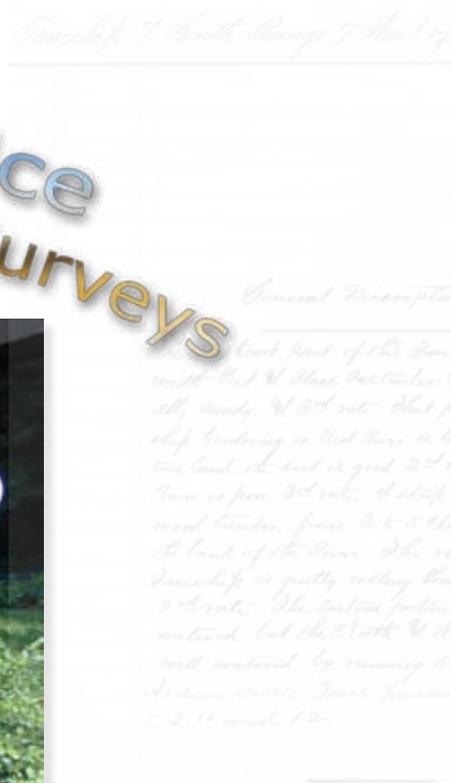


General Land Office Automated Patents and Surveys



By Karen Roberts
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Walking into the modest room, the smell of history hits you like opening your grandmother's hope chest. It is the smell of documents older than anyone reading this story—documents dating back almost to the birth of the United States. These historic gems are relevant to today's surveyors, and, thanks to new communication technology, many of the records are now available online at www.glorerecords.blm.gov.

The Bureau of Land Management-Eastern States office is the largest public land title holder in the world. BLM-Eastern States maintains more than nine million historic land documents, including survey plats and field notes, homestead certificates, cash patents, military warrants, serialized patents, and railroad grants. Among them are the very first land records resulting from the Land Ordinance of 1785, which authorized the transfer of public lands to private individuals and covered lands in the Northwest Territory and Louisiana Purchase.

With more than 4.2 million records available to the public, and over three million land patent records scanned, indexed, imaged, and made available online, the GLO web site [<http://www.glorerecords.blm.gov>] is one of the most visited in the Department of the Interior. Surveyors researching specific lands can query the GLO database by township, document number, land description, and county and land owner's name.

"The GLO Records site provides the public with a wealth of historical data and literally tells the story of the settlement of the West," said Mike



John Butterfield, BLM-Eastern States General Land Office Systems Manager, demonstrates the automation process using the first survey plat for the State of Louisiana.

Nedd, State Director, BLM-Eastern States. "Title companies, surveyors, historians, genealogists, and other interested people are able to search online these fascinating and valuable records and print them for further study," he said.

Survey plats, which are critical historic documents that can be used to locate the land referenced in a land patent's legal land description, are a recent addition to the site.

The site now hosts historical and current cadastral survey plats for Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Idaho, Michigan, Mississippi, and Oklahoma and survey information for the area of the original 13 U.S. colonies collected at the request of other federal agencies.

The GLO Records web site will continue to expand its database to provide the public with more records in a user-friendly environment. Additional states will be added to the GLO web site as the data and images become available. "Eventually, we would like to obtain the records for the Western States so as to be able to continue automating all of the records in one easy-to-access location," said Patricia M. Tyler, Branch Chief, GLO Records.

Some history

The General Land Office was established within the Treasury Department in 1812 to survey public lands and issue patents to individuals settling the land.

Part of this task has been to establish and maintain all survey and land title records. The office became part of the Department of the Interior in 1849. Almost a century later, in 1946, it was merged with the U.S. Grazing Service to form the Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

The survey and disposition of public lands in the United States was governed by the cadastral elements of principal meridian, numbered section, township, and range. As each territory or state came within the public domain, the General Land Office established a baseline running east and west and a principal meridian north and south to guide the land surveys.

Numbered townships were laid out in tiers north and south of the baseline, while numbered ranges were laid out east and west of the meridians. The intersecting lines of townships and ranges formed a checkerboard or grid of townships, each containing 36 sections. Each section of a township contains 640 acres and is one square mile in area. Typical land entries consisted of parcels between 40 acres and 320 or more acres, usually in increments of 20 acres.

There were several ways to obtain land from the federal government in late 1700s and early 1800s. An individual could buy the land—at \$1.25 per acre at that time. A pioneer could claim up to 640 acres by building a homestead on the land and producing crops. Military men sometimes received land in return for services in a war.



Once the legal requirements governing a land transfer and entry were met—whether by a cash payment, surrender of a bounty land warrant, or a proof of residency and improvements—officials at the local land office forwarded the case file to the General Land Office in Washington, D.C., along with a final certificate which declared it eligible for a patent. There the case file was examined and, if found valid, a patent or deed of title for the land was sent back to the local land office for delivery to the entryman.

The General Land Office recorded each land entry in tract books arranged by state and legal description of the land in terms of numbered section, township, and range. The case files were retained and kept in separate filing systems for military bounty land warrants, pre-1908 general land entry files, and post-1908 general land entry files.

The Springfield, Virginia-based Eastern States Office of the Bureau of Land Management has retained custody of the General Land Office tract books for the 13 eastern public land states. The oldest document on file at BLM-Eastern States office is a land entry from 1788; the second oldest dates back to 1790 and is part of the Virginia military warrants which transferred land in Ohio to Revolutionary War Veterans from Virginia.

Over the years, the need to preserve and protect these records reached a critical point. Decades of continued use of the historic records of land patents, tracts, and field notes by government agencies, title insurance companies, industry, researchers, and others caused considerable wear and tear on these treasures. This was exacerbated by previous storage in non-climate controlled settings. Age cannot be reversed despite the efforts of the BLM-Eastern States artisan bookbinders who use old-world skills and new technologies to maintain the books in usable form.

In 1989, automation began, and the digitization continues to ensure the documents are available to those who need them. "This digitized system allows the BLM to better preserve these captivating pieces of United States history by limiting human contact with the originals, while opening up access to anyone with an Internet connection," said John Butterfield, BLM-Eastern States GLO System Manager.