

THE RECOVERY OF THE SOUTHERN CORNER STONE OF THE DISTRICT.

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(Read before the Society, March 18, 1913.)

The southern corner stone of the District of Columbia has at last been brought to light and its exact location is no longer a mystery.

The sea-wall surrounding the quaint little Jones's Point lighthouse below Alexandria, Va., has given up its long-kept secret and has been broken into by the United States Engineers, who have been at work in its immediate vicinity for some time past, and the long-buried stone has been uncovered to inspection, for the first time since 1861.

Because of its importance as the initial boundary and one of the standstone pillars or mile stones placed at intervals approximately one mile apart, to define and mark the Federal Territory, it possesses no little historic interest.

Shortly after Congress in 1790, authorized the erection of a territory "ten miles square" on the Potomac river, its actual position was permanently marked by the erection of suitably inscribed brown sandstone monuments, about one foot square, beveled at four inches from the top and extending two feet above the surface of the ground.

These were procured from the quarries leased by the United States Government at Acquia Creek, Va., and were forty in number.

President Washington directed that a preliminary survey should begin at a point on Hunting Creek, by running a line from Alexandria Court House south-

westward half a mile and thence southeastward to the northern shore of Hunting Creek.

After the establishment of the initial point, his instructions regarding the lines of the District were as follows: "Beginning at Jones's Point, being the upper cape of Hunting Creek in Virginia, and at an angle in the outset of forty-five degrees west of the north, and running in a direct line ten miles for the first line: Then beginning again at a right angle with the first, across the Potomac ten miles, for a second line; thence from the termination of said first and second line, running two other lines of ten miles each, the one crossing the eastern branch aforesaid and the other the Potomac and meeting each other in a point."

This being the initial or corner stone of the District, its erection was deemed worthy of a celebration, and this took place in the presence of a large concourse of people, on April 15th, 1791, the ceremonies being under the immediate direction of Hon. Daniel Carroll and Dr. David Stuart, both Commissioners.

The latter was a practicing physician, residing in Alexandria, Va., and was the leading practitioner in that part of the state. He was at this time somewhat elderly, benevolent-looking and a great admirer of the classic poets, whom he often quoted in conversation; while Mr. Carroll, though still a young man, was already one of the prominent citizens of Washington, and a large land holder.

A correspondent of the *Massachusetts Spy*, writing from Alexandria, a few days after the occurrence, thus describes the affair:

"On Friday the 15th. inst. 1791, The Hon. Daniel Carroll and Dr. David Stewart arrived in this town to superintend the fixing of the corner stone of the federal district. . . .

The mayor and the commonality, together with the members of the different lodges of the town, at three o'clock waited on the Commissioners at Mr. Wise's, where they had arrived, and after drinking a glass of wine to the following sentiment,

“May the stone we are about to place in the ground remain an immovable monument of the wisdom and unanimity of North America,”

the company proceeded to Jones's Point in the following order :

1. The town sergeant.
2. The Hon. Daniel Carroll and the Mayor.
3. Mr. Ellicott and the recorder.
4. Such of the aldermen and common council as were not Free Masons.
5. The strangers.
6. The Master of Lodge No. 22 with Dr. David Stuart at his right and the Rev. James Muir at his left, followed by the rest of the fraternity in their usual form of procession, and lastly
7. The citizens, two by two.

When Mr. Ellicott had ascertained the precise point from which the first line of the District was to proceed, the Master of the Lodge and Dr. Stuart, assisted by others of the brethren, placed the stone: after which a deposit of corn, wine and oil was made upon it.

In the course of his remarks Rev. James Muir said :

“May this stone long commemorate the Goodness of God, in those uncommon events which have given America a place among nations. Under this stone may jealousy and selfishness be buried forever.

“From this stone may a superstructure arise whose glory, whose magnificence, whose stability, unequalled hitherto, shall astonish the world and invite even the savage of the wilderness to a shelter under its roof.”

The company partook of some liquid refreshment and retired to the place from which they came, where a number of toasts were drank.

In 1885, the United States overnment established and built a lighthouse upon Jones's Point, about 15 feet north of the boundary stone and six years later, 1861, under the direction of the United States Engineer Corps, a retaining sea wall was constructed upon the top of and over the stone, completely hiding it from view.

For more than half a century, no human eye has looked upon this earliest monument, the subject of Dr. Muir's prophecy.

About eight years ago the speaker visited the site of each of these ancient landmarks and was able to secure photographs of nearly all of them. The result of these excursions was presented to this Society on May 14th, 1906, and January 14th, 1907, respectively.

At this time and, in fact, ever since the civil war, the exact location of this stone has been a baffling mystery. There has been no uncertainty as to the main fact, viz: that the stone was somewhere under the sea wall of the Jones's Point lighthouse, below Alexandria, Va.

