

Capital City and Arlington Boundaries

Treasured Jewels in our Heritage Crown

BY *SHERMAN PRATT*

When our founding fathers were meeting in Philadelphia to adopt a new constitution and create a new democratic nation one of their most perplexing problems was to determine precisely where to place that national capital.

Almost all of the delegates at the constitutional convention agreed that the capital should be "centrally" located. There was, however, considerable disagreement as to just what that term meant. To those from New England or the upper Atlantic coast, central meant Philadelphia, New York, or perhaps Boston. Those were the areas where the most population was centered, or where industrial, commercial and financial activities were established and growing.

Delegates from the far south almost on the Gulf of Mexico, however, were far more interested in a capital centrally located from a geographical standpoint if they were ever to be able to reasonably reach the seat of government over the great distances to be traveled in those days through roadless wild country long before fast railroads, interstate highways and jet passenger aircraft.

After considerable, sometimes quite heated, bickering, arguing, negotiating and give and take, northerners yielded to southerners and a mid-Atlantic location was selected on the upper reaches of the tidal Potomac River waters. The capital city was to be a ten mile square straddling the river in the Georgetown, Maryland and Alexandria, Virginia areas on land donated by the states of Virginia and Maryland. A capital thus located would be on navigable waters, so essential to trade and commerce, and yet sufficiently inland so as to provide maximum security from naval attack by a hostile power.

The new President, George Washington, promptly recognized the need to lay out the boundaries of the new capital city with precision and called upon one of the most experienced and capable surveyors of the day, Major Andrew Ellicott, to do the job.

Andrew Ellicott

Major Andrew Ellicott, commissioned by George Washington to survey the capital boundaries in 1791, came from a Pennsylvania Quaker family that moved to Maryland in 1771 and established extensive mills in an area that eventually became Ellicott City.¹ Ellicott was a talented mathematician and

with his first cousin George Ellicott became skilled in astronomy. He surveyed, or was involved in surveying, much of the boundaries of Pennsylvania on the west to Lake Erie and on the south next to Virginia (now West Virginia). He finished the work started by Mason and Dixon on the Pennsylvania-Virginia boundary. He was surveying the western boundary of New York when he was summoned to survey the new District of Columbia, at which time he requested the assistance of a remarkable free black man, Benjamin Banneker.

Benjamin Banneker

Benjamin Banneker was born in 1731 as a free black man. His father, Robert Banneker, bought 100 acres of land in Maryland which was later inherited by Benjamin. Benjamin Banneker was exceptionally talented and mostly self educated in mathematics and other subjects. He was one of the first students to take advantage of free lessons in astronomy offered by Andrew Ellicott's cousin George. By extensive practice and persistent application he became extraordinarily proficient at astronomical observations and sightings. Legend has it that he also designed and carved a wooden clock, the first in America, that worked for over 50 years.²

In the *Washington Post* Sunday comic sections in 1995 featuring segments of cartoonist Patrick M. Reynolds' booklet, highlights of Banneker's life and career are depicted. Reynolds relates that Banneker began working south of Alexandria at Hunting Creek (now called Jones Point) lying on his back to find the exact starting point on the ground for the survey and boundaries. He plotted about six stars as they crossed his spot at a particular time of the night. From that location, the surveyors advanced northwest into Virginia and then crossed the Potomac into Maryland. The field team armed themselves with axes, choppers and earth tools, since much of the route was through dense woods, swamps, and undergrowth, to clear four 40 foot wide swaths each of ten miles length. The strenuous pace soon proved too much for Banneker, who was in his 60s, and in April 1791 he left the team and went home to Howard County in Maryland while Ellicott and the others completed the survey. At home Banneker wrote a compendium of mathematics, astronomy, essays, proverbs, and jokes and, with the help of Thomas Jefferson, succeeded in having it published. He wrote an almanac published in 1795 that accurately predicted an eclipse. He died in October 1806 at the age of 75.

