EAST CORNER

THE FOUR CORNER STONES OF THE  
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

1897

THE BOUNDARY MONUMENTS OF THE DISTRICT  
OF COLUMBIA

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MARCUS BAKER

The earliest landmarks of the District of Columbia are the stone monuments which mark its boundaries. Of these there were forty originally, all located and erected in 1791 and 1792. Washingtonians who have gone afield in the suburbs may perchance have somewhere come across an old monument bearing an inscription of which JURISDICTION was the most prominent word. Those who have done so have looked upon one of our most venerable monuments; and yet it is not very venerable, at least for a monument, being but a trifle more than a century old. But no monument or landmark of the District of Columbia can be older than the District itself, whose creation was authorized in July, 1790. Whatsoever landmarks there are in it of earlier date than this belong not to the District as such, but to Maryland and Virginia. After the protracted debate over the location of the seat of government of the very young United States was ended and selection made of a tract not to exceed ten miles square on the banks of the Potomac, the next step was to locate the tract and survey and mark its boundaries. This was done in 1791 and 1792 by Major Andrew Ellicott. Since this first survey in 1791 many surveys have been made in the District and many thousands of dollars spent thereon. None of them, however, have or can have the peculiar interest which attaches to the *first* one.

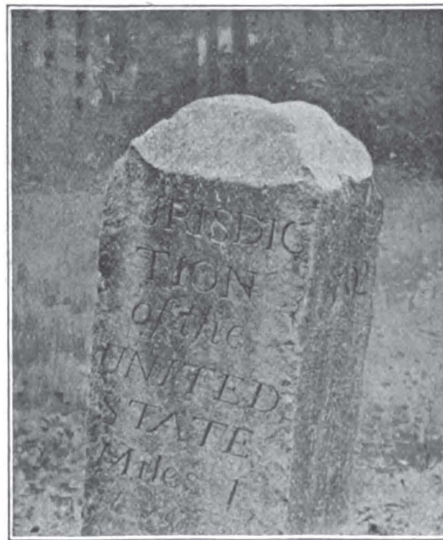
Pursuit of knowledge of the beginnings of those things which grow into importance in human affairs is the delight of the antiquary, while the story he is able to weave from the fragments collected is a source of pleasure to many, and especially to those whose interest draws them into an Historical Society. I do not know that any detailed account of the surveying and marking of our boundaries was ever written. Scraps of information I have met with here and there, but only scraps. The field-notes of the survey, where are they? Have they been destroyed? If not, who has them, and ought they not to be discovered and published?

I have spoken of scraps of information about these monuments. Most of the information I have concerning them is derived from an inspection of the monuments themselves. In the summer afternoons of 1894 I spent many delightful hours between four o'clock and sundown in looking them up. Each one contains an item of information recorded upon it, and recorded nowhere else, so far as I know. Major Elliott, who made the survey, was interested in the *variation of the compass*, or magnetic declination, as we now call it. To his intelligent interest we are doubtless indebted for our earliest knowledge of the magnetic declination in the District of Columbia. On every monument was carved the *variation*, and he who would now make use of this valuable information—increasingly valuable with increasing years—must get it, at first hand, by a forty-mile tramp across the fields in the outskirts of Washington. I have now visited the site of every one of the forty stones originally planted, having but recently completed this inspection, and am therefore now prepared to report as to how these ancient landmarks have withstood the wear and tear of the first century of their existence.

It will be remembered that the original District of Columbia was a square, with each side cutting the meridians at an angle of  $45^\circ$ . Thus we have a N., E., S., and W. corner, and also a S. W., N. W., N. E., and S. E. side. Throughout the entire extent of our forty-mile boundary, stone posts were set



at every mile. Thus there are, or were originally, 40. These stones are of the same material as that used in the first public buildings of Washington, known as freestone, and came from Aquia creek, in Virginia. They are about four feet long, two feet being in the rough and in the ground, and two feet above ground. The part above is one foot square and two feet high, with beveled top, forming the frustum of a four-sided pyramid. They were not dressed, but sawed out, as



