Retracing the Footsteps of US General Land Office Deputy Surveyors
Gary H. Stevenson, LS
Douglas County Surveyor

US Deputy Surveyors
- Little is known about most of them
- Most also did surveys for railroads
- Most were well educated
- A lot of them were Civil War veterans

Follow the “Footsteps” of the Original Surveyor
Second General Rule: That the original township, section, quarter-section, and other monuments as physically evidenced must stand as the true corners of the subdivisions which they were intended to represent, and will be given controlling preference over the recorded directions and lengths of lines.

US Deputy Surveyors
- OVERALL THE ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE GLO DEPUTY SURVEYORS IS REMARKABLE
- HOWEVER, THERE ARE EXTREME DIFFERENCES IN THE ACCURACY OF THE ACTUAL SURVEYING
- WHY THE EXTREME DIFFERENCES?
  - INTEGRITY & HONESTY
  - HARSHSHIPS
  - DIFFICULTY
  - MONEY - NO PROFIT FOR MANY

KNOWING & IDENTIFYING THE DIFFERENCES CAN BE VERY VALUABLE TO PLS CORNER RECOVERY

US Deputy Surveyors
- BRIEFLY RELATE MY EXPERIENCE WITH 3 DEPUTY SURVEYORS
  - OSCAR TAYLOR
  - THOMAS B WALKER
  - PATRICK H CONGER
  - MORE IN DEPTH WITH GEORGE B. WRIGHT

Rod Squires Papers
- His Articles on the PLS in Minnesota is a valuable resource for the Land Surveyor
- How the GLO surveys progressed - why?
- Understanding the Deputy Surveyors’ contracts
- Reprinting Surveyor’s General letters and field may help to show the integrity and the accuracy of the deputy surveyor
- Letters sent and received by the Surveyor General’s office and the Deputy Surveyors give insight into their dealings while under contract
  - Work problems were encountered
  - Report misunderstandings
  - Problems discovered with the parties
  - More than corrections
"The accuracy of the rectangular net was dependent upon the quality of the deputies employed...

"Those individuals and partnerships that were good were those who were temperamentally willing to fulfill officious requirements, work speedily, and accurately."

Background by Others

- MINNESOTA PUBLIC LAND SURVEYORS
  - The Deputy Surveyors of Minnesota's Original Public Land Survey System
    - By Larry Swenson (1996)
    - Minnesota Surveyor's Articles
    - John Freeman, Cany County Surveyor
    - Lewis Pfeifer/ling, MN/DNR Surveyor
    - Papers & Presentations
    - Don Manoors, PE, LS

Approximately 250 Deputy Surveyors in Minnesota

My Experience

- Starting out in our surveying careers, we are naive about the GLO process
- We think the GLO surveyors were all the same
- Same Equipment
- Same Instructions
- Same Results

1st Experience - Oscar Taylor - Wright County - 121-28
US Deputy Surveyor 1856 - 1859

Did Not Close on West Township Line

1st Experience - Oscar Taylor - Wright County - 121-27 & 28
US Deputy Surveyor 1856 - 1859

Omitted Lands?
Oscar Taylor - Wright County - 119 - 28
Erroneous Meander Line - Omitted Land

BLM Dependent Resurvey for Omitted Islands

Oscar Taylor - Original Post
North's Corner
Section 8
T 121 N - R 27 W
Wright County

Set in 1856
Found in 1975
Marked with
2 slates, N. & S
1/2 x 3 1/2 x 40

2nd Experience - Thomas B. Walker
US Deputy Surveyor
1857 - 1858

Partnerships with
William P. Allen
Edgar P. Putnam
T. T. Barnes
George B. Wright

Walker, Allen, & Putnam - 1871
T 130 N - R 37 W

4 Mils Extremly Well

Grand Except for West 2 miles
Surveyed by E. P. Putnam
Patrick H. Conger

- He was awarded contracts to do the township lines, township subdivisions, and reservation boundary at the same time.
- Commissioner's recommendation was that contracts for both township lines and subdivisions should not be issued at the same time, but were preferred to be a year apart.
George B. Wright
Private Land Owner & Private Surveyor
Plat No. 1 - Douglas County - 1876

Wright had real estate holdings in 20 counties with several thousand acres of land to locate for various parties.

