

Spotlight

Using Land Records at the Genealogical Forum of Oregon

Gerry Lenzen

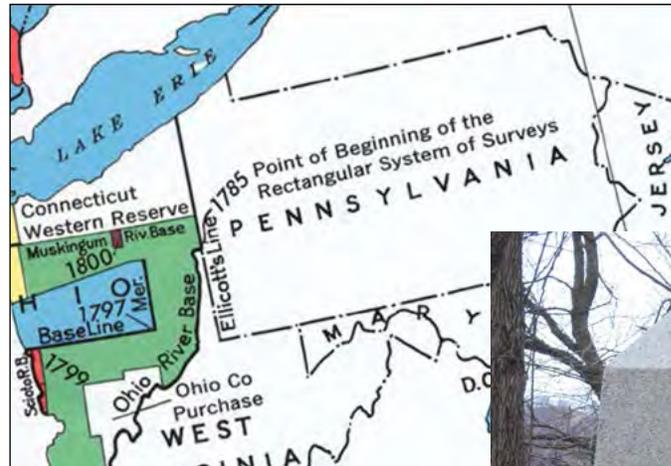
When researching an ancestor or a person of interest (POI), many researchers examine land records in depth. Doing so can help put the POI in context, reveal the names of neighbors, and provide perspective about the land the person walked.

Editor's note: For the reader with no Oregon ancestors or persons of interest, this article may still be relevant if you have an interest in the early Oregon land records for the property where you live.

For the person who wishes to do land research in the Pacific Northwest, the most important thing to determine is the Township (T) and Range (R) of the land parcel. This information may be obtained in several ways. If you have a deed, the property description will provide the Township, Range, and Section (S), i.e., T2S R2E S19. Oregon Donation Land Claims, and possibly Rejected Claims, will also give this data. This information may be found in GFO resources discussed in the March and June 2015 issues of the *Bulletin*. Additionally, the U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management website allows a search of General Land Office Records by locality and a person's name for public lands first purchased from the federal government.¹ This will yield Township, Range, and Section for either warranted or patented lands in the Public Domain. Another possibility, if the geographic location is known, is to use the GFO's locator map (discussed later.) However the Township and Range are discovered, it is important to understand this system to use it efficiently.

INTRODUCTION TO THE PUBLIC LAND SURVEY SYSTEM (PLSS)

Under the Federal Northwest Ordinance (Act of July 13, 1787) and several subsequent acts, all of the public lands west of the Ohio River were surveyed by the rectangular grid, or cadastral², survey of measurement. This was done as a means of subdividing and describing public



Map showing the Public Land Survey System "Point of Beginning"



Public Land Survey System "Point of Beginning" monument

domain land in the United States. At this link,³ you can view images of the Northwest Ordinance.

The key survey lines running north and south are called "meridians" and they were numbered or named starting at the Ohio River and going west⁴. The "point of beginning" of the U.S. Public Land Survey System was where the Ohio River leaves Pennsylvania at the northern tip of West Virginia on the Ohio side of the river. This is now designated as a U.S. Historic Landmark.

A site in the west hills of Portland, Oregon, called the Willamette Stone, is the point from which all of Oregon, Washington, and Idaho (west of the Rocky Mountains) were surveyed. This location was established with measurements from the original site on the bank of the Ohio River. The Willamette Stone is now an Oregon State Heritage Site.



The Willamette Stone in Portland's west hills.

From the Willamette Stone, a vertical (or longitudinal) line running north and south was established. This principal meridian was named the Willamette Meridian. Working from this meridian, additional vertical lines were surveyed east and west, and these were called Township (T) lines.

Again, using the Willamette Stone, a horizontal (or latitudinal) line was surveyed. This first line is called the Base Line. More horizontal lines were surveyed to the north and south of the Base Line creating Range (R) Lines.



The Willamette Stone is located at the intersection of the Willamette Meridian and the Base Line.

