



THE PUBLIC LAND SURVEY SYSTEM

A Dependable Land Ownership Foundation

—Bryan H. Meyer, President, Wisconsin County Surveyors Association & La Crosse County Supervisor

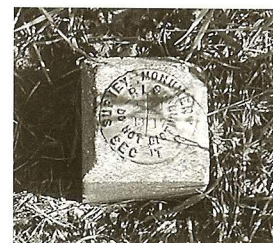
The Public Land Survey System (PLSS) is Wisconsin's very first infrastructure and serves as the essential framework for property ownership. A properly maintained network of PLSS corner monuments, allows for a reduced risk of property disputes, equitable taxation, and more reasonable expenditures by private citizens and local governments. PLSS is the very foundation for determining the location of nearly every property description in Wisconsin. Section 59.74 of the Wisconsin Statutes states counties are responsible for the perpetuation of landmarks including the corner monuments of the PLSS. Counties provide necessary funding and staffing to re-establish and maintain the PLSS network in their county.

The PLSS is a system of land partitioning and distribution implemented by the federal government with the passage of the Land Ordinance of 1785. The effort was championed by Thomas Jefferson who envisioned a nation of "yeoman farmers" each of whom would own and work 160 acres of land. The Continental Congress was deeply in debt following the Declaration of Independence. With little power to tax, the federal government decided to use the sale of the Western Territories to pay off the American Revolutionary War debt.

The PLSS is based on thousands of section- and quarter-corner locations distributed at approximately half-mile intervals throughout the state. The PLSS in Wisconsin was established between 1832 and 1866. It is a roughly gridded network of surveyed lines and monuments. Approximate 6-mile by 6-mile squares are known as "townships." Those townships are composed of 36 approximately 1-mile by 1-mile squares known as "sections." Township boundaries were surveyed first; sections were then created within those township lines. The "Initial Point" for Wisconsin's PLSS is located on the Illinois border where it intersects the 4th Principal Meridian. The location has been marked with a concrete survey monument with a brass cap. A nearby historical marker along State Highway 84 commemorates the beginning of the PLSS in Wisconsin.

The original government surveyors who laid out the grid work were a hardy group working diligently to measure and mark the land, and to assess the soils, timber, and vegetation as they measured. Distances were measured in chains and links, based

continues



The 4th Principal Meridian survey monument.

WISCONSIN PLSS FACTS

- ❑ The Wisconsin's State Capitol building can be considered one of the world's most expensive survey monuments. The center of the capitol rotunda is built over a section corner. A survey marker marking the actual corner is set in the lower level of the building.



- ❑ Gene Shepard—the 19th-century writer, Oneida County Surveyor, and creator of the fictitious Hodag (a fierce creature now immortalized as the mascot for the city of Rhinelander)—claimed to have captured a specimen of the beast in Section 37 in a township near Rhinelander.

Of course, there never are more than 36 sections in a PLSS township in Wisconsin.



- ❑ A few areas of Wisconsin were settled early enough to have legally recognized land boundary systems in place prior to the PLSS being developed. Generally, these are land grants in the Green Bay area, early French (and then American) settlements in Green Bay and Prairie du Chien, and early Indian reservations.

on Edmund Gunter's 66-foot measuring chain. The chain—an actual metal chain—was made up of 100 links, each 7.92 inches in length. Carefully recorded notes were documented in field books regarding land measurements. When the lines being run intersected land objects, the distance at which the line first intersected and then left the object was noted. These objects included: rivers, creeks, swamps, marshes, hills, ridges, groves, wind falls, and settlers claims and improvements.

The corners of the original government survey were typically marked with wood posts set in a dirt mound. Nearby trees were then blazed. These “bearing trees” served as witnesses to the corner location. A direction and distance was noted from the corner to each tree. Should the corner post become lost, these trees could be utilized to re-establish the corner location.

Under the 1785 act, Section 16 of each township was reserved as the “school section.” Due to its nearly central location, this one-mile square was set aside for public education sometimes serving as the location of the one-room schoolhouse. Portions of Section 16 not occupied by the school could be sold off to generate revenue for educational purposes.

The terms, “homesteading,” and “back 40” are important parts of American history and culture relating to PLSS. In the original Homestead Act of 1862, during the Lincoln Administration, each settler was allocated 160 acres of land; in other words, a quarter-section. A “back 40” is a reference to a quarter-quarter section in a distant part of the farm which would contain approximately 40 acres.