

THE ARLINGTON BOUNDARY STONES

By

June Robinson*

In the July heat of Philadelphia, 1787, shortly after the compromise had been reached which allowed members of the Constitutional Convention to continue with their work of writing a constitution, other issues arose which threatened to tear the delegations apart. One of these issues was the location of the seat of government. Where should it be located? Convincing arguments were put forth for New York, Philadelphia, Richmond, Annapolis, and other established cities, as well as for undeveloped areas in a number of other sites. The matter was solved — as were several other controversial issues, by agreeing that the choice would be left up to the Congress of the new government. By September 5, when the Committee of Eleven reported, the following statement was read: “To exercise exclusive legislation in all cases whatsoever over such district (not exceeding ten miles square) as may by cession of particular States and the acceptance of the Legislature become the seat of the Government of the United States . . .”¹

Several years later, after the Constitution had been ratified, the first seat of government was designated by the old Congress before it voted itself out of existence. The new Congress would meet in New York, just as it had met.

The First Federal Congress was scheduled to assemble the first Wednesday in March, 1789. The House of Representatives was not able to assemble a quorum until April 1; the Senate, until April 6. Congressmen gave weather, bad roads, and poor transportation as excuses. Southerners gave the inconvenience of New York as a major reason for the delay.

The seat of government had not always been in New York. In 1783 the old Congress had met in Philadelphia, then moved to Princeton, Annapolis, and Trenton, before settling in New York in 1785. Many disputes took place before New York was designated for the new government, but Congressmen from New England, New Jersey, and South Carolina had combined with New York to force the decision.

Citizens of New York had subscribed more than \$39,000 to repair and remodel the old City Hall on Wall Street to prepare a meeting place equal to the dignity of the new government. Pierre L’Enfant, a French military engineer, had designed a setting equal to those of the grand buildings of Europe.²

Representatives from Philadelphia were not impressed.³

The first business of government was to count the electoral votes and notify the new president, swear in officers, and begin work. Petitions began to pour in, including a memorial from the citizens of the states of New

Jersey and Pennsylvania “praying that the future seat of government might be established on the Banks of Delaware, and proposing a cession of a tract of land ten miles square.” Similar petitions came from the inhabitants of Carlisle, Lancaster, York, Reading, and Germantown, Pennsylvania. The citizens of Baltimore submitted a petition declaring their town “to be exceedingly commodious and eligible for the permanent seat of the United States.”⁴

During the first session of Congress James Madison is recorded as having said in a speech on September 4, 1789, “I presume that the expenditures which will take place, where the government will be established, by them who are immediately concerned in its administration, and by others who may resort to it, will not be less than a half a million of dollars for a year.”⁵ Proposals were put forward for a permanent residence at sites on the Susquehanna River, adjacent to the falls of the Delaware at Trenton, and along the Potomac. The month before, William Maclay, Senator from Pennsylvania, had nominated a number of places in Pennsylvania including Lancaster, Wright’s Ferry, Yorktown, Carlisle, Harrisburg, Reading, and Germantown. Citizens from Georgetown, Maryland, offered to put themselves under the exclusive jurisdiction of Congress if they should be chosen.

During the second session of the First Congress, the two great divisive issues of the day — the management of the public debt and the location of the capital — were handled. On January 14, 1790, Secretary of Treasury Hamilton had proposed that the debt be paid off with a long term funding program and that the debts the states had incurred during the war be assumed by the national government and funded as part of the federal debt. Debate, discussion, and dissension followed. In the end, on July 26, 1790, the Assumption Act passed. It was believed that it would never have passed without the compromise which established a permanent seat of government for the United States on the Potomac River.

In May, 1790, Robert Morris proposed that Congress should leave New York and meet in Philadelphia. In June the vote was for Philadelphia, but a reconsideration gave the majority vote to Baltimore. Another proposal for ten more years in New York was defeated. On July 1, 1790, by a vote of 14 to 12 the Senate voted for a temporary residence of ten years at Philadelphia and a permanent residence on the Potomac. The House voted in favor of the same Residence Bill on July 12.

Two years later Thomas Jefferson wrote his version of the Compromise of 1790. He wrote that in order to mediate a crisis, he had brought Madison and Hamilton together and out of that meeting came an understanding that would break the impasse over residence and assumption. Jefferson wrote: “It was observed, I forget by which of them, that as the bill would be a bitter one to the Southern states, something should be done to soothe them, that the removal of the seat of government to the Patowmac was a just

measure, and would probably be a popular one with them, and would be a proper one to follow the assumption. . .”⁶ The consent of congressmen whose districts lay along the Potomac was sought, and putting the interests of their districts first, they agreed to the Assumption Act. Several New England congressmen were induced to vote for the Residence Act if the Maryland and Virginia members would vote for Assumption.