All of the lines (both Township and Range) are approximately six miles apart. This means it is approx-

imately six miles from one Township line to the next Township line and about six miles from each Range line to the next Range line. Each Township and Range is further subdivided into one-mile squares called Sections. There are 36 Sections, or 36 square miles, in each Township and Range. These units may be further subdivided into half, quarter, or eighth sections, or further subdivided into even smaller lots or parcels. The Township and Range designations are included in the description for any parcel of land owned by an individual.

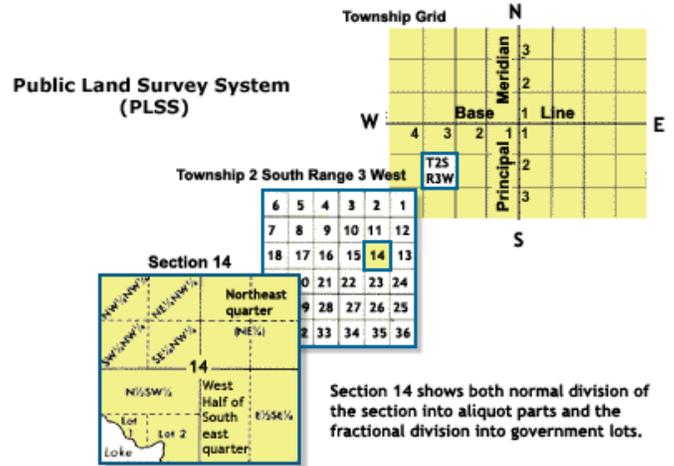
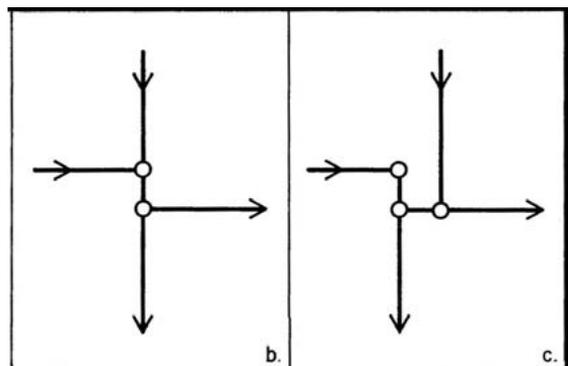


Illustration of the PLSS system from the National Atlas

Because this system is a flat overlay on something that is not flat, there are a few exceptions to this "rule." Due to the curvature of the earth, the survey lines need to be adjusted every few Sections. This is shown on maps by the use of an elongated "S" curve to the next Section on a roadway. It can also be shown as a square corner adjustment to the next Section on a map. This adjustment may occur on both left and right corners of a given Section. Also, remember that if land is on a slope, even though it may only show it to be in one section (or 36 square miles) the actual acreage may be much more if walking the surface of the ground, especially in mountainous areas.



Two possible adjustments to Section corners.

other information. The Oregon State Archives holds many of the oldest land records originally filed at the county level. Newer records will be among the counties' holdings—usually at the county courthouse. Regular readers of the *Bulletin* may remember an article in the December 2014 issue (page 17) that featured information about the Newberry Library's online interactive map resource.

This tool allows the user to view the county boundary changes in each of the states at any specified time.

USING THE GFO LOCATOR MAP

If the researcher is unable to find the description of the land in existing records, but knows the geographic location of the parcel, the GFO has a large map of the state of Oregon on the west side of the red brick pillar in the center of the library that will help to determine Township and Range. Find the Willamette Meridian and Base Line, then locate the property of interest and count the Township and Range lines from the Willamette Meridian and the Base Line to the property location on the map.

