The Public Land Survey Records for Minnesota
It's a square world

Déjà vu - Again

Presentations 2007

MSPS. The Past as Prolog: Public Land Survey Records for Minnesota

Mn/DOT. A Partial Inventory of the General Land Office Surveying Records for Minnesota

Some Preliminary Thoughts on Instructions for Surveying the Public Lands in Minnesota

An Inventory of the Public Land Surveys Records for Minnesota; The Special Instructions (211 pp.)
The Public Land Surveys in Minnesota

Well-known

Generally

how the surveys were carried out

Specifically

how each corner was established
how each half mile segment of line was run
The Public Land Surveys in Minnesota

Poorly Understood

why the surveys spread the way they did

Original Intent

To map the spread of surveys in Minnesota – completed duh!

To describe their historical significance
Impact on the land surface when they occurred
Impact on the social organization when they occurred

To describe their modern significance
Dominant organizer of space in a large part of the United States
Land – the First and Last Frontier

The Public Land Surveys transformed "formless wilderness into a remarkable national geometry of squares and rectangles"
Spatial Organization at Various Scales
The Extent of the Rectangular Surveys
Sidetracked – Mapping how they Spread Elsewhere

Green Bay
"The objective of all dedicated employees is to thoroughly analyze all situations, anticipate all problems prior to their occurrence, have answers for these problems, and move swiftly to solve these problems when called upon. However, when you are up to your ass in alligators, it is difficult to remember that your initial objective was to drain the swamp."
I got bogged down in details, details, details

Details of the surveying process
Details of the administration
Added to my original intent

To provide a context for the modern surveyors “following in the footsteps” of the deputies

I’ve grown old looking at the context
But enough of my problems!

Public Land Survey Characteristics

A. Purpose – providing a "legal description" of the land the federal government would privatize

B. Mapping – as the land surface was subdivided an inventory was made of the surface, describing the features that were thought to be relevant to prospective landowners, and maps were made

C. Operationally – the surveys were carried out by a cadre of deputy surveyors under contract with the federal government
A Legal Description

Boundaries comprising lines and points provided

a definition of the boundaries of a parcel of land, and
an unambiguous location of that parcel

Consists of

a written description that refers to
a plat

Townships, Sections, Quarter Sections, and Quarter-Quarter Sections
Principal Meridians and Baselines

A Modern Legal Description!

The N 296.33 feet of the S 605.82 feet of the W 735’ of the W 50 acres of the S1/2 SW1/4 Section 31 Township 28 N Range 22W

Beginning at the SW corner of Section 31 T 28 N R 22 W
Thence N along W line of section 1319.0 ft
Thence N 89 37° 30” E 1646.35 ft
Thence S 0 3° E 1326.4 ft
Thence S 89 52’ 20” W 1647.35 ft to Point of Beginning (SW corner of Section 31)

PLS description a variant of metes and bounds? (The scholar in me talking!)
My Odyssey

Alienation of Minnesota’s Land Surface

**Conveyed to Individuals**

- Military Service: 5,305,375
- Cash: 6,004,752
- Homestead: 11,320,200
- Timber & Stone: 1,435,275
- Timber Culture: 414,020
- Scip. Agricultural College: 620,300
- Scip > Other: 403,305
- Other: 4,303,572

**Conveyed to State of Minnesota**

- School land: 2,888,058
- Territorial: 4,798,413
- Railroad Companies: 8,141,489
- Internal improvements: 500,000
- University: 52,160
- Agricultural College: 120,000
- Soil Surveys: 46,080
- Public Buildings: 6,900
- Parks & Forestry: 28,400
- Total: 16,420,000
Public Land Ownership
The Underlying Historical Processes - Federal Policy

A. Creating private landowners

Congress signed treaties with Native American groups in which the aboriginal title of the groups was extinguished giving the United States “fee title” to land.

The ceded lands were surveyed, divided up into conveniently sized parcels, with described boundaries and a unique location.

3. Title conveyed to individuals, corporations, and even states

B. Creating governments defining and protecting the legal rights of those landowners
The Northwest Territory
Records

Evidence of the points and lines

B. Evidence of the surveying process and administration

Monuments and Reference Points – what was
A Purported Witness Tree! – what is

Monuments – what is
Evidence of the surveying process and administration

Field Notebooks – from which the plats were drawn and descriptive lists made

Township Plats – drawn at a scale of two inches per mile

Descriptive Lists

Correspondence including annual reports, instructions, and circulars

Iowa State Archives Des Moines
Minnesota State Archives. St. Paul

Minnesota State Archives

Minnesota State Archives
Minnesota Historical Society

A Guide to the Records of
Minnesota's Public Lands

by Gregory Kinney and Lydia Lucas

National Archives Washington D.C.
Where’s Waldo?
Field Notebooks

Still a Lot to be Learned about Notebooks
The quality of those who look at the evidence matters; “Some men come by the name of genius in the same way as an insect comes by the name of centipede - not because it has a hundred feet, but because most people can’t count above fourteen”
Descriptive Lists