A Pennsylvania representative expressed a common opinion when he noted that “the Patomacke scheme is so absurd that very few expect Congress will ever go there — but continue in Philada.”⁷

On July 15, 1790, President Washington signed the Residence Act into law. The Assumption Act was passed in August, 1790.

The general site authorized by the Residence Act was large, consisting of the region on the Potomac River between the Eastern Branch (Anacostia River) and the Conococheague, approximately seventy miles upriver. Under terms of the act final selection of the ten mile square which was to comprise the actual capital would rest with the President, who was also authorized to appoint three commissioners to supervise a survey of the site and to purchase land for the government⁸

President Washington went to Georgetown in October, 1790, toured the entire stretch of river, and promised to announce his exact choice within a few months.

On January 24, 1791, Washington issued a proclamation directing the commissioners “to survey and limit a part of the territory of the ten miles square on both sides of the river Potomac so as to comprehend Georgetown in Maryland and to extend to the Eastern Branch.” The states of Maryland and Virginia were agreed to cede such land as was identified to the federal government.⁹

Six weeks later, on March 3, 1791, at the request of the president, Congress amended the Residence Act to authorize “the location of the residence at the lower end of the present site so as to comprehend the Eastern Branch itself and some of the lower country on its lower side in Maryland and the town of Alexandria in Virginia.” It further provided that no public buildings were to be erected on the Virginia side of the river.¹⁰

The seat of government was to include two thriving villages — Georgetown in Maryland and Alexandria in Virginia. This is the area — except for the land later ceded back to Virginia — we know now as the District of Columbia.

Three commissioners had been appointed in authority over the District. They included General Thomas Johnson and the Honorable Daniel Carroll of Maryland, and Dr. David Stuart of Virginia, Washington’s family physician. Major Pierre L’Enfant was chosen to lay out the proposed city. Major Andrew Ellicott was assigned to survey the ten miles square. Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson notified Ellicott in February, 1791, that he was

“desired to proceed by the first stage to the Federal Territory on the Potomac for the purpose of making a survey of it.”¹¹

Andrew Ellicott

Andrew Ellicott was in the third generation of a family which had come from England to live in America. Although the family was Quaker, Andrew Ellicott was commissioned by Governor Johnson of Maryland first as Captain, then as Major in the Elk Ridge Battalion of Militia during the Revolutionary War. He served under General Washington.

The Ellicott family had settled first in Pennsylvania. Finding little scope for their mechanical ability in the agricultural heartland of Bucks County, they moved to a tract of land in Maryland on the Patapsco River where they established extensive mills, known as Ellicott's Upper and Lower Mills. They began with flour mills, went on to cotton mills, and eventually an iron foundry. They became interested in transportation and promoted the Baltimore and Fredericksburg Turnpike and the Cumberland Road.

Young Andrew was born January 24, 1754, studied first in Pennsylvania in a little Quaker School and later in Philadelphia under Robert Patterson. He showed talent in mathematics and earned his living as a surveyor. He was married to Sarah Brown, daughter of a prominent Friend, just before the American Revolution, and moved his little family to the Ellicott colony in Maryland. In 1785 he served as a Professor of Mathematics at the University of Pennsylvania, and in 1805 was appointed Director of the Mint.

Following the war one survey of importance after another occupied him, taking him away from his wife and growing family of children. He was a devoted husband, and it is from letters he wrote to his wife as well as journals he kept detailing his activities in the field when letters were impossible to send, that we know a great deal about him and his work.

In 1784 he was serving on a Commission with seven distinguished Commissioners from Pennsylvania and Virginia whose task was to complete the survey of the boundary between Virginia and Pennsylvania, finishing the work begun by Mason and Dixon. For the skillful accomplishment of his share of the work, the College of William and Mary gave him the honorary degree of Master of Arts.¹²

His work in the field usually took him away from his family from early spring until late fall. During the winter months he reveled in family life and study. The family moved first to Baltimore, later to Philadelphia.

