

Finding an Ancestor's Land at the Bureau of Land Management Website and in Plat Maps

Ilene (Kanfer) Murray, Publications Director, St. Louis Genealogical Society
publications@stlgs.org

Land in the original colonies was surveyed using a British system called **metes and bounds**, based on measuring from a designated marker and continuing in straight lines from point to point. This system was confusing because of the wide range of measurements used by surveyors and the reliance on natural features and landowners' boundary lines that changed over time.

After the Revolution, the original thirteen colonies and seven new states kept all of the land within their borders and their original surveys; these are the **State-land States**:

Connecticut	Maine	New York	Tennessee
Delaware	Maryland	North Carolina	Texas
Georgia	Massachusetts	Pennsylvania	Vermont
Hawaii	New Hampshire	Rhode Island	Virginia
Kentucky	New Jersey	South Carolina	West Virginia

Land records for these states are usually in state archives and not at the national level UNLESS the state had federal military bounty land available. If so, records will be at both levels.

In 1785, the **Public Land Survey (PLS) System** began as a way to map all of the available land in the new country. Within a few years, western land was being sold and used by the new federal government to raise money. It was also a way to pay soldiers for their service and to encourage westward migration. Thirty states have land in the PLS System:

Alabama	Idaho	Missouri	Oregon
Alaska	Indiana	Montana	South Dakota
Arizona	Iowa	Nebraska	Utah
Arkansas	Kansas	Nevada	Washington
California	Louisiana	New Mexico	Wisconsin
Colorado	Michigan	North Dakota	Wyoming
Florida	Minnesota	Ohio	
Illinois	Mississippi	Oklahoma	

PLS System Surveys

Based on a system of rectangles divided into sections, mapping in these states starts with **longitude and latitude**, imaginary lines going north and south and east and west.

Longitude lines are also called **principal meridians**. These are the lines that go north/south (up/down) on land maps dividing the globe. There are thirty of them in the U.S., but they don't follow state boundaries. From a principal meridian, you measure east and west. These are called **baselines** or **latitude**.

Most of Missouri is in the fifth meridian and most of Illinois is in the third and fourth. A small portion of Indiana is in the first, but most is in the second. You can find a complete U.S. meridians chart here:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_principal_and_guide_meridians_and_base_lines_of_the_United_States

U.S. Public Land Survey System: Township, Section, and Range

- A **township** is a square piece of land that is six miles by six miles, so thirty-six square miles. Townships are divided into portions called **sections**. They are numbered from one to thirty-six. Number 1 is in the upper right (the northeast) and the numbers go up sequentially to the left (west), then down (south) and to the right, then down and to the left till the last row, which ends at 36 (the furthest southeast corner). Each section is one mile by one mile and contains 640 acres.
- The **range** of a township is assigned by measuring east or west of a principal meridian.
- The **baseline** of a township is the spot used to measure north or south townships.
- Each section of a township, those 640 acres, is divided into half and quarter sections. Some are further divided into sixteenths, which are called quarter of a quarter.

For a really good description of land and explanations of divisions with charts:

<https://web.gccaz.edu/~lynrw95071/Township%20Range%20Explanation.html>

- Townships are measured above and below a baseline, so they run north and south.
- Ranges run parallel to a principal meridian, so they go east and west.
- You will see township and range written as T1N, R2E or T4S, R4W, sometimes with periods and/or commas, sometimes without.

Bureau of Land Management (BLM) General Land Office (GLO) Records

<https://www.blm.gov>

This website contains more than five million federal land and title records from 1820 onward for the thirty public land states. There are survey plats (drawings) and field notes from 1810 and more than 1,100 volumes of military bounty land patents.

Before you start, some things to know:

- **Federal land patent:** transfer of land from the government to an individual

- **Survey plat:** a drawing of the boundaries of a piece of land, including its acreage
- **Cadastral survey:** one which “creates, marks, defines, retraces, or re-establishes the boundaries and subdivisions” of federal land
- **Field notes:** narrative record of a cadastral survey, including descriptions of the process and the names of everyone participating
- **Land status records:** used in the western states, including township surveys and maps
- **Tract books:** used by thirteen eastern states to keep track of transactions involving their public domain land

Be sure you read the text on the BLM website so you understand what you will be looking for when you go to the General Land Office (GLO) website: <https://glorerecords.blm.gov>

On the home page, you should also read the text. Then, go to the *Search Documents* tab in the menu bar.

