
This is a thought provoking book. Its author, a native of Germany, notes how shocked she was when she first perceived the landscape upon her arrival in the American Middle West. Her reaction was that the “small towns were ugly and uninteresting, and the rural landscape was appallingly monotonic” (p. [ii]). In time she realized that the rectangular pattern for surveying land, established by the Land Ordinance of 1785 and subsequent enactments, constituted “a basic formative influence on the American landscape” (p. [iii]). Johnson later concluded that most Americans and Canadians accept this survey system “as natural, inevitable, or perhaps in some inscrutable way, divinely ordained” (p. [i]). The author focuses on the result of this rectangular survey in what she calls the upper Mississippi Hill Country (portions of Illinois, Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota).

Order Upon the Land presents an informative account of the development of the rectangular system by which the bulk of the land of the United States was surveyed. Attention is given to terms of sale, but the emphasis is on how the surveying was done and its impact upon natural and environmental features and influences. Johnson concludes that towns, farms, and roads have generally conformed more to base and meridian lines, and the endless congressional townships cut therefrom, than to hills, lakes, rivers, and other natural features. The resulting landscape pattern, especially discernable when flown over on a clear night, reflects the basic rectangular or grid system established by the original federal survey. Johnson offers useful pictures and maps which illustrate ways in which this survey has modified the natural landscape pattern.

Johnson is correct in thinking that Americans should give more attention to protecting and preserving the natural landscape. Although not created in heaven, the rectangular survey system, however, should not be confined to purgatory to do penance without a full awareness of its contributions and an equally full consideration of its alternatives. It has
contributed immensely to the development of the American economy and to the reduction of disputes about land titles. Although the system has large room for improvement, much of the beauty of the American landscape remains, and resourceful innovations can make the rectangular survey increasingly compatible with the natural landscape when such is feasible and desirable.

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_Acres for Cents: Delinquent Tax Auctions in Frontier Iowa._


Why had no monograph been done on late nineteenth century delinquent tax auctions when the folklore view was that “tax liens were an instrument of war against speculators”? Swierenga answers that question indirectly in this book, which required numerous assistants to ferret out the diverse and almost inaccessible data, the use of computer programmers from three institutions, and a narrative that accounts for only 103 pages of the work. Notes cover almost half as many pages, and figures, tables, and appendixes bulk more than the narrative itself.

In Iowa, Swierenga finds that his preconceptions were not supported by available fact. The last four decades of the nineteenth century saw county treasurers auctioning off more than two hundred thousand tax liens, producing overall about 2 percent of the total taxes. This study, which concentrated on rural tax liens, shows that the tax buyers operated primarily as “a moneylending operation; they ‘stood in’ for delinquent property owners at the treasurer’s pay window” (p. 17). Tax title was based on state law and not on common law, and tax buyers were attracted by as much as 40 percent return from their investment. Their action was described as a government managed loan agency for the benefit of local farmers. Their intent was not to acquire the land but to reap the higher than legal rate of interest permitted on tax liens.

In view of the critical comment found in many contemporary accounts about the tax buyers, the collective bi-