After the Virginia-Pennsylvania line was complete, his next assignment was to run the west line of Pennsylvania from the Ohio River north to Lake Erie. In 1786 and 1787 a third assignment found him with a commission completing the north boundary of Pennsylvania to Lake Erie. On October

29, 1787, after an arduous summer the commissioners reported that they had extended the line from the 90th milestone to Lake Erie and "marked the same in a lasting or permanent manner by milestones or posts surrounded by mounds of earth where stones could not be procured." One hundred years after the line was run, the marks had in some cases disappeared, but the 1887 commissioners praised the early commissioners for the accuracy of their work. In 1788 Ellicott surveyed the islands in the Alleghany and Ohio Rivers within the state of Pennsylvania.

That year Benjamin Franklin, retired governor of Pennsylvania, who had long made it policy never to endorse any person or candidate, enclosed a certificate for Andrew Ellicott in a letter: "I do hereby certify whom it may concern, that I have long known Mr. Andrew Ellicott as a Man of Science; and while I was in the Executive Council have had frequent Occasions, in the Course of Public Business, of being acquainted with his abilities in Geographical Operations of the most important kind, which were performed by him with the greatest Scientific Accuracy. Given at Philadelphia this 10th Day of August, 1789. B. Franklin late President of the State of Pennsylvania."¹³

That summer Ellicott was commissioned by the U.S. Government to run the western boundary of the state of New York. Because of political difficulties with Canada, this survey occupied him for the greater part of a year. As part of the survey, he finally received a pass which permitted him to view the Niagara and to make the first actual measurements of the river, the falls, and the rapids.

From 1791-93 he was the chief surveyor for the Territory of Columbia on the Potomac River. Later he represented the United States on a survey of the Georgia-Spanish Florida boundary. He died August 28, 1820.

Capital Survey

With the spring of 1791 the task of surveying and laying out the permanent seat for the government of the United States was to begin. Andrew Ellicott was selected to do the survey. The Commissioners were advised of Ellicott's appointment in a letter from Jefferson: "The President thinking it would be better that the outline at least of the city, and perhaps Georgetown should be laid down in the plat of the territory. I have the honor to send it and to desire that Major Ellicott may do it as soon as convenient, that it may be returned in time to be laid before Congress. . ."¹⁴

Ellicott received his formal notification from the Secretary of State in a letter written February 1, 1791. He was advised that he was to run the first two lines as mentioned in the President's proclamation to fix the beginning point, and from that to establish the four "lines of experiment" for the

ten-miles square. In addition he was to find the true meridian and determine the latitude and map the course of the rivers within the segment surveyed.

Ellicott wasted no time. He was in Alexandria by mid-February. He wrote this letter to his wife on February 14, 1791, from Alexandria:

“My Dear/

I arrived at this town on Tuesday last in good health; — but in consequence of bad weather could not proceed to business, (till Friday last.) I have been treated with great politeness by the Inhabitants, who are truly rejoiced at the prospect of being included in the Federal district. I shall leave this town this afternoon to begin the rough survey of the ten miles square. . .

I am my Dear in great hast
Your Affectionate Husband.”¹⁵

That same day he wrote to Mr. Jefferson giving an outline of his plan for the ten miles square:

“Sir/

I arrived at this Town on Monday last but the cloudy weather prevented any observations being made untill (sic) Friday which was very fine.

. . . I shall submit to your consideration the following plan for the permanent location which I believe will embrace every object of Advantage which can be included within the ten miles square [viz] — Beginning at the most (sic) inclination of the upper cape of Hunting Creek and running a streight (sic) line North westerly ten miles making an angle at the beginning of 45° with the Meridian for the first line. Then by a streight line into Maryland northeasterly at right angles to the first, ten miles for the second line. Thence by a streight line at right angles to the second south easterly ten miles for the third line. Thence for the fourth line at right angles to the third south westerly ten miles to the beginning on the upper cape of Hunting Creek — Or the beginning may be expressed more in the spirit of the Proclamation thus ‘Running from the Court House in Alexandria due south west and thence a due south east course till it shall strike the River Potomac.’ . . .

. . . You will observe by the plan which I have suggested for the Permanent Location a small deviation with respect to the courses from those mentioned in the Proclamation. The reason of which is that the courses in the Proclamation strictly adhered to would neither produce streight lines nor contain quite the ten miles square besides the almost impossibility of running such lines with tolerble (sic) exactness.

I am Sir with the greatest

Respect and esteem your
Hbl. Servt.
Andrw. Ellicott”¹⁶

Because Andrew Ellicott’s brothers, who had become his chief assistants in recent surveys, were still completing the New York boundary survey, and his young cousin George Ellicott was not able to participate, Benjamin Banneker — a free black who lived near the Ellicott Mills in Maryland — was selected as his assistant.