A 1996 Contest for Banneker Artifacts

Considerable attention and some controversy arose in August, 1996, when an inheritor of Banneker's few possessions, Elizabeth Wilde, an Ellicott descendant in Indianapolis, Indiana, made them available for auction in

Bethesda, Maryland. As reported by staff writer Jon Jeter in the *Washington Post*, "...supporters of a planned museum for the legendary black scientist had hoped to buy the few remaining possessions from money they had raised upon learning that the Colonial-era treasures would be for sale."³ They were thwarted, however, when a stranger, later identified as Emanuel Friedman, quietly appeared and launched an energetic bidding contest that drove prices for items beyond the reach of the museum organizers. When the auction was over, Jeter wrote, Friedman had paid over \$85,000 for Banneker artifacts, including one drop-leaf table for \$32,500 that would normally sell for about \$10,000. In the end the museum supporters had managed to buy only a handwritten ledger. They could have taken some comfort, perhaps, from the fact that it was an especially treasured item, since it was personally used by Banneker in his work on the District of Columbia boundaries.

With respect to the auction of the Banneker artifacts, the *Washington Post* editorialized several weeks before the auction, in part:

...The Ellicott family to whom (Banneker) bequeathed his possessions have the right to dispose of them any way they see fit...[and] to auction off the 20 or so artifacts for whatever they may bring...Still if the objects are dispersed and the memory of Mr Banneker stripped from them, the sale will be a sad one...it would be a significant investment in this area's own historical awareness if someone could be found—or come forward—to keep the collection together.⁴

To the dismay of historians and museum proponents, and contrary to the hopes of the *Post*, no one did step forward and, as stated, the possessions passed to Friedman. Time only can tell whether they will someday be returned to "keep the collection together."

The Survey

Ellicott began his boundary survey at Hunting Creek near present day Jones Point in Alexandria, Virginia.⁵ The place is now a park owned and operated by the National Park Service and once housed a Coast Guard Light House built in 1855.⁶ It is almost beneath the approaches to the Woodrow Wilson Bridge. The Ellicott-Banneker operation was not without its perils. The region was still heavily wooded and several men assisting Ellicott lost their lives during the survey's course. One was killed by a falling tree. Accounts differ on the extent of personal commitment and involvement by both Ellicott and Banneker. Some writers have said that Ellicott spent most of his time in the observatory tent and left the field work to younger and more energetic helpers. Others have written to the contrary and claim that he repeatedly visited every one of the forty mile and corner marker stones that stretch through Virginia and Maryland and back to the South stone at Jones Point.⁷ Probably, without in

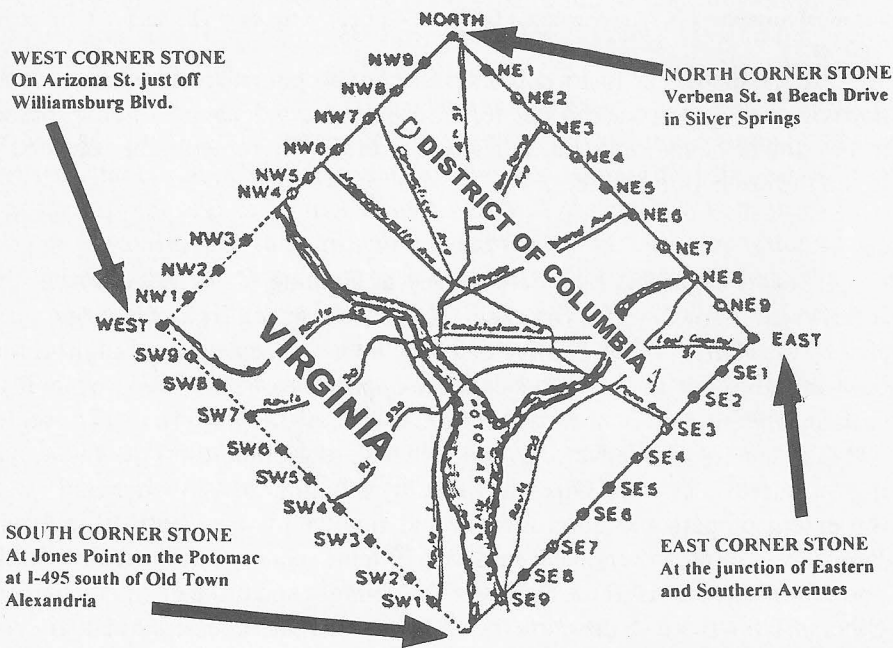
any way detracting from his magnificent and meritorious achievement, the truth lies somewhere in between.