BOUNDARY STONE S. E. 1

This monument is one mile S. E. from the E. corner of the District of Columbia

their surfaces show. Each of the four faces bears an inscription. The face fronting Virginia or Maryland bears the name VIRGINIA or MARYLAND respectively. The opposite face, however, does not bear the name District of Columbia, but in bold capitals the words JURISDICTION OF THE UNITED STATES, for which reason I have heard these monuments spoken of as "*jurisdiction stones.*" This peculiar and unusual inscription is interesting and suggestive. It throws strong light on the times and temper of those order-

ing the inscription. The colonies had but recently emerged from a prolonged and bitter struggle for freedom. Each new-fledged state was therefore jealous of the freedom so dearly bought and was loth to give up any of its jurisdiction to any person, natural or artificial. When, therefore, jurisdiction was actually ceded to the sovereign states but just united, exclusive jurisdiction was given to these *united* states with misgiving and reluctance and to the extent of "not to exceed ten miles square." When the survey began in 1791 this territory, over which the United States might exercise exclusive jurisdiction, was nameless; so was also the city to be created within it, which hitherto had been spoken of as the Federal City. But when, in the autumn of 1791, the survey approached or reached its end and a map or plat was to be made, the question arose as to the names. The three commissioners then formally resolved that it should be the *City of Washington*, in the *Territory of Columbia*. Possibly some of the stones were planted, or at least marked, before this conclusion was reached. However it may be, Columbia does not appear on any monument, but the more important fact is recorded that here, and here only, it may be added, the jurisdiction of the United States was at that time absolute and unqualified.

The survey was begun April 15, 1791, at the spot where the light-house on Jones point, near Alexandria, now stands. Here, on that day, with elaborate Masonic ceremonial and in the presence of a large concourse of citizens, chiefly from Alexandria, was the first boundary monument of the District of Columbia planted. But it is now invisible. When the light-house was built, in 1855, the foundation walls were laid around and over the stone, thus burying it from sight. A small cross on the brick steps in front of the south door of the light-house is pointed out by the light-house keeper as the spot beneath which sleeps this hidden and initial landmark.

After the completion of the boundary survey the line was cleared of trees to the width of 20 feet on each side of the

line. In this 40-foot lane through the woods stone posts were set at every mile. Those on the Virginia line bear the date 1791; all others 1792—*i. e.*, the 14 stones from the south point of the District N. W. to the W. corner, and thence N. E. to the Potomac, were set in 1791, while the remaining 26, to complete the whole boundary, were set in 1792. How large a tree may grow in Washington in a century may be judged from the size of those now standing within 20 feet of the old line. The distance of each stone from the preceding corner—*i. e.*, preceding as above described—is marked on the side which faces the District, as, for example, miles 7, miles 8, etc. When the surveyors found that an exact number of miles from a corner ended at a point in a swamp, stream bed, or other place ill suited for a monument, they measured forward or backward to firm or high ground, where they planted the monument. Thus, at the crossing of the Potomac on the N. W. line, the 3d and last monument on the Virginia side is 3 miles and 14 rods from the west corner, the inscription being “3 Miles & 14 P.,” this P. standing for poles, and reminding us of the table in our arithmetics where we learned that  $5\frac{1}{2}$  yards or  $16\frac{1}{2}$  feet make 1 rod, perch, or pole. In addition to these marks, the stones on the N. W. line from the Potomac to the north corner are numbered from 1 to 5. These numbers are on the Maryland face.

The present condition of these century-old monuments may be stated as follows: In very good condition, 3; good condition, 5; fair, 16; bad, 9; stumps in place, the whole top being broken off, 3; wholly lost and site unmarked, 2; in place but invisible, 2.

It is perhaps needless to refer to the importance of preserving original landmarks. Everybody recognizes the desirability of having boundaries clearly defined and permanently marked; but no marks, however permanent they are designed to be, will last forever. For noting the damage done them by the general agencies of decay as well as that resulting from malice or mischief, inspection must be made from time to time and the inspection must be in turn followed by repairs and

renewal when necessary, if permanency is to be secured. The results of the inspection here described make plain the need of renewal in some cases and of repairs in others. The closing years of the century seem an opportune time to draw the attention of the proper authorities to the matter, with a view to having this work done.

For future reference and for use in connection with repairs and renewals, should such be undertaken, I include with this general account, specific notes with respect to each stone. These notes are arranged from the field-notes, the first of which were made in June, 1894, and the last in 1897.

**SOUTH CORNER.**—This stone is said to be in place in the brick wall on the south side of the light-house at Jones point, near Alexandria. A cross cut on one of the bricks in the gateway immediately facing the main entrance to the light-house is said to be exactly over the stone.