Benjamin Banneker

Benjamin Banneker was the great-grandson of an Englishwoman named Molly Walsh who had been deported from England in 1683. After serving her indenture she rented, then bought farm land, and grew tobacco. She

married a slave she had purchased, then freed, who claimed to be the son of an African chieftan. Bannka or Bnnaka was disinclined to work but was said to be a man of bright intelligence, fine temper, with a very agreeable presence, dignified manner, and contemplative habits. Although the laws of the day were very hard on a freeborn person who intermarried with a slave, Molly considered the circumstances, changed her name to that of her husband, adopted his people, and withdrew from her white neighbors. Benjamin was the oldest son of her daughter Mary, who also married a freed slave. Robert took his wife's name, which by that time had been changed to Banneker. The family worked hard and prospered and Robert Banneker was able to buy 100 acres of land in his name and that of his son Benjamin and his heirs.¹⁷

Young Benjamin learned to read and write; he attended a small country school for a while and especially enjoyed arithmetic and mathematical exercises. While still a young man he apparently borrowed a pocket watch, studied it carefully, and translated the dials and gears into a series of drawings which he converted into three-dimensional parts which he carved from hard-grained wood. The striking clock he built continued to operate for fifty years. At the age of thirty-two he bought his first book, a Bible. He made two entries "Benjamin Banneker was born November the 9th, in the year of the Lord God, 1731. Robert Banneker departed this life July the 10th 1758."

Banneker remained a "loner" most of his life, reading, playing the flute and violin, and farming. Because they lived near the Ellicott Mills, where many men worked, his mother became the chief supplier of garden truck for the mill and the Bannekers came to know and be known by the mill hands and the proprietors. He read the newspapers which came into the store and conversed on topics of the day. The Revolutionary War touched Ellicott City lightly. Maryland was not a battlefield. Free Negroes were exempted from military service by the Militia Law of 1777.

Benjamin Banneker became interested in astronomy as a result of the activity of George Ellicott, son of the mill owner. As George developed his skill in astronomy, he established the habit of giving free lessons on astronomy to any village inhabitants who wished to hear him. One of the first was probably Banneker. Banneker's new interest developed rapidly. He purchased or was loaned a number of books on astronomy. He worked through the books one by one, then turned to a telescope and a set of drafting instruments for making observations of the time of the stars on the meridian, of their southing, and of their rising and setting. After becoming familiar with the stars and planets, he attempted to make a projection of the sun.

George Ellicott encouraged him to calculate an ephemeris for an almanac. (Almanacs were the most popular printed matter in America at that time.) The first two printers to whom Banneker submitted his almanac turned him

down. It came to the attention of The Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, the Relief of Free Negroes unlawfully held in bondage and for Improving the Condition of the African Race. He refigured the ephemeris and his almanac was published in 1795. (The capitalization in the previous sentence is copied exactly as given.)

The Survey

The first step was to set up a surveyor's camp near the apex of the proposed square, somewhere near Hunting Creek on Jones' Point near Alexandria. The party consisted of several men who tended the pack horses, packed and unpacked, and helped clear a route through the dense underbrush and forest.

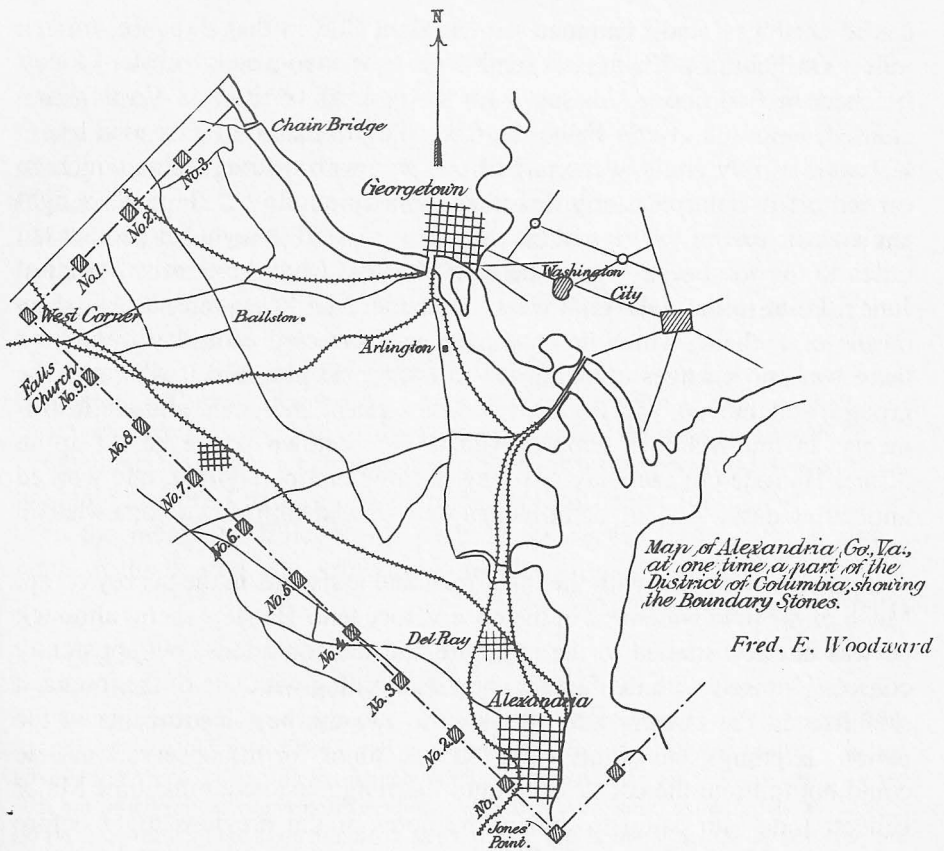
Ellicott usually established his main camp on top of the highest available elevation in the region to be surveyed, seeking the edge of a forest or a clump of trees for additional protection. This was a problem in the tidewater region, but when the survey moved away from the river he was able to find more suitable camps.