The Boundary Stones

The ten mile square, or 100 square miles, capital city was to be laid out in a diamond shape with north, east, south and west corners as indicated in the diagram. There were to be stones marking the four corners with smaller stones at one mile intervals between the four corners for a total of 40 stones. The Virginia stones are designated (1) the South Cornerstone, (2) Southwest stones 1 through 9, (3) the West Cornerstone, and (4) Northwest stones 1 through 3.

According to a 1994 Department of the Interior Geological Survey prepared by Elaine S, McGee,⁸ the marker stones were sandstone and were quarried at the Aquia Creek quarry on the Potomac River, in Stafford County, Virginia, just south of the Quantico U. S. Marine base and about 40 miles south of Washington, D. C. The sandstone also was later used for many early Federal buildings, including the White House and the center portion of the U. S. Capitol.

McGee wrote that “two sizes of stones were used for the original markers: the corner stones were specified to be five feet long and one foot square and that the stones placed at one mile intervals [between corner stones] were



Courtesy of Northern Virginia Boundary Stones Committee (NOVABOSTCO)
 District of Columbia Boundary Stones of 1791.

four feet long and one foot square.” She added that markers and corner stones were placed in 1791 so that two feet of the stone were buried below ground level and the remaining two (or three) feet were above ground. She wrote, further, that “the buried portion of the marker or corner stone was roughly hewn [and] the portion above ground had a sawn finish and the top was cut with a bevel edge.”⁹ Inscriptions were placed on the sides of the stones to indicate that they marked the boundary of the Capital City. Fourteen of the stones, to include the South and West Cornerstones, were located in Virginia and marked the boundary of Virginia and the Capital City. After the 1846 retro-cession to Virginia of that part of the national capital that had been ceded to the Federal government in 1791 for the capital, the boundary stones in Northern Virginia no longer marked the division line between the capital and Virginia. That boundary line was changed and became the southern shore of the Potomac River. Just precisely where that shore line was and is located, and at what tide height, low, high or mean, has been the subject of disagreement to this date. In any event, the previously installed boundary stones in Virginia then became markers to delineate the boundaries between the County of Alexandria (Arlington later), and the County of Fairfax. When the Town (later City) of Falls Church was chartered in 1875, from parts of both Fairfax and Arlington counties, Southwest stone #9 became located within Falls Church and ceased to be a boundary stone. The stone again became a boundary stone in 1936, however, when the town line was redrawn to exclude the portion that had been taken from Arlington County.¹⁰ From that time the stone has marked the boundary at that point between Falls Church and Arlington County.

The South Cornerstone that constituted the initial point for the survey was, and is, at Jones Point alongside present I-495 (the “beltway”). It is now under the abandoned U. S. Coast Guard lighthouse that is preserved as an historical artifact in a small municipal park. With the announcement of plans to replace the Woodrow Wilson bridge on the capital beltway (I-95/495), concern was expressed by local historians and preservationists that the South Stone might be moved or lost in the massive construction. In a letter to the *Washington Post*, however, Gene McCormick, Project Manager for the Potomac Crossing Consultants, wrote reassuringly that “our intent is not only to protect the south cornerstone but to enhance the site.” He explained that “...we will work with the local community, the park’s owner - the National Park Service - and others to explore the creation of a south cornerstone visiting space that is a focal point for residents and visitors.”¹¹

Virginia boundary stones from the South Cornerstone lie north-westward at one mile intervals to the West Cornerstone near the intersection of Williamsburg Boulevard and North Arizona Streets (Meridian Street in Falls

Church) in north Arlington. The West Cornerstone is located on a wedge shaped land tract of about 5,000 square feet, parts of which lie within Arlington and Fairfax Counties and the City of Falls Church.¹² The stone's height above ground level is about two feet, which has led to the belief that for some unknown reason a mile stone four feet in height, instead of a cornerstone of five feet, was used in this location. The land on which the stone is located has been known until recently (see below) as the West Cornerstone Park.

