

SUNDAY, JUNE 7, 1998

# The Four Cornerstones of the Original D.C.

On a recent Saturday, I indulged my enthusiasm for local geography and history when I led three friends on a day tour of the District's four cornerstones.

These stones are sited at the corners of the original District of Columbia, which included parts of Arlington County and the City of Alexandria. I was eager to show my companions these symbols of both the profound thought and the physical labor that went into the layout of the nation's capital. So, it is with sadness that I must report on the poor surroundings and neglected condition of most of the stones.

The stones mark the corners of the original "L'Enfant Diamond," in reference to Charles Pierre L'Enfant, the great planner of Washington. The surveying was done by a team under Benjamin Banneker and Samuel Ellicot in 1791 and 1792 at the behest of Thomas Jefferson.

The surveyors dropped a stone once every mile along the city's border, beginning at the south corner of the diamond at Jones Point near the Woodrow Wilson Bridge. The District is 10 miles on a side, so the surveyors placed 40 stones altogether.

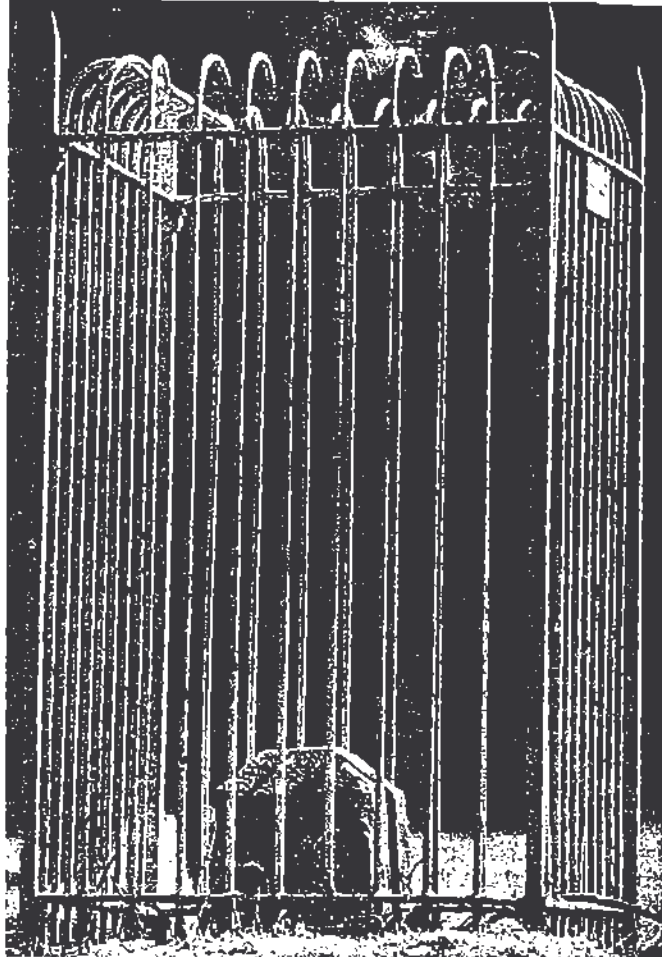
Most of the stones still survive, though in varying degrees of disrepair and neglect. Some, including all four cornerstones, are encased in wrought-iron cages that the Daughters of the American Revolution placed around them about 90 years ago. What follows are my findings on the condition of the four cornerstones.

■ The north cornerstone is located just off East-West Highway about a half-mile from the Silver Spring Metro station. It is at the bottom of a shallow embankment below the roadway guardrail, at the edge of an apartment complex and behind the houses on Verbena Street. It rests at the edge of a drainage path, and as a result, it slowly is being covered by sediment. Anyone can climb over the fence surrounding the stone and stand on it, causing further damage.

■ The east cornerstone is in a tangled, wooded lot thick with poison ivy just off the elbow-

shaped intersection of Eastern and Southern avenues. This is a tired section of the city, at the edge of Seat Pleasant, about a quarter of a mile from the Capitol Heights Metro station.

The stone is concealed by many leaves and branches. The lot is filled with litter and



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debris, and a swath of trees about 50 feet from the cornerstone has been knocked down and smoothed into a muddy path. The cage around the stone does form an impenetrable barrier, which affords the marker some protection. Nevertheless, its location is unkempt.

■ The west cornerstone, located about midway between the Metro stations of East Falls Church and West Falls Church, is off Arizona Avenue. A tiny park has been established

around the stone, and a higher, newer iron fence surrounds it. A plaque attributes the erection of the fence to the Falls Church chapter of the DAR. The stone also marks the meeting point of Arlington County, Fairfax County and the City of Falls Church.

A story told about the stone is that a tree grew up around it, encasing it for decades. Then in 1963, the tree was struck by lightning and eventually died. The stone reemerged in good condition, and its current surroundings seem to ensure that it will remain protected for a long time.

■ The south cornerstone was the first marker to be laid. According to records, on a stormy April 15, 1791, Banneker, a Philadelphia astronomer and black freeman, and a local troupe of Masons placed this stone that would serve as the reference point for the other 39 stones and the outline of the new federal district.

Like its western counterpart, the south cornerstone is in a park, this one at the southern tip of Jones Point, but its future is more precarious than that of the northern marker.

The stone is inside the alcove of the bulkhead marking the edge of the Potomac River, and at high tide, it is in the river. When we saw the stone, water covered its base, and litter and detritus from the less-than-sparkling-clean river filled the cage.

The south cornerstone also is threatened by the plans for a replacement span for the Woodrow Wilson Bridge. Construction of a proposed bridge of 12 lanes, which would be located south of the current bridge, could damage or destroy the cornerstone's site.

Local governments could, with a modest effort, protect these unique historical markers. If they can't or won't do so, then perhaps the U.S. Park Service could step in.

How sad it would be if these boundary markers and the history behind them were covered with sediment, washed away or bulldozed over in the march of progress.

—Richard M. Todaro