The focal point of his operation was the observatory tent which Ellicott located by tracing a meridian and then laying off an angle. At this observation point he set up his large zenith sector and astronomical clock. The clock was a precision timekeeper which was usually set up on the stump of a tree which he would have cut down for that purpose. He then erected his observatory tent over the sector and the clock and his other instruments. Other tents for sleeping and a cook tent were erected nearby. The horses were tethered in the general area.

The most important of the instruments was the larger of his two zenith sectors. It was probably the most accurate scientific instrument in America at that time and used for determination of the latitude by observation of stars near the zenith.

Other important instruments were his transit and equal altitude instrument. His field equipment included a smaller zenith sector. For taking horizontal angles he used a brass circumferentor with a radius of eight inches. He also had a very fine plain surveying compass for use in running the lines, several sextants, three telescopes, an artificial horizon, several thermometers, two stopwatches with second hands, two sets of cased drafting instruments, and two copper lanterns which had special slits for tracing meridians and giving the direction of the lines when they were determined at night by means of celestial observation. Two two-pole chains were basic to field work.¹⁸ Ellicott's surveying instruments are now held in the Smithsonian Museum of American History.¹⁹

Banneker's chores were to assist Ellicott in the observatory tent and



Map of Alexandria (Arlington) County, Virginia, at one time a part of the District of Columbia, showing the Boundary Stones.

Courtesy of the Historical Society of Washington, D.C.

participate in observations made in the fields. His most important responsibility was to maintain the astronomical clock. Its accuracy was a vital part in making correct observations.

In previous surveys, the younger Ellicott brothers had worked in the field while Andrew stayed in the tent. Banneker, at the age of fifty, was much more useful with the instruments than he was running the lines. Ellicott worked in the field. In place of the crew of twenty men he usually had, he was able to recruit no more than six — none with previous field experience.

The procedure for laying out the square was a simple one. Before undertaking to define the square, Ellicott traced a meridian at Jones' Point on the west side of the Potomac River and laid off an angle of 45° from this meridian

to the northwest and continued in a straight line in that direction for ten miles. On February 23, the *Alexandria Gazette* announced that Mr. Ellicott finished the first line of this survey of the Federal Territory in Virginia and crossed, below the Little Falls, the River Patowmack on the second line.²⁰ He made a right angle at the end of that line with a straight line which he carried off in a northeasterly direction, also for ten miles. He made a right angle at the end of the second line and carried it off straight for another ten miles to the southeast. Finally he carried a line from the terminal point at Jones' Point to meet the end of the third line. The lines were measured by means of a chain, which he examined and corrected each day to be sure there were no changes affecting its accuracy. He plumbed it wherever the ground was uneven, and traced it with his transit and equal altitude instruments. In mid-March Ellicott moved to Georgetown where he set up an office. He rode out each day, arriving in camp before daylight, and worked until after dark. A bout of influenza had slowed him down somewhat in late February.

