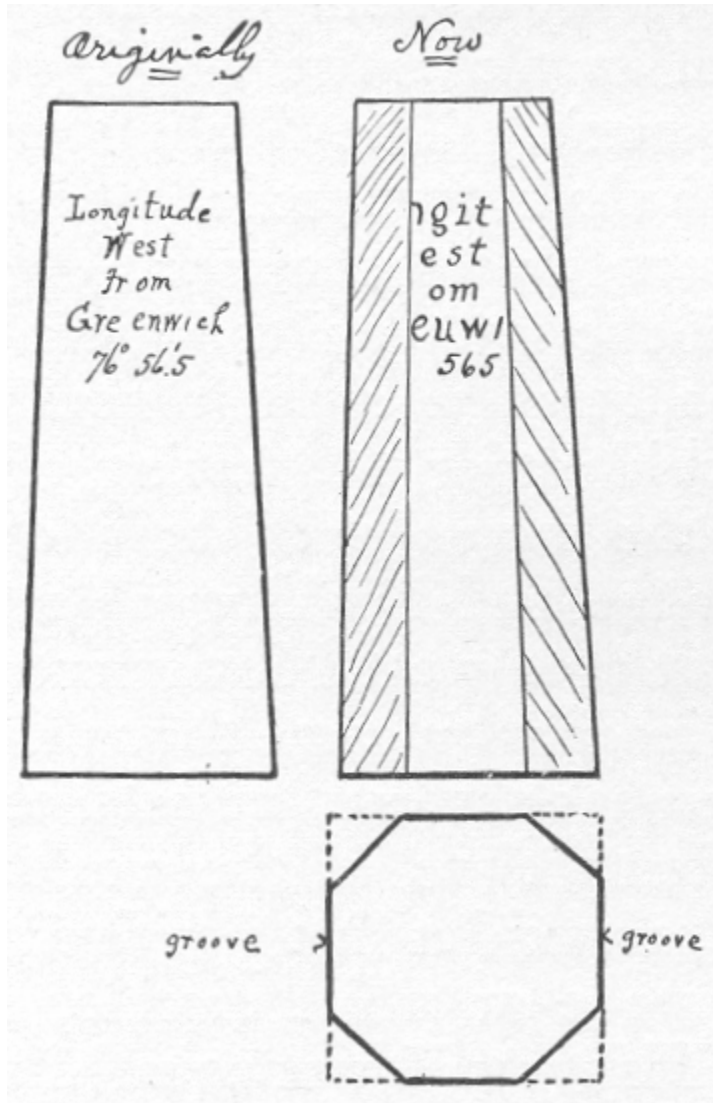


Sightings... The American Meridian – Then

Alice Morse Earle (1902)

[Ed. Note: The following is excerpted from Alice Morse Earle's *Sun-Dials And Roses Of Yesterday*, Macmillan, New York, 1902, pp. 41-44.]



American Meridian Stone ('Now' = 1902)

We had the meridian line in Washington surveyed and marked in noble fashion when the City and District were first laid out; and the most interesting meridian line in the whole world should naturally be to Americans this famous national meridian line of the United States; but it has fared at our hands as though it were an object of obloquy instead of pride.

On the 15th of April in 1791 there was laid with solemn and elaborate Masonic ceremonial the cornerstone of the District of Columbia; now half-forgotten and hidden from view, this mighty symbol of our vast nation forms part of the foundation wall of the lighthouse at Jones Point near Alexandria, Virginia. The ten miles of the District were marked during the following year with milestones, and on the District the words, "Jurisdiction of the United States," on the other the names of the surrounding states, dates, etc. These stones are known in their neighborhood as "Jurisdiction Stones." As it was then the custom of various great nations to reckon longitude from their own capitals, - and a bad system it was, - our Revolutionary ancestors promptly proposed that the new nation should have its meridian line. On L'Enfant's plan for the Federal city appears a mark for an historic column (now the site of the Emancipation

Statue in Lincoln Park), and from this column all distances through the continent were to be calculated. But when Ellicott, another engineer, laid off the streets, avenues and "appropriations," as they were called, he began by drawing a true meridian line through the "Congress House," or Capitol.

But the Meridian Hill known to Old Washingtonians is not at the Capitol, but north of the White House, at the head of Sixteenth Street, so there is another meridian to consider. In a letter (now in the State Department) written to President Jefferson by Nicholas King, it appears that King laid out a meridian line along Sixteenth Street in 1804. The letter is given by Mr. Marcus Baker in his interesting article, "Surveys and Maps of the District of Columbia." An obelisk was planted on the top of a hill north of the

president's house; and two stones were set near the site of the Washington Monument. This obelisk is gone and the site unmarked. Another was set near the Capitol and called the Capitol Stone; this is also vanished and the site unmarked. Another stone, known as the Jefferson Stone, was also set. The site of this is known.

Admiral Porter had a house at the head of Sixteenth Street; on the southern lawn stood a low sandstone block on which was placed a brass sun-dial. This has been called the Meridian Stone; it was removed and is now doing service as a carriage step at the corner of R and Fourteenth streets. This was not, so Mr. Baker infers, the original stone. The true meridian stone, set in 1804, stood where placed until some time in the (eighteen) seventies, when Meridian Hill was graded down. The stone was carried to the District building and thrown in a rubbish heap.

Later, when Lieutenant Hoxie was on duty, it was sent to the Reform School and set up as a hitching post. It is about four feet in height and was originally square in section and slightly tapering.... The corners have been cut off.... (See Figure).

Sightings... The American Meridian – Now Steven R. Woodbury (Springfield, VA)



At the corner of 24th and H Streets NW, in Washington DC is a meridian line in the sidewalk, and a commemorative – and informative – plaque:

The American Meridian

To your left is the hemisphere of the Atlantic, the hemisphere of Europe and Africa, of Roman numerals and Indian script, of the Silk Road and the rising sun.

To your right is the hemisphere of the Pacific and the American West, the hemisphere of Japan and China, of calligraphy and rocketry, of towering volcanoes and the starry night.

Beneath your feet is the line that divides the two.

From 1848 to 1884, the United States of America marked the center of its world at this line. Before it accepted the Meridian at Greenwich, England, as the “Prime Meridian,” the United States separated the world into eastern and western hemispheres along the American Meridian, a line that originated at the old U.S. Naval Observatory and passed through this point.

This Meridian was used to survey the western states, and the straight borders of those states are measured in integral degrees from this point.

Wyoming Eastern Border: 29 Degrees (Am.) West
 Western Border: 36 Degrees (Am.) West
 Colorado Eastern Border: 27 Degrees (Am.) West
 Western Border: 34 Degrees (Am.) West
 Oregon Eastern Border: 42 Degrees (Am.) West

Also borders of Arizona, California, Idaho, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, North and South Dakota, Utah, and Washington.

The plaque was installed in June 2000 by The George Washington University.



The inscriptions on the sundial at the Sacred Heart Chapel, in Bowie, Maryland, read “July 1827” “latitude 38°59’N” and “longitude 00°20’E” (*Compendium* 5:3). Are readers aware of other sundials which describe their longitude from the United States Prime Meridian?

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