

Life and Times of Boundary Stone, SE #6

BY JOHN MULLER

In the late night hours of April 2008, the Metropolitan Police Department gave chase to a vehicle speeding up Wheeler Road towards the DC-Maryland line. The pursued bucked a sharp right at Southern Avenue and lost control of his vehicle which hopped the left curb, smashing a historic gas streetlight from Baltimore Harbor in front of The Master's Touch Praise Ministries and continuing to barrel through a wrought-iron fence that for nearly a century had safeguarded one of the oldest monuments in Washington, DC. Boundary Stone SE #6 broke in two, separated at its base.

Stephen Powers, who for the past seven years has painstakingly documented the condition of all forty Boundary Stones that demarcated the original city limits, says SE #6, elevated and on a grassy plane, was in the best condition of any of the stones prior to the 2008 accident. In the early 20th century journals of Fred Woodward, for decades a chronicler and advocate of the Boundary Stones, the pristine condition of SE #6 is detailed.

"No other stone compares favorably with this one. It is in a beautiful state," Woodward writes. He notes, "Near Wheeler Road" and "[i]n a cultivated field. Condition – excellent. On land of W.H. Burr."

For the next four years following the traffic accident the stone sat untethered at 901 Southern Avenue on the Maryland side of Southern Avenue, continuing to historically delineate the DC-MD boundary, but without the encasement, making it susceptible to any enterprising vandals bold enough to attempt to heist a broken off 150-pound piece of American history.

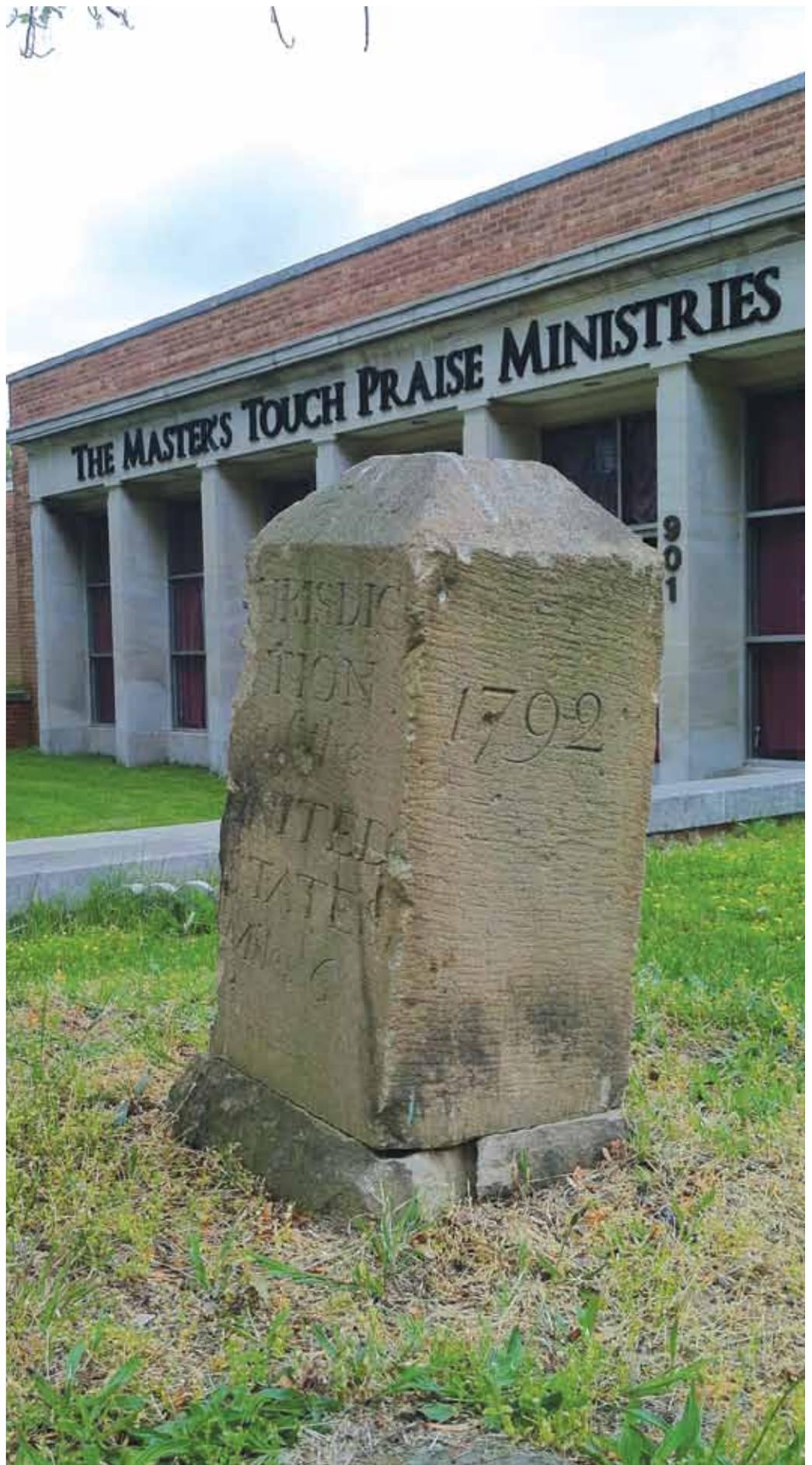
As time would tell the stone is now gone. Early last month, at a meeting of the National Capital Boundary Stones Committee (NACABOSTCO), a representative of the DC Surveyor's Office was notified of the condition of SE #6. The Surveyor's Office then contacted the District's Department of Transportation (DDOT) who legally own a three foot easement around each of the 26 stones that form the current DC-MD boundary from Western Avenue to Eastern Avenue to Southern Avenue. DDOT removed the stone and then with great fanfare delivered it to the DC Surveyor.