S. W. 1.—This monument, slightly seamed, stands in the back yard of a place owned by Mr. Oscar Baggett, 1200 Wilke street, Alexandria, Virginia. It is erect, in fair condition, bears the date 1791, and the variation recorded upon it is  $0^{\circ} 30'$  west.

S. W. 2.—Stood upon the north side of Shuter's hill, where in late years excavations have been made; not found, and it is thought that it is lost.

S. W. 3.—Stands erect in field on south side of road on the Cunningham place, on the northern rim of a small valley; is much battered, and the inscriptions only partially legible. It appears to have been planted at a point eighteen rods less than three miles from the south corner. The inscription "M302p" is supposed to mean two miles and 302 rods. The variation recorded upon it is east, but the amount is illegible. Its date is 1791.

S. W. 4.—Broken off at the ground and lost. The stump, plow scratched, is in place, standing in the field north of the road and about four feet from the fence.

S. W. 5.—Like the preceding, this is broken off near the ground and gone. The stump, slightly projecting, may be seen in a valley near the east bank of a creek on the north side of the road.

S. W. 6.—Standing erect on the eastern rim of a widish valley in a field recently cleared; is seamed and somewhat battered and chipped; is sixteen rods less than six miles from the south corner, the inscription being "Miles [?] 304 p." The variation is  $0^{\circ} ?'$  east, the figures showing the minutes being illegible. The date is 1791.



S. W. 7.—Leaning and in bad condition. Bullet-battered and broken. Stands in an open, cleared field. The date cannot be read, the last figure being chipped off. The variation is east, but its amount uncertain. I think it is  $0^{\circ} 05'$ .

S. W. 8.—Lost. According to the statement of Mr Morgan Steeves, who has lived in Falls Church for 40 years, it stood near the road on the side of Throckmorton or Upton hill. It fell with a caving bank, lay for some time where it fell, and finally disappeared some 10 or 15 years ago.

S. W. 9.—This stone, slightly leaning and in fair condition, stands in an old meadow and is surrounded by brush. It is partially buried by washing. Its date is 1791 and the variation  $1^{\circ} 0'$  east.

WEST CORNER.—This stone, about one mile north from Falls Church, stands in the edge of a grove north from Mrs De Putron's house. It is badly broken, but the broken piece was lying by it (October 25, 1896), and by putting it in place part of the inscription could be made out. The date is 1791 and the variation  $2^{\circ} [?] 0'$  east. The number of minutes is uncertain, and may be 10, 20, 30, 40, or 50, or perhaps 00.

N. W. 1.—Standing erect in a grove, on land tenanted by a Mr Crimmins. Somewhat broken at the top. The date is gone. The variation is  $1^{\circ} 0'$  east.

N. W. 2.—Standing erect in woods on the James Payne estate. Bad condition. The top is partially broken down and the pieces carried off to be used as whetstones. Date illegible. Variation  $0^{\circ} 35'$  east.

N. W. 3.—Bad condition. Is in the woods. It is broken off below ground and the broken part lies some 20 or 30 feet from the base, which was long buried out of sight. It is said to have been broken down by an army wagon during the war. The variation is east, and its amount obscure. It appears to be  $10'$ . The date is 1791. When surveys were in progress in 1894 for developing the water power at Little falls, diligent search was made for this buried stump, which was found after much difficulty. It is the last stone on the Virginia side of the Potomac, and is three miles and fourteen rods from the west corner, the inscription being "3 Miles & 14 P." It should be replaced without delay.

N. W. 4.—All the monuments described up to this point no longer mark the boundary of the District of Columbia. They mark only the boundary between the counties of Alexandria and Fairfax, in Virginia, being on the Virginia side of the Potomac, in the region ceded back to Virginia in 1846. This and all the succeeding monuments mark the boundary of the District of Columbia as it now exists. This stone is four miles and 100 rods from the west corner, being marked "Miles 4 100 P." This increased distance, over four miles, was necessary to get the stone up on the high and firm bank of the Potomac. It stands erect in the woods, on land owned by the United States, and is in fair condition. The variation marked upon it is  $0^{\circ} 3'$  west. The date is 1792. The old

cocking-main of ante-bellum days was near this and just outside the District of Columbia.

N. W. 5.—This stone, in fair condition, stands erect in the woods near the receiving reservoir and on the "government farm." In addition to the word Maryland, it bears the number one—*i. e.*, it marks the end of the first mile on the Maryland line. The variation marked upon it is  $0^{\circ} 4(?)$  west.

