



# The Significance of PLSS Corners

By Warren Delles, County Surveyor

Images captured by an aerial photography camera high above Mille Lacs County show a clearly recognizable rectangular pattern of land usage in the fields, woodlands, and roads far below. This colorful checkerboard pattern etched into the diverse topography stems from boundaries created and surveyed pursuant to acts of Congress dating back to the 18th century.

In 1785, Congress enacted a law implementing a method for the subdivision of public lands into Townships six-miles square, with Townships subdivided into thirty-six Sections, most of which are one mile square. The method was designed to facilitate conveyances of land from the Federal Government to States and private citizens. The law required that a survey of the public lands be completed prior to the transfers of title. The survey became known as the Public Land Survey System (PLSS).

The PLSS evolved over time to include the placement of corner markers, usually wood posts, at Section corners, and at half mile intervals referred to as Quarter corners. Subsequent acts of Congress provided the method of dividing Sections into Quarter Sections and Quarter-Quarter Sections.

One of the responsibilities of the Mille Lacs County Surveyor is to preserve approximately 2000 corners of the original PLSS throughout Mille Lacs County. The laws established by acts of Congress and principles detailed and documented by the Bureau of Land Management are significantly important to the preservation of the PLSS corners in Mille Lacs County:

That the boundaries of the public lands as surveyed under the approved instructions, the physical evidence of which survey consists of monuments established upon the ground, and the record evidence of which consists of field notes and plats duly approved by the authorities constituted by law, are unchangeable after the passing of the title by the United States.

That the physical evidence of the original Township, Section, Quarter Section and other monuments must stand as the true corners which they were intended to represent, whether in the place shown by the field notes or not.

The Public Land Survey System was developed to establish permanency to the positions of the corner markers placed by the original surveyors for the purpose of disposal of land by the Federal Government. Court decisions have held that the physical evidence of the corner markers placed by the original surveyors controls the location of the corner, even if in conflict with other information in the record. When the Federal Government issued a conveyance to a parcel of land, the corner locations as marked in the original Public Land Survey controlled the location of the rights issued to the party or parties conveyed.

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Although the advancement of technology continually allows us to obtain measurements with greater accuracy and precision, the evidence of the location of the original PLSS corner is paramount. The foresight of the permanency of the original corners protects and maintains the rights of the landowners, which could otherwise be jeopardized as technology continuously improves our measuring capabilities.

In the process of restoring missing corners of the PLSS in Mille Lacs County, the County Surveyor strives to determine the best available evidence of the original corner locations by reviewing the records and information found in various public and private locations; and making a thorough field search for remnants of the corner position.

While most of the PLSS corners throughout Mille Lacs County have been reviewed for conformance with historic records, the preservation and maintenance of the corners of the PLSS is a continuous process. The investment and effort to preserve the corners of the PLSS promotes and maintains harmony in the community, and perpetuates and protects the imperative positions from which the historic land use patterns originated.

