

Then & Now – Boundary Corner or Witness Stones

History in our midst!!

Introduction: The town of Princeton is surrounded by historical boundary corner monuments which mark the 24 bearing changes in the town's borders. You may see these monuments when walking in the woods or along the trails of Leominster State Forest.

Originally called 'Boundary Corner Stones', we find that more recently these were called 'Witness Stones' by Joe Choiniere in an article about the Naquag parcel.

The history of bearing witness and perambulating is adopted/adapted from English traditions. In spring, there is the English Christian ritual of Rogation Days. The rituals include a perambulation to affirm the bounds. The marchers walk the bounds and in "olden" times



***Brian Keevan Witnessing the stone at the corner of
Princeton-Sterling-Holden***

this included young people who were prompted to remember the position of the stones by a whack with a stick. Pain was meant to stimulate their memory.

Colonists and immigrants to New England brought over with them a long tradition of marking and periodically affirming town and parish boundaries. This involved a committee of men from each town along a common border, walking the bounds or town lines every so

many years.

Boundary monuments have been required by state law since the 1700s to be established and maintained in all Massachusetts towns. While many towns do not maintain the stones as required, the stones still exist.

These stones represent an interesting and visible view into town history.

The Law concerning boundary corner monuments: MGL Part I Title IV Chapter 42 contains language in several sections for the setting out and maintenance of physical monuments at the corners or bearing changes in the lines separating towns in the Commonwealth. Two of the relevant sections are:

Section 2. The boundary markers of every town shall be located, the marks thereon renewed, and the year located marked upon the face thereof which bears the letter of the town locating its boundary, once every five years, by at least two of the selectmen of the town or by two substitutes designated by them in writing. The marking shall be made with a paint or other suitable marking material.

The proceedings shall be recorded with the town clerk and the board of selectmen of the town in writing signed under penalty of perjury setting forth which boundary marks were located, and those which were not located. A copy of such records shall also be sent, by registered letter, to the town clerk and the board of selectmen of any contiguous town.

Section 4. The selectmen of contiguous towns shall, at the joint and equal expense of such towns, erect permanent stone monuments at every angle of their respective boundary lines and wherever a highway crosses such lines, unless such monument, two feet high from the ground, already exists or unless such lines are bounded by the sea or by a permanent stream. The monuments shall be well set in the ground, at least four feet high from its surface, and shall have the initial letters of the respective names of such towns legibly cut thereon.

In 2013, Brian Keevan, the town Perambulator, undertook a project to find all of the boundary stones and update the 'witness' dates. After successfully accomplishing this goal, he published his findings with photos and other documentation on each of the stones.



Princeton-Westminster Stone found just north of Rocky Pond Road, and bearing dates back to 1838 (P-W6)

The carvings are variable in depth, quality, and legibility. In general, the carvings before the 1850's are very clear and precise, those from the 1850's through the 1870's are often irregular and shallow, and those in the 1880's and

1890's are again clear. The most recent carved date on any stone is 1898. Several stones have nearly all available space used for carvings. A bright flashlight aimed at a low angle from the sides proved very helpful in deciphering the carved characters.

The monuments are found at every bearing change in the town's borders. There are 24 such monuments in towns, and all have been updated as of 2013 and most were also witnessed in 2018. The Princeton side of each stone is marked with a "P". The stones also bear markings from adjacent towns, and it is interesting to see how recently the other towns have actually performed the witnessing. Six of the stones are markers for three towns.

The map below shows the location of the monuments. Note that there is a section of the boundary on the east side which follows the Stillwater River, and stones mark the start and end of that section.

Finding the boundary stones makes for an interesting exercise!

Princeton Hikes participants have seen about half of these monuments during hikes around town. For example, there are seven or eight near trails in Leominster State Forest, including four on Rocky Pond Road. There is one on top of Squaw Cap, near East Princeton, one near Esty Road, and four in the Northwest 'jut' of town. Some are on private land, but many are on public land, and often not far from trails or roads. A GPS phone app such as All Trails can be used to see where the town line changes direction.



Shows Brian's stone designations at each of the bearing changes of Princeton's boundaries. At each of these points that is a monument.

The Hubbardston-Princeton-Rutland Monument

As an example of the detail found on the stones, here is what Brian documented for the west-most stone in town, at the Hubbardston-Princeton-Rutland corner. This stone is found on DCR land just over the border off route 62. A dirt road leads out along a wetland, and a small stone wall is found on the left side of the road, which contains the monument.

From Brian:

MARK. - The corner mark is a rough stone slab 3.8 feet high and about 7 x 15 inches in section. The letters R P are cut on the southeast face, and H on the northwest face. There are also a number of other initials and dates cut upon the stone. Coordinates: N 42° 26.796' W 71° 57.927'

The Princeton and Rutland (southeast) face of HP-R, after much brushing and unearthing some buried carved dates. P 1828 H are carved near the top, then the initials J H B & C, then M C & N W (the N may be JV ligatured). Large letters R and P indicate the two towns sharing this face. The carved dates following are 1833, 1838, 1843, 1848, 1853, 1858, 1863, 1868, 1873, 1878, 1883, and 1898. The large painted date may be 1993.

The Hubbardston (northwest) face of H-P-R. H carved at the top, below which are the carved dates 1858, 1863, 1868, 1873, 1883, and 1888. Painted dates are 1958, 1993, and now 2013.



This stone was visited and witnessed on July 21, 2013. Also present were several representatives from the town of Hubbardston.



H-P-R, northeast edge of slab (facing the Hubbardston/Princeton line). Carved dates from top are 1848, 1853, 1859, 1865, 1870, 1883, and 1888.



H-P-R, Rutland/Princeton face, witnessed with "2013".

This document was written and compiled in 2023 by Rick Gardner using the work done by Brian Keevan and recent discussions with Brian. As town perambulator, Brian is planning to re-witness the stones over the next couple of years.