Banneker remained with the other men and assistants in the survey camp. Much of his time was spent in the observatory tent. He slept there, although he was not accustomed to the exposure and the conditions, but apparently consoled himself with the fact that he was working with one of the foremost scientists in the country and was able to use the best instruments in the nation. Evenings and nights were the best times for his observations. He could not fall into the cot to sleep until morning. Just about that time Major Ellicott rode into camp to review the notes of the previous night before going out to do the field work. There were other observations to take during the day as well. Banneker took observations of the sun with the equal altitude instrument to establish the correct time for the observatory clock.

The work was made unpleasant by the extreme changes of spring weather and the hazardous nature of the work. One of the men was killed by a falling tree.

Progress was watched with interest by the citizens of Alexandria. An article in the *Georgetown Weekly Ledger* read . . . "Some time last month arrived in this town Mr. Andrew Ellicott, a gentleman of superior astronomical abilities. He was employed by the President of the United States of America to lay off a tract of land, ten miles square, on the Potowmack, for the use of Congress; — is now engaged in this business and hopes soon to accomplish the object of his mission. He is attended by Benjamin Bannkier(sic), an Ethiopian, whose abilities, as a surveyor, and an astronomer, clearly prove that Mr. Jefferson's concluding that race of men were void of mental endowments, was without foundation."²¹

On March 28 the President came down from Philadelphia to consult with the commissioners. He commended Ellicott for his work.

On Friday April 15, 1791, after Daniel Carroll and Dr. David Stuart arrived in Alexandria to supervise the fixing of the Federal District, the mayor, other town officials, and the townspeople turned out to participate in the event. They walked from Wise's Tavern in town to Jones' Point shortly after 3:00 in the afternoon. According to a report in the *Alexandria Gazette* of April 21, 1791, after Ellicott ascertained the precise point for its installation, "the master of the Masonic Lodge and Dr. Stuart, assisted by some of the other brothers, placed the stone; after which a deposit of corn, wine and oil were made upon it and the following observations were delivered by the Rev. Muir:

'Of American it may be said as it was of Judea of old, that it is a good land and large, O America, and prosperity within thy palaces. May jealousy, that green-eyed monster, be buried deep under the work which this day we have completed, brethren and gentlemen'.²²

On June 21, 1794, a permanent stone was inscribed with the words "The beginning of the Territory of Columbia" and placed at Jones' Point.

In the meantime Ellicott was pushing the survey through the outlying lands of the district. He wrote to his wife:

"Surveyors Camp, State of Virginia
June 26, 1791

"My Dear Sally

Since my last . . . nothing material has transpired except the return of the President- . . . The Country thro' which we are now cutting one of the ten-miles 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 neighbourhood of Alexandria, and George-Town, — we find but little Fruit, except Huckel berries, and live in our Camp, as retired as we used to do on Lake Erie—Labouring Hands in this Country can scarcely be had at any rate; my estimate was twenty; but I have to wade slowly thro' with six,—this scarcity of hands will lengthen out the time much beyond what I intended.—As the President is so much attached to this country, I would not be willing that he should know my real sentiments about it.—But with you, whose love, and affection, I have constantly experienced, almost from my infancy, I am not afraid to make sentiments known.—

This country intended for the Permanent Residence of Congress, bears no more proportion to the Country about Philadelphia, and German-Town, for either wealth or fertility, than a Crane does to a stall-fed Ox!— . . .

I am My Dear Sally your
Affectionate Husband"²³

When Banneker agreed to work with Ellicott on the survey, he had not planned to stay for the entire survey. In April, shortly after the cornerstone was dedicated, Ellicott's brothers completed their task on the New York survey and came to join him. Banneker waited until one of Ellicott's trips to Philadelphia in late spring and accompanied him back to Ellicott City and his farm. He had participated in most of the Virginia survey.

By next year, with his experienced brothers working on the line and two other experienced young surveyors on staff, Ellicott could turn all of his attention to the Federal City. Trouble had been brewing between Major

L'Enfant and the Commissioners for some time and the sale of public lots in October, 1791 brought the matter to a climax. Major L'Enfant refused to turn over copies of the map of the Federal City to satisfy purchasers at the public sale. Problems grew worse. In March, 1792, Thomas Jefferson wrote to tell the Commissioners that it was impracticable to continue to employ Major L'Enfant any longer and that he had been notified his services were at an end. Ellicott was directed to finish laying off the plan on the ground and surveying and plotting the District.²⁴

Major Ellicott soon found that to preserve peace with the Commissioners called for the greatest use of his good temper. All three were men of prominence and their faults seemed to lie in their dispositions, rather than in their competence. General Johnson was described as having a brusque and impetuous manner, but a kindly disposition and marked executive ability. Daniel Carroll was at that time a member of Congress, owner of a great estate, aristocratic and somewhat dictatorial. Dr. Stuart was a practicing physician in Alexandria who was an elderly benevolent gentleman.

