

Improve Your Access to Old Records

by

+ Knud E. Hermansen, P.L.S., P.E., Esq.

How many times have you come across a description calling for a plat that is not recorded? How many times have you envied surveyors who have collections of old plats? Perhaps, on the other hand, you have access to old plats in a private collection or at the courthouse but find it too tedious and time consuming to search through the collection for a plat that may be useful? The fact is, many times there are old plat collections that can be purchased, copied, or indexed relatively easily. In some cases, with a little time, effort, expense, and cooperation from other surveyors in the area, you can improve your access to old records.

One method to improve your access to old records is to purchase copies of existing collections or the indices for existing collections. For starters you may wish to purchase the microfilm index for the surveys located at the Archives in Harrisburg. They have the index and many if not all of the original surveys on microfilm. Some groups and private parties are also willing to sell what they have gathered and indexed. For example, a couple of years ago the Mid-State Chapter of the Pennsylvania Society of Land Surveyors copied and made an index for the entire collection of early survey records found in the Centre County Courthouse. For another example, a genealogist residing in Fulton County has collected and copied several hundred old plats dating back to the late 1700s, encompassing what is now Blair, Huntingdon, Fulton, and Bedford Counties. In both cases, the names of the landowner and adjoiningers have been alphabetized in a comprehensive index for easy access to the records. Both the indices and copies of the original surveys can be purchased for a reasonable sum.

A second method to improve your access to old records is to locate and index existing collections that you may be aware of but are ordinarily useless because they are too time consuming to use. Examples include the road docket, the "drawer" of county surveyor plats at the local courthouse, old plats in the possession of the county historical society, and plats found in the offices of other surveyors. If you are aware of a potentially useful collection, there are several steps you can take in order to make the information useful and accessible. First, save yourself some time, effort, and cost by getting together with another surveyor, the local surveying chapter, or the historical society for the area and pool your resources, knowledge, and costs.

The second step, if the records are not already bound and accessible, is to

make one copy of the entire collection. With the availability of lightweight transportable copiers, this is no longer a problem. For large maps, there are now many locations that can make a mylar or vellum print from the original. Copying is probably best done as a team effort (all at one time) or by sending one secretary on a slow day, weekend, or after work to the location, with everyone paying a portion of the cost and the secretary's wages. (Many times a secretary or retired person can be enticed to spend some of their free time doing this task for extra money.)

The third step, if the copies or accessible originals are not organized, is to organize the copies into sections. Most plats are best organized by the county and municipality as shown on the plat (rather than trying to determine if the property falls within a "new" or renamed county or municipality). Proper organization will allow someone using the copies, if all other means to find and identify a particular plat fail, to confine their search to a particular section rather than have to search through all the copies.

The fourth step is to number the copies. Pages can be numbered sequentially from the beginning to the end of all the copies or by starting over again at the beginning of each section (i.e. starting at page number one at the beginning of each section). If the second page numbering scheme is chosen, a prefix should be used in conjunction with the page number (e.g. A - #, II - #, 1 - #, etc.) to avoid confusion and problems if the pages are inadvertently mixed or placed in the wrong section. Another alternative is to bind each section in a separate volume.

The fifth step is to prepare an index in order to easily and accurately access the proper page and information on the copies. For property surveys, the best way to compile an index is to set up a computer data base with a data entry for every name. Each name, along with the page number where the name appears, would be a separate entry in the data base. A simple index would contain only the name of the surveyor's client while a more comprehensive and useful index would also have additional entries that contain the adjoining landowner's name that appears on the plat. To allow the computer to alphabetize the names, the entry should list the last name first. In addition, it is frequently helpful to include with each name the area or size of the parcel, location of the parcel (i.e. county and municipality), the names of the major physical features appearing on the plat (e.g. rivers, mountains, roads, etc.), surveyor's name, and date of the survey. This additional information is not only helpful to find the relevant plat but will help the researcher avoid making a mistake where the same landowner may have obtained several surveys or two or more different

people had the same name.

The best way to type the information into a data base is to hire a secretary and share the cost with another surveyor or agree on a common format and software and give each participant a separate section to enter into the data base -- eventually combining all the individual data entries into one comprehensive data base when everyone has completed their section. Unfortunately, the second method requires the copies be separated and the work completed piecemeal with the slowest participant holding up the completion and use of the document and index by the other participants in the project.

For records other than property surveys (e.g. road plats) the best index is probably a small scale map of the local area that shows the particular feature or subject of concern. For roads, the best map is probably a county road map; for subdivisions the best map may be a copy of the tax map; and for streams the best map may be a NGS 7.5 minute quadrangle sheet. To convert the area map to an index, one or more people will have to carefully annotate the small scale map with the volume and page number where the information on the feature or subject can be found. For example, to annotate a particular road from the road docket onto the "index" map, simply mark the page number (and volume if more than one book) alongside or across the road as it appears on the map. To use a completed index road map, the user simply locates the particular road on the "index" map and reads the volume number and page where the information for the road can be found. Because many of these old records use ancient names, obscure landowner names, or features to identify them, it may be necessary for several surveyors or long time county residents to prepare the index together.

The sixth and final step is to make extra copies of the documents, index, or both. Sometimes, part of the cost can be recovered by selling the index and copies of the plats. In any event, it is a good idea to keep an extra copy safe in the event the original is destroyed, lost, stolen, or ruined. With the wide popularity of computers, a copy of an index can be stored on a computer disk and the spare disk given to someone else for safe keeping.

Hopefully, by reading this article and following the steps it suggests, some surveyors will be able to increase their access to old records. This may be a good project to keep employees busy during slow times in the winter or adopted as a local surveyor's group project. Good luck!

+ Knud Hermansen is a professional land surveyor, professional engineer, and attorney at

law. He operates a consulting firm in Old Town, Maine and is a faculty member at the University of Maine, Orono.