

Mansfield Memories - Did you know your elected officials' duties once included perambulating?

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In 1960, Mansfield and Sharon officials hiked into the woods off Mansfield Avenue and Bird Road to locate one of the granite shafts marking the town boundaries. *Courtesy/Mansfield Historical Society*

MANSFIELD - Massachusetts law requires each city and town to contact its neighbors every five years and reaffirm the boundaries that separate them. This act is called perambulating and was handed down from ancient traditions in England.

Perambulating involves locating and inspecting old granite markers or other landmarks that define town lines. And in the swampy wilds of southeastern Massachusetts that was not always easy.

An early example of perambulation occurred on Nov. 26, 1793 when Mansfield selectmen John Dean and Jonathan Newcomb met two selectmen from the Town of Attleborough. They reported the following:

“We began at a heap of stones for the southwest corner of Mansfield,” they reported. Next they found a second “heap of stones on ridge hill, on Balcom’s plain.” Then finally “a large heap of stones being the northwest corner of Mansfield and the southwest corner of Foxborough, and the southeast corner of Wrentham [now Plainville], and the northeast corner of Attleborough [now North Attleboro].”

Perambulating continued faithfully through the years. Some selectmen considered it an opportunity to enjoy a good walk and meet with fellow officials from the area. Others saw it as a nuisance. Either way it often left them with a good story.



This old granite marker in this 1960 photo indicates Corner 2 looking northeast where Attleboro, Mansfield and North Attleboro meet. *Courtesy/Mansfield Historical Society*

Take 1935 as an example, when selectmen Edward Richardson and Henry Olsen were joined by Town Manager Harold Everett. They met three Norton

selectmen near West Mansfield in search of the boundaries. They were reported to be in high spirits at the start, “only to be confronted with swamps, stone walls, brooks, hills, and dales.”

One of the older gentlemen soon turned back. The others continued to search in vain. They only found the marker when they paid a nearby resident two dollars to bring them to it.

The Mansfield News commented on their misfortune, “perambulating the boundaries, as some selectmen of the past learned to their sorrow, is not the pleasant Saturday afternoon jaunt that most people suppose.”

Ten years later perambulators wandered around for three hours in a swamp looking for the markers in a light rain.

“Lost an afternoon of painting and missed the ballgame,” grumbled Selectman John Prescott.



This marker in a photo from 1897 shows Corner 3 looking northwest where Foxborough, Mansfield, Norton, Attleboro and Wrentham (now Plainville) meet. *Courtesy/Mansfield Historical Society*

After inspecting the border with Sharon in 1960, selectmen Edward Jameson and Salvatore DeLutis suggested that current perambulators should leave detailed descriptions of how to find the markers for their successors.

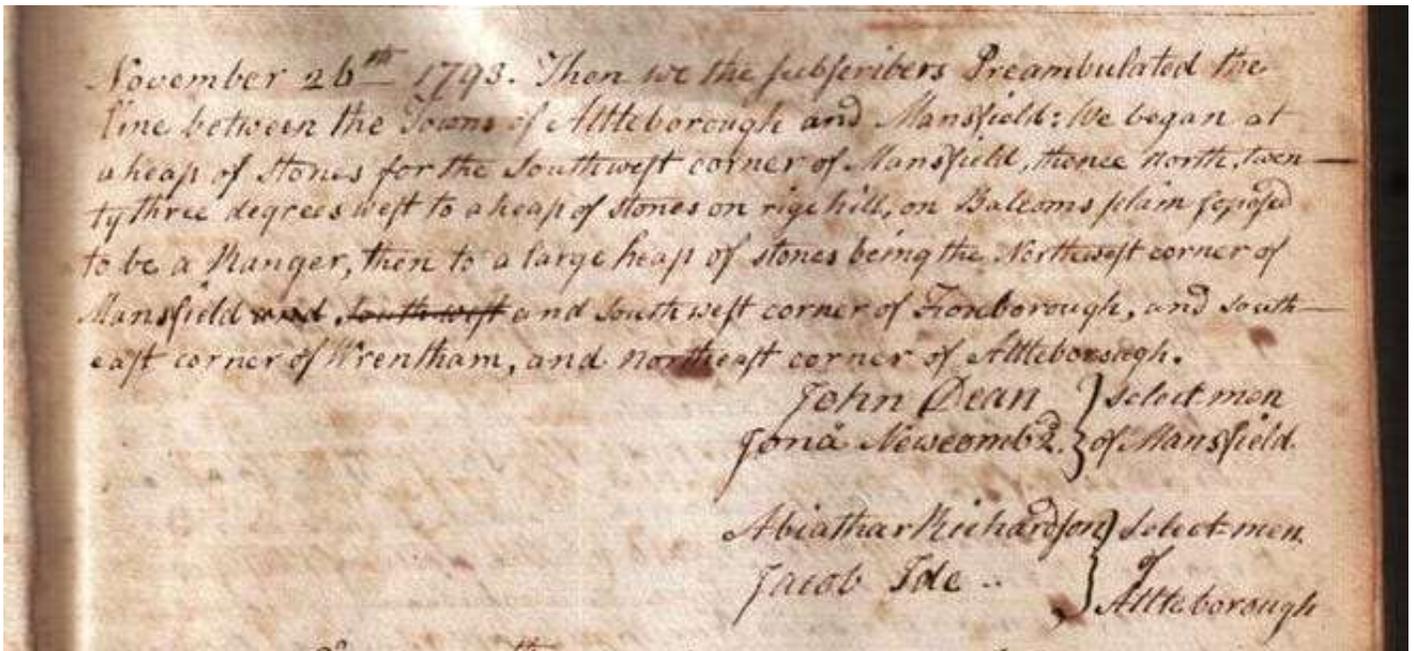
“Even a rough sketch of the locations, and how to get to the markers, would help in the future,” DeLutis suggested.

Selectmen remembered there was comprehensive documentation of all markers performed in 1899 by the Massachusetts Topographical Survey Commission. An oversized volume was produced that described the locations in detail and included photographs of every boundary marker.

But that did not help wandering perambulators in 1965 when Selectman Lewis Davison and highway department employee Armand Brunelle met a North Attleboro official to do their duty. The trio searched for two hours.



Show above are Forrest Peterson, left, and Lewis Davison, right. Davison spent two hours searching for the town's markers in 1965. Courtesy/Mansfield Historical Society



A record of officials perambulating to locate the town's boundaries.

“I wouldn’t say we were lost, but I sure was glad to find the high tension lines,” said Davison.

“You should have had Bobby DeLong’s [Boy] Scouts find the marker for you,” said Selectmen Forrest Peterson. “We might have needed them to find us!” replied Davison with a smile.

The tradition of selectmen perambulating the boundaries seems to have ended sometime in the 1980s or ’90s. But the Town of Mansfield continues to follow the law. The Engineering Division of the Department of Public Works finds the markers every five years and files a report. The last report was completed in 2017, with the next scheduled for 2022.