Toponymy and The U.S. Land Survey in Wisconsin

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Of all the works of man on the land, one of the most widespread, if not the most important, is the subdivision of land. The U.S. rectangular survey, more widely known as the Township and Range system, is the system by which much of the United States is surveyed. This survey system was authorized by Congress in the Land Ordinance of 1785. It was devised for the purpose of description and disposal of the public domain. The Township and Range system was not used in the older Atlantic seaboard states and in a few other areas surveyed prior to the establishment of the federal government. Most of the United States west of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers has been surveyed in accordance with the U.S. Rectangular Survey. Sixty-nine percent of the contiguous U.S. is covered continuously by it, and with Alaska included another nine percent is covered intermittently (Fig. 1).

Many books describe the Township and Range system and a number of works discuss its striking impact on the cultural geography of the nation.[1] Notably lacking in all these studies is any mention of its influence on toponymy. At least three areas need study: (1) the derivation of distinctive placenames from elements or characteristics of the Township and Range survey; (2) the pat-

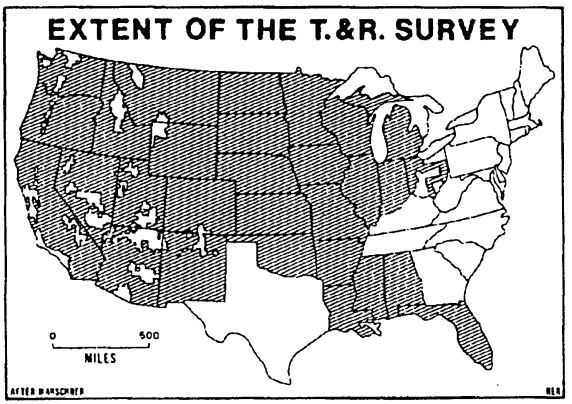

Fig. 1. Extent of the Township and Range Survey.

tern of the "names on the land" and possible explanations for it, and (3) the significance of the Township and Range system as an originator of placenames.

The fact that the United States contains an estimated four million placenames made it necessary to limit this examination to a single area, specifically Wisconsin, and to a readily accessible data source, namely U.S. Geological Survey quadrangles. Every available U.S.G.S. quadrangle at scales of 1:24,000, 1:48,000, and 1:62,500 was examined. Atlases, plat books, special purpose maps, and various secondary works on Wisconsin placenames provided supplemental data.[2] Despite the inherent weaknesses of such an approach, it offers an approximate picture of the influence of the Township and Range system on the toponymy of Wisconsin.

The basis of the Township and Range system is a grid based on selected lines of latitude and longitude known respectively as the Baseline and Principal Meridian (Fig. 2). From the point at the intersection of the Principal Meridian and the Baseline, surveyors ran perpendicular lines at six-mile intervals. These lines are surveyed at right angles to one another and enclose rectangular plots of land. The north-south lines define strips of land called ranges and are numbered 1, 2, 3, etc., east and west of the Principal Meridian. East-west lines establish strips of land called tiers (or townships) and are numbered 1, 2, 3, etc.,

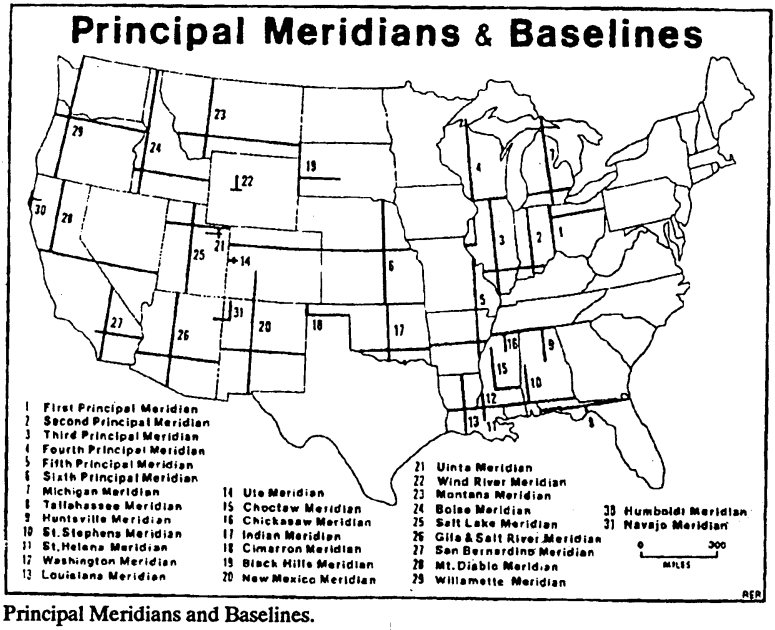

Fig. 2. Principal Meridians and Baselines.

