

THE SURVEY AND SALE OF THE  
PUBLIC LAND IN MICHIGAN,  
1815-1862

A Thesis

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insufficient to suspend the work.<sup>1</sup> In October, Parke acknowledged Williams' instructions to complete his contract.<sup>2</sup> In the same letter, Parke also mentioned that he would finish the work of Clark and Thomas. The preceding spring as the surveyors journeyed from the woods, Clark had remarked, "Parke, if we are ordered to complete our work you must finish mine for I would rather lose all that I have done than return here."<sup>3</sup> Clark was sincere for he never made another attempt to finish the work he had begun. Only Parke and Christmas were willing to try it again.

As these two men traveled to their work in the fall, Christmas suggested to Parke that he be allowed to help Parke with the two unfinished contracts of Clark and Thomas; otherwise Christmas believed he would lose money on the job. Christmas was quite optimistic at that time upon the prospects of finishing the surveys.<sup>4</sup> A short time later, however, he sent a note to Parke in which Christmas offered to sell his contract, and he asked what Parke would give for it. Parke replied that he would give nothing for he couldn't possibly do the work.<sup>5</sup>

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1. Elijah Hayward to Micajah T. Williams, August 30, 1831, in Ibid., p. 314.

2. Hervey Parke to Micajah T. Williams, October 7, 1831, in Ibid., p. 354.

3. Parke, "Reminiscences," in op. cit., pp. 583-584.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

In a few days, Christmas renewed his plea for help in fulfilling his contract. He must have been on the verge of a breakdown for Parke described him as "broken down, discouraged, and sick of the woods, to the shedding of tears as he was pleading for assistance."<sup>1</sup> Parke reluctantly agreed to finish the contract and Christmas immediately left the woods. Eventually, after much suffering, Parke finished the entire job, but it required much more time than usual for such work. The following year Parke received a letter from Christmas which stated that he had lost ninety dollars on his contract.<sup>2</sup>

That experience should have afforded the surveyor general and the Commissioner of the General Land Office some idea of what to expect as the surveys moved northward, but they never fully utilized the information. After the Treaty of Washington in 1836 and the beginning of surveys to the north, instead of allowing more time and adequate compensation, the government attempted to push the surveys at the lowest possible cost and with the greatest possible speed. The results, of course, were disastrous for most of the work had to be resurveyed at a later date.

Although the work completed from 1837-1840 was of the poorest quality of any that was ever done in Michigan,

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1. Parke, "Reminiscences," in op. cit., pp. 583-584.

2. Ibid.

complaints about the surveys began almost as soon as they were started.<sup>1</sup> In 1830, the residents of Oakland County bitterly protested in a memorial to Congress that the surveys in that county were so inaccurate that they were useless. The memorialists attributed the deficient survey to the opinion of the country that was held by the surveyor who did the work [Joseph Wampler]. He believed that the country would not be settled before the ravages of time erased the marks of the survey; therefore, he believed there was little point in wasting time by running a good survey, and he had acted upon that belief.<sup>2</sup>

The poor quality of the surveys was also one reason advanced to have Michigan set off as a separate surveying district.<sup>3</sup>

Undoubtedly, the belief that the country would never be settled caused many surveyors to perform their duties improperly. Especially was that true in the area north of the Grand River, for most of the country was one vast region of swamps, lakes, and dense forests; a country that had no value when measured by the agricultural

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1. For example see the letters of Lewis Cass to Edward Tiffin, August 15, 1822, and George Graham to Edward Tiffin, January 31, 1826, in Carter, op. cit., XI, 259 and 939-940.
  2. "Memorial to Congress from Citizens of Oakland County" in Carter, op. cit., XII, 114-115.
  3. See infra, Chapter III, "The Office of the Surveyor General."

standards of the day. Not until several years later was the value of the timber recognized.