Boundary stone #9, (SW9) one mile to the southeast, is located in publicly owned open space in the Four Mile Run flood plain that once was the right of way for a line of the Old Dominion Railroad. The stone is on the Arlington/City of Falls Church boundary line and is a few feet from the intersection of Van Buren and North 18th Streets.

In 1980, SW stone #9 was denoted a National Historic Landmark to honor Benjamin Banneker after nomination by the Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation, and also in that year the South Cornerstone was added to the National Register. By 1991, Barbara Hynak, an Arlington lawyer, and her colleagues in the Virginia DAR succeeded in having all the other 12 markers added to the Virginia Landmarks Register and then to the National Register of Historic Places.¹³ On the fence surrounding SW stone #9 there is a marker identifying the stone as the Benjamin Banneker stone and a statement that the site possesses national significance in the history of the United States. The land on which stone #9 is located, and other areas nearby, have been known until recent renaming (see below), as the Four Mile Run Park on the Falls Church side of the boundary, and as the East Falls Church and Isaac Crossman Parks on the Arlington side of the boundary. Most of the lands and surrounding areas, to include much of the City of Falls Church, were once owned by the early settler Isaac Crossman, some of whose progeny still live in nearby historic houses in or around Falls Church.

Currently, the South Cornerstone marks the location where the boundaries of the City of Alexandria and the County of Prince Georges, Maryland, and almost the boundary of the District of Columbia converge. The southernmost point of the District boundary ends a couple of hundred yards north of the stone due to changes in the shore line in recent years. Stones SW1, SW2, SW3, and SW5 all now lie within the City of Alexandria due to expansions and annexations by the city, and they thus mark no boundaries. Stone SW4 on King Street near South Wakefield Street in Arlington would mark the Alexandria-Arlington boundary at that point were it not for its relocation a few feet within Arlington due to road construction. Stones SW6 (also slightly off-line due to road construction), SW7, SW8, NW1, NW2, and NW3 mark the boundary between Arlington and Fairfax counties. Stone SW9 marks the boundary

at that point between Arlington County and the City of Falls Church. The West Cornerstone marks the location where the boundaries of Arlington and Fairfax counties and the City of Falls Church converge.

Recent and Current Condition of Stones

Through the years there have been periodic studies to determine and record the location and condition of, and how to preserve, the Virginia boundary stones. Among the more energetic and especially helpful were the action of the Virginia chapters of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) and a special committee known as the Northern Virginia Boundary Stones Committee (NOVABOSTCO). The committee was formed on September 17, 1993, at the recommendation of the Falls Church Historical Commission, following an invitation from the Northern Virginia Planning District Commission. Four jurisdictions participated: Fairfax and Arlington counties and the cities of Alexandria and Falls Church, along with some other concerned organizations including the Maryland Society of Surveyors, the Virginia Association of History, the Regional Parks Authority, local chapters of the DAR, and the Northern Virginia Planning District Commission. Arlington County was represented on the committee by individuals from the Heritage Alliance, the Historical Affairs and Landmark Review Board, and by Karl VanNewkirk from the Historical Society. The group first met on March 13, 1994. VanNewkirk is a past president of the society and has conducted tours of the boundary stones for the benefit of society members and others.¹⁴

Beginning in 1915, the Virginia DAR erected fences around all of the existing boundary stones.¹⁵ The fences, most of which still stand today in various stages of repair, were generally about three feet square and five feet high. In a 1994 survey, a NOVABOSTCO report found that only a few of the fences were in good condition and others were "in fair or poor shape." Local fence consultants indicated that renovation or replacements costs for each stone would be about \$2,500.¹⁶ NOVABOSTCO reported that in 1976, the year of the observance of the national bicentennial, the condition and status of the boundary stones had also been the subject of attention by the National Capital Planning Commission. The commission surveyed the stones and made a number of recommendations for their safekeeping or preservation.