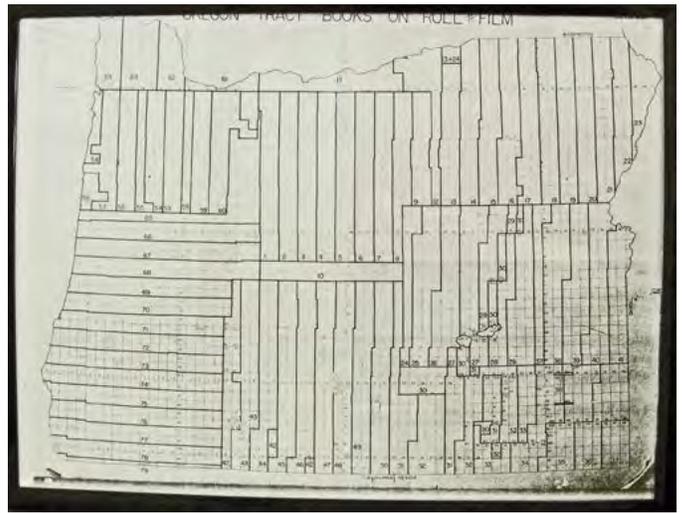


GFO map showing Township and Range Lines in Oregon

Once the Township and Range are known, there are several other GFO resources that may be of value. Begin with the three locator maps hanging in the hallway just off the multi-purpose area. These maps will help to identify specific microfilm reels that may provide additional information about the property.

OREGON TRACT (REGISTER) BOOKS

These records will provide the name of the first purchaser and the date of the sale as well as the name of the patentee and additional information about the patent.



Use the Township and Range information and this map to determine the specific box number for the microfilm. For example, if the property is Township 2 South (T₂S) and Range 2 West (R₂W) it will be found in reel number 53. Begin at the Willamette Stone and count two spaces south or down, then count two spaces west or left. Likewise, if the site is T₁₀E R₂N, the record will be in reel number 11.

Retrieve the tract books microfilm from the drawers in the Oregon collection. It will be in a plain white box as are many others, so be careful to retrieve the correct film. Read the box cover very carefully to avoid lost research time due to retrieving the incorrect box. We recommend using a brown wooden block, located on the top of the cabinet, to mark the place where the film was removed so the microfilm can be put back in the correct location.

The actual Tract Books from which the images were taken are large two-page registers. This type of book was used in most states to record original entries from the federal government under land grant laws. The entry information is organized numerically by Section, regardless of the overall assembly of the books. The information on any individual film can be organized in two different ways. Usually the information is arranged by Township within a Range. Occasionally they are compiled by Range within Township. The first few frames of the film should be carefully reviewed to determine which system is used on a specific reel.

The left page of each tract book entry provides a description of the tract by Township, Range, and Section. It also gives the name of the purchaser and sometimes the number of acres. The information may be listed sequentially by the specific claim number in the specific Township/Range.

UNDERSTANDING NUMBERS

CLAIM NUMBER

- Not the same as ODLC certificate number
- Specific to each Township/Range
- May indicate parcels in more than one section in the same Township

NOTIFICATION NUMBER

- On the Oregon Plat Map
- Used on all forms relating to the claim prior to the time the ODLC number was issued

CERTIFICATE/ODLC NUMBER

- Also shown as the receipt or certificate of purchase number from Washington, D.C.

Please note that this claim number is a different number from the ODLC certificate number, and may indicate parcels in more than one Section in the same Township. Other times the information may be entered strictly in Section number sequence, so the same claim number may appear in more than one Section. Because the claim number applies to the order in which claims within a Township/Range were made, there may be similar numbers in adjacent Townships/Ranges. Within any Township/Range, the numbers usually ranged from 1 to less than 100.

The right page of each tract book entry specifies the date of sale, the receipt/certificate number (which is also the ODLC number), the name of patentee, date of the patent, the volume and page in the Federal land register book in which the patent is recorded, and the federal act under which the patent was issued (i.e., ODLC, Homestead, 1820, etc.) Sometimes the patent was issued to someone other than the original warrant holder. The land warrant could be sold for whatever value the holder could receive. In turn, the new warrant owner would receive the patent in their name, in which case the patent may have an annotation providing the original warrantee's name.