Marcus Baker says in his "Surveys and Maps of the District of Columbia," a paper read before the Geographical Society, March 23, 1894,

"On the 15th of April, 1791, there was laid with solemn and elaborate Masonic ceremonies, the corner stone of the District of Columbia. This stone, still standing, though hidden from view, forms a part of the foundation wall of the lighthouse at Jones' Point, near Alexandria, Va. It is under the gateway in front of the south door of the lighthouse."

"An inquiry addressed to the Lighthouse Board asking for its exact location was answered in these

words: 'Referring to your letter relating to the location of the southern corner stone of the District of Columbia, which is said to be located on Jones' Point lighthouse reservation, the board states that its records and those of the engineer of the Fifth Lighthouse District throw no light on the subject; but an unverified statement places the stone under the front steps of the keeper's dwelling.' "

During a conversation with Mr. F. E. Wilkins, the lighthouse keeper, he showed the writer an old map of the surrounding territory then owned by the Southern Railway Company, on which the line of the District (which is at present the dividing line between Alexandria and Fairfax Counties of Virginia) was shown,—crossing the southwestern corner of the dwelling, thence across the yard formed by the sea wall, emerging from the sea wall immediately beneath a small flight of wooden steps leading from the yard above mentioned to the beach. This convinced me that the stone would be found (if ever found at all) in this exact place. This map may be found in Vol. 11, Plate 3, Columbia Historical Society's publications.

Some months later there was discovered in the records of the engineer's office, a report of Mr. C. H. Sinclair, made in 1884 (which I understand has never been printed), in which mention was made of a mark made on the sea wall. A part of this reports is as follows:

"At Jones' Point in 1861 a sea wall three feet eight and a half inches high was built and the corner stone enclosed in the wall.

The light house keeper, Mr. Greenwood, saw the stone at the time the wall was built and says it was 12 inches by 12 inches and stood 15 inches above the ground.

The wall has a batter of 2 inches, and on a stone marked in the sketch, a figure is cut.

The keeper said that this was cut to show where the center of the side of the stone was, and as near as he could place it, the centre of the stone itself was at a point 6 inches from the edge of top of the wall, and that on this wall, stone was on the outside of the corner stone."

A year or two ago the flight of wooden steps referred to was washed away by a severe storm, leaving this portion of the wall immediately accessible, as it had not been before.

Mr. E. B. Gregg, of this city, rendered a very acceptable service by discovering on the face of this wall, an *arrowhead mark*, evidently made for a purpose.

This mark was photographed and is shown in the pictures presented.

The discovery of this mark, which agreed so nearly with Mr. Sinclair's description, seemed conclusive to me that the long-looked-for stone had been definitely located, if not discovered, and I immediately took steps to secure the necessary authority to demolish a part of the wall, and bring once more to light this ancient landmark, this first tangible mark of an effort to implant in what was then a wilderness, the permanent boundaries of the future home of the infant republic.

In the light of today, and in the prophetic light of the future, what momentous events radiate from this bit of sandstone.

Both branches of the United States Government having charge of the reservation, the Engineer Corps and the Lighthouse Board, readily gave their permission, but stipulated that there should be no expense attending the same, chargeable to their department, and that everything should be done under their direction.

Thus the matter rested until June, 1912, when Lieut. Col. W. C. Langfitt, of the United States Engineer Corps, at that time engaged in extensive operations in the immediate vicinity of the stone, broke into the wall and, as I had foreseen, found the stone within a few inches of its predicted location.

Still further, the Engineer Corps has constructed a substantial niche or cage about six feet long and four feet in height and two and one-half feet in depth, covered with a broad concrete slab.

This slab has a circular opening some six inches in diameter exactly over the center of the stone, making it accessible for surveyors.

The opening in front of the stone measures four feet wide and two feet eight inches in height. The stone is slightly varied in shape from the remaining ones, being about eleven inches by nearly fourteen inches, instead of the usual twelve by twelve. About twenty-two inches of the stone is now above the surface of the ground, which at this point is beach sand.

In view of the fact that this historic boundary stone has been brought to light and well protected, and also that the United States Government has recently reclaimed a large tract of land north of and almost adjoining the reservation on which the lighthouse is situated, it would seem almost certain that this spot will become an object of veneration and of frequent pilgrimages on the part of sightseers and others.

Unfortunately, the lighthouse and its tiny reservation of 2952 square feet (about one small city lot) is surrounded by private property, a small portion of which should be acquired by the United States in order to gain access to the stone.

At the present time there is no public roadway leading to the reservation and the corner stone, but it

seems probable that such a road may be opened up through this newly reclaimed area and leading from Alexandria.

Such a road, if constructed, would not give access to the corner stone, there being still some twenty-five or thirty feet of private property between them.

