PLSSFinder — Online access to Wisconsin’s PLSS Records

Overview
The Public Land Survey System (PLSS), at the most basic level can be described as a legal (not mathematical) reference system established by the Federal Government in 1785 to divide and then convey lands from the Public Domain to private land owners. It is a roughly gridded network of surveyed lines and monuments that represent approximate six-mile by six-mile “townships”. Each township is further subdivided into approximate one-mile by one mile “sections”. The PLSS is a key part of the original legal basis for virtually all property in the state.

PLSS in Wisconsin
By Wisconsin State Statute, the county is custodian for PLSS corners within their boundaries. This statutory authority was not supported with state funds, so most recovery/remonumentation has been completed with local revenues. Progress towards updated PLSS monuments and coordinates vary widely across the state, with some counties having completed remonumentation, while others are at various stages of completion.

Delivering PLSS corner information
PLSSFinder is a free, Internet-accessible catalog designed to help users locate current information about PLSS corners in Wisconsin.

Our office has been involved in cataloging and reporting section corner remonumentation status since 1975 through various publications.

PLSS corner information accessible through this application comes directly from county contributors. While corner attribute information is retrievable from this application, other relevant corner attributes may be available via direct links to online digital tie sheets maintained by the contributor on their Web sites providing real-time information.

Status
To date, we host records of corner information for over 37 Wisconsin counties (see illustration above) with an additional 10 counties in progress. Corners are shown in a common view so that users can visually navigate, locate and identify them.

Records within PLSSFinder are displayed as either solid-filled squares or white-filled squares that include various attribute information such as name, coordinates, datums, metadata, and other pertinent characteristics for that corner.

Corners with solid-filled squares represent those corners that have direct links to the contributor’s online tie sheets, while corners with white-filled squares depict those corners without tie sheet links from this application. However, many of the white-filled squares may have tie sheets available from the contributor’s Web site as a subscription fee service or available in hard copy from the county surveyor’s office.

Navigating
PLSS points are shown in a common view so users can visually navigate, locate and identify them.

There are several different ways to navigate the PLSSFinder site. The user is initially directed to the statewide coverage available and the Search tab. From here users can search for a specific location, a county, a location according to township/range/section, or a specific point by its individual ID. After performing a search, by drawing an outline around specific points using the Identify tab (or icon) or by clicking on the individual point, the Results tab displays specific attribute information about
Locating PLSS corners and viewing associated records

the points selected. The Map tab allows users to manipulate the type of base layers and data layers visible on the map. County PLSS information is updated regularly depending on the county’s publishing schedule. Consult the metadata or the date given in the “view record” for the dataset inventory date. Contributing PLSS corner information is easy. Simply provide us your dataset in any of the following formats: shapefile, geodatabase, dbf, xls, or mdb.

Protecting/reporting disturbance
If a PLSS monument has been disturbed or has potential to be disturbed or destroyed, please report this immediately to the county surveyor or land information office or municipality (surveyor or engineer). Do not attempt to “repair” or “restore” any such damage as you may actually make matters worse.

Remonumentation
A common activity by counties is the marking of PLSS corners with sturdy, modern monuments, a process called remonumentation. The State of Wisconsin established a statutory mandate in 1970 calling for counties to complete remonumentation within 20 years, but provided no funds for this work. The progress towards complete remonumentation amongst the counties varies greatly across the state from no remonumentation to complete remonumentation.

As county PLSS remonumentation activity increases, more information is generated. Coordinates are established on the PLSS corners using a combination of conventional survey techniques and GPS technology meeting or exceeding the FGDC Geospatial Positioning Accuracy Standards. This information, if made readily accessible, is beneficial to users at the private, local, and state levels.

Through the use of GPS, the location of the monuments can be tied together by angles and distances to the adjacent corners. This creates a geodetic framework so that each corner of the PLSS can be defined with individual coordinates and referenced to a geographic framework.

For those counties that have completed their remonumentation program, doesn’t mean the work is done. They have shifted into a “maintenance” phase. Without continual maintenance, the quality and availability of reliable monumentation will rapidly decrease.

Geodetic and PLSS control is a vital component of surveying, mapping, and engineering projects and the development of geospatial/land information systems.

Web References
1. Public Land Survey System
   www.sco.wisc.edu/plss/index.php
2. PLSSFinder
   www.sco.wisc.edu/plss/help.php
3. County Surveyors
   www.sco.wisc.edu/surveying/wi_county_surveyors.php
4. Wisconsin Land Information Officers
   www.wi.gov/lis.aspx
5. FGDC Geospatial Positioning Standards
   www.fgdc.gov/standards/standards_publications/