

# The Public Land Act of 1785

When the American Revolution was over, the new government had no money – but it had land. To pay soldiers for their service, the government gave a soldier a land warrant as payment. A warrant is a claim (ownership), in this case to a certain number of acres in the western territory. These warrants differed according to how long a man served in the military and what his rank was. If the soldier died in the war, then his family received the warrant for his land. The warrants in the Virginia Military District (VMD) were for areas from 100 acres to 15,000 acres.

Describing specific pieces of land was not easy. The boundaries were unclear because no consistent method had been established for marking tracts of land. Areas of land are called parcels. Most parcels were only described as a certain amount of land (a number of acres) in a general region.

Members of the new Congress knew that the land parcels in the western territories needed to be described more precisely. Congress passed the Public Land Act of 1785. They recommended that land be marked in areas shaped like

squares. The Earth's surface is round and not flat, so parcels would not be perfectly square, but they could be close.

The land in the Northwest Territory was to be surveyed and divided into tracts of land six miles square (6 miles x 6 miles), called townships. Then each township would be divided into 36 sections, each being 1 mile x 1 mile square. Each township and each section was assigned a number so it could be identified. One square mile was equal to 640 acres of land. Land would be sold for \$1 an acre or \$640 a section. Within each township one section was to be saved, not sold, in order to provide money to support new schools. In many townships, this was Section 16 [see graphic (NN)], near the center of the township. This system of

*A Township*

6	5	4	3	2	1
7	8	9	10	11	12
18	17	16	15	14	13
19	20	21	22	23	24
30	29	28	27	26	25
31	32	33	34	35	36

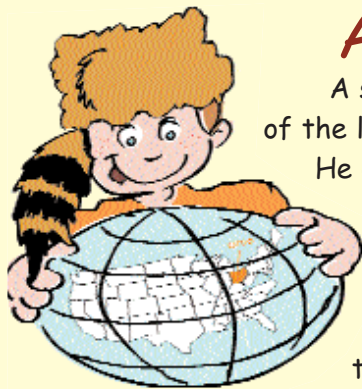
Congress reserved section 16 near the middle of each township for the use of public schools.

*Graphic (NN)*

measuring and marking land for public use is known as the federal survey system. It was first used in eastern Ohio in an area just west of the Ohio River. This survey was called the Seven Ranges.

Other Ohio surveys soon followed. One of them set the Ohio-Indiana state line, called the "First Principal Meridian." The main latitude line to intersect, or cross, that longitude line was set at the 41°N Latitude. Once these two lines were

established, surveyors began to set boundaries and describe the land in relation to them. Permanent markers (usually metal stakes and pins in the ground) would be laid, and boundaries could be proven. This system of surveying land was carried into many other American lands, too, as the country grew. Grids were not always established in 6-mile x 6-mile sections, but the rectangular system was imitated because it worked so well.



## Along the Ohio Trail

A surveyor is someone who takes measurements of the land and sets markers to show boundary lines. He or she cannot use things like rivers, trees, rocks, or other land forms to do this because they change over time. Instead, a surveyor uses the surface of the Earth.

The Earth's surface is described by using two sets of lines: longitude lines (which run north and south) and latitude lines (which run west and east). These lines make a kind of grid over the Earth's surface, like an invisible "net" that hugs the planet.

The central longitude line (marked as 0° Longitude) is called the Prime Meridian and runs through Greenwich, England. Longitude lines that run nearly parallel to the west of the meridian are measured as °W and those that run nearly parallel to the east of the meridian are measured as °E.

The central latitude line (marked as 0° Latitude) is called the Equator and runs around the world through South America and Africa primarily. Latitude lines that run parallel to the north of the equator are measured as °N and those that run parallel to the south of the Equator are measured as °S.

A single, tiny spot on the earth can be measured using these lines. That spot can be named and recorded as the place where a latitude line and a longitude line cross. For instance, Columbus, Ohio, is 40°N Latitude, 83°30'W Longitude. Always name the latitude line first, longitude line second.



## *Along the Ohio Trail: A Short History of Ohio Lands*

*Researched and Written by:*

Tanya West Dean, B.A., History, Wittenberg University  
and W. David Speas, B.S., Education, Heidelberg College

*Edited by:*

Dr. George W. Knepper, Distinguished Professor of History,  
Emeritus, The University of Akron.

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