PROCESS FOR OBTAINING A LAND PATENT

WARRANT

- Issued as private application or for military service
- Gives the holder the right to claim land
- Restricts the right of others to claim the land
- Could be sold to another person or entity

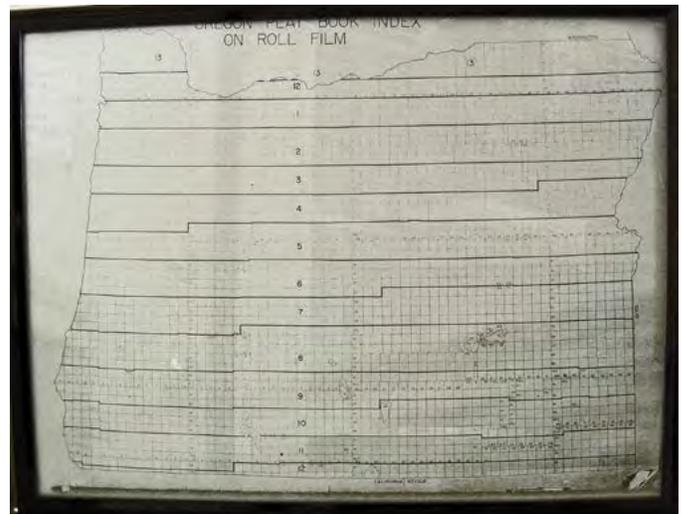
The warrant holder (whether the original recipient or someone who had purchased it from the original holder) could file a claim at a land office. This claim would be surveyed to confirm the details and was sent to Washington, D.C. where a patent would be issued in the warrant holder's name.

PATENT

A land patent is the initial transfer of a parcel of land from the federal government to an individual or private entity. These transfers of title may be the result of a Donation Land Claim, Military Warrant, Homestead, or Cash Entry.

OREGON PLAT (MAP) BOOKS

Researchers use these records to “see” the land being researched.



Use this map in the same manner as the Tract Book map. The locations in the previous example, T2S R2W, will be found on microfilm reel number 12, and T10E R2N will be found on the same reel. The plat books are also in plain white boxes, so care must be exercised to retrieve the correct microfilm.

On the microfilm, each Township is described by at least two maps. Typically, the first map shown was created in the 1860s after government-approved survey-

ors mapped the claims being made for all individuals under the Donation Land Act of 1850. Claims were given a number in the specific Township where the claim was located. This claim number applied only to that Township; not to any others.

This first map gives the number of each Section. It shows the outside boundaries of each claim in the Township. It details the length (in feet) of each survey run and the angles made at each turning point. Major geographic features such as rivers may be included, as well as the name of the claimant, number of acres claimed, claim number, and notification number. The notification number was taken to the U.S. Surveyor General's Office by the field surveyor. The Office then issued a certificate number to the claimant. This certificate number is what we know as the Oregon Donation Land Claim number. (The notification number was used on all forms, such as affidavits and depositions from the claimant and his neighbors. These were included in the application prior to the time the ODLC number was issued).

The image of the surveyed ODLC on the first map may not conform to the grid survey lines because the claim was made before the lines were constructed. The outline resembles a metes and bounds type of survey as was done in the colonial states.