N. W. 6.—This stone is about one mile west of Tenley, at the side of a road leading south from River road. It is in bad condition, being so much battered as to be in the main illegible. The variation is east, but its amount is illegible, as is also the date.

N. W. 7.—This stone is about one-fourth of a mile southwest from the Chevy Chase circle and stands erect, in good condition, in the low part of a meadow. The variation marked upon it is  $0^{\circ} 59'$  east. The date is 1792. It bears the number 3 on the Maryland face—*i. e.*, is three miles from the Potomac.

N. W. 8.—This stone, standing erect, in fair condition, is in a growth of young timber where it is difficult to find without a guide. It is three-fourths of a mile northeast from the Chevy Chase circle. The variation marked upon it is  $0^{\circ} 2(9?)$  east, the last figure being broken and uncertain. The date is 1792. It bears the number 4 on the Maryland face.

N. W. 9.—This stone, standing erect, in fair condition, is in thick woods on land of J. B. Brown, one of the Carroll heirs, and is near a stone quarry and at some distance from any public road. It is difficult to find without a guide. The variation recorded upon it is east, the amount apparently  $2^{\circ}$ , but it is so broken and chipped as to make the reading doubtful. It bears the number 5 on the Maryland face.

NORTH CORNER.—This stone, standing erect, in fair condition, is on the Fenwick place, and is best reached by way of Fenwick station on the Baltimore and Ohio railroad. It is taller than the ordinary mile-posts and differently marked. It stands in an old cornfield, where it is partially buried by washing. It bears the legend "Miles 10," is dated 1792, and the variation is  $1^{\circ} (2?)$  east.

N. E. 1.—This stone, slightly leaning, but in fair condition, stands in an open meadow a few rods from the Seventh-street road. It is readily reached by the Silver Spring electric railroad, being only three or four minutes' walk from that point of the railroad where it leaves Seventh street and turns east. The date is 1792 and the variation  $1^{\circ} 6'$  east.

N. E. 2.—This stone, erect, in fair condition, is in Takoma, about two blocks east of the railroad station. It stands in the fence line on the west side of Maple avenue near the corner of Carroll avenue. The date is 1792 and the variation  $1^{\circ} 12'$ , but whether east or west cannot be deciphered from the stone.

N. E. 3.—This stone, erect, in fair condition, is on the Martin estate, in the edge of the woods, and is best reached from Stott station on the Baltimore and Ohio railroad, from which it is distant about half a mile. The date is 1792 and the variation  $0^{\circ} 18'$  west.

N. E. 4.—This stone stands erect, in good condition, in a line fence of the Miller estate, in the edge of the woods. It is on the north side of and near the Sargent road. The date is 1792 and the variation  $0^{\circ} 25'$  west.

N. E. 5.—This stone is in fair condition, but leaning at an angle of about  $45^{\circ}$ . It is a little less than a quarter of a mile south of the Queens Chapel road and stands in a truck garden on the edge of a ditch. The date is 1792 and the variation  $0^{\circ} 22'$  east.

N. E. 6.—This stone, erect and in very good condition, is near the Brentwood road, on the bank of a gulch in the woods. It is best reached from the station Rives on the Baltimore and Ohio railroad, from which it is distant less than one-fourth of a mile. Its distance from the north corner is six miles and ten rods, as the inscription "Miles 6 & 10 P." informs us. The date is 1792 and the variation  $0^{\circ} 51'$  east.

N. E. 7.—This stone is erect but seamed; otherwise is in good condition. It is nearly a mile from the Bladensburg road and difficult to find without a guide; is best reached from the station Rives on the Baltimore and Ohio railroad. The date is 1792 and the variation  $1^{\circ} 8'$  east.

N. E. 8.—This stone, erect and in good condition, is south of the Anacostia or Eastern branch and a few rods north of the road from Benning to Bladensburg. It stands in a field overgrown with weeds on the McCormick place. The date is 1792 and the variation  $0^{\circ} 24'$  east.

N. E. 9.—This stone is erect, but in bad condition. It stands on the northeast side and close to a private road leading from and quite near the Sheriff road. A large cherry tree has grown up close beside it, hiding one of its faces. The date is 1792 and the variation  $0^{\circ} 19'$  east.

