

MASON AND DIXON'S LINE.

THE name of "Mason and Dixon's Line" is one that to the rising generation is fast losing its significance and power, though for the first half of the century it was in every one's mouth, echoed in halls of legislation, repeated in courts of justice, and shouted in political gatherings as the watch-word and battle-cry of slavery on the one hand and freedom on the other. Bancroft, in his second volume, speaks of it as "forming the present division between the States resting on free labor and the States that tolerate slavery;" and he adds, "that it is so is due not to the philanthropy of the Quakers alone, but to climate.*" But as early as 1854 Latrobe,* with clearer foresight and discernment, says: "Perhaps less to climate than to interest. Slavery south of Mason and Dixon's line will cease to exist so soon as it ceases to be the interest of land-holders to hold and work their fields with slaves. Bancroft's mistake," he adds, "is in attributing slavery to *climate*, which is unchanging, and would make the institution lasting, instead of to *interest*, which is changeable, and may cause slavery to cease to exist."

Looking upon the map of the United States, one naturally asks, "why the southern line of Pennsylvania was not continued to the New Jersey shore, why the eastern line of Maryland does not there strike it, and why a circle should be the northern boundary of Delaware, the odd result of which has been to leave so narrow a strip of Pennsylvania between Delaware and Maryland, that the ball of one's foot may be in the former and the heel in the latter, while the instep forms an arch over a portion of the Key-stone State itself." The explanation is connected with the "line" of which we are speaking.

On the 4th of March, 1681, William Penn obtained a grant of land westward of the Delaware and northward of Maryland, a part of the southern boundary of which was to be "a circle drawn at twelve miles distant from Newcastle northwards, and westwards unto the beginning of the fortieth degree of northern latitude;" and in the *difficulty of tracing this circle was the origin of the work of Mason and Dixon.*

In August, 1681, Penn, through his agent Markham, had received "that extensive forest lying twelve miles northward of Newcastle, on the western side of the Delaware," and early in the following year Markham met Lord Baltimore at Upland, now Chester, to settle the boundaries of the two provinces. Upland, which was supposed to be

north of the Maryland line, was found by observation to be twelve miles south of it, and in view of this fact Penn's agent declined acting, and went to England to consult with Penn himself. Now Penn had from the beginning been dissatisfied that so much of his province was inland, and that the passage to it up Delaware Bay was so difficult and dangerous, especially in the winter season, and had sought, but in vain, from the Duke of York for a grant of the Delaware colony. At length, however, the grant was made, in August, 1682, conveying to Penn the town of Newcastle, with a territory twelve miles around it, and the tract of land extending southward from it on the river Delaware as far as to Cape Henlopen—a grant doubly important to Penn from the discovery of the true latitude of Upland. And with this grant in view Penn came to America, and took possession of the territory October 28, 1682.

The conclusion thus reached was resisted by Lord Baltimore; and an appeal being made to the king in council, the matter was referred to the Committee of Trade and Plantations, who, as a compromise, divided the peninsula north of a line west from Cape Henlopen between the two parties, so that "Penn obtained a way to his too backward-lying province just as wide and as long as the present State of Delaware." This was on the 13th of November, 1685, when the Duke of York, under whom Penn claimed, had become king. But in the political changes of the next twenty-three years both Maryland and Pennsylvania were taken from their proprietors; and it was not till the accession of Queen Anne that Penn was able (June 23, 1708) to obtain an order in council enforcing the decision of 1685, though even then nothing was done under it. In 1718 Penn died, and in 1723 we find his widow arranging with Lord Baltimore to preserve peace on the borders for eighteen months, in the hope that within that time the boundaries might be finally settled. But it was not till May 10, 1732, that a deed was executed between the children and devisees of Penn and the great-grandson of the first Lord Baltimore, "agreeing upon a line due west from Cape Henlopen* across the peninsula, from whose centre another line should be drawn tangent to a circle twelve miles from Newcastle, while a meridian from the tangent point should be continued to within fifteen miles from Philadelphia, whence should be traced the parallel of latitude westward that was to divide the provinces. Should the meridian

* See his valuable address before the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in 1854, to which the writer is indebted for most of the facts, and often for the language, of this article.

