

St. Michael Historian



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Settling the Public Lands

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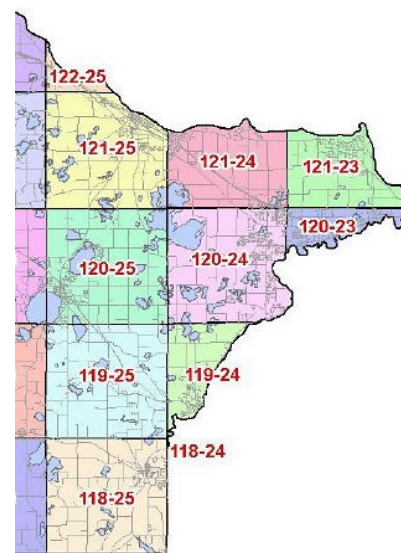
A common conversation that I have had with St. Michael natives will often include a statement that goes something like “My great, great grandfather started the farm I grew up on;” or “Our farm near St. Michael was where our family settled when they immigrated to the US.” Implicit in those statements is an assumption that getting to the land was a matter of course. It seems that while people may have an appreciation for the hard work it took to farm the land in the years before mechanization, they take for granted that the land itself was ready to be farmed. Even fewer give much thought to how their ancestors selected, located, and paid for the land that would eventually become a farm. It may be possible for us to imagine, and many of us well remember, the St. Michael void of housing developments; but can any of us really imagine the St. Michael void of farmland? Farmland, that is land that is ready to be tilled and planted, was a man-made creation in this part of Minnesota. Unfortunately, we have no photos of what the pre-farmland St. Michael looked like (it would have looked just like a forest), and we have no recorded memories from St. Michael founders of what it was like to locate a future farm in the midst of what was then known as the “Big Woods”; but we can assemble information from other sources to create a picture of what it may have looked like.

It should be noted that the woodland that would later become St. Michael provided for the needs of Native Americans for many centuries. Their use of the land; however, conflicted with the vision of the Congress under the Articles of Confederation. To the first government of the United States, any lands under the control of the United States, but not yet claimed by individual citizens, would be both a source of revenue for the deeply in debt infant government and the basis for the country’s future prosperity and strength. The land that became St. Michael did not become a part of the United States until the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, but the system for how that land would be divided up for sale was established in the Land Ordinance of 1785. The original scheme was modified and fine-tuned over the subsequent twenty years, but the Rectangular Survey System was a vast improvement over the old system of “metes and bounds” whereby legal land boundaries were described according to geographic features like rocks and streams. It is probably not necessary to explain why that would be impractical for partitioning millions of acres of land for efficient transfer of ownership.

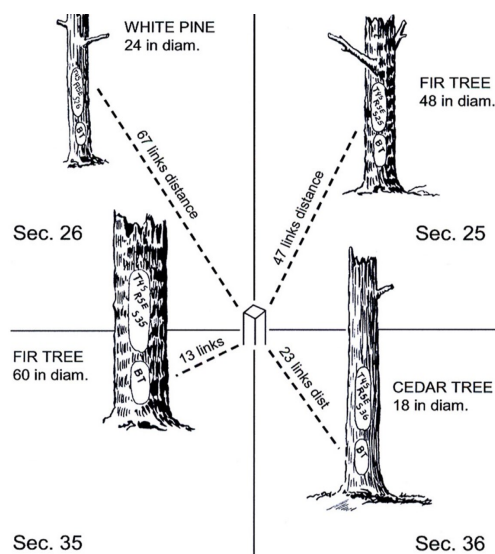
The basics of the Rectangular Survey System was this: at a place of origin, a north-south principal meridian was established that followed one of the imaginary lines of longitude. Every six miles moving east or west from that meridian created a “range”. When the public lands in Minnesota, west of the Mississippi River, were surveyed, the surveyors worked from the 5th Principal Meridian which was established in 1815 at the mouth of the Arkansas River, and then that line was



Above: the numbering of townships in Minnesota is based on their relative position to 5th Principal Meridian and Clarendon Base Line. Below: the eastern 3 ranges of Wright County showing township numbers and ranges.



extended north. St. Michael lies within the 23rd and 24th ranges west of the 5th Principal Meridian. For the latitudinal position, an east to west “baseline” was established through Clarendon, Arkansas. Moving north from that baseline, a township line was established every six miles. Therefore, each geographic township in Minnesota has a number indicating how far north it is from the Clarendon Baseline (in six-mile increments), and a Range number indicating how far west it is of the 5th Principal Meridian (also in six-mile increments). St. Michael lies within Township 120 North, Range 24 West, and also the Wright County portions of Township 120 North, Range 23 West. Many readers may recall that St. Michael lies within the former Frankfort Township. Frankfort was a political, or government, township, the boundaries of which coincided with the geographic township. To this day, all land transactions are still described using the numeric geographic township designations assigned to them in the original surveys despite the fact that Frankfort no longer exists. Each six-mile square township was further divided into one-mile square sections with the numbering of each section starting in the northeast corner then moving west and then south so that section 36 was in the southeast corner. Sections were further divided into quarter sections of 160 acres as that was the standard amount of land that settlers purchased.