Ellicott was hurried by the Commissioners who wanted to sell lots as fast as possible. He was personally supervising the boundary lines and the work of his brothers, and laying out the streets in the city according to the plan devised by L'Enfant.

On January 1, 1793, he signed a certificate recorded in the records of the Commissioners:

" . . . These lines are opened, and cleared forty feet wide, that is twenty feet on each side of the lines limiting the territory: And in order to perpetuate the work, I have set up square mile stones, marked progressively with the number of miles from the beginning on Jones' Point, to the west corner. . . thence to the place of beginning on Jones' Point; except in a few cases where the miles terminated on declivities, or in waters; . . . On the sides of the stones facing the Territory is inscribed, 'Jurisdiction of the United States.' On the opposite sides of those placed in the Commonwealth of Virginia, is inscribed 'Virginia,' and on those in the state of Maryland, is inscribed 'Maryland.' On the third and fourth sides, or faces, is inscribed the Year in which the stone was set up, and the variation of the Magnetic Needle at that place. In addition to the foregoing works I have completed a Map of the four lines with a half mile on each side, including the said District, or Territory, with a survey of the different waters.

Witness my hand this first day of January, 1793.

Andw. Ellicott"²⁵

The area surveyed was described as a square, but it was in fact more in the nature of a trapezoid. The northern point is not exactly north of the southern point. It is 116 feet west of the meridian through the southern corner. The sides were intended to be exactly 10 miles in length, but they vary in length:

The Southwestern side is 10 miles plus 230.6 feet long; the Northeastern side is 10 miles plus 263.1 feet long; the Southeastern side is 10 miles plus 70.5 feet long; and the Northwestern side is 10 miles plus 63.0 feet long.²⁶

When the line had been completely surveyed, it was carefully cleared for a distance of 20 feet on either side, making a 40 foot lane through the woods and brush for each ten mile strip. The fourteen stones on the Virginia side of the river were in place before the end of the first year. Each bears the date 1791 and the distance from the preceding corner. Sometimes the workers discovered that the exact location for a stone was a stream or bottom of a ravine. In those instances the monument was placed on firm ground along the line as close to the mile as possible. The fourteen markers bear the name "Virginia" on one side and "Jurisdiction of the United States" on the opposite side.

Although Ellicott's troubles with the Commissioners took him to the point of giving notice before the survey of the city was completed, the high favor in which he was held by the President and Mr. Jefferson turned to his advantage and the Commissioners returned all his staff and papers. The inhabitants of the area, very much aware of his work and the problems, praised him. He expressed the thought that his "victory" was in some measure owing to the President. George Washington stated that but for Major Ellicott no permanent plans would have resulted.

Conclusion

Over the years the condition of the historic boundary markers has gradually deteriorated. The stones on the Virginia border were left in place even after Retrocession when the State of Virginia took back the land that had been ceded. During the Civil War the stones were a popular target for the troops which occupied that part of Virginia. The forty foot wide swath through the forests that identified the boundary grew back to brush and forest, followed by farms and houses. Some of the stones on private property have been well taken care of. Others were moved in the process of pushing roads through the wilderness. Some were partially buried as land was filled.

In December, 1914, a DAR Committee on Preservation of Historic Spots and Records for the District of Columbia held a meeting to hear about the condition of the DC Boundary Markers and to issue a call for their preservation. The committee selected the maintenance and preservation of the stones as their patriotic work for the year. They agreed to place an iron fence around each stone and sponsoring chapters paid \$1.00 for a deed which gave permission to erect the fences.²⁷ Chapters are still responsible for maintaining individual stones. Even with the fences, the stones continue to deteriorate as the stone defoliates and the carving disappears; people use the fenced areas as trash and refuse disposals; and conditions of weather and climate take their toll. A plan for permanent maintenance has been proposed and may be implemented as part of the observances of the bicentennial of the placing of the stones.

The boundary stones in Virginia mark most of the boundary of Arlington County. They tie its heritage firmly to the seat of government for the United States.