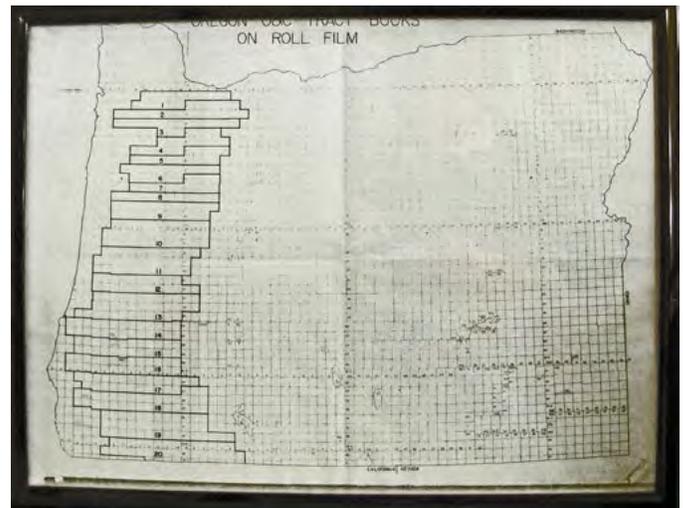
The second map for the Township on the plat book microfilm was drawn from the field notes made by the surveyors as they detailed each of the Oregon Donation Land Claims in any Township. It contains the original measurements on each line established for the Township grid according to the Willamette Meridian and Base Line. These numbers are usually of little interest to researchers as they were created to specifically locate the north/south and east/west boundary lines and the corners of each Section. The important items on this map are the physiographic and man-made features. Rivers and streams are named. Cross-hatching and dimpling was used to convey elevations and depressions. These in turn were named if they were major features. Roads, trails, farm plots, and orchards were sketched. Of most importance to researchers, individual houses were identified with the Oregon Donation Land claimant's name if the house was in existence when the survey was made.

The microfilm may show additional maps for any given Township. Most of them describe details not otherwise shown on the first two maps. This may occur when an individual makes a claim that crosses into two separate Townships. There may be a small explanatory map in both Townships that show the relationship to the whole claim. However, there will be a separate claim

number for the parcel in each Township. The notification number will apply to all parcels in all Townships, as will the certificate number that is issued as the ODLC number.

OREGON & CALIFORNIA (O&C) RAILROAD PLAT BOOKS

If your POI's land claim has not been located in any other record, it is possible it may be located within the O&C Railroad microfilms. Purchases of land from the O&C are not found in either county or "special" federal records; however, there may be a notation in the Federal Tract Book regarding a registration in the O&C tract book records.



Use the O&C Plat Books locator map to determine the specific microfilm. Carefully retrieve the O&C Plat Books microfilm from the drawers in the Oregon collection. It is very easy to confuse the tract and plat boxes. There are several numbered Townships on each roll of microfilm.

These records provide an abbreviated survey record of the included lands; the Townships located only within the Willamette Valley and adjacent foothills or mountains to the east and west. Therefore, they begin at the Willamette Stone (T1) and go south to the California border (T41), and they include information only from Range 13 West to Range 7 East.

The O&C Plat Books are "special" federal records that are much smaller and contain very little information. The title of this series of records implies that they are maps, but they are not. They are forms that contain spaces for entering the following information: Meridian, Township, Range, Section, part of section, number of acres, kind of land entry, number of entry, date of entry, name of patentee, and date of patent. Similar to other patents, the patent for some of the O&C lands may have

OREGON & CALIFORNIA RAILROAD LANDS



Construction began on the first railroad to connect Oregon to California in 1868. As an incentive to develop the region, the Oregon and California (O&C) Railroad was granted 3.7 million acres of land, laid out in a checkerboard plan and stretching in a 60 mile-wide swath from Portland to the California border. The grant required the O&C to sell the land to settlers for no more than \$2.50 an acre. These lands were available for individual purchase in the 1860s and 1870s through the Homestead Act of 1862.

The O&C attempted to retain the property as long as possible for their own economic benefit. In Oregon, the obvious asset was the value of the timberland that fringed the valley on the east to the Cascade Mountains and covered the coast mountain range to the west. An announcement by the O&C in 1903, that they had no plans to sell any additional land brought about an appeal to the federal government by affected Oregon counties. In 1916 Congress terminated the grant rights and reclaimed over two million acres.

