

# Searching for your property corners? The Public Land Survey System can help

If you own rural land, you might be interested in finding information about your property's corners. In Wyoming, nearly all rural property descriptions rely on the Public Land Survey System (PLSS).

Before you begin your search, it helps to know a bit about how the PLSS works. You may have heard the terms “corner” or “monument” with respect to property boundaries, and it is important to understand that these words are not interchangeable.

A corner can be thought of as an imaginary, immovable point created in law with the original survey, whereas a monument is the physical object that marks that point. Out on the ground, monuments associated with the PLSS and the clues recorded around them may help locate your property's corners. Once you know how these monuments fit into the bigger PLSS picture, understanding where your property corners may lie becomes a whole lot easier.

## History of the PLSS

The PLSS was established in 1785 when the federal government created a standardized, rectangular method for dividing and describing public lands.

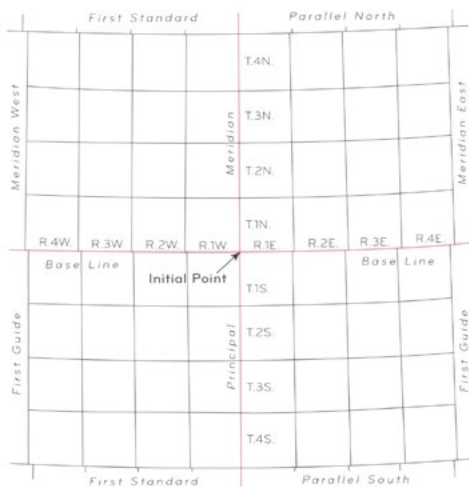


Figure 1. Township numbering system (from the 2009 Manual of Surveying Instructions).

First, surveyors established fixed points on the ground, known as initial points. From those points, they ran a principal meridian north and south and a baseline east and west to form the backbone of the system.

Using this framework, contracted surveyors laid out six-mile-by-six-mile square townships and divided each township into 36 sections, each one mile by one mile. These sections were then typically divided into smaller parts to describe individual parcels—half sections (320 acres), quarter sections (160 acres), or quarter-quarter sections (40 acres). Today, this system helps landowners clearly identify, describe, and locate their property using a consistent method that has defined land descriptions for nearly two and a half centuries.

In Wyoming, most land is referenced to the Sixth Principal Meridian, which was established in 1855, although some areas in and around the Wind River Indian Reservation use the Wind River Meridian, established in 1875. These meridians serve as the anchor points from which surveyors laid out the familiar townships and sections that form the basis of Wyoming land descriptions today.

Because much of Wyoming consists of rugged terrain, including steep slopes, rivers, timber, and rocky ground, surveyors often had to work through challenges that led to slight variations in the size and shape of sections. Despite these irregularities, the PLSS framework continues to provide a reliable reference for identifying property locations and boundaries.

The monuments set during original surveys were typically stones or wooden posts. More modern ferrous monuments were set in subsequent surveys to perpetuate these original monuments.

Whether simple stones or engraved caps on a metal post, PLSS corner monuments are the highest form of evidence in defining land boundaries. Surveyors rely on these official, undisturbed monuments because they mark the location of the true legal corner on the ground, even when later measurements show minor differences.

Modern Wyoming surveyors focus on finding, protecting, and perpetuating these markers to isolate errors, anchor boundary lines, preserve property rights, and keep today's records consistent with the original surveys. Perpetuation of original monuments involves replacing less durable stone or wooden monuments with more persistent stainless steel, iron, or aluminum post monuments.

When an original monument is missing, damaged, or cannot be found, surveyors may rely on corner accessories. These secondary clues were set and recorded during the original or subsequent surveys to confirm or reestablish the true corner location.

Accessories may include marked trees, distinctive terrain features, memorials (buried objects), mounds of stone, or other long-lasting structures that were documented in the official record to help locate the true corner position in the future should the monument be disturbed or destroyed. Even if the monument itself isn't visible, these nearby reference points allow surveyors to accurately recover the corner, ensuring landowners can still rely on clear and dependable boundary locations.

