

The Fairfax Stone

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In the summer of 1736, Colonel William Mayo and his party faced a decision at the fork of a stream. Sent up river by Lord Fairfax and Virginia's Lieutenant-Governor William Gooch to locate "the true meridian of the first fountain of the river Pattowmack," they were charged with establishing the northwestern corner of the Fairfax Grant. Upon arrival at a point some 16 miles east of modern Cumberland, Maryland, they had to choose whether to continue straight ahead along a channel later named the North Branch or to veer left up what is now called the South Branch of the Potomac River. Based on their snapshot view of the natural history of this location, they opted to continue westward.

Unknown and unknowable to them, their choice of which fork to ascend was to determine the boundary between two states, influence the boundary locations among three others, and foster litigation lasting into the Twentieth Century. Only in 1909 did the U.S. Supreme Court decree once and for all that the North Branch marked the southern border of Maryland (Lassen, 1976). This was long after the Colonial Virginia land grant they were surveying was partitioned between two states, among more than a dozen counties, and into hundreds of plantations, farms, and villages.

As a general geographic rule, a river's name and all that pertains to it follow the larger tributary at any confluence. A major exception to this rule resulted when the Mississippi River was named near its headwaters before French explorers discovered the larger Missouri and Ohio rivers joined it further downstream. Although all the Potomac tributaries above its tidal reaches carried Indian names (the South Branch was Wappacomo while the North Branch and the main stem above Harpers Ferry was Cohaungoruton), their locations and relative sizes were but vaguely perceived in 1736 (Everstine, 1946).

Captain John Smith's 1612 map of Virginia shows "Chesapeack Bay" and the "Patawomeck flu" fairly well in its tidal part, but with somewhat less accuracy from its

falls to a fork probably at present Harpers Ferry and with nothing further upstream. Augustin Herrman's 1673 map of Virginia and Maryland is almost modern in its portrayal of tidal "Potowmeck River" but rather schematic for both forks of the Shenandoah and for the Potomac west of Harpers Ferry. Delisle's c.1734 map of "La Louisiane" shows the present Ohio, Cumberland, and Tennessee rivers rising on the west side of a single Appalachian "ridge" with two forks each for the Shenandoah and Potomac rivers rising to the east (Fite & Freeman, 1926). Modern maps reveal Delisle's single "ridge" to be a complex of several ridges and valleys with tributaries of the James River separating the Shenandoah headwaters from those of all streams draining westward.

Even the meaning of "first fountain" as proclaimed by King James II to denote headwaters was open to interpretation, which may have influenced the decision of the Mayo party. With the full extent of the North American continent then as unknown to Virginia colonists as it was to English royalty, "first" could equally well have meant "westernmost" as "hindermost" in the political climate of the times. Colonel Mayo and his party may have been predisposed to continue westward up the Cohaungoruton rather than to turn aside up the Wappacomo with but the slightest justification.

A possibility exists that rainfall in the watershed of the North Branch in the summer of 1736 could have swollen its flow to give it a temporary appearance of being the major tributary. Indeed, during the drought year of 1969 the South Branch did have the lower average flow. Even when flow from the two branches is approximately equal, from a downstream approach the North Branch appears to continue onward while the South Branch diverges obliquely to the side. Which branch appears as the major one is thus subject to vagaries of weather and first impressions; any snapshot view at this confluence stands a good chance of supporting the wrong conclusion.