You can now search by document type, location, or identifier. You will probably want to start your search by document type, where the first choice is “Patents.”

You will see designations you should be aware of:

- **Warrant (warrantee):** To receive federal public land, a person had to apply for a certain number of acres. (The person was the warrantee; the document was the warrant.) Warrants could be allocated to others or sold.
- **Patent (patentee):** Once a warrant was approved, it was exchanged for a patent, the equivalent of a deed or title. (The person receiving the patent was the patentee; the document was the patent.)

Searching Land Patents

- Pick a state; fill in as little as a name or add more.
- Carefully analyze the search results to determine location and neighbors. Note the principal meridian, the township and range, the **aliquots** (division of a surveyed section of land, fractional portion of the area of a section), and the section, for use later on.
- In the search results, click on the “Accession” link. Notice the three tabs: *Patent Details*, *Patent Image*, *Related Documents*
 - Patent details: date, acreage, other pertinent information
- Then scroll down to the map. Click the tiny blue box to get the exact spot on the map. Use the slider on the left to zoom in and out
- *Patent Image* tab: Click on the “Image” link in the first column and then wait a minute or two while the site creates a PDF of the document for you. You cannot save it from the website, but you can right-click on it and open it in your PDF viewer.

- Note that many of the screens offer a “Printer friendly” option that you may want to keep for your records, either as a screen grab or a printed copy.
- The *Related Documents* tab gives you documents matching the land description of the current document. This allows you to see other people in the county that have land in the same township, range, and section, a huge help in putting together families.
- Other documents are limited in scope for genealogy.
- *Search Documents by Location* is an excellent resource if you know where the land is but don't have the specifics.
- *Search by Identifier* can be used if you have specific patent or survey number.

Plat Maps and Books

A **plat map** shows how a tract of land is divided into lots in a county. It is drawn to scale and records the land's size, boundary locations, nearby streets, and any rights of way.

Plat books are **atlases** showing land ownership by township and range. They are usually based on public land surveys and were especially popular during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

You can access many plat maps and books in both hard copy and online.

In Missouri, go to the Missouri Digital Heritage collection on the Secretary of State's website <https://mdh.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/mocoplats>. The online collection here is from throughout the state. There are currently 141 volumes, published from 1875–1930. They are digitized images that you can view, download, and print.

In Illinois, there is a small statewide collection at the Illinois Secretary of State's website <http://idaillinois.org/digital/collection/IllinoisPlats/search/>

Indiana has a large digital collection with links to many volumes on the Indiana State Library website: <https://www.in.gov/library/collections-and-services/indiana/indiana-county-maps-atlases-and-plat-books/>.

Additional References

Hone, E. Wade. *Land and Property Research in the U.S.* Salt Lake City: Ancestry Publications, 1997.

Rose, Christine. *Military Bounty Land, 1776–1855*. San Jose, California: CR Publications, 2011.

Macoupin County, Illinois: Township 9N, Range 6W

6	5	4	3	2	1
7	8	9	10	11	12
18	17	16	15	14	13
19	20	21	22	23	24
30	29	28	27	26	25
31	32	33	34	35	36

Locating Your Ancestor's Land

Using the township and range map provided, see if you can plot the following, all in T9N, R6W:

1. Gerald Nimmons, 80 acres, E 1/2, SW 1/4, Section 33
2. Arthur Monke, 160 acres, SE 1/4, Section 12
3. Nanna England, 40 acres, SW 1/4, NW 1/4, Section 31
4. W. D. Kilton, 40 acres, NW 1/4, NE 1/4, Section 20
5. Eugene Sies, 160 acres, E 1/2, E 1/2, Section 36
6. Helen Foelman, 240 acres, NW 1/4, Section 15 AND N 1/2, SW 1/4, Section 15
7. Harold Hoeffler, 160 acres, S 1/2, SW 1/4, Section 34 AND W 1/2, SE 1/4, Section 34
8. Amos Rovey, 10 acres, SW 1/4, SW 1/4, SE 1/4, Section 22
9. Clarence Nall, 80 acres, E 1/2, NE 1/4, Section 14
10. B. L. Monke, 20 acres, W 1/2, NW 1/4, NW 1/4, Section 12

Answers on Next Page

Macoupin County, Illinois: Township 9N, Range 6W

6	5	4	3	2	1
7	8	9	10	11	12
18	17	16	15	14	13
19	20	21	22	23	24
30	29	28	27	26	25
31	32	33	34	35	36