### Proceed with caution

Perhaps you and your neighbor are interested in walking the boundary between your properties. This may be important if you intend to build a fence, or your neighbor intends to construct other improvements near the property line, or maybe to settle some small uncertainty.

However, a few words of caution are in order. First, boundary surveying and boundary law are extremely complex topics that must be evaluated by competent surveyors and decided in court. Legal concepts such as adverse possession that may affect legal boundaries are outside the scope of this article.

Second, there are many commercially available products that appear to accurately display property boundaries on a GPS unit or smartphone. While these types of products are sufficient to give a general idea of where you are in relation to a boundary or which hunting unit you are in, what they show is, at best, a rough estimate of where these boundaries are. They should not be utilized to determine precise boundary or corner locations. What's worse than stringing a half mile of fence line? Stringing it twice.

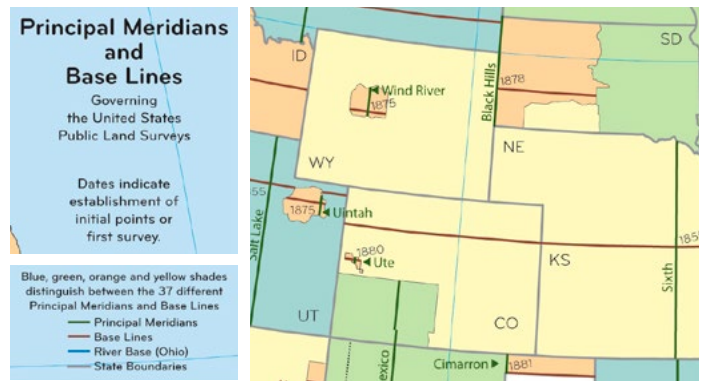


Figure 2. The principal meridians and baselines of the PLSS (from the 2009 Manual of Surveying Instructions).



Figure 3. Official monuments recovered in Shirley Basin. Sandstone quarter section corner, ca. 1871, and iron post with brass cap section corner on range line, ca. 1938. Photos courtesy of the BLM.



Figure 4. Official monuments recovered on Shirley Mountain. An iron post with brass cap monument and an accessory bearing tree, ca. 1966. Photos courtesy of the BLM.

## Reliable resources

Luckily, there are some freely available resources that can help you determine what monuments to look for at your property corners. The first is your county clerk's office. This office will have records such as plats, maps, and corner records.

Plats are specialized drawings that represent surveyed lines and include bearings and distances between corners. Corner records are helpful if a private land surveyor has visited a corner on your boundary. They typically include descriptions of what monumentation was found and when. Sometimes they will even include a picture of the monument, measurements to nearby accessories, and bearings and distances to adjacent PLSS corners.

Another resource is the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Wyoming Cadastral website, found at <https://bit.ly/wy-blm-cadastral>. This resource includes access to historical survey plats and field notes from the original and subsequent government surveys. Within these documents you can find the monument type, markings, and accessories set during official surveys. They also often describe nearby features (creeks, roads, fence lines) that can help focus your search on the ground.

Ultimately, you may need assistance from a registered professional surveyor to locate your boundaries. However, understanding how the PLSS works, how monuments and accessories fit into that system, and what monuments to look for gives landowners a solid foundation for making informed decisions about their property—and potentially reduces future boundary disputes if survey monuments are preserved.

Whether you are planning improvements, checking a fence line, or simply trying to understand where your boundaries lie, knowing what surveyors look for and where to find reliable information can make the process far less intimidating. With the help of historical county documents and resources and the BLM's official survey records, you can make an informed search for your property's corners and gain a better appreciation for the survey work that has helped shape Wyoming for generations.

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Scribe marks on a bearing tree on Shirley Mountain, ca. 1966. Photo courtesy of the BLM.