



TEXAS GENERAL LAND OFFICE
GEORGE P. BUSH, COMMISSIONER

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PRESS RELEASE

Pioneer Surveying exhibit stakes claim for Texas Surveyors' Week March 15-21

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(AUSTIN) — A new exhibit at the Texas General Land Office explores little-known heroes from Texas' past and present — land surveyors.

"Pioneer Surveying in Texas," located on the first floor of the Stephen F. Austin State Office Building, takes a look at the surveying experience in pre-revolutionary Texas prior to 1836, as well as challenges faced by surveyors during the Republic and early statehood. The exhibit features many antique surveying tools, several of which are on loan from the Texas Society of Professional Surveyors.

"Land surveyors are at the heart of operations at the Texas General Land Office, and it has been that way since Texas was a young Republic," said Texas Land Commissioner George P. Bush. "Surveyors have literally shaped Texas. Surveyors record boundaries, and they also mark our progress and growth. For example, if a building is constructed, or a home is sold, surveyors make sure that deals are always fair and square."

Pioneer Texas surveyors faced many obstacles on the frontier, including bears, uncooperative settlers and the occasional violent altercation with indigenous peoples. The nature of their jobs meant they had to traverse literally uncharted territory. The Archives of the General Land Office hold numerous examples of difficulties faced by surveyors, who continued the task of plotting the foundation of Texas' land system as it expanded from its early origins to encompass the boundaries we recognize today.

Items on exhibit from the Pre-Republic time period include the Town Tract of San Felipe de Austin, dating to the year 1828. One of the first surveying tasks in Austin's Colony was to lay out the town of San Felipe de Austin on the Brazos River. The description of this survey mentions the first surveying standards adopted in the colony.

"This town was surveyed with the compass adjusted to the true north, the variation of the needle was ten degrees 37 minutes east. The measurements were adjusted to the Mexican vara calculated at eight percent less than the English yard, so that the vara used in this survey was two and six tenths English inches less than the English yard." At 33 1/3 inches, the vara has been the official unit of measurement in Texas. In 1919, the Texas Legislature confirmed the vara at that length. To this day, all surveys recorded at the GLO are reported using the vara.

Other items on exhibit include an affidavit for the loss of a conditional headright certificate with the Land Office in 1847. In the affidavit, John McKimm testifies that in 1839 or 1840, his certificate was placed in the hands of a surveyor, who is said to have been killed by the indians [sic], and that the said certificate was lost or mislaid ...”

Once McKimm swore that he had lost the certificate and not sold or transferred it, a replacement certificate was issued.

In practicing their trade, pioneer Texas surveyors often spent weeks in the field and had to carry everything they needed to survive as well as the tools of their trade. Several of those tools are on exhibit, including an antique surveyor's compass and transit, both on loan from TSPS; a plumb bob; a transit chain; and a replica 19th century black powder revolver. Learn more about pioneer Texas surveyors by visiting the GLO Archives and Records. The GLO is open to the public Monday through Friday, 8 a.m-5 p.m. This exhibit will run through September.

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