north and south of the Baseline. The resultant six-mile squares (townships) contain thirty-six sections, numbered from 1 to 36 beginning in the upper right hand corner of the township. Each section, an area of 640 acres or one square mile, may be subdivided into half-sections, quarter-sections, and so on, for more detailed location and description (Fig. 3).

Almost every feature of the Township and Range survey occurs in one way or another in the toponymy of Wisconsin. The basis for surveying Wisconsin under the Township and Range system was laid in 1831 when it was still part of

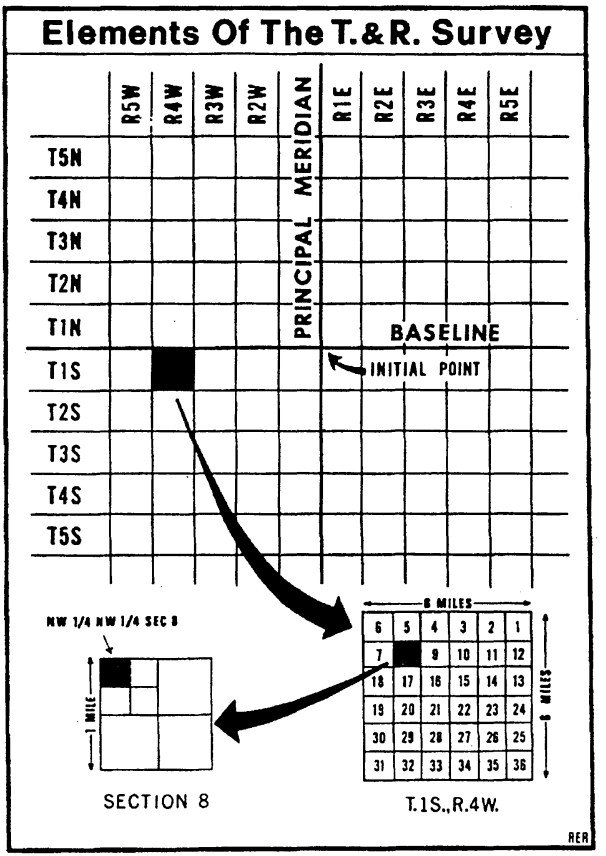

Fig. 3. Elements of the Township and Range Survey.

Michigan Territory. That year Lucius Lyon, United States Commissioner on the survey of the Wisconsin-Illinois border, built up a mound six feet square at the base and six feet high to mark the intersection of the border and the Fourth Principal Meridian, in what is now Grant County. All Wisconsin public land surveys began from this point, which became known as *The Point of Beginning* (Gard 185).

Since the Baseline for the Township and Range system in Wisconsin formed the southern boundary of the state, it did not generate any Wisconsin placenames. *Meridian Drive* and *Meridian Road* in Clark, Marathon, Price, and Taylor Counties, however, were derived from their locations on the Fourth Principal Meridian. The grid laid out from this baseline and meridian gave rise to numerous names. The list includes *Range Line Road* in Forest County; *Range Line Lake* in Oneida, Forest, and Vilas Counties; *Range Line Creek*, Forest County; several lakes called *Town Line Lake* in Langlade, Oneida, and Polk Counties, for example; at least three *Townline Roads*, those in Shawano, Rusk, and Langlade Counties; *Townline Creek*, Oneida County, and many others. Less obvious are *North Line Road* and *Line Road* in Grant County; *Line Lane*, Marathon County; *Lineville Road*, Brown County; and similar forms. A number of names originated from their location within a township. Examples include *Twenty Six Road* located in the center of Township 26 North, Clark County; *Town Center Road*, Green and Grant Counties; *Center Drive*, Taylor County; and others. Places were also named for their location at a township corner: *Town Corner Lake* and *Town Corner Creek* in Marinette County; on boundary lines between townships: *Boundary Road* in St. Croix County; and at the junction of townships: *Fourtown Junction School* in Barron County.