"We're excited to be able to provide a safe location for the Boundary Stone and to allow the public to view it and enjoy the direct historic link from our office to the District's original surveyors Pierre L'Enfant, Andrew Ellicott, and Benjamin Banneker," says Roland Dreist, the District's Surveyor.

History of the Boundary Stones

Keeping with the finite accuracy that marked the placement of the Boundary Stones, L'Enfant and Banneker were not actual surveyors.

After the passage of the Residence Act in July 1790, "that



Boundary stone SE #6 at its location before it was removed by the DC Surveyor's Office. Photo: John Muller



A page from the early 20th century journals of Fred Woodward, a chronicler and advocate of the Boundary Stones, detailing the pristine condition of SE #6.

a district of territory, not exceeding ten miles square” be located on the Potomac between the Eastern Branch (now the Anacostia River) and Connogochegue (a tributary of the Potomac in Western Maryland), the clock began ticking to meet the December 1800 deadline to have the capital city planned and ready to inhabit.

Before the city could be built, it had to be surveyed. Returning to his home in Philadelphia to rest after surveying the western boundary of New York, Major Andrew Ellicott received a letter from Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson. Dated February 2, 1791, the letter told Ellicott he was to “proceed by the first stage to the Federal territory on the Potomac, for the purpose of making a survey of it.”

With his younger brothers still in New York, Ellicott moved post-haste to find an assistant with the necessary technical mathematical and astronomic skills to undertake the assignment. Through the recommendation of his younger cousin, Ellicott learned of Benjamin Banneker, a sixty year old free black tobacco planter and largely self-taught astronomer.

After a visit to Banneker’s farm in present-day Baltimore County, Ellicott hired him. They arrived at Alexandria on the evening of February 7, 1791 to begin the project. On April 15, 1791, after taking diligent calculations to de-

termine the location of the southernmost boundary and the “four lines of experiment,” the apex of the ten miles square was placed at Jones Point.

According to historian Silvio A. Bedini, writing in a 1991 article in Washington History:

Later, after the boundary lines had been established, they were cleared to make a lane 40 feet in width through the woods for the entire ten-mile distance. The original milestones were also replaced by more formal boundary markers; each of those on the Virginia line bore the date 1791 and those on the Maryland side were marked 1792, reflecting the different completion dates. Also inscribed was the exact distance from the preceding corner.

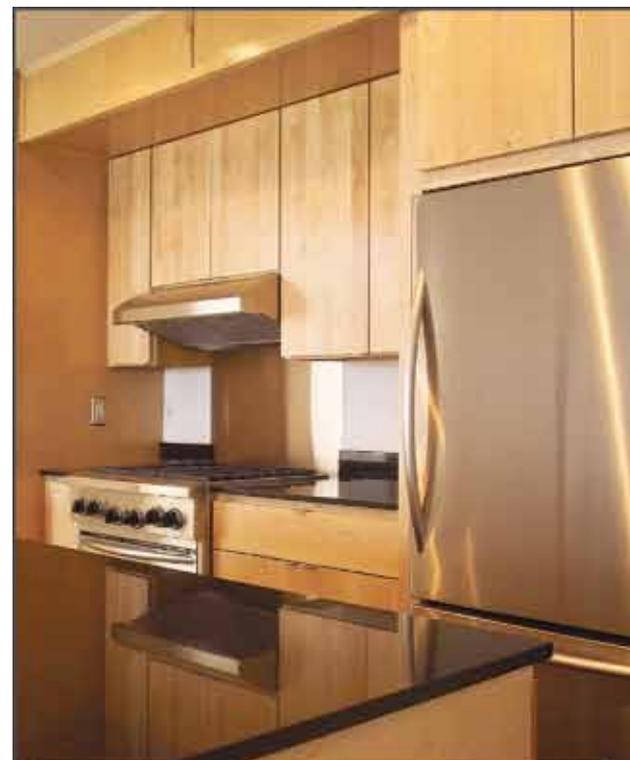
The city’s newfound interest in the stones is a long time coming. Before a member of NACABOSTCO spoke up for the caretaking of SE #6 neither the Surveyor’s Office, DDOT, or the Historic Preservation Office had performed an annual or bi-annual inventory and condition report on the stones.

“It is important for the DC Surveyor’s office to be involved with all the stones, not just this one,” says Powers, who with the assistance of the American Society of Civil Engineers- National Capital Section (ASCE-NCS) has organized fence restoration service projects at twenty of the fences in Virginia and on the DC-MD border over the past two years. “And it is just as important to get that stone back to its original location listed on the National Historic Register as a protected site”

Powers, Co-chairman of NACABOSTCO, suggests, “There are several ways to repair and replace this stone to the site which involve reinforcement and the correct mortar product. Historical stone companies and archeological architectural firms abound.”

SE #6 could be protected from any future vehicular accidents utilizing protective bollards such are at place at SW #3 or installing a surrounding stone wall as are in place at SE #5 and SE #7 which could easily be erected according to Powers.

According to DCRA Public Affairs Officer Helder Gil, for now, until the various agencies that have a stake in the Boundary Stones including DDOT, National Park Service, Historic Preservation Review Board, Daughters of the American Revolution (who erected the fence around the stone) and NACABOSTCO can determine how to place the stone back in the ground, SE #6 will be on display at the DC Surveyor’s Office at 1100 4th Street SW, Room 3174. ●



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