By far the most sophisticated and in depth recent effort for the well being of the stones was made in the 1994-95 period by the NOVABOSTCO group. In the period from March 17, 1994 to August 28, 1995, NOVABOSTCO, chaired initially by Maurice J. Terman of the Falls Church Historical Commission and then

by VanNewkirk, held fifteen meetings and conducted two field surveys. In its report dated September 1995, the committee described in detail its findings with respect to the current condition of the boundary stones. It reported that only ten of the stones were believed to be those originally placed in 1791; that the South Cornerstone was replaced in 1794; that the stump of stone SW4 “may be a part of an original stone, but the stump of SW5 may not be, and that SW2 is not an original stone.” The committee also reported that only eight stones appeared to be in their original position and orientation, but that SW1, SW2, SW4, SW5, SW6, and SW8 had all been moved; and in the 1890s, NW3 was discovered broken and was then believed reassembled in its original position. The commission found that five stones are completely on private property, four are in jurisdictional rights-of-way (ROW), one on the ROW of the Virginia Department of Transportation, two are in multi-jurisdictional public parks, and one is owned by the National Park Service (South Cornerstone). The committee rated only three stones (SW1, SW9 and NW3) to be in “good shape,” and reported that two (SW4 and SW 5) “were only stumps.”¹⁷

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With respect to the responsibility to maintain and protect the stones, the committee recommended, among other things, that (1) the jurisdictions adjacent to stones enter into agreements to specify which jurisdiction will have responsibility for each stone, and (2) for stones located on private property easements be obtained from the owner so that the stones can, under reasonable conditions and notice, be accessed and viewed for inspection or maintenance purposes. The committee noted that in past years some uncertainty had existed with respect to ownership of the stones wherever located, but that the latest position of the Federal government was that it did not own the stones in question, except for the South Cornerstone. With respect to ownership of the stones, Peter H. Maier, Attorney for the City of Falls Church, in an “informal legal opinion” dated March 16, 1994, stated that “because [the stones] are fixtures, the stones belong to whoever [sic] owns the property on which they are located.” Maier also opined, concerning stones located on private property, that “the owners would have to grant an easement for anyone to have access to the stones.”

In its report, NOVABOSTCO’s recommendations included the following:¹⁸

a. Site stewardship and maintenance assignments be accepted by Alexandria (for SW1, SW2, SW3, and SW5), by Arlington (for SW6, SW7, and NW1),

by Fairfax (for SW8, NW2, and NW3), by Falls Church (for SW9 and WC), by VDOT (for SW4) and by NPS (for SC);

- b. That no stone be moved or reoriented except for the resettling of SW9;
- c. That local jurisdictions work with the DAR to refurbish or replace DAR protective fences, and that bollards be added to SW2, SW3, SW6 and SW8;
- d. That National Historic Landmark status be sought for all stones; and
- e. That greater public understanding and appreciation of all the boundary stones and their history through a brochure, selected signs, highway markers and a traveling educational exhibit be developed.

Proposed Name Changes for Parks with Stones

In early February 1996, the Arlington Historical Society (AHS) learned that the Falls Church Historical Commission and the Advisory Board for Recreation and Parks in October 1995 had proposed that the name of the Arlington Isaac Crossman Park area at the Falls Church/Arlington boundary adjacent to Van Buren Street at SW boundary stone #9, and certain other nearby park lands, be renamed the "Benjamin Banneker Park at Four Mile Run." The Society also learned that nearby civic associations and affected park and historical authorities had been advised of the proposal.

On February 12, the president of the AHS wrote to the chairman of the county board on the matter and reported that the AHS board of directors had considered the matter. The president pointed out that the board did not understand the need for any change in name, but that if the park was to be renamed a better designation would be the "Ellicott-Banneker Park."

The president, in explaining the rationale of the society position, pointed out that Banneker had already been recognized for his significant role in the sightings for the boundary survey with a marker plaque at SW stone #9, but that Ellicott, who was in overall charge and worked mostly in the field for the entire forty mile operation, had not been commemorated anywhere along the boundary, or perhaps elsewhere. The president added, "We think our suggested alternative would be a reasonable compromise that will afford Banneker additional recognition while not diminishing or overlooking the far more extensive role of Ellicott."

