

—by Peggy Riek and John Butterfield, BLM—Eastern States

Historical Survey Records

Did you ever wonder how the early pioneers of our Nation saw our land as they moved from the colonies in the East to the West in search of a new life in the old Northwest Territory? You're in luck.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM)—Eastern States has added yet another interesting feature to the Department of the Interior's popular General Land Office (GLO) Records Web site at www.glorerecords.blm.gov.

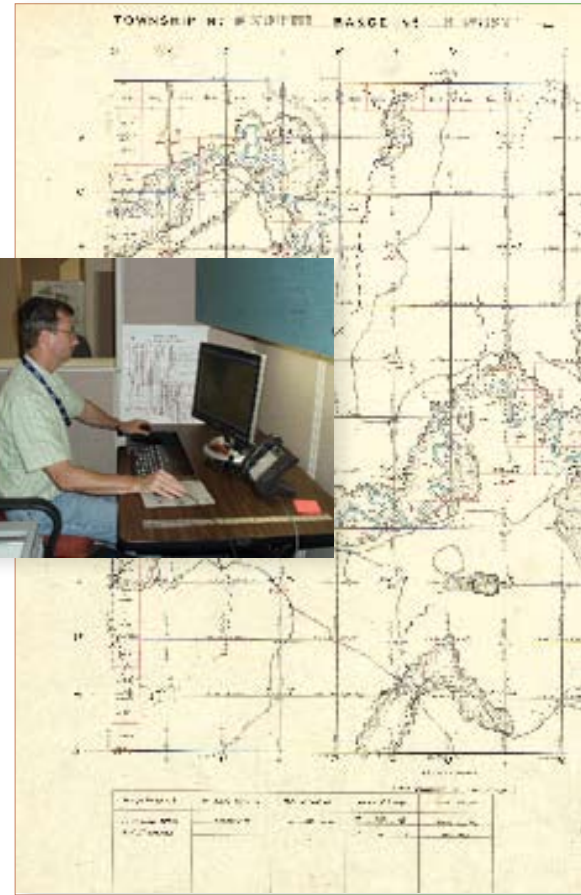
At the GLO Records Web site's "New! Survey Plats" link, visitors can view historical and current cadastral survey plats for the states of Ala., Ark., Fla., Idaho, Mich., Miss., and Okla., as well as current survey information performed for other federal agencies in Texas and from the 13 original colonies.

Survey plats and field notes are the official survey documents used when land title is transferred through land patents from the federal government to individuals. Today, these critical historic documents help researchers locate the land referenced in a land patent's legal land description.

These survey plats further tell the story of each area surveyed, much like a picture taken during the early settlement of the United States. As the early surveyors moved and surveyed westward, pioneers followed and settled on the "best lands"—lands rated and noted by the surveyors as first, second, or third rate.

Using the U.S. rectangular system of surveys, also called the Public Land Survey System, surveyors first created field notes describing, in detail, the surveyed lines, the terrain over which they passed, and the nature of the soil, vegetation and timber, salt licks, and other items of economic interest. From those notes, survey plats were prepared.

"These plats not only show the boundaries but also define and name the parcels and subdivi-

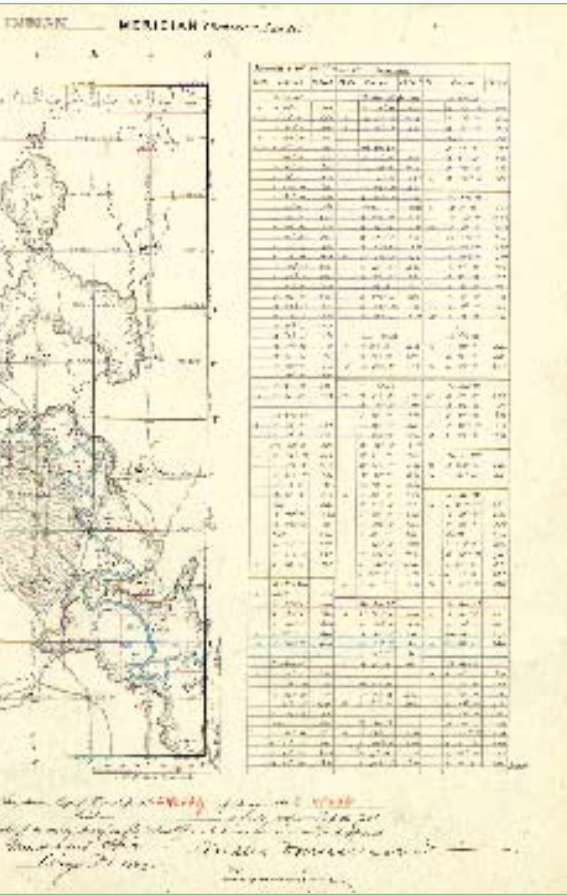


Above: John Butterfield, BLM—Eastern States General Land Office Systems Manager, demonstrates the automation process using the first survey plat for the state of Louisiana

sions of the land, as well as some of the physical features found in the notes. In many ways, these records were the first maps of the country, showing the locations of rivers, early settlements, roads, forts and trails, and items of topography," said Chief, Cadastral Survey, Michael Young, BLM—Eastern States.

BLM—Eastern States maintains the repository for the Nation's original survey records for the Secretary of the Interior. This repository totals 133,000 survey plats and 2.75 million pages of field notes dating back to the 1820s. The records contain a complete description of each mile surveyed, every monument set, and every bearing tree scribed.

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“Through the years, we have formed both federal and state partnerships for the exchange of survey records, survey plats, and field notes. In 2004, we began making the records available for viewing on the Internet,” said State Director, Michael Nedd, BLM-Eastern States.

The survey plats are first scanned to full-color, high-resolution images, then compressed and made available to the GLO Records Web site. The uncompressed images are archived onto long-life optical media. To date, over 37,000 surveys have been added to the GLO Records Web site.

Another phase of the GLO Records Automation which is under development and being tested for the GLO Records Web site involves the automation of the original field notes. Currently, field notes for

the “beta” test state of Oklahoma are being automated; 40 percent of Oklahoma’s notes have been automated so far.

Once the field notes are scanned, they are linked with the plats during the indexing phase to allow the end-user to go directly from a survey plat to a boundary description in a set of field notes. In the past, public access to field notes required hours of records research using microfiche at a county survey or records office, a State Survey Office, or a BLM State Office.

“Having these records available on the GLO Records Web site has enabled smooth and efficient flow of information to the public. Title companies, surveyors, historians, genealogists, schools, and other interested people will now be able to obtain data and images capturing historic and current land survey plats,” said Nedd.

The GLO Records Web site is continuously expanding its archives to provide the public with more records on its user-friendly environment. As the data and images become available, survey information from additional states will be added to the GLO Records Web site.

“The GLO Records Web site debuted in May 1998. Since then, we have been improving public access to the federal land patents within the 30 Public Land States,” said Branch Chief, General Land Office Records Automation, Patricia Tyler, BLM-Eastern States. Today, more than 3 million cash-entry and homestead patent documents for the eastern and western states between 1820 and 1960 are available online. Once automated, the documents are withdrawn from public use and placed in archival storage to protect the records. The public can access the GLO Records Web site 24 hours a day, free of charge, and view, print, or request a copy of a document from the BLM.