Above: examples of blazes on bearing trees, which acted as backups to the corner posts.

The Land Ordinance of 1785 required that a ground survey be completed and that monuments be left on the surface so that there was not only physical evidence of all of the boundaries, but also legible notations scribed on those monuments so that land buyers would know the limits of their property. The public lands that became St. Michael were surveyed in three initial stages. The township boundaries were surveyed in the summers of 1853 and 1854. The subdivisions within the township were completed by October of 1855. The speed at which they could complete surveys was dependent on the terrain, weather conditions, and the size of the crew. From the 1854 field notes we know that the south and east township boundaries were surveyed by a crew of just five men. The crew leader was the Deputy Surveyor, John Ryan, who kept the field notes and was responsible for the accuracy of the survey. Since our area was dotted with numerous lakes and swamps that were not only impossible to walk through, but which also had to be measured for placement on the plat, the “compassman” had to calculate angles between fixed points and then triangulate the distances. Then, there were two chainmen who dragged a Gunter’s Chain, a chain of 100 links totaling 66 feet, to measure linear distances. Additionally, there was an axman whose job it was to clear paths, cut corners posts, and mark or “blaze” bearing trees

which would act as reference points to the corner posts, as it was presumed that posts might be purposely moved or lost to the elements. It is unlikely that settlers had problems locating their property since all of the land in St. Michael was settled within a couple of years after the surveys were completed. Using a magnetic compass, and perhaps a solar compass, did not guarantee 100% accuracy. The government completed a total resurvey of the land in 1890, and property owners contracted subsequent surveys. While later adjustments to property lines likely led to disagreements between neighbors about who owned what, the first surveyors did a remarkable job considering the technology they were using at the time.

In addition to the notes of the distances that he would need to make his map or “plat”, the Deputy Surveyor was also instructed to describe the terrain as they traversed it to indicate whether they were walking through prairie or timber and to assess the quality of that timber. Oak, basswood, and maples were typically noted as “1st class timber”. Additionally, John Ryan detailed at what distances along their path that they entered and exited different vegetations. The notes, therefore, provided a description of the land that might be useful to land buyers. If there were manmade features already on the land, the survey was supposed to note those as well. Mr. Ryan took note of a trail near the Crow River. No doubt this was a trail used by Native Americans and possibly early traders. According to the plat that Ryan drew, the trail ran along what is now Landon Avenue or what many of us still refer to as “the River Road”. The field notes and plats were often all that prospective settlers used to make their decisions on what parcels to buy, unless they wanted to take the time and effort to personally inspect the land, as some did.

The physical evidence of the first surveys is now gone except for the field notes and plats. As the first settlers developed their farms, corner fence posts replaced the original monuments, and since bearing trees were no longer needed, they were



Above: a portion of the original 1856 plat of Township 120 N, R. 24 W. The original intersection of downtown St. Michael is where Sections 11, 12, 13 & 14 meet. Note the trail in Section 13 running through what is now the Rec. Center and lower Edgewood Edition. Below: an example of the field notes from 1854. The survey team was walking north from the south side of the township into Hanover. In the margin are the number of chains since the starting point.

42,50	Right bank of Crow River d 15 runs NE Rocky bed high bank water clear current swift	
48,50	Left Bank of Crow River a 10 3,50 chms wide	
58,50	Leave timber for Prairie beats E & W	a 40
80,00	Set Post for Corner to Sections 25, 30, 31 & 36 level made mound of earth & sods dug pits & trench as per instructions Surface level Soil at rate timber oak & maple	

simply cut down as they were likely intruding into a farmer’s new field. But before the farmers could begin clearing any land, they first had to purchase it. Once the initial surveys were completed, the Deputy Surveyor sent his notes and plats to the land office then in charge of disposing of those lands. In the 1850s this was in Minneapolis.