Township Exterior Diagrams
The Paper Trail

A. Individual applied for an appointment to the Surveyor General
   Awarded contract, required oath, bond etc and given instructions
   Surveyor General sent contract, oath, and bond to Commissioner GLO

B. Additional correspondence between Surveyor General and Commissioner
   Additional correspondence between Surveyor General and deputy

Surveyor General received field notes and diagrams
   Transcribed notes and compiled plats and descriptive lists

D. Sent plats and descriptive lists to land office
   Sent plats, field notes, and request for payment to Commissioner GLO
Correspondence

Oaths, Contracts, Bonds
Instructions

General Instructions of the Surveyor General
that morphed into the Manual

Instructions of the Commissioner of the
General Land Office

Special instructions of the Surveyor General

Circulars
General Instructions

1846 Instructions from Surveyor General George W. Jones

1850 Surveying Manual for Oregon
   [1850 Instructions from Surveyor General Caleb H. Booth]
1852 Surveyor General George B. Sargent directed to use the Oregon Manual
1853 Surveyor General Wamer Lewis directed to use the Oregon Manual

1855 Manual

1862 Manual made part of every contract

Manual republished (1871) 1881, 1890, 1894, 1902

Instructions - Act May 3, 1862

A. The printed Manual of Instructions relating to the public surveys ... bearing date February twenty-second, eighteen hundred and fifty-five

B. The instructions of the Commissioner of the General Land Office

C. The special instructions of the surveyor general when not in conflict

   with the printed Manual or
   with the Commissioner's instructions

shall be taken and deemed apart of every contract for surveying the public lands of the United States
Instructions regarding the first surveys west of the Mississippi

Commissioner John Wilson to SG Warner Lewis May 16th 1853

SG Warner Lewis to Deputy Elisha Norris July 28th 1853
Circulars see White

April 8, 1847 Form of letters

April 17, 1879 Prohibiting filing triplicate plats before duplicate plats approved
... you will not, after the receipt of this order, file the duplicate plats in the local land offices until the duplicates have been examined in this office and approved, and you officially notified to that effect

November 1, 1879 How to divide a Section

March 13, 1883 Restoration of Lost and Obliterated corners

Letters Received - Iowa
Letters Sent – Iowa

Special Instructions – St. Paul
Letters Sent – St. Paul

So how did I do - mapping the spread of (completed) surveys across Minnesota?
The surveys did not spread across the United States

Spread throughout the United States – Ripples from pebbles thrown into a pond
Surveys spread throughout the United States because of

1. A technical characteristic; principal meridians and baselines

2. The administration of the surveys
Principal Meridians and Baselines

Administration

Structure
Surveying Districts
Surveyors General
Contracted Deputies
General Land Office

Congressional Funding
Administration of the Surveys – Office Work

Remarkable How Little We Know

1857 - Minnesota surveying district established

Charles L Emerson (Surveyor General) directed to close down the office in Detroit
Transfer Michigan surveying records to state of Michigan
Opened office in St Paul and responsible for questions about Michigan surveys
Acquired the field books and plats of surveys already completed from Surveyor General of Wisconsin and Iowa

1908

Surveying district closed
Records transferred to State
The Original Surveyor General’s Office

Contracted Deputy Surveyors

William A. Burt
Photo: State Archives of Michigan
Surveyor General’s 1848 Report

Microfilm – the bane of historical research
They may have motors and be capable of creating digital images but they are still a pain in the ass

Territorial Records

M499. The territorial papers of the United States: The Territory of Minnesota (a microfilm supplement), 1849-1858 (National Archives microfilm publications; Microcopy No. 1050)
11 microfilm reels
Records relating to all government functions in Minnesota Territory, selected from files, dockets, and record books of federal agencies that had jurisdiction over various aspects of territorial administration
The records are from the U.S. Congress, Supreme Court, Court of Claims, Census Bureau, Post Office Department, Justice Department, State Department, and Interior Department
Published Records

Annual Reports of the Commissioner of the General Land Office

First appeared in 1817

Until 1848 these reports were published as part of the Annual Reports, Secretary of the Treasury

After then they appeared as part of the Annual Reports, Secretary of the Interior

Several also appeared as a separate bureau edition
Territorial Papers

[Several maps of different regions are shown, including one of Minnesota.]
Conclusions?

I could not have mapped the spread of the surveys without understanding the details of the surveying process and their administration.

The sidetracks were, in fact, important for fulfilling my original intent.