In addition to the apparent worthlessness of the land, the region was also extremely difficult to survey. The surveyors could not choose their own path, but they had to follow instead the line set by their compasses and by government regulations no matter where it led. In such a country they might spend a day running a mile of survey.<sup>1</sup> The task would have appeared ludicrous to the surveyors if their situation had not been so desperate. Small wonder then that they became discouraged in that northern area.

A large part of the blame for the defective surveys can be attributed, however, to the government's policy of contracting the work at a set price no matter what the conditions were under which the work had to be done. Although the government changed the rates occasionally, it was usually retrospectively after the harm had been done and not in anticipation of expected difficulties. In 1837 the rate was four dollars per mile for the running of township lines and \$2.75 per mile for the

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1. For a description of the procedure a surveyor had to follow in running the surveys see C. S. Woodward, "The Public Domain, Its Surveys and Surveyors," in M.P.H.C., XXVII, 306-323; and Lowell O. Stewart, Public Land Surveys, (Ames, Iowa, 1935), pp. 91-118.

running of section lines;<sup>1</sup> an amount that was insufficient for under the contract system the surveyor was responsible for all costs connected with the work. That meant that he had to pay the wages of his helpers, pay all transportation costs, and also supply food for the entire party. In addition, the contract was on a time basis.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, the work had to progress smoothly and rapidly without too much delay if the surveyor were to complete his contract and make a profit from his work. In the country north of the Grand River it became increasingly difficult to do so. That difficulty is illustrated in a letter to the surveyor general from one of the surveyors, William Sullivan, who was working in the region some twenty miles north of Ionia:

The country in which it is my lot to operate is so swampy and destitute of suitable vegetation that my horses have literally starved to death. Myself and men have sickness from constant exposure in the mud and water, on which account the men have all left me. Money will not tempt another man to engage with me at present. When it freezes I think I can get another company somewhat South to help me through...It takes so much longer to survey a section than in ordinary land that I am of [the] opinion that I shall be a considerable loser [sic]. \$4 per mile would hardly pay for surveying this land. If I become a bankrupt I cannot help it: my intentions are good.<sup>3</sup>

1. Annual Report, Commissioner of the General Land Office, 1837, Sen. Ex. Doc., 25 Cong., 2 Sess., Doc. 11, p. 44.

2. Stewart, op. cit., p. 62.

3. William Sullivan to Robert T. Lytle, September 17, 1837, GLO: Let. Rec'd. by the Sur. Gen., XXIII, 1837, N.A.

The next month he asked for an advance in pay in order to settle his debts if he were to continue the work. He declared, "If you don't I will be a 'Goner' and the fellows will pounce on me like the devil on a Sinner."<sup>1</sup>

Another surveyor in sending some completed work to the surveyor general remarked in an accompanying letter:

The township last surveyed was worse surveying than those the notes of which I forwarded, and having taken a small peep into the one I will commence next, I have reason to believe it worse than any yet, or worse than any I have attempted to survey; and Town 12 & 13 [North] R 6 [West] from appearance are truly appalling; [if] I will survey this Township be pleased to say to me one of two things that you will give me a sufficient compensation to remunerate me or leave to quit the contract. If one or the other is not done, I must say that my means are inadequate to finish. Such a bad contract I am convinced you never let out...no man can do this contract for the money...and I may as well lose money one way as another. And from what I have seen as well as information of those who have been threw [sic] the remaining Townships are worse than what I have done. I will finish this and quit unless I can be better paid. I have used every industry and Economy yet my present experience exceeds the amount of what I have done more than one hundred dollars...here I am placed on the divide between lakes, with ponds, swamps and a growth of Pine, Cedar, Hemlock exceeding anything I have ever seen...it is almost impossible [to move] and it took a full half day to get three miles.<sup>2</sup>

These letters are typical of many received by the surveyor general in those years. Despite the recommendation of the surveyor general in 1837 that the surveying

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1. William Sullivan to Robert T. Lytle, October 20, 1837, in Ibid.
  2. John Melroy to Robert T. Lytle, November 15, 1837, in Ibid.