Land Acquisition by Pre-emption

When the movement west began in the years after the Revolution, laws regarding the settlement of public lands required that land first be surveyed and then offered for sale at a public auction. Impatient settlers, however, often moved onto “unoffered” lands and even non-surveyed lands in order to get choice parcels. These settlers were considered “squatters”. Even though this was illegal, squatters often created “claim clubs” that worked to prevent the bidding on lands on which they had squatted. Congress finally gave in to public pressure and passed the Pre-emption Act of 1841. The act allowed pre-emptors (squatters) the right to purchase land on which they had squatted before it came up for public auction, as long as the land had first been surveyed. Squatters had to be citizens or show intent to become one, reside on the land, and make improvements like planting crops and building a cabin. In other words, the pre-emptors had to have proof that they intended to remain permanently. The first people to make claims to the public lands that became St. Michael were those who not only knew the law, but they also knew when the land was going to be surveyed. Records and early written histories all indicate that John K. Aydt and members of his family, were the first ones to select claims in the future St. Michael. Aydt had been operating a mill in St. Paul since 1851 and had previously lived in southern Illinois after his immigration in 1841. The point here is that Aydt knew the land acquisition process and would have been watching for the notices in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* regarding where the surveyors were operating. In fact, most of the first claimants in the future St. Michael were those who had either been in the US for at least a year, or who were in contact with someone who was already here, and were therefore likely familiar with how to get “in the front of the line”. Other early claimants included the families of Zachman, Anselment, Gutzwiller, Vetch, Lenz, Roden, Marx, Zahler, Dehmer, Eull, Hackenmueller, Duerr, and Barthel. In other words, many of St. Michael’s “founding families” were those who already knew the process before they started scouting for land.

The early histories record that John K. Aydt and his son Leonard came up the Mississippi and then up the Crow River in September 1854 to select claims. By this time the township boundaries had been surveyed even though the interior section boundaries had not. Regardless, a month earlier Congress expanded squatters rights to unsurveyed land. After selecting their land and erecting a claim shanty on it to show others that the land had been claimed, the pre-emptor went to the land office in Minneapolis and filed a “Declaratory Statement”, a formal intent to purchase, and thus protected his claim.

The pre-emptor then had 30 months to “prove up” his claim (show proof of the requirements under the law) and get someone to submit an affidavit swearing that they had met the requirements of the pre-emption law. Presuming that they met all the requirements, the last thing they needed to do was to pay for the land, which could be done in cash or, as was the case for much of the land in St. Michael, with military bounty land warrants.

Military Bounty Land Warrants

After the passage of the Land Ordinance in 1785, the US Congress continued to try to influence how the land was settled and who settled it. Between 1788 and 1855 Congress passed multiple “Military Bounty Land” acts to encourage both enlistments as well as westward settlement, by rewarding military service with grants of land to veterans of the Revolutionary War, War of 1812, and several so-called “Indian Wars” in the east. The veteran did not receive the land as a direct payment, instead he was notified with a certificate that he was entitled to the warrant. Most of the warrants that were issued granted the holder 160 acres of land, or a quarter section. The warrant could be submitted as payment at the land office for the patent, or legal title, to the land. Most veterans, however, never took the government bait to settle in the new territories. Instead, the veterans or their heirs, who were comfortable remaining where they were Back East, sold the warrants to land dealers.

The face value of the warrants was the minimum government price for the land or \$1.25 per acre, for a total of \$200 for the 160-acre warrant. Dealers offered the holder of the warrant a discounted price since it was otherwise no good to them unless they settled on the land. The dealer then assigned (sold) the warrants to immigrants and others looking for land in the new territories at face value, keeping the difference as their profit. Especially in the early 1850s when land was a very hot commodity, there was a very active exchange in military bounty land warrants on Wall Street. An estimated two-thirds of all the original land purchases in St. Michael were done with military warrants that were initially awarded to a soldier in an early war and then assigned to the settler by a land dealer. Other settlers, those who didn’t have military warrants, simply paid cash at the land office. These were called “cash entry” transactions. Either type of payment worked, but it is likely that land dealers persuaded people to purchase the military warrants as it guaranteed the settler the lowest price per acre as insurance against a sudden spike in the market price. The patent to the land was often not processed for several years after the warrant or payment was made. Consequently, later generations have a misunderstanding as to when the family farm was actually settled. Patent dates of 1860, for example, probably mean that the land was settled in 1856 or 1857.

Between 1853 and 1858 the Big Woods in Wright County went from generic wilderness to subdivided parcels with numeric designations. Additionally, within those same five years, most of the land was claimed by eager settlers including the founders of St. Michael.

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We're on the Web!
See us at:
www.saintmichaelhistory.org
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 Meetings are held on the second Monday of the month at the St. Michael City Hall in the Gries and Lenhardt Public Meeting Room adjacent to the library.
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Upcoming Events

All public events are on hold until further notice due to the current pandemic and the health concern of our members. Please stay safe!



Left: The Military Bounty Land Warrant granted to John White, ordinary seaman on the frigate Spitfire in the War of 1812. White sold his warrant to a land dealer who sold and assigned the warrant to Franz Zahler, who then used it to purchase his land in St. Michael. Like others who purchased these military bounty warrants, Zahler knew nothing about White or his military service. It was just a vehicle to get land at a guaranteed price.