Notes and References

- *June Robinson is president of the Arlington Historical Society. She holds an M.A. in history from Seattle University and is employed in the publications office at National Archives.
- ¹Max Farrand, Editor. *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*. Volume II. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1911) p. 505.
- ²Margaret C.S. Christman. *The First Federal Congress: 1789-1791*. (Washington: Smithsonian Press, 1989) p. 108.
- ³*Ibid.* p. 110.
- ⁴*Ibid.* p. 153.
- ⁵*Ibid.* p. 181.
- ⁶*Ibid.* p. 188.
- ⁷*Ibid.* p. 188.
- ⁸U.S. Congress, First Congress, 2nd Session.
- ⁹National Archives, RG 42. *Records of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds*, Volume 1.
- ¹⁰U.S. Congress, First Congress, 3rd Session.
- ¹¹Catharine Van Courtland Mathews, *Andrew Ellicott: His Life and Letters* (New York: The Grafton Press, 1908) p. 83.
- ¹²*Ibid.* p. 19
- ¹³*Ibid.* p. 70.
- ¹⁴Silvio A. Bedini, *The Life of Benjamin Banneker: The Definitive Biography of the First Black Man of Science* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972) p. 107.
- ¹⁵Mathews, p. 83
- ¹⁶*Ibid.* p. 84
- ¹⁷Bedini, p. 16.
- ¹⁸*Ibid.* p. 118.
- ¹⁹National Capital Planning Commission Bicentennial Report. *Boundary Markers of the Nation's Capital: A Proposal for Their Preservation and Protection*. (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976) p. 7.
- ²⁰Mathews, p. 87.
- ²¹Bedini, p. 122.
- ²²*Ibid.* p. 314.
- ²³Mathews, p. 88.
- ²⁴Bedini, p. 82.
- ²⁵National Archives, RG 42.
- ²⁶Bedini, p. 125.
- ²⁷NCPC Bicentennial Report, p. 37.

Additional Sources

- Bowling, Kenneth R. and Helen E. Veit, Editors. *The Diary of William Maclay and Other Notes on Senate Debates: March 4, 1789-March 3, 1791*. The Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore. 1988.
- Farrand, Max, Editor. *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*. Volume I. Yale University Press: New Haven. 1966.

Appendix

Location of Arlington (Alexandria) Boundary Stones

- SOUTH CORNER STONE — Located in the seawall in front of the Jones' Point Lighthouse in Alexandria. It can be viewed from the water at low tide.
- SOUTHWEST NUMBER 1 MILE MARKER — At the Southwest corner of the intersection of Wilkes and South Payne Streets in Alexandria. On private property under a tree in the front yard.
- SOUTHWEST NUMBER 2 MILE MARKER — On the east side of Russell Road just north of King Street. (Possibly not an original marker.)
- SOUTHWEST NUMBER 3 MILE MARKER — At the north end of the parking lot of the First Baptist Church, 2932 King Street, Alexandria. (The third mile ended in a ravine.)
- SOUTHWEST NUMBER 4 MILE MARKER — Located adjacent to Fairlington Village along the shoulder of King Street just north of Wakefield Street. (Marker has been broken off.)
- SOUTHWEST NUMBER 5 MILE MARKER — On the edge of a stream valley park next to Walter Reed Drive just east of King Street. (Marker has been broken off.)
- SOUTHWEST NUMBER 6 MILE MARKER — Located in the median strip of Jefferson Street just south of Columbia Pike in Arlington. (Moved from its original site by building.)
- SOUTHWEST NUMBER 7 MILE MARKER — Next to a fence on the edge of a woods off the parking lot west of Kenmore School.
- SOUTHWEST NUMBER 8 MILE MARKER — Located on the edge of a parking lot behind an apartment building at the intersection of John Marshall Drive and Wilson Boulevard. (Rotated on its base and in very bad condition.)
- SOUTHWEST NUMBER 9 MILE MARKER — In a stream valley park along Van Buren Street north of Columbia Street in Falls Church.
- WEST CORNER STONE — Situated in a park which has been developed with the help of members of the Arlington Historical Society. Off Meridian Street just south of West Street in Falls Church.
- NORTHWEST NUMBER 1 MILE MARKER — Located in the side yard of a home at 3607 Powhatan Street on the Arlington County Line.
- NORTHWEST NUMBER 2 MILE MARKER — On the edge of a deep woods next to a private home at 5298 Old Dominion Drive. (Chipped and in poor condition.)
- NORTHWEST NUMBER 3 MILE MARKER — In the center of the backyard of a home at 4013 Tazewell Street, Arlington. (Placed slightly beyond its mile distance because the higher, firmer ground would provide a more permanent site.)
- THE REMAINING MARKERS ARE IN MARYLAND.

Persons attempting to follow the marker trail are advised to contact owners before trespassing on private property to get close to the markers.

NOTE: Information taken from *Boundary Markers of the Nation's Capital: A Proposal for Their Preservation and Protection*.