* Not the present Cape Henlopen, which on Lord Baltimore's map is called Cape Cornelius, but the point, about fifteen miles south, where the States of Maryland and Delaware come together on the ocean. On the latest map of Maryland it is marked as Fenwick's Island.

cut a segment from the circle, the segment was to be a part of Newcastle County. This parallel of latitude is the "Mason and Dixon's line" of history.

But to execute this deed of 1732 on parchment, says Latrobe, was a different thing from executing it on the disputed territory. First, there was difficulty as to the point in Newcastle that was to be the centre of the circle; then it was questioned whether the twelve miles were to be its radius or its circumference; and last, there was a doubt about the true Cape Henlopen. And then other difficulties and chancery proceedings, protracted for more than a quarter of a century, still kept the vexed question unsettled; so that it has well been said, "If there was any thing that could equal the faculty of the Marylanders for making trouble in this matter, it was the untiring perseverance with which the Penns devoted themselves to the contest, and followed their opponents in all their doublings." And in the end they had their reward; for on the 4th of July, 1760, another deed was executed,* as a result of which the controversy was finally closed. Under this deed commissioners were appointed, who at once undertook the completion of the east and west peninsular line, and the tracing of the twelve-mile circle. But the progress made was very slow; and at the end of three years they had completed little more than the peninsular line and the measurement of a radius. This delay seems greatly to have disappointed the proprietors; for on the 4th of August, 1763, Thomas and Richard Penn, and Lord Baltimore, the great-grandson of Cecilius, the first patentee, then being together in London, agreed with Charles Mason and James Dixon "to mark, run out, settle, fix, and determine all such parts of the circle, marks, lines, and boundaries as were mentioned in the several articles or commissions, and were not completed."

Of these two "mathematicians and surveyors," as they are called, but little is known. Mason is said to have been an assistant of Dr. Bradley at the Royal Observatory at Greenwich. He was elected a member of the American Philosophical Society March 27, 1767, as Dixon also was April 1, 1763; and in the notice of their election each is styled "surveyor, of London." In addition to running the boundary line as described in this article, Mason and Dixon, under instructions from the Royal Society, also determined the length of a degree of latitude in the provinces of Pennsylvania and Maryland, an account of which is given at length in the *Philosophical Transactions*.

* This deed Latrobe speaks of as "a treatise in itself, and whether for technical accuracy (as a rare piece of conveyancing), legal learning, or historical interest, not surpassed by any paper of its kind." Its duplicate original is still preserved in the archives of Maryland at Annapolis, which was formerly called *Providence*.

And after their occupation in America they were both employed, under the direction of the Royal Society, to observe the transit of Venus across the sun, as seen at the Cape of Good Hope, in 1769. And when Mayer's lunar tables were sent to London to compete for the prize offered by the Board of Longitude, Mason made improvements and corrections in them, and they were published as "Mayer's Lunar Tables, improved by Mr. Charles Mason," in 1787. Dixon died at Durham, England, in 1777; and Mason, who came back to this country, died in Pennsylvania in February, 1787.

Leaving England in August, they arrived in Philadelphia on the 15th of November, 1763, and at once entered upon their work. Bancroft erroneously speaks of them as having run the line in 1761; but they did not commence it till 1764, and it was not completed till 1767, and not finally marked till 1768. Adopting the peninsular east and west line of their predecessors, as also their radius and tangent point, they still had to ascertain and establish the tangent from the middle point of the peninsular line to "the tangent point," and the meridian from thence to a point fifteen miles south of the most southern part of the city of Philadelphia, with the arc of the circle to the west of it, the fifteen miles distance, and the parallel of latitude westward from its termination. But so accurate had been the work of the previous surveyors that Mason and Dixon record, in their proceedings of November 13, 1764, that the true tangent line, as ascertained by themselves with their superior instruments, "would not pass one inch to the westward or eastward" of the post, marking the tangent point, set in the ground by the surveyors who had gone before them; so that, after all, "the sighting along poles and the rude chain measurements of 1761 and 1762 would have answered every purpose, had the proprietors so thought."