US Deputy Surveyor's Accuracy in 1870s
- Wright's last contract in 1872 - He was one of the best!
- Quality of Surveys by other Deputies seemed to get worse in the 1870s
- Surveyor General - numerous letters about poor surveys
- Squires Research Shows Few Rejected Surveys, but many complaints

Inspection of Deputy Surveyor's Work by Nathan Butler - 1872

SE Corner of Becker County
Townships Subdivided by Milton P. Noel - 1870
Herman Stearns County Surveyor

Some of Butler's Comments
- Surveys poorly done - making it difficult to determine in some cases what are intended to be subdivision lines and corners
- Random lines not closed - 20 to 40 rods off - ¼ corners set on random and not corrected
- Diagonal lines
- Various lengths - not within a chain of a mile as required - some not within 2 to 3 chains
- Lakes very different that meander lines show
- Large lakes shown that don't exist

Known Bad or Poor Surveys Why Not Corrected?
- Surveyor General had a very limited budget
- Letters show budget was always a concern
- 10% set aside for inspections
- Some bonds were forfeited
- 1860's & 1870's saw rapid settlement could not change after land sold
- Problem with timber trespassers
Robert Harvey
State Surveyor of Nebraska

Meander Lines Do Not Fit
My Experience:
Clue to
Accuracy &
Integrity
of the Survey

What Happened on the 4th Guide Meridian?

Surveyor General’s Office
Letters from County Surveyors
- Problems with corners
  - Can they be corrected
- Areas poorly surveyed
  - Can it be resurveyed
- Omitted Lands
  - Can they have a contract
1937 Dependent Resurvey of Conger's Work

Dependent Resurvey of Conger's Work - 1926

Dependent Resurvey of Conger's Work - 1926

Surveyor General Letters - Conger

Complaint Received
Special Instructions to Buildings Correct South line 1.45 N. W. 1. W.

4th Experience - George B. Wright
Founded City of Fergus Falls in 1870
1835 - 1882

A Surveyor of High Reputation & Smart Businessman

Articles About George B. Wright

- George Wright, Principal Surveyor
  Archive Files, Minnesota Historical Society
  & Other Far Country History Society Publications (Summer 1992)

- George E. Wright, Deputy Surveyor 1855-1870
  Red River, University of Minnesota
Letter from Surveyor General Washburn to Wright - 1862

...having confidence in your ability and knowledge of the character of the work required in the public surveys...

George B. Wright
Surveyor of High Reputation

In 1863 this Deputy Surveyor wouldn't compromise his integrity... he writes:

"I must finish my contract for government surveying. I will lose on it, but I'd rather lose than give it up and so lose my reputation"

Wright Loved Being In the Field

1865 while working at the Surveyor General's Office he writes:

"The idea of a steady business behind a counter or in the office for 10 or 15 years one might as well be in a State Prison for life."

In 1867 he was offered the position of City Engineer for Minneapolis with expensive luxuries but declined... "I'll have no greatness thrust upon me in that way."

George B. Wright in Douglas County
Subdivided 5 Townships - 3 Months
George B. Wright
Examples of Retracing His "Footsteps"

Wright - East Line Sec. 36, T 127 N – R 39 W
Discovered error in Town Line while checking corners & chain
Wright measured 86 71 chains between test corners

Notes that the township east having been subdivided and part sold
to changes can be made in the township line

Surveyor General's Office Made Changes
Created 2 Quarter Corners from same Witness Corner

T 127 N – R 39 W
T 127 N – R 38 W

W C 21 71 chains north
W C 14 88 chains north

Supreme Court of Minnesota
Chan v. Brandt - 45 Minn. 93, 47 N.W. 461

- Monuments & boundary lines as established by the US Government survey control descriptions
- Mistakes in surveys cannot be corrected by judicial department

- In 1887 County Surveyorbullet substituted Sect. 31 127-38 and held
- Geo Wright moved notes from Witness Corner – 14 88 chains for George Wright
- East West Quarter Line
- Court did not mention 2nd Quarter Corner – case was only to Section 31
- Court did not see the survey of adjacent townships showing a certain corner position was material

Retracing East Line Sec. 10, 127-40

Notes House