



RESEARCH SERVICES SECTION

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PROJECT COST:

\$32,283



The fragility of many of the letter books inventoried through this study limits digitization options.

An Inventory of the Public Land Survey Records for Minnesota: The Special Instructions

What Was the Need?

The public land surveys that established the legal framework for real property descriptions and titles in Minnesota were performed between 1847 and 1908 by deputy surveyors under the supervision of Surveyors General. These deputies were guided by instructions received with their contracts, and the Surveyors General also received various instructions from their superiors, the Commissioners of the General Land Office. The correspondence among these individuals is often referred to as “Special Instructions.”

These instructions are crucial for accurate reconstruction of the original survey lines and corner monuments; this information is especially important for Mn/DOT’s boundary surveys. They are seldom used, however, because they are in paper format and scattered in repositories across the country. Government officials, land surveyors, attorneys and private citizens need to be able to access these records easily, and modern digital imaging, geo-indexing and the Internet offer promising avenues for addressing this need.

What Was Our Goal?

The main objectives of this research were to:

- Locate and categorize the Special Instructions given to the deputy surveyors who ran the public land survey lines and established the corner monuments in Minnesota.
- Compile an inventory of these instructions and acquire illustrative samples of these records.
- Identify the most practical, cost-effective way to make the instructions electronically available with a minimum of handling.

What Did We Do?

Researchers conducted a preliminary inventory of the Special Instructions, especially those documents included in the correspondence files maintained by:

- The Surveyors General of Wisconsin and Iowa, located in the Iowa State Archives, Dubuque.
- The Surveyors General of Minnesota, located in the Minnesota State Archives in the Minnesota History Center, St. Paul.
- The Commissioners of the General Land Office, housed in the National Archives, Washington, D.C.

The inventory provided a preliminary index to the various record collections in the three locations. It contained description and analysis of some of their contents, and assessed their quantity and condition. Researchers took digital photographs of representative samples of records and made recommendations for producing digital images of these collections.

What Did We Learn?

The project report notes that there is some difficulty in differentiating, with absolute certainty, the Special Instructions from other instructions in the correspondence. Therefore, the researchers recommend that all letters between the Commissioners of the

“Inventories of the survey records, along with an organizing framework, are necessary prerequisites for any meaningful analysis and application of the original survey data.”

—Rod Squires,
Associate Professor,
University of Minnesota
Department of
Geography

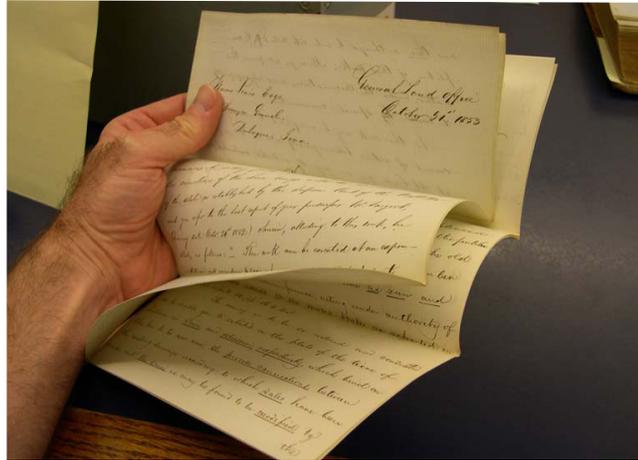
“Electronic access to these vitally important documents that address land title and boundary definition will enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of land surveyors and those dependent on them while also working to improve the integrity of Minnesota’s vital legal framework for real property.”

—Jay Krafthefer,
Right of Way Supervisor,
Mn/DOT Office of Land
Management

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The Iowa State Archives contains letters like these from deputies to the Surveyors General that are associated with earliest public land surveys in Minnesota.

General Land Office, the Surveyors General and the deputies be digitized.

Digital photography is permitted in each repository, and is the easiest and cheapest way to make images of the records. This option is preferable to scanning because many of the letters are compiled in bound volumes, some of which could be damaged during a scanning effort. Digital photography requires less handling of the records and can produce high-quality color images of both single letters and letter books. The most time-consuming part of the process will be making an index of all the images created.

This process can be streamlined by first compiling lists of the surveying deputies who carried out the work; the dates of all the contracts relating to surveys in specific areas; and circulars and other letters that the Commissioners sent to all Surveyors General.

What's Next?

The goal of the larger research effort that includes this project is to create an electronic database for all records relevant to public land surveys in Minnesota. Incorporating a spatial index into this database would provide optimal access to this resource, allowing users to find documents by location using public land survey corners, lines, sections, townships and other instructions.

The current study shows how these valuable records can be made available to modern land surveyors and others who seek a deeper understanding of how the surveys were carried out in Minnesota. In cooperation with Mn/DOT, the University of Minnesota has reallocated some funds received for this project to a follow-up effort to digitally capture the letters containing Special Instructions in the Iowa State Archives. This process will serve as a model for handling similar records in other repositories, both for Minnesota and for other locations.

This project is a crucial part of a broader effort involving cooperation among multiple agencies and interest groups seeking to preserve, convert and improve access to the entire General Land Office record collection. Other aspects of the collection include the General Land Office plat maps (already available [on the Web](#)) and General Land Office field notes (comprising more than 275,000 pages).

This Technical Summary pertains to Report 2008-05, “An Inventory of the Public Land Survey Records for Minnesota: The Special Instructions,” published May 2008. The full report can be accessed at <http://www.lrb.org/PDF/200805.pdf>