When responses to the proposed name changes were received from all parties concerned it was determined that there was no support for the name changes as proposed, whereupon an ad hoc inter-jurisdictional work group was formed for the purpose of reaching a mutually acceptable solution for the naming of parks that straddled jurisdictional boundaries. The ad hoc group met on March 29, 1996 in Conference Room 2, Falls Church City Hall. The meeting

was chaired by Maurice J. “Rick” Terman of the Falls Church Historical Commission and attended by:

from Arlington County:

Paul Zingg, East Falls Church Civic Association,
Sherman Pratt, Arlington Historical Society,
Lawrence Goldschmidt, Historic Affairs & Landmark Review Board,

Donald Mazingo, Parks and Recreation Commission;

from Fairfax County:

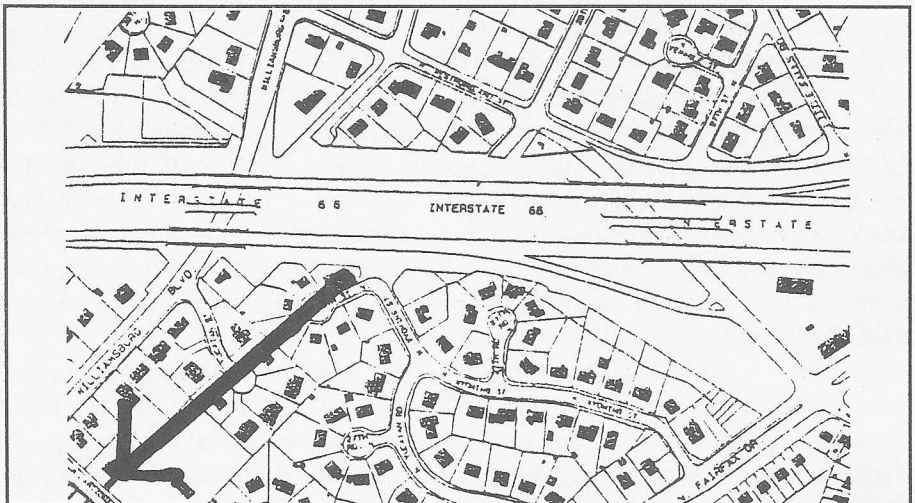
Jack Hiller, History Commission,
Jeanne Niccolls, Park Authority;

from Falls Church City:

Barry Buschow, Advisory Board for Parks and Recreation,
Mark Gross, Chair, Planning Commission.

After several additional meetings, and some exchange of correspondence, the ad hoc group succeeded in resolving differences in preferred park names and at its final meeting on May 30th reached a consensus that the parks should be named as follows:

1. The name “Isaac Crossman Park at Four Mile Run” should apply for all of the Arlington and Falls Church parkland west of Van Buren Street.
2. The Arlington and Falls Church parkland between Van Buren and Sycamore Streets should be named the “Benjamin Banneker Park.”



Courtesy of Arlington County

Andrew Ellicott Park at the West Cornerstone.

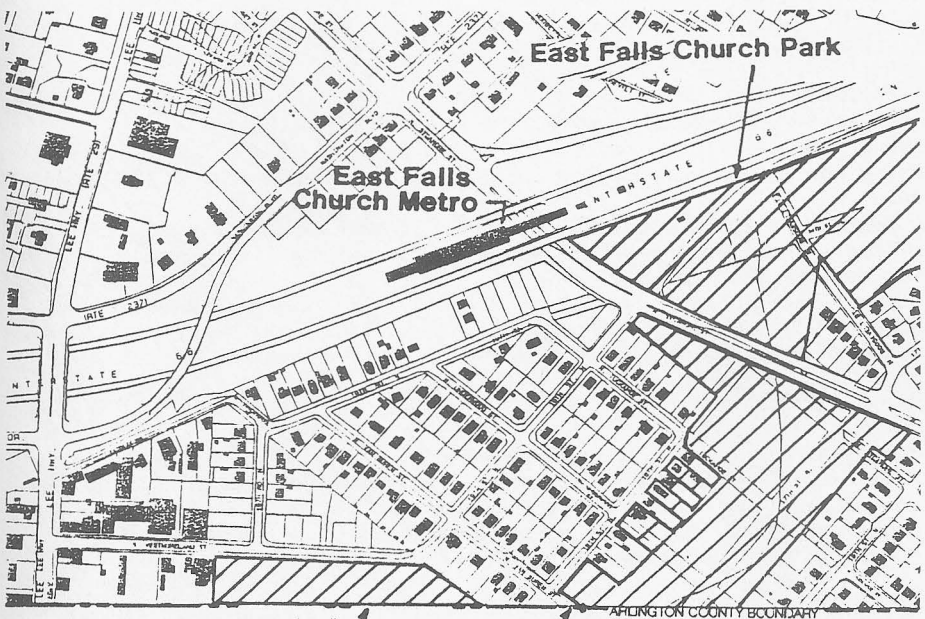
3. The name "East Falls Church Park" should be retained for the Arlington Parkland east of Sycamore Street.