A suggestion has been made that the Government purchase a small portion of the extreme point of land on which the lighthouse now stands, say all east of the present westerly line of the reservation.

The ground is almost without value and its selling price would certainly be a mere trifle, as there is less than half an acre and all of it sand.

It seems more than likely that if such a bill were to be introduced into Congress, no objection would be made and the bill would pass.

Lieut. Col. W. C. Langfitt, of the Engineer Corps, deserves our kind consideration for valuable services rendered by him in uncovering the stone and allowing us to photograph the same as soon as it was visible, and later constructing a suitable concrete cage which is a perfect protection for the stone.

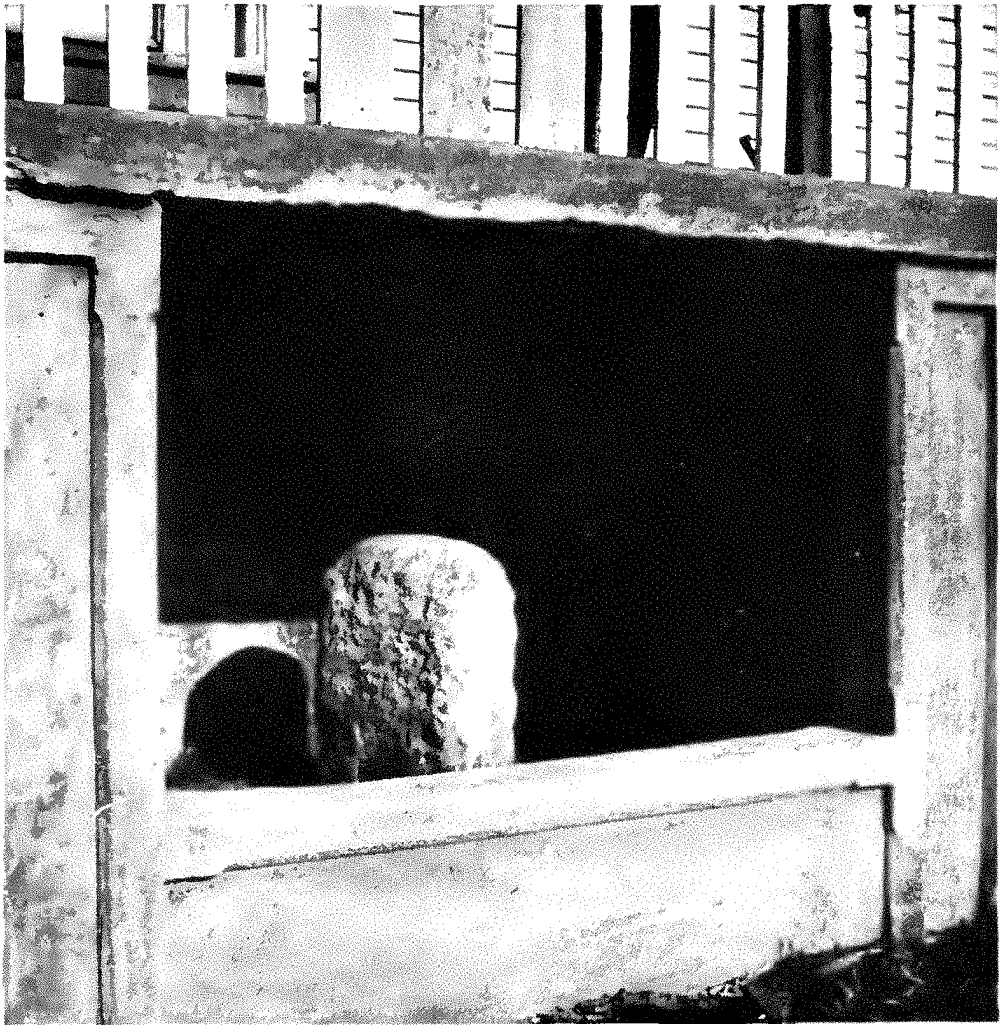
Some inscription should be placed upon the enclosure to the effect that this is

THE INITIAL CORNER STONE OF THE DISTRICT OF
COLUMBIA, PLACED IN POSITION
APRIL 15, 1791.

An enduring bronze tablet will cost about \$75.00, but pending the question of expending such a sum, a printed sign might be secured at a cost of a few dollars.

The present time is a favorable one to suggest to the Representatives in Congress from this Congressional

district in Virginia that a little effort and the expenditure of a small sum of money would suffice to restore and fully protect for the future the remaining thirteen stones on the Virginia side of the old territory, thus saving these ancient and truly honorable landmarks from hand of the careless and the wantonly vandal, leaving them subject only to the ravages of time, whose softening finger dulls the sharpest lines and adds a beauty and a charm even to decay.



THE CONCRETE CAGE OVER THE STONE.
Erected in 1912.