As the survey was extended, the problem of maintaining square townships in spite of merging meridians arose. The solution was to run new baselines at certain intervals, along which lines running true north could be offset against township lines from the south. Such parallels came to be called correction lines (Fig. 4). Even this aspect of the Township and Range found its way into the toponymy of Wisconsin with *Correction Creek* and *Correction Lane* in Taylor County.

The division of townships into sections provided the origin of a great many placenames. Of the thirty-six numerals used to designate the square mile subdivisions of a township, only eight did not find expression in toponymy, and some were the namesake for multiple features. Numerous lakes are named for the section in which they are located. Some are simply named *Section Lake* like one

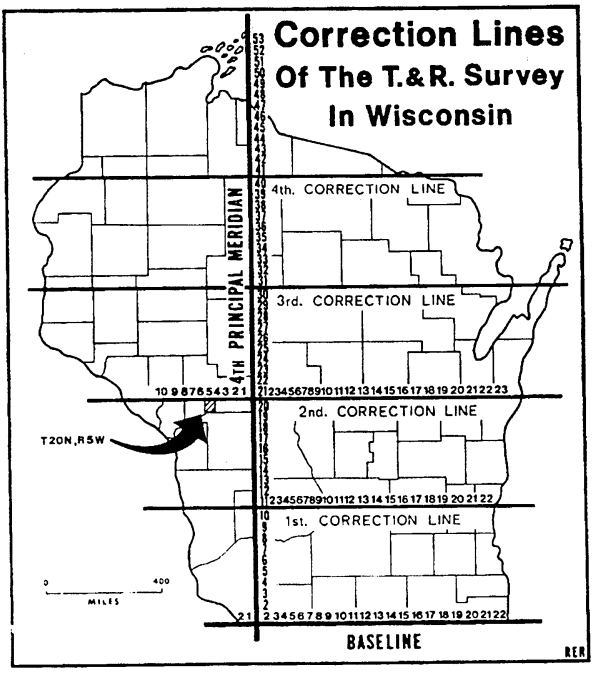

Fig. 4. Correction Lines of the Township and Range Survey in Wisconsin.

in Oconto County. The origin of others like *Section 30 Lake* or *Section 10 Lake* in Langlade County are even more obvious. Less conspicuous are examples like *Lake Six* and *Lake Nine* in Iron County, *Lake Nineteen* and *Lake Thirty* in Taylor County, and *Lake No. 10* in Walworth County, all of which originated in the same manner. A few lakes were named for their locations at a section corner, like *Corner Lake*, Oneida county; or on a section line, like *Line Lake*, occurring in both Oconto and Bayfield Counties.

The Land Ordinance of 1785 provided that section 16 in each township was to be reserved for the use of common schools. Later section 36 was also granted to the schools. This aspect of the Public Land Survey gave rise to placenames like *School Section Hollow*, Richland County; *School Section Lake*, Marquette, Waupaca, and Waukesha Counties; *School Section Bluff*, Dane County; and *School Section Road*, Waupaca and Walworth Counties.

As roads were laid out, they often followed section lines, and equal amounts of land for the rights of way were taken from each section. The

numerous right angle turns common to many of Wisconsin's rural roads even today is a legacy of this practice. Other remnants are the numerous roads with names like *The Section Line Road,* Florence County; *Section Line Road*, Outagamie and Iowa Counties; *West Line Road*, Brown County; and so forth. The Act of 1804 authorized the sale of public lands in quarter sections and made the term quarter section an important part of the rural lexicon. *Quarter Line Road* in Oconto, Forest, and Door Counties and *Quarterline Road* in Waupaca County are examples of toponyms formed from this term.

Lakes were not the only features named for their location within a section. Among the features named for the section in which they occur are *Section One Road*, Jackson County; *Section 20 Church*, Sawyer County; and *Lake Five School*, Waukesha County. The names *Middle Lane* in Clark County, *Center Road*, Shawano County, and *Section Road* in Waukesha County are all derived from their locations in the middle of sections.