Having verified the tangent point, they next measured on its meridian fifteen miles from the parallel of the most southern part of Philadelphia, and so ascertained the northeastern corner of Maryland, which was, of course, the beginning of the parallel agreed upon as the boundary between the provinces. And on this parallel they ran their course due westward, cutting down the forests before them, as we learn from their field-notes, so as to form "a vistro" eight yards wide, in the middle of which they set up their posts to mark the line of the parallel surveyed. On the 17th of June, 1765, they had carried this parallel to the Susquehanna. By the 27th of October they had reached the North Mountain, the summit of which they ascended to see the course of the Potomac; and on the 4th of June, 1766, we find them on the summit of the

Little Alleghany, and at the end of that summer's work. The Indians were now troublesome, and for the next year negotiations with the Six Nations became necessary, and as these were not concluded before May, it was not till the 8th of June that the surveyors took up their work where they had left it the preceding year. On the 14th of June they had reached the summit of the Great Alleghany, escorted by a deputation of the Six Nations. But the roving Indians of the wilderness began to give them uneasiness, and in September twenty-six of their assistants left them through fear of the Shawnees and Delawares. Still, however, with other assistants who had been sent for, they pressed on with their work, and at length reached a point two hundred and forty-four miles from the river Delaware, and within thirty-six miles of the whole distance to be run, when they came to an Indian war-path in the forest. Here their Indian escorts tell them that it is the will of the Six Nations that their surveys shall come to an end; and as there is no appeal from this decision, they leave their work, return to Philadelphia, report all the facts to the commissioners, and receive an honorable discharge on the 26th of December, 1767. At a later date the line was run out to its termination by others, and a caisson of stones some five feet high, in the forest, now marks the termination of Mason and Dixon's line, so far as it is the southern boundary of Pennsylvania. It should be borne in mind, however, that the north and south line which divides Delaware from Maryland is really a part of the Mason and Dixon line, so that the popular impression that "the line" was the boundary between the Free and Slave States is an error. For slavery existed in Delaware (which is both east and, by its circular northern boundary, north of the line dividing Maryland and Pennsylvania) until it was abolished by the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution. Mason and Dixon's line was the boundary between freedom and slavery where it ran east and west between Pennsylvania and Maryland, but *not* where it ran north and south between Maryland and Delaware. And then, again, the southern boundary of Pennsylvania, being limited to five degrees of longitude, was not long enough to take the line to the Ohio River; and as the western boundary of the State was to be a meridian, and the course of the Ohio upward inclined irregularly to the east, the consequence was that a narrow strip was left between the river and the meridian, belonging to Virginia, which is known as the "Pan Handle," from its fancied resemblance to the handle of a frying-pan, the body of the State forming the pan itself.

The line, or rather lines, of which the history has thus been given were directed,

both by the agreement of the parties and by the decree of Lord Hardwicke, to be marked in a particular manner. And accordingly the surveyors erected at the end



STONES MARKING THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN PENNSYLVANIA AND MARYLAND.

of every mile a stone having P on the one side and M on the other, and at the end of every fifth mile a larger stone, with the arms of the Penns on one side and those of the Baltimore family on the other.* These stones are of oolitic limestone, or the Portland stone of Great Britain. They were all carefully cut in England, and sent over to this country as they were needed; but as the last ship-load came after the location of the stones was interrupted, many of them were left near Fort Frederick,† where the writer has seen one used as the corner-stone and support of a corn-house, and four or five making the steps to the front-door of a negro's cabin. They were regularly set up on the parallel surveyed as far as Sideling Hill; but as here all wheel transportation ceased in 1766, the further marking of the line was a vista cut in the woods, eight yards wide, with piles of stone on the crests of all the mountain ranges, built some eight feet high, as far as the summit of the Alleghany, beyond which the line was marked with posts, around which stones and earth were heaped, the better to indicate and preserve them.



THE FIVE-MILE STONES.



* In 1768, on a re-examination of the line, it was found that the stone at "the middle point" on the peninsular east and west line had been dug up by persons engaged in *money digging*, the belief being prevalent that Kidd and others had landed and buried their treasures on the shores of the Chesapeake. And it was evidently supposed by the ignorant diggers that the stone, with its armorial bearings, was placed by the freebooters to mark the place where they had buried their treasures.

† Fort Frederick is a well-preserved relic of the colonial times. It stands on the north bank of the Potomac, in Washington County, Maryland, about fifty miles below Cumberland. It was built of stone, at a cost of some \$30,000, in 1755-56, under the direction of Governor Sharpe.