4. The land at the West Cornerstone west of Arizona Street in Arlington should be renamed "Andrew Ellicott Park at the West Cornerstone."

On July 16, Arlington County Manager Anton S. Gardner prepared an agenda item for the county board recommending approval of the ad hoc committee proposal for change of names of the parklands in Arlington County.¹⁹ The manager advised the board that the name changes would be in accordance with the board policy for naming county facilities adopted on November 26, 1988. The manager recommended that the parks renaming be contingent upon approvals from the authorities in Fairfax County and Falls Church.

On August 3, 1996 the County Board, on a motion by Chairman James Hunter and seconded by member Ellen Bozman, approved the parkland renaming as recommended by the County Manager.²⁰

Thus, with the county board approval the curtain was brought down successfully and peacefully on what might otherwise have become a cantanker-



**Isaac Crossman Park
At Four Mile Run**

Benjamin Banneker Park

New names for Arlington Boundry Parklands at Falls Church.

Courtesy of Arlington County

ous, contentious and bitter fought controversy. Citizens of all jurisdictions concerned could be relieved and pleased with the outcome. Even Crossman, Banneker and Ellicott may well have cheered with satisfaction were they still around to do so.

Notes

Sherman Pratt has been a resident of Arlington County since his retirement from the Army and the Federal Civil Service. He is a past president of the Historical Society and a contributor to the Society's *Magazine*. He is the author of books on World War II and Korean War military and Arlington County history.

References

- ¹ Patrick M. Reynolds, *A Cartoon History of the District of Columbia* (Willow Street, PA: Red Rose Studio, 1995), p. 47.
- ² *Ibid.*, pp. 34-37.
- ³ Jon Jeter, "Mystery Bidder Buys the Show at Banneker Auction," *Washington Post*, September 9, 1996, Metro Section, p. B1.
- ⁴ "The Banneker Artifacts," *Washington Post*, August 22, 1996, Editorial, p. A24.
- ⁵ Reynolds, *Cartoon History*, pp.40-41.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 40-43.
- ⁸ *Open-File Report 94-592*, U. S. Geological Service, Reston, VA, p. 3.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- ¹⁰ C. B. Rose, Jr., *Arlington County Virginia, A History* (Baltimore: Port City Press, Inc.,1976), pp.141-142.
- ¹¹ Gene McCormick, *The Washington Post*, July 15, 1998, Letters to the Editor, p. A23.
- ¹² Arlington County Department of Public Works, Survey Plat, in Arlington County Court land records, Deed Book 1424, p. 202.
- ¹³ Northern Virginia Boundary Stones Committee (NOVABOSTCO), *Findings and Recommendations*, September 1995, p. 2 (On file in the Virginia Room, Arlington County Central Library).
- ¹⁴ Karl VanNewkirk is currently the editor of the *Arlington Historical Magazine*.
- ¹⁵ NOVABOSTCO, *Findings and Recommendations*, p. 6.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6, par. 10.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- ¹⁸ NOVABOSTCO, *Findings and Recommendations*, p. 5.
- ¹⁹ Memorandum, Arlington County Manager to the Arlington County Board, Subject: *Naming of "Isaac Crossman Park at Four Mile Run," "Benjamin Banneker Park," and "Andrew Ellicott Park at the West Cornerstone,"* July 16, 1996, on file in the Office of the Arlington County Manager.
- ²⁰ Arlington County Board minutes, August 3, 1996, page 283, Item #9.