

Surveying the Boundaries of the District of Columbia (Washington DC)

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SUMMARY

The Federal District of Columbia, better known as Washington DC, is perhaps the most powerful city in the world. With 100 square miles of land donated from two of the original thirteen States, Maryland and Virginia. Learn why and how was this location was chosen to become the capital city of a new nation, the reason British soldiers later burned the White House to the ground, and why Virginia successfully requested to have its donated land retroceded in 1846. Several notable individuals participated in the ground survey of 1791-92. The lives of Andrew Ellicott, Pierre L'Enfant, and Benjamin Banneker reflected the diverse populations---and fortunes---of a young America. Surprisingly, most of the 40 boundary stones, the oldest documents of the Federal City, are visible today. But that was not always the case. A female volunteer association, the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), began to care for the stones in 1915. Of course, finding the stones was only the first of many challenges of preserving the historical boundary survey that, even today, shapes political boundaries and traffic patterns.

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INTRODUCTION

Early History of Washington DC

After winning its independence from Great Britain in 1783, several of the 13 original United States wanted the prestige of hosting the new nation's capital city. In 1787, the newly ratified U.S. Constitution provided for a 100 square mile land parcel along the Potomac River for the seat of the Federal government. Nearly equidistant between Georgia and Massachusetts, the states of Virginia and Maryland gladly offered parcels, which included the existing port cities of Alexandria (VA) and Georgetown (MD). The first U.S. President, George Washington, selected a questionable, swampy location, but one conveniently located 18 km from his Virginia plantation at Mount Vernon.

To celebrate the 300th anniversary of Columbus' first voyage to the Americas in 1492, "the Territory of Columbia's" name and diamond shape were determined. At the time, Columbia was a popular poetic name for the first independent nation in the Americas. Also in 1792, the Columbia River, flowing from the Rocky Mountains into the Pacific Ocean, received its name. In 1786, the capital of South Carolina moved inland from colonial Charleston to Columbia. Of course, a South American nation took that name formerly in 1819, and use of the name to refer to the United States declined. But thanks to the Columbia Broadcasting Company and Columbia Pictures, the female personification of America is, even today, recognizable in cinemas worldwide.

President Washington appointed Andrew Ellicott to survey the area and employed Pierre Charles L'Enfant, a French military engineer, to design the plan of the Federal city. The lives of Ellicott, L'Enfant, and Benjamin Banneker reflect the diverse populations---and fortunes---of a young America. In 1791-92, the Ellicott survey team placed 40 boundary stones around the perimeter of the District of Columbia, one at each mile, beginning at the southern tip of the diamond in Alexandria, and working clockwise.

From there, Ellicott's team embarked on a 40-mile journey that took nearly two years. They created the boundary lines of the capital by clearing 6.5 meters of land on each side of the boundary and setting a uniquely marked stone at each mile interval. On each stone, the side facing the District of Columbia displayed the inscription "Jurisdiction of the United States" and a mile number. The opposite side said either "Virginia" or "Maryland," as appropriate. The third and fourth sides displayed 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 place (Boundary Stones, 2007).

Clearing this densely wooded and hilly terrain with axes and saws was exceedingly painstaking work. One need not wonder that the first 19th century road leading west, the Leesburg Turnpike, would take advantage of this clearing. The nearly straight road is a major traffic artery today and forms the boundary between the Virginia counties of Arlington and Fairfax. And, the new road was urgently needed when President James Madison and the U.S. Congress evacuated Washington in the face of an approaching British Army, relocating 60 km west to Leesburg and safety.

In August 1814, during the War of 1812, British forces invaded and burned the Capitol, the President's House, and other public buildings. These were rebuilt within five years, but for a long time, Washington remained a rude, rough city. In 1842, English author Charles Dickens described it as a "monument raised to a deceased project," consisting of "spacious avenues that begin in nothing and lead nowhere." At the request of its residents, the Virginia portion was retroceded in 1846, thus confining the federal district to the eastern shore of the Potomac (District of Columbia History 2007).

Reasons for the retrocession were twofold. First, in a compromise, Congress approved then President Washington's selected location so near to his home with the caveat that no public buildings would be erected on the Virginia side of the Potomac River. Fifty years later the Virginia side remained a swampy wilderness, an area increasingly expensive for the city to maintain. Second, changing attitudes about slavery in 19th century America caused rumors to swirl that the Federal District would outlaw slavery. This, in fact, did occur in 1850. Fearing the loss of their property, slaveholders on the Virginia side agitated for the retrocession of the parcel to the State of Virginia, where their chattel would be secure (until Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of 1863).

Three Men, Three Destinies

Andrew Ellicott the premier surveyor in early American history. In addition to surveying the boundaries of the District of Columbia, Ellicott extended the British colonial survey of the Mason-Dixon line westward, which became, in the mid 19th Century, the dividing line between slave (southern) and northern (free) states. He instructed Meriwether Lewis on surveying methods prior to the latter's epic two year journey, with William Clark, that gave the United States a gigantic territorial claim westward. Earlier, the "Ellicott Line" (80°31'12" West Longitude) had become the baseline for the surveys of the Northwest Territory, the beginning of the Public Lands Survey System (PLSS). The PLSS survey is "the first mathematically designed system and nationally conducted cadastral survey in any modern country" and is "an object of study by public officials of foreign countries as a basis for land reform" (Mendinghall, 1974). Ellicott later became a professor of mathematics at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.

