

Determining Land Ownership

A quick guide to Surface title

Searches

Traditional searches should generally begin in the County Courthouse. Offices within are for the public, and are open to anyone. County Courthouses are located in the County Seat (essentially the County Capital).

Public offices:

Assessor – The Tax office tracks ownership of all land parcels in their County. The trick is giving them proper information with which they can query, i.e. matching surveys to taxable parcels.

•Address: If there is a structure on the property, the assessor can give you the associated property outline.

• Township, Range, and Section: A Township and Range exist in reference to specific Baselines and Meridians, and contain 36 Sections. Sections are square miles within a given Township. These are broken further into "quarters" (160 acres) and "quarter quarters" (40 acres).

•Private Survey: More prevalent East of the Mississippi, a private survey should have parcel numbers that are tracked by the assessor. Typically, parcels are oddly shaped.

GIS – Geographic Information Systems collect data from numerous sources, providing satellite images and ownership information. Not all counties have a GIS office, but if they do, it's a great resource. GIS gives in-depth images of the entire county.

•A county's GIS office is also usually available online, as are programs such as Google Earth that largely show similar information.

A "typical" search

If using paper maps when researching ownership, go big to small.

➤ Overlay different maps in order to pinpoint your location. From broad (County Road Maps) to relatively specific (Assessor's plats that run as small as a few acres).

➤ Use large landmarks such as towns, rivers and roads as a means to narrow the search for the specific parcel of land.

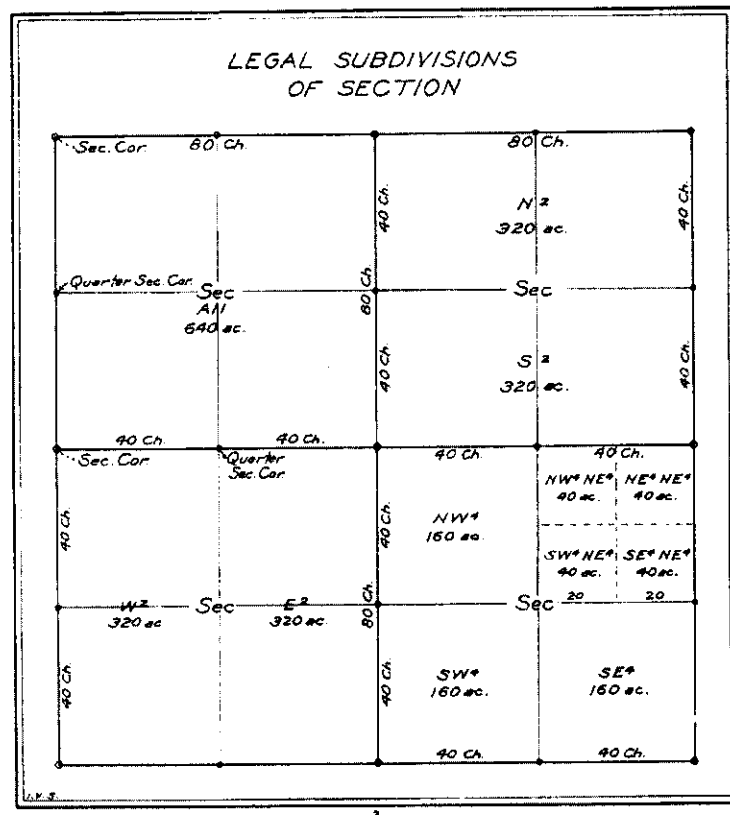
➤ County Road Maps typically have a survey overlay that will direct the search to a specific parcel or Section (of Township and Range).

➤ A County atlas is sometimes available at a County Surveyor office. This will typically direct you to specific private surveys, if applicable

Surveys:

Below, a typical Section from the Cadastral (aka Rectangular) Survey. Note: An entire section is typically one square mile.

A quarter quarter is 1320 feet (also described as 20 chains) on a side.



East vs. West: East of the Mississippi river, climbing areas will typically be found using private surveys, and it is quite likely that private (aka fee) land will be encountered. In the West, the Rectangular Survey is much more prevalent, as are public lands.

For a more detailed history of the Cadastral Survey, visit the BLM's website, specifically: <https://www.glorerecords.blm.gov/Visitors/PLSS.asp>