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LAND SURVEYING: THEN AND NOW, AND WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

By Nick Stewart St. Louis County Land Surveyor

Gov. Mark Dayton proclaimed March 18-24 as Surveyors Week in Minnesota in recognition of the work surveyors do, stating “Minnesota appreciates the historical contributions of surveyors and the new technologies that are constantly changing this profession.”

What picture comes to mind when you hear “land surveyor?”

Maybe you think of people in reflective vests looking through a high tech camera on a heavy duty tripod?

Perhaps a painting of George Washington peering through a telescope into the wilderness?

St. Louis County has a busy and productive Land Survey Division, with three licensed professional land surveyors and a total staff of 19.

We have a unique role in the land records system. We work in the present, with an eye both to the past and to the future.

The Public Land Survey System (PLSS) has been around longer than St. Louis County has existed. The plan (originally developed by Thomas Jefferson) was to survey the entire country in a grid system, creating 6 mile square townships, and then subdivide each township into 1 mile squares. Every half mile, a monument was set to mark a corner.

These original surveyors established the corners mainly with wood posts and then blazed and scribed nearby trees as a reference (bearing trees) in case the original wood posts were ever destroyed.

After the original corner was set and accepted by the Surveyor General’s Office the corner’s position is fixed and unchangeable. Once the survey was complete, a plat map was created and utilized for the sale of property from the U.S. Government to private owners.

The Public Land Survey System served its original intended purpose. But local landowners and municipalities (many which were barely formed) were left to maintain the positions of these corners, and so the system fell into disrepair fairly quickly.

Today our job is to maintain the numerous records and perpetuate the original positions of the Public Land Survey System (PLSS) throughout St. Louis County.

We also provide land surveying services to a variety of county departments, including Public Works, Land and Minerals, the Auditor's Office, Recorder, Title Examiners and Attorney's Office, to name a few.

For developers and professional surveyors, we review and approve plats, common interest communities (CIC) and registered land surveys (RLS).

For landowners, we assist with general land survey boundary issues and document research.

It's important to note we do not move corners or section lines. We maintain and preserve the original positions and the accompanying records for the future.

Our crews utilize current technology, such as GPS, to locate the original corner positions. We then document and record our findings in the County Recorder's Office for future use.

It's a massive undertaking in a county that spans 7,000 square miles. In the surveyor's world, that's over 25,500 corners.

Currently, we have 8,000 of those corner positions recorded and in our database. That leaves 17,500 still to be certified.

With our staff and outside remonumentation contract programs, we are able to certify and record 500 to 600 corners per year. At this rate, it will take 30 to 35 years to complete certification of all remaining corners in the county.

Our work sometimes involves analyzing old survey records and notes. Other times we're out in the field traveling by ATV, snowmobile or boat to visually inspect each section corner in the county.

We will visit every corner, whether high and dry, or in the plentiful swamps we have here in St. Louis County.

Every so often we find the actual corner posts set by the original surveyors, or a scribed bearing tree. It's the hunt and this history that keeps us searching.

Our highly trained surveyors and technicians take pride in their work, knowing it benefits everyone in St. Louis County.

Having verified corners protects property owners' rights and investments. It helps resolve legal disputes and misunderstandings, and improves accuracy in taxation.

It also helps various county departments to more efficiently do their work and serve the public. The benefits of maintaining the PLSS are innumerable.