

# The Mason-Dixon Line

Not a North/South Boundary Line



The large stone above is known as the Tripoint Stone and rests at the intersection of the West Virginia, Pennsylvania and Maryland border. The 1885 date is when the permanent marker was set after replacing the original wooden markers. It is said you can stand on this spot and be in three states at the same time.

The inset photos are examples of the "crownstones" with the Penn coat of arms on the side facing Pennsylvania and the Calvert coat of arms on the side facing Maryland. The "crownstones" were placed every 5 miles along the line, while stones placed every mile in between displayed a "P" on the Pennsylvania side, and an "M" on the Maryland side.

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Many Americans know about the Mason-Dixon Line and often associate it with the Civil War. Actually, the famous state boundary had nothing to do with the Civil War or slavery when it was surveyed—the war’s legacy often overshadows the origins of the line. Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon’s commission to survey the Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Delaware borders was prompted by colonial disputes between the Penn and Calvert families that predated the American Revolutionary War. The Mason-Dixon story stands as an enduring tribute to the two surveyors who carried out a difficult mission during unfavorable circumstances of the eighteenth century.

In 1632, Charles I, King of England, granted land to Cecilius Calvert that was later to become the state of Maryland. When William Penn was also granted land by Charles II five decades later, boundary disputes occurred between the Calvert and Penn families. Three of William Penn’s boundaries were clearly delineated but the southern boundary proved to be troublesome because of confusion over inadequately surveyed land. The Calvert and Penn land grants called for a property line to run at the 40th parallel of north latitude; therefore Pennsylvania’s southern border and Maryland’s northern border would be identical—an easily understood agreement. Problems arose, however, when it was discovered the 40th parallel failed to intersect with the 12 Mile Circle around the town of New Castle, as required in the agreement. Surveyors also discovered the town was more than 20 miles south of the 40th parallel, thereby creating a no man’s land commonly referred to as “The Wedge”; both the Penns and Calverts laid claims to the disputed area.

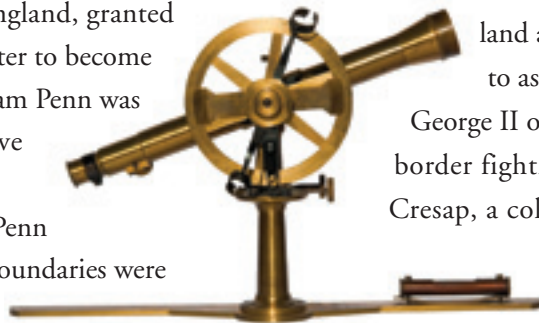
The Penns were especially concerned by the disputed boundaries since they assumed the 12 Mile Circle and the 40th parallel would intersect south of Philadelphia, the capital city of their colony. Instead, it was determined the line actually ran north of Philadelphia. The confusion and disputes eventually escalated into armed conflict involving the Pennsylvania and Maryland militias and Thomas

Cresap, one of western Maryland’s most significant historical figures.

Both the Pennsylvania and Maryland authorities attempted to collect taxes from residents in the disputed areas who weren’t happy with the chaotic situation. Thomas Cresap, an Englishman who arrived in Maryland at 15 years of age, later settled near Wrightsville (today located in Pennsylvania) and was granted 500 acres of land by Maryland. Cresap collected taxes and acted as an agent of Maryland. Pennsylvania interpreted Cresap’s actions as encroachment, and armed conflict resulted. The subsequent hostilities during the 1730s involving Maryland and Pennsylvania militias are referred to as “Cresap’s War.” Intercession by King George II of England was necessary to stop the border fighting and arrange for a cease fire. Cresap, a colorful and central character to the dispute, later settled in Oldtown, Maryland, and participated in the French and Indian War.

The 80 year old property line debate obviously needed a resolution involving accurately surveyed boundaries. An English court eventually arbitrated the matter, and the quarrelling families agreed to a compromise requiring new boundary lines to be drawn starting 15 miles south of Philadelphia. Since qualified colonial surveyors could not be found, the Penns and Calverts agreed to commission Charles Mason, an astronomer with the Royal Society in Greenwich, and Jeremiah Dixon, a surveyor from Durham County, England, to mark a boundary line between Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Delaware. Mason and Dixon accepted the commission and after a long Atlantic crossing arrived in Philadelphia in November 1763.

Mason and Dixon started their work by establishing the precise location of Philadelphia because it had previously been decided the east-west border between Maryland and Pennsylvania was to be laid 15 miles due south of that city. The surveyors later determined that line lay in latitude of 39 degrees 43 minutes 18.2 seconds north.





