

Did You Know Un-recorded and Historic Surveys are Available through the Public Land Survey Office?

The PLSO is actively looking for unrecorded survey maps and records that were produced prior to the 1973 Survey Recording Act (SRA) RCW 58.09. The PLSO has been effectively searching out and acquiring old unrecorded survey records. These records are stored in the DNR's Fire Cache Warehouse at the State Light Industrial Park in Tumwater, where the PLSO is located. A retired DNR employee, Ted Smith, is working one day a week to go through the boxes of records to capture and catalogue those maps and notes that contain unrecorded survey boundary information. The records are being cataloged and eventually will be scanned and indexed into the PLSO database. After scanning, the records will be available on-line at the PLSO survey research portal, WebXtender. Hard copies of the survey records that Ted has cataloged are available for research by special request to our PLSO staff.

The modern practice of land surveying is much improved thanks to recording of surveys per the SRA and the resulting, ever-expanding availability of survey records as well as better methods and techniques. The first surveys of federal land in Washington (then part of the Oregon Territory) were completed by contracted Deputy Surveyors for the General Land Office (GLO). The contracting out of surveys "North of the River" were transferred to the new GLO office in Olympia when the Washington territory was formed. The plats and notes that were completed prior to the establishment of the Olympia GLO office were left in Oregon City. Duplicate copies of the GLO records were sent to GLO Headquarters in Washington, DC and the county surveyors. A fire destroyed the Olympia GLO office in the 1880s and replacement records were provided by the Washington, DC office. The Olympia GLO office was eventually closed and all the records were sent to the BLM state office in Portland, Oregon. BLM records are available on line at their website and also at the PLSO website.

We can be thankful that modern surveys and the original GLO records have been preserved and are available. But unfortunately the SRA has not fixed all the problems associated with survey records research. Some pre-SRA surveys or private survey records are inaccessible. Boundary information seen on some early maps recorded under the SRA can be lacking or very disappointing. But, they do let you know what was set and some information on the boundary determination. Unrecorded maps made prior to 1973 are a hit and miss proposition. There were no established standards on what should be shown, so it was up to the surveyor to decide what format to use and what information should appear on the map. Still, if you get an opportunity to use one of those pre-SRA records and retrace it, you might be surprised at how well it fits both boundary occupation and the land description.

If you know of pre SRA (or any unrecorded) survey records, including field books, that are available contact the PLSO. Arrangement will be made for the staff to pick them up and therefore preserve the records. If you just have one, or a few, you can email a scanned image or mail the hard copy to the PLSO for scanning.