EAST CORNER.—This corner-stone is erect and in good condition. It stands on the Lee place in a cultivated field. The date is 1792 and the variation  $0^{\circ}$  (10 or 12 or  $19'$ ) east. The last minute figure is broken and uncertain.

S. E. 1.—This stone, slightly leaning and in fair condition, stands in the woods on the old Marshall farm, about half a mile south of Central avenue. The date is 1792 and variation  $0^{\circ} 11'$  east.

S. E. 2.—This stone, erect and in excellent condition, is on the Trimble estate, among low scrub in a pasture, and is difficult to find without a guide. It is a short distance south of the Bowen road. The date is 1792 and the variation  $0^{\circ} 4'$  east.

S. E. 3.—This stone, slightly leaning, is in bad condition. It stands in a garden near the Suitland road about two miles east of Anacostia. The date is 1792 and the variation  $0^{\circ} 8'$  west.

S. E. 4.—This stone stands erect on the south edge of the Naylor road and in the bank where the wheels of passing vehicles have ground off every vestige of lettering. It should be replaced forthwith.

S. E. 5.—This stone, erect, in fair condition, stands in a garden on land owned by a Mr Thompson. It is some distance from any public road and not far from the south bank of Oxon run. The date is 1792 and the variation 0° 21' east.

S. E. 6.—This stone, erect and in excellent condition, stands in a garden a few rods southwest of the Wheeler road, on the top of the plateau. The date is 1792 and variation 0° 18' east.

S. E. 7.—This stone, at the northeast edge of the Livingston road, is near the bank of a small stream flowing into Oxon run. Freshets in this little stream have deposited gravel and clay about it so as to bury it almost completely out of sight. Only the tip is visible. By dint of hard digging for some time I uncovered the record of the variation, which proved to be 0° 25' east.

S. E. 8.—This stone, erect, in fair condition, stands in the edge of a swampy thicket, where it is about half buried from view. It is some distance from any public road, and could not be readily found without a guide. The date is 1792 and the variation 0° 34' east.

S. E. 9.—This stone, slightly leaning and in fair condition, stands on the east bank of the Potomac, northeast from Alexandria, and may be readily reached by the Fox ferry. It is partially submerged during highest water. It is 8 miles and 291 rods from the east corner, the inscription being "Miles 8 291 P." The date is 1792 and the variation 0° 37' east.

*Summary of Variation of Compass Observed in 1791 or 1792 and Recorded on the Boundary Monuments of the District of Columbia.*

Stone.	Var.	Stone.	Var.	Stone.	Var.	Stone.	Var.
S. ....	?	W. ....	2° 00' E.	N. ....	1° 27' E.	E. ....	0° 10' E.
S. W. 1. ....	0° 30' W.	N. W. 1. ....	1 00 E.	N. E. 1. ....	1 06 E.	S. E. 1. ....	0 11 E.
S. W. 2. ....		N. W. 2. ....	0 35 E.	N. E. 2. ....	1 12 E.	S. E. 2. ....	0 04 E.
S. W. 3. ....	E.	N. W. 3. ....	0 10 E.	N. E. 3. ....	0 18 W.	S. E. 3. ....	0 08 W.
S. W. 4. ....		N. W. 4. ....	0 03 W.	N. E. 4. ....	0 25 W.	S. E. 4. ....	
S. W. 5. ....		N. W. 5. ....	0 4? W.	N. E. 5. ....	0 22 E.	S. E. 5. ....	0 21 E.
S. W. 6. ....	E.	N. W. 6. ....	E.	N. E. 6. ....	0 51 E.	S. E. 6. ....	0 18 E.
S. W. 7. ....	0 05 E.	N. W. 7. ....	0 59 E.	N. E. 7. ....	1 08 E.	S. E. 7. ....	0 25 E.
S. W. 8. ....		N. W. 8. ....	0 29 E.	N. E. 8. ....	0 24 E.	S. E. 8. ....	0 34 E.
S. W. 9. ....	1 00 E.	N. W. 9. ....	2 00 E.	N. E. 9. ....	0 19 E.	S. E. 9. ....	0 37 E.

Mean variation in 1791 or 1792.....	0° 30' E.
Variation in 1897.....	4 35 W.
Change in 105 years.....	5 06
Yearly change.....	2'.9

[N. B.—The stones are numbered in order from south corner to west corner, west to north, north to east, and east to south.]