Before the termination, many individuals did purchase private patents to the O&C lands. As with purchases directly from the federal government, these transactions were not recorded in county records until such time as the individuals who purchased from the O&C then sold the property to someone else, at which time that transaction was (and subsequent transactions were) entered in the land records for the county in which the parcel was located. The lands purchased from the O&C are not found in the Federal records either. They can be found in the microfilm of the O&C Tract Books at the GFO library. The grants from the federal government gave the railroad the right and the responsibility to sell the land, although all of Sections 16 and 36 in each township were reserved to the local government, usually the county, for the use of public schools.

been issued to someone other than the original warrant holder. As with the regular ODLIC patents, frequently a person would sell the warrant to someone else, who in turn received the property's patent in the warrant.

OREGON LAND SURVEYS

For a more in-depth look at a land parcel of interest, the Oregon Land Survey microfiche may be of value. The GFO microfiche collections are in a cabinet adjacent to the microfilm viewer in the multipurpose room at the back of the library.

Several of the drawers contain records organized by Range from 1 East to 49 East from the Willamette Meridian. Other drawers contain records organized by Range from 1 West to 15 West from the Willamette Meridian. Within each range, the microfiche are organized from 1 South to 41 South from the Willamette Base Line, and from 1 North to 9 North from the Willamette Base Line.

Using a known Township and Range, locate the correct packet. The packet will contain two "sets" of film. The first set will be labeled 1 of (n) in the upper right corner. The last one will be labeled (n) of (n). This set will show the specific field notes for the government surveys of each Township. Somewhere on the images the name of your POI will probably be listed. No index to the names in these records exists. Further, each Township was surveyed in a different manner so there is no way to estimate where the surveyors may have started or finished. They did not start with Section 1 and proceed through Section 36, but instead wandered all over, tying in certain specific landmarks and man-made improvements as best they could.

The last microfiche in the Township packet, the second "set" will be labeled 1 of 1, contains images of maps that are either identical or very similar to the ones contained in the Oregon Plat Books. One map image will outline the boundaries of the Oregon Donation Land Claims, and the other will detail the landforms and man-made improvements. Often there are additional maps that describe obscure relationships and features of the landscape or for the Oregon Donation Land Claims.

Note: Usually, this last microfiche is easier and quicker to view before attempting to load the microfilm for the plat books. However, there may be more maps on the Plat Books microfilm than appear on the Land Survey microfiche. Therefore, both should be investigated.

INDIVIDUAL ODLIC SURVEYS

The microfiche cabinet also holds a small collection of ODLIC surveys, each identified with the term “DLC” followed by a number in the upper left corner. This is the claim number that was issued to each applicant within a Township. Remember, the claim number was unique to each Township, so it is necessary to know the Township before attempting to locate a claim number in this collection. The claim number is usually abbreviated as a capital “C” or as “CI” on the notes and maps. The Township and Range are also listed on each microfiche label. The records contain the complete survey for each of the

claims and the name of the claimant; however, it does not appear that all claims are included in this record set.

MINING CLAIMS

The microfiche cabinet also contains records for the Oregon mining claims on file with the Bureau of Land Management. The GFO has no index for these files. They are organized by the name of the mining claim so it is necessary to know the specific name of a claim to be able to use this record set.

Author's note: I would like to offer my thanks to Nanci Remington and all the Bulletin editors and proofreaders for their help with this article.

ENDNOTES

1. <http://www.glorerecords.blm.gov/search/default.aspx>
2. From the French, “cadastre,” which means “register.”
3. http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc_large_image.php?doc=8
4. Meridians were numbered until the sixth Principal Meridian (Nebraska, Kansas, and Oklahoma). From there they were named for a feature or place, i.e. “Willamette Meridian,” which, for example, might have been about the 14th Principal Meridian.
5. http://sos.oregon.gov/archives/Pages/records/provisional_territorial.aspx
6. <http://publications.newberry.org/ahcbp/> As of 13 August 2015 the interactive map portion of this site is temporarily unavailable, but other elements are still functional.
7. The federal tract books in the GFO collection contain entries to about 1900 under the various federal land acts.