Although high river water in spring is typically

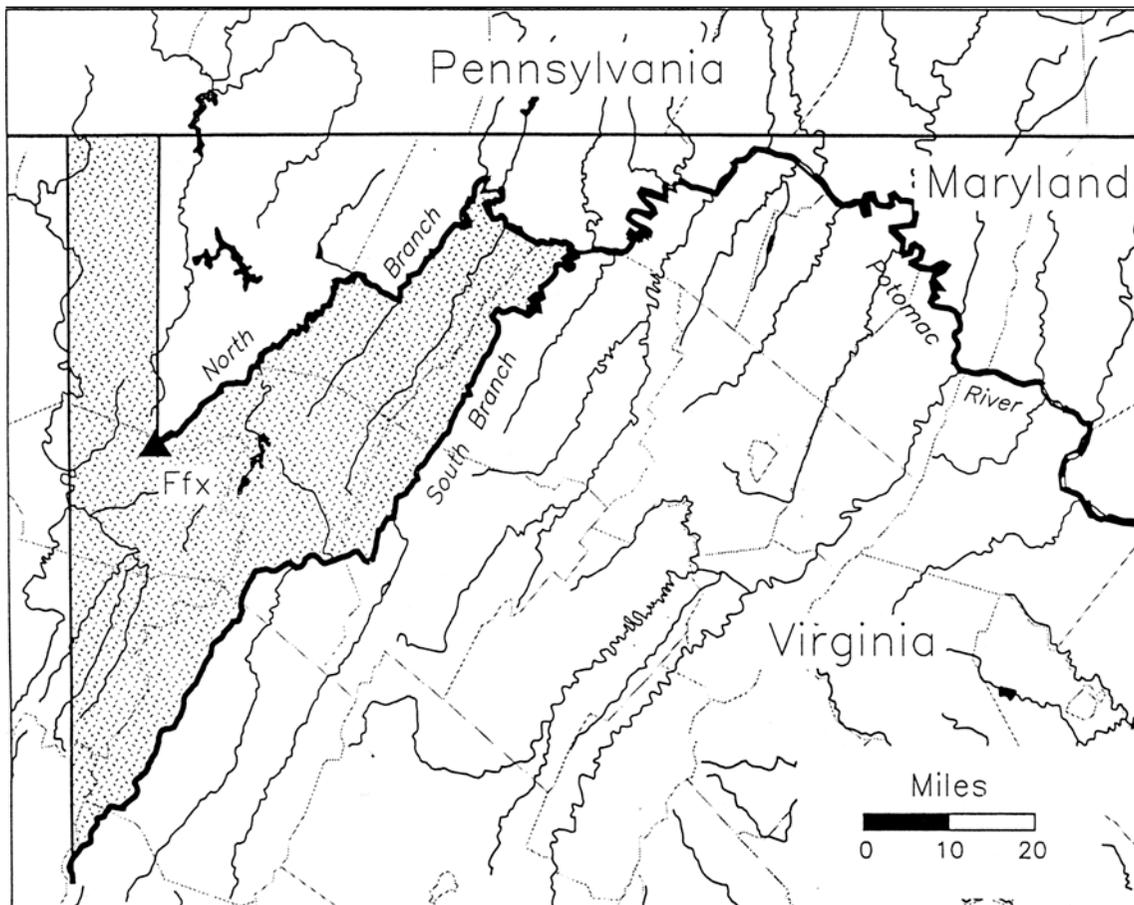


Figure 1. The shading shows the area that would have been lost to Virginia and claimed by Maryland had the Mayo party followed the South Branch of the Potomac River to its "first fountain." Ffx is the location of the Fairfax Stone. (Elizabeth Campbell, Virginia Division of Mineral Resources, assisted in the electronic preparation of the map.)

followed by low water in summer, floods and droughts may be weighed on the basis of their statistically expected repeat frequency — 5 years, 50, or 500. While deciduous trees leaf in the spring and shed in the fall, defoliating "locust" (= cicada, *Magicicada septemdecim*) infestations tend to repeat every 17 summers. North American snowshoe hare (*Lepus* sp.) populations along with those of their major predator, the lynx (*Lynx* sp.), peak and crash at about 10-year intervals, their numbers varying by as much as one full order of magnitude in their cycle. Any snapshot observation about the natural

history of a given place and time may or may not represent an average or typical state of its systems; in all probability it does not.

As a result of accurate surveying in the Nineteenth Century and the aerial and satellite imagery of the Twentieth, we now know the South Branch is the longer of the two and has the larger watershed. The South Branch extends 133 miles upstream from the confluence and drains 1493 square miles whereas the North Branch extends only 97 miles and drains 1328 square miles. Based on data collected by the U.S. Geological Survey

since 1899, the mean annual discharge of the South Branch is 1310 cubic feet per second whereas that of the North is but 1277. Daily flows, however, range 10-100 times larger or smaller than these mean values. Acquiring these numbers required decades of careful measurement and diligent observation by the Survey, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and the Interstate Commission on the Potomac River Basin.

Colonel Mayo and his party were dispatched to discover the headwaters of the Potomac because in 1688 King James II bequeathed Thomas (Lord) Culpeper all the land between the Potomac and Rappahannock rivers to a line to be drawn between their first fountains. Lord Fairfax inherited this bequest and, in 1746, the western boundary of his tract, the Fairfax Line, was surveyed between those two headwaters. The Fairfax Stone, a block of native sandstone engraved "Ffx," was planted at its northwestern end, the headwaters of the North Branch. This stone was subsequently taken to designate the southwestern corner of Maryland as shown on Thomas Kitchin's 1755 map of the British and French dominions in North America (Fite and Freeman, 1926).

It was not until 1771, when Colonel Thomas Cresap surveyed both branches of the Potomac, that its first fountain was finally located in present Highland County, Virginia, on a meridian some 12 miles west of the Fairfax Stone and 52 miles south of it. Thus, the headwaters of the South Branch are both the westernmost and the hindermost of the Potomac. The Fry-Jefferson map of 1775 accurately shows this relationship along with other major tributaries to the Potomac. Nevertheless, the meridian of the Fairfax Stone marked the western extent of Maryland with the North Branch as its southern border; Colonel Mayo's decision in 1736 at the confluence of the North and South branches of the Potomac binds political boundaries even today.

One can but speculate on subsequent turns of events had Colonel Mayo opted to tack left up the South Branch. All or parts of the counties of Mineral, Grant, Hampshire, Hardy, Pendleton, Preston, Tucker, Randolph, and Pocahontas, now in West Virginia, and the northwestern corner of Highland County would have belonged to Maryland (Figure 1). The whole question of the disposition of the district of West Augusta into northwestern Virginia (now West Virginia), southwestern Pennsylvania, and eastern Ohio could have been decided otherwise, resulting in borders among those states possibly quite different from ones now observed.

Rational planning about how best to use the land we inherit requires us to know what we have and what benefits and constraints it confers upon us. The land, its climate, its surface and subterranean waters, the plants that grow in and on it, and the animals that inhabit it require long-term observation before any rational planning is credible. Permanent and continuing geological and biological surveys, such as those conducted by the Virginia Division of Mineral Resources and the Virginia Museum of Natural History, are an absolute requirement for obtaining the baseline information needed for land-use decisions.

Any snapshot of these characteristics is likely to produce an inaccurate picture of the lay of the land. Once a wrong turn is made, however, rectification of its consequences ranges from difficult to impossible. The Fairfax Stone does not lie at "the first fountain of the river Pottowmack," but we are stuck forever with the after effects of Colonel Mayo's decision made in 1736 where the North and South branches join to become the main stem of the Potomac River.

Acknowledgments

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