State of the art equipment was made available for the journey. A six foot mounted telescope called a “zenith sector” measured the angles of reference stars from the zenith of the sky as they crossed the meridian. This precision instrument required safe keeping and was transported on a soft mattress fastened to the bed of a spring loaded wagon. Additional instruments included a precision clock, a Hadley quadrant used to measure angular distances, 66 foot long measuring chains, telescopes, wooden rods to measure sloping ground, and a large chest containing printed reference materials. Axmen cleared a line of sight path, a distance of 233 miles on the east-west boundary line and 83 miles on the north-south side between Maryland and Delaware.

To make a useful and obvious record of their measurements, Mason and Dixon used 12 inch square stones, quarried and carved in England, that were placed every mile with larger “crownstones” placed every fifth mile. Small stones displayed a “P” on the north face and an “M” on the south face to designate the directions of the two states. The more elaborate crownstones featured engravings

**Editors Note: I spent half a day trying to find this stone and ran into these kind, local folks who showed me the way. You definitely have to have a four-wheeler or a horse to get to it. The stone is remote and hard to find if you don't know the area. — Lance**

**Cassie Wilson, left, with Levi Wilson in front of her, and Christian Wilson sitting on the stone. Lori Wilson, right, holding Carlee Wilson, with Gabrielle Wilson to her right, at the Tripoint Stone on the border of West Virginia, Pennsylvania and Maryland.**

of the Penn and Calvert coats of arms. Because of rugged terrain, wagons carrying the heavy limestone monuments were unable to cross Sideling Hill in western Maryland, so temporary oak posts were used; permanent markers were set later. At the western end of the Maryland-Pennsylvania demarcation, the terrain again prohibited the use of wagons transporting stone markers, so rock groupings were used instead. In the early 20th century, the rock groupings were replaced with stone markers.

Surveying the land was difficult work. Records indicate the men would lie on their backs, often in freezing temperatures, to look through their 6 foot telescope for the purpose of measuring angles between the stars and



The vandals rock (left), is located in the town of Markleysburg, PA, on a paved road and is in the region of the Tripoint Stone. The locals say it's a decoy to keep vandals from damaging the real stone. The real Tripoint Stone (right) sits well back in the woods, about 3 miles on a dirt trail and has very distinctive markings. If you look closely you can see a vertical line which we believe defines a state line and an "A" to the left of that, with the "P" chipped away. To the right of the line appears a "W" for West Virginia (the "V" apparently chipped away).



the meridian. Each observation took a couple of weeks.

Mason and Dixon's efforts meant significant changes for some residents near the border. As the surveyors moved locations, locals paid attention because the Englishmen's calculations determined if they resided in Maryland or in Pennsylvania.

The surveyors also caught the attention of Native Americans who were concerned the Europeans would continue to mark and eventually claim territory as they moved westward. Negotiations were required before the party reached Cumberland, Maryland, in June 1767. A compromise was reached when the Native Americans accepted payment of 500 English pounds in exchange for permitting the survey to continue. Approximately 100 men subsequently departed Cumberland and moved toward Big Savage Mountain.

The surveyors were stymied by rugged surroundings and resistant inhabitants as they trekked west. Native Americans continued to view the survey as an intrusion into their lands and unlike their counterparts near Cumberland, were more willing to use force. Conditions were considered to be so dangerous near the Monongahela River that many axmen abandoned their jobs. Reinforcements sent from Fort Cumberland assisted in the effort until work finally ended in October 1767 at mile 233. Mason and Dixon

realized they had to abandon the project when Mohawks threatened to resist with force. A large stone pyramid was erected at a point about 36 miles from their intended destination.

The final section of the boundary was completed by others at a later date.

What happened to the limestone markers set by Mason and Dixon? Fortunately, many have survived. A 1950 inventory concluded that 217 of the original 219 markers along the Maryland-Pennsylvania border remained intact. A 1994 inventory conducted by the Mason & Dixon Preservation Group was not so optimistic and reported that a large number of the monuments were missing, damaged, or threatened. According to their website, the group hopes to preserve the remaining stones and replace those lost or damaged beyond repair.

In 1768, Mason and Dixon presented copies of their maps to the commissioners that hired them—mission accomplished. The Penn and Calvert families paid the \$75,000 costs associated with the four year project. Mason and Dixon later returned to England and never worked together again. Dixon died at age 45 and was buried in England. Mason returned to America and resided in Philadelphia until his death in 1786. It is interesting to note that Mason and Dixon's demarcation line separating the Penns and Calverts has endured and experienced notoriety, even though both colonial families lost all lands in the Revolutionary War.