Ellicott City, Maryland, near Baltimore, is a trendy boutique town today. Andrew Ellicott's forefathers opened a mill there in the 18th century; in the 19th century the town became a significant commercial center on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad.

Pierre L'Enfant. A Parisian by birth, L'Enfant moved to America in 1777, and fought with the Marquis de Lafayette for American independence. His engraved design of his Washington DC city plan was submitted late, and because he constantly quarreled with his supervisors, President Washington dismissed L'Enfant in 1792. None other than Andrew Ellicott continued the planning of Washington DC. L'Enfant was not paid for his work and fell into disgrace, spending the rest of his life trying to persuade Congress him back wages. Although offered a position as Professor of Engineering at West Point in 1812, he declined it. L'Enfant died in poverty in 1825 (Stewart, 1899). A century later L'Enfant's contributions were finally recognized. He was reburied in Arlington National Cemetery and honored with a monument that included his city design. Washington's busiest subway station, the junction of four of the five Washington Metro lines, is at L'Enfant Plaza,

Benjamin Banneker was a free black man whose intellectual curiosity was surpassed only by passion for civil rights. At age 21, Banneker saw a pocket watch owned by the uncle of the surveyor Andrew Ellicott, also named Andrew. He was so amazed by it that Ellicott gave it to him. Banneker spent days taking it apart and reassembling it. This event changed his life, and he became a watch and clockmaker. One customer was Andrew's brother Joseph Ellicott, who needed an extremely accurate timepiece to make astronomical calculations. Joseph Ellicott was so impressed with Banneker that he lent the young man books on mathematics and astronomy. The self-educated Banneker's scientific achievements and anti-slavery vision of social justice and equity merged in *Benjamin Banneker's Almanac*. He wrote to then Secretary of State and author of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson, a plea for justice for African-Americans, calling on the colonists' personal experience as "slaves" of Britain, and quoting Jefferson's own words. Jefferson replied to Banneker asserting his own interest in the advancement of the equality of America's black population. Jefferson also forwarded a copy of Banneker's *Almanac* to the French Academy of Sciences in Paris.

What made Banneker's *Almanacs* innovative --- aside from the fact that they were produced by a black man in an age when African Americans were considered incapable of scientific, mathematical or literary accomplishment --- was the inclusion of commentaries, literature, and fillers that had a political and humanitarian purpose (Public Broadcasting Company, 2007).

Two parks, one in the District of Columbia, and another in the City of Falls Church, Virginia, honor Benjamin Banneker today.

The Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR)

Over the next century, the condition of DC historic boundary markers deteriorated due to neglect and a lack of concern. Many of these stones had been buried or destroyed. In 1915, the Washington DC chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), a nationwide women's association, voluntarily assumed the responsibility of protecting the boundary stones by erecting an iron cage around each one with the following ethos:

That the DC DAR take up for part of their patriotic work for the year, the preservation and protection of the old boundary stones on which are recorded the oldest records of the District, by placing an iron fence around each stone, to be done by Chapter or individually (DAR, 2008).

Over the last century, DAR members, in the great tradition of American volunteerism, have performed maintenance on these oldest of Federal monuments.

CONCLUSION

Today, the DC Chapter of the DAR continues to preserve these historical monuments and to create public awareness of their importance. Although several have been moved or replaced, 38 of the original 40 boundary stones are still located in or near their original locations selected by Andrew Ellicott and the nearly 60-year-old Benjamin Banneker. After many construction delays, Washington DC opened for business as the capital of the United States in 1800. Sadly, George Washington had passed away in December 1799. John Adams was ending his term as America's second president when he moved into the White House in the summer of 1800. Eight months later Thomas Jefferson occupied the Oval Office and had his personal secretary, Meriwether Lewis, train in surveying under Andrew Ellicott. By 1806, Lewis' exploration and surveying of the vast western lands that drain into the Mississippi River, known as the Louisiana Purchase which doubled the size of the United States, and created a century-long demand for public surveying.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Douglas Batson is a 26-year U.S. civil servant. Following 10 years as a civilian with the U.S. Army in Germany, he is in his second stint with the U.S. Department of Defense. A political geographer, Batson is a staff member to the Foreign Names Committee of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names. He holds a Master of Education from Boston University and a Bachelor of Science degree in geography from Excelsior College in Albany, New York. He previously worked for the U.S. Geological Survey, the U.S. Department of Justice, and is retired from the U.S. Army Reserve. Available in the summer of 2008 as a PDF file at www.ndic.edu/press/press.htm, Batson's book, *Registering the Human Terrain: a Valuation of Cadastre*, is the product of his proposal to focus U.S. foreign policy on land administration matters, which earned him a 12-month research fellowship in 2006.

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