



# THE PUBLIC LAND SURVEY SYSTEM

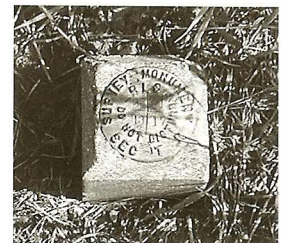
## A Dependable Land Ownership Foundation

—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 4th Principal Meridian survey monument.*

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

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