Since many transportation routes follow lines of the Township and Range Survey, it is not surprising that the names of roads make up the largest category of toponyms derived from this survey system (Fig. 5). Hydrographic features were the next most common items to be named for some element of the Public Land Survey. While lakes constituted the single most common feature within this category, other features can be found. Examples include creeks: *Section 20 Creek*, Sawyer County; ditches: *Township Ditch*, Winnebago County; reservoirs: *Townline Reservoir*, Marathon County; and flowages: *Rangeline Flowage*, Marathon County. Few names of terrain features originated from the Survey. Research disclosed only *School Section Hollow* in Richland county, *Section Hollow* in Richland County, *School Section Bluff* in Dane County, and *Townline Bluff* in Juneau County.

Besides roads, relatively few cultural features were named for characteristics of the Township and Range System. These include a few schools (*Section Ten School*, Barron County; *School No. 28*, Pierce County; *Lake Five School*, Waukesha County), a church (*Section Eight Church*, Marinette County), a small number of populated places (*Range*, Polk County; *Rangeline*, Manitowoc County; *Center*, Rock County; *Lake Five*, Waukesha County; *Northline*, St. Croix County), and at least two cemeteries (*Townline Cemetery*, Dodge and Waupaca Counties).

At first glance, the distribution of placenames derived from elements of the T. and R. System appears without reason. Some tentative statements, however, are possible. Placenames derived from the Public Land Survey are

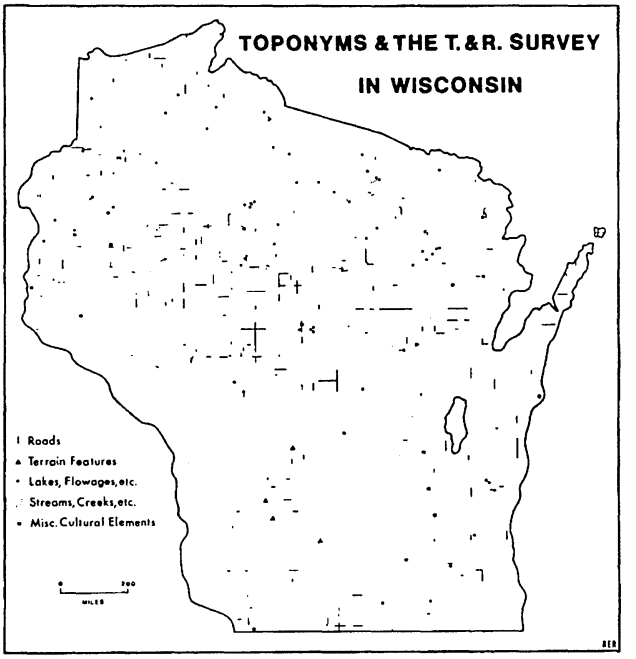

Fig. 5. Toponyms and the Township and Range Survey in Wisconsin.

relatively meager in southwestern Wisconsin (Western Uplands). Here, because of the nature of the terrain, the roads did not commonly follow range lines, township lines, or section lines, and the area contained relatively few natural lakes. The northern half of the state was just the opposite in both respects, and T. and R. – derived placenames are much more common. The northern portion of the state, too, contained large areas of national, state, and county forest where government personnel familiar with the Public Land Survey probably named many of the features. One fairly large area of northeastern Wisconsin completely lacks any names originating from the Township and Range Survey. The Menominee Indian Reservation, in fact, has a relatively sparse placename cover, and the few names present are largely Indian in origin or remnants of the lumber era.

The time of settlement, too, undoubtedly played some role. The southwestern and southeastern parts of the state were settled earliest, some areas even before the land was surveyed and legally open to settlement. These areas of the state, likewise, have traditionally had a higher population density and a greater number of economic and cultural groups to provide a source of names.

The effect of the T. and R. system on placenames does not approach its influences on other cultural features like political boundaries, transportation routes, field patterns, and street patterns in Wisconsin. Whether this holds true for other areas surveyed by the T. and R. remains to be seen, though it seems likely. Regardless, the Township and Range Survey did have an effect on toponymy and helps explain the origin of names not only in Wisconsin but undoubtedly wherever this survey system was employed.

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Notes

1. See Johnson for a good historical overview of this system, especially in the Upper Midwest. Other sources include Carstensen, Marschner, Pattison, and Thrower.

2. Ongoing efforts by the U. S. Geological Survey to enter all placenames in the United States into a centralized data base are making the search for names much easier. Phase I of the Geological Names Information System is available for all states. Phase II is in progress. For further information on this project, write to Manager, GNIS, U. S. Geological Survey, National Center 523, Reston, VA 22092; Tel: (703) 648-4000.

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