PUBLIC LAND RECORDS FOR CALIFORNIA

Introduction

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) of the U.S. Department of the Interior maintains many records of public lands which may be useful to the private surveyor. These records and the application of the public lands system to California are described in some detail.

Initial Points in California

All public land surveys in California are referenced to three initial points as shown in Figure 1.

   a. Humbolt in Northern California.
   b. Mt. Diablo in Central California (east of San Francisco Bay).
   c. San Bernardino in Southern California.

These are all at prominent mountain peaks visible for many miles.

The San Bernardino Meridian (Figure 2) was established in November of 1852 by Henry Washington at longitude 116° 55' 17" and latitude 34° 07' 29". A short history of the establishment of this reference point is given in the following paragraphs.

By order of Samuel D. King, Surveyor General for the United States, Deputy Surveyor Henry Washington set the initial point for the San Bernardino Meridian. Washington, along with a party of 13 men, climbed Mt. San Bernardino in November of 1852 and set a 23-foot wooden post anchored by three pine trees and surrounded by a stone wall. The cost of the project was $511 for 7 days work.

Washington then ran the principal meridian from T3N to Death Valley. (Principal meridian was run by triangulation from initial point [I.P.] to T3N due to difficult terrain.) He then ran the base line from the I.P. to R3W by triangulation and then from R3W to the Pacific Ocean by standard methods. The base line follows Base Line Road in San Bernardino County. Albert Ruxton, Deputy Surveyor, surveyed T1N, R1E in 1876 but did not close to the I.P.

In 1892, Deputy Surveyor John Rice ran from T3N to the base line along the principal meridian, using Ruxton's monuments, and intersected the base line at a point some 13.45 chains east of Washington's initial point (887.70 feet) and established a new initial point at his intersection.

In 1907, Deputy Surveyor Pearson completed the survey of the principal meridian from the south, using Washington's monuments along the east boundary of T2S, R1W for a starting line. Pearson intersected the base line 4.20 chains (277.20 feet) west of the Rice initial point and 9.25 chain (610.50 feet) east of Washington's initial point.
Figure 1 – Principal Meridians in California
U.S. cadastral engineer F.W. Chapin surveyed T1S, R1W and confirmed the location of the Pearson and Rice monuments. He set brass cap pipes at the location of the two monuments and accepted them as correct. He made mention of the Washington monument, but accepted it only as a point on the base line, not the initial point.

In 1966, an expedition sponsored by the American Congress of Surveying and Mapping recovered all monuments and confirmed their location. They tied the points to the California Coordinate System and
established a new geographical position for Washington's monument at longitude 116°55'48.675" and latitude 34°07'12.646".

Summary

1. Washington's monument has certain historical value and marks a point on the base line, but does not control property location.

2. Rice's monument would control property location in T1N, R1E, T1N, R1W, and base line only.

3. Pearson's monument would control property in T1S, R1W, T1S, R1E, and base line.

4. All original monuments found along township lines or section lines would control.

Bureau of Land Management Land Status Records

The records in the California BLM office consist of several elements. Each township has an ownership or Master Title Plat and a Historical Index. Some townships may also include Leasable Resource Plats which show issued mineral leases and permits.

One additional new record is the Miscellaneous Document Index, which lists documents involving unidentified lands or orders of a general nature. These documents are an integral part of the records and this index should be examined in conjunction with the records for each township to determine the complete status of public lands.

The public may inspect microfilm copies of the new records. Paper copies may be purchased from the California State Office of the BLM or the respective BLM District Offices in California. The District Offices in California are in Bakersfield, Susanville, Redding, Folsom, Ukiah, and Riverside.

Assessors Plat

The Assessor's Plat shows the land, which has been patented to private ownership, the instrument numbers, and sometimes the reservations to the United States as stated in the patent. The absence of such information would indicate the land is still federal land, often referred to as public domain. Withdrawals, rights-of-way, national forests, Indian reservations and actions are also shown. Lands, which have been patented and then reacquired by the United States by donation, purchase, or condemnation are shown when such information is available and are referred to as acquired lands. An assessors' plat is shown in Figure 3. The assessors' plat is the method used to find the grantees name to perform a search in the recorder's office.

Original Survey

The assessor's plat is not to be confused with the original survey. The original survey plat has authority at law, but the Assessor's plat has none. The master title plat forms the basis of an assessors' map in California. The following is a history of T 22 N, R 4 E, Mount Diablo Meridian. The history is well recorded because a resurvey was requested in 1966, and provides a good illustration of how original surveys were performed in California. Figure 4 shows the order the township was surveyed.
Figure 3 – Assessors’ Plat
Figure 4 – Order of Surveying T22N, R4E, MDM
History of Surveys

1867          W.F. Ingells surveyed the west boundary.

1867          E.H. Dyer surveyed the south boundary.

1869          Thornton F. Battele surveyed a portion of the subdivisinal lines.  see Figures 5.

1872          William Minto surveyed the west 4 1/2 miles of the north boundary of the township.  Minto's field notes made no reference to the Battele corner of sections 2, 3, 34, and 36.

1875          Edward A. Von Schmidt surveyed the east 1 1/2 miles of the north boundary beginning his completion at the Minto 1/4 section corner of sections 2 and 35.

1878          John A. Benson surveyed the east boundary of the township, running "random and true" between the Dyer southeast corner and the Von Schmidt northeast corner of the township.  Benson then completed the subdivisinal lines of the township, as partially illustrated in Figure 6 and 7.  Benson found a gross error in the south half of Battele's line between sections 34 and 35, displacing the corner of sections 26, 27, 34, and 36 southerly.  Benson accepted Battele's corners as common to his survey which forced a strong bearing into his lines.

1914          Benjamin L. McCoy.  Butte County Surveyor, resurveyed in the SE1/4 of section 3; he found and perpetuated the 1/4 section corner of sections 3 and 10.

1957          Jesse A. Bumgermer, Registered Engineer No. 2436. resurveyed a portion of section 3, as shown by a map recorded in Book 22, page 26, Butte County records.  Bumgermer's map indicates that he found the 1/4 corner of sections 3 and 4.  He also remonumented the corner of sections 9, 10, 15, and 16.

1963 & 1966   John W. Hamby.  Land Surveyor No. 2843, surveyed portions of sections 3 and 10. Hamby's maps indicate that he did not use the McCoy perpetuation of the 1/4 corner of sections 3 and 10 nor the Bumgermer 1/4 corner of sections 3 and 4.  Hamby did not use any proportionate method of restoring the lost corner of sections 3, 4, 9, and 10.

Not all township plats were irregularly surveyed.  Figure 8 shows a more normal township plat.
Figure 7 – Benson’s Completed Plat 1878