

CHASTAIN-SKILLMAN, INC., FIFTY-SEVEN YEARS OF SURVEYING IN THE STATE OF FLORIDA AND HOW IT AFFECTS YOU, THE LANDOWNER

By Denis R. Pearson, PSM



Imagine it is 1824 at the General Land Office in Washington. On July 9, General Andrew Jackson makes a request to President James Monroe that you be appointed Surveyor of the Public Lands of Florida. You will become the first Surveyor General of the State of Florida. Your name is Colonel Robert Butler. William P. Duval was the appointed territorial Governor of Florida and George Graham was the Commissioner of the General Land Office in Washington. On July 10, George Graham would notify Governor Duval of the appointment. Your task will be to divide the State of Florida into Townships, six miles by six miles square, then divide each Township into thirty-six Sections, one mile by one mile square. This task, with today's technology and access by highways, streets, roads, etc., would be an enormous task and could take months or years to complete. In 1824, with the equipment of that era, and Florida being a vast and wild wilderness, it is hard to imagine a task of that magnitude. Keep in mind Florida was bounded by clear blue oceans and had clear springs, rivers, streams and lakes. The wildlife and plant life was extremely plentiful and not easy to enter, and the majority of the land was populated by Seminole Indians. Some of the early field notes from this era close with the following entries: "injuns and alligators too bad, we quit". This was to inform the Surveyor General that the Deputy Surveyor did not complete this portion of the survey and it was properly noted in the field notes why. Florida was an extremely exquisite area to behold but it was a very hostile environment in many ways.

Settlers were moving in and clearing land prior to the survey taking place, so Colonel Butler was under extreme pressure to get this started, and completed, as soon as possible. Lt. Governor Walton, in the absence of Governor Duval, instructed Colonel Butler to establish an Initial Point so the Capitol Building would be in the center of the first quarter section to the northwest. The quarter section to the northwest had been granted by the United States Government, as the seat of Government. The Initial Point is also known today as The Tallahassee Base, The Guide Meridian Marker, and The 0 Marker. It can be found just south of Gains Street and just west of Bloxham Street in Tallahassee, Florida. Colonel Butler appointed his most skillful surveyors to run the Tallahassee Base Line, west to the Perdido River. This task was completed by Benjamin Clements and James Exum, appointed by Colonel Butler. Colonel Butler received instructions to survey twenty townships in the vicinity of Tallahassee. Equivalent to 460,800 acres, this is an extreme task, even with today's technology. Colonel Robert Butler appointed Deputy Surveyors, as required, to expedite the subdivision of the Public Lands of Florida into Townships and Sections. These original surveys set up the surveying and identification system we use today: Section, Township and Range. This system is used in Florida and most of the United States.

In the late 1800's and early 1900's, the survey of the Public Lands of Florida was continued by several surveyors. The objective was to complete the subdividing and ensure the integrity of the original surveys of the Public Lands of Florida. As Florida continued to develop, the destruction of the original General Land Office corners was inevitable. The original monuments, in most cases, have been destroyed by the development of subdivisions, highways, streets, roads, etc. The destruction of historical and critical monuments continues today. Although it is illegal, the law is not enforced. As a landowner, the preservation of these and all monuments is essential to establish boundary lines. The continued destruction of the original corners and their accessories makes it harder for the surveyor to determine the correct boundary lines.

At Chastain-Skillman, the records of the past are preserved in what we, the Survey Department, call section, plat and project files. We are in the process of scanning this information and ensuring the integrity of the files for future use. These files include old government notes, old maps from the mining companies, old surveys performed by this firm from 1950 to 2007, old section breakdowns of areas with original section corners located and mapped, and a vast amount of information that can be reproduced in the field and staked by the field crews. This enables our surveyors to reproduce, on the ground, section and boundary corners that could otherwise be considered obliterated. As a landowner, this is beneficial in several ways: establishing the correct boundary line, locating or replacing lost corners, and resolving boundary disputes.

The Survey Department of Chastain-Skillman's Lakeland office consists of three Professional Surveyors and Mappers: Robert F. DuBois (Director of Survey, with over 21 years of survey experience), John Richard Noland, Jr. (Senior Project Manager, with over 19 years of survey experience), and Denis R. Pearson (Project Manager, with over 35 years of survey experience). Each Professional Surveyor and Mapper has assistant project managers with several years of field and office experience. The survey department has three CAD technicians and a senior CAD technician that oversees the CAD work. The senior CAD technician, Harry Greives, Jr., has 9 years of field surveying experience and over 11 years of CAD experience. We have five to eight field crews in the field, on any given day, depending on the projects scheduled. The field crews all have access to and knowledge of Global Positioning System, (GPS) - RTK network, the latest data collection equipment available and the latest CAD programs. In short, we keep abreast of the latest technology; have one of the best, if not the best, office support teams in the State of Florida, and continue in the tradition of the original surveyors. We do our best to ensure the integrity of all existing and new survey monuments set by others or this firm.

In 1950, one hundred and twenty-six years, after Colonel Butler started his division of the Florida Public Lands, Chastain-Skillman, Inc. was founded. Chastain-Skillman's records date back fifty-seven years, along with records received in the 1950's that date back even further. This vast supply of information is extremely important to the preservation of the land boundary lines, and essential to you as a landowner.

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