

THE American Surveyor

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Measure, Mark, Inventory and Pattern:

Public Art Meets the PLSS

>> By Karla Powell and Tim Kent, LS

In 1996, when artist Jerry Mayer was awarded the commission to create a public art exhibit alongside a new community policing center slated for development, his concept for the piece was still jelling. He began to research the history of this Portland, Oregon, area once called Russellville (now known as Mill Park) and learned of nearby Baseline Road along with its point of origin—the Willamette Stone Meridian (see sidebar). Intrigued with the idea of “invisible” lines that spanned south to the California border and north to Canada, Mayer also visualized an axis that extended west to the Pacific and east to the Idaho border. To learn more he called on the Bureau of

Land Management’s Oregon State Office.

There, former Branch Chief Wayne M. (Mike) Gardner and longtime cadastral surveyor Al White educated Mayer on the whys and wherefores of these “invisible” lines. Mayer felt honored to be introduced to this field of work, in which he sensed the mystique of a “secret society.” With White’s assistance, he soon deciphered and decoded the original survey notes of William Ives.

Mayer became further intrigued with how the land changed over time, “becoming smaller as it was subdivided.” Thus inspired by the measuring, marking, inventorying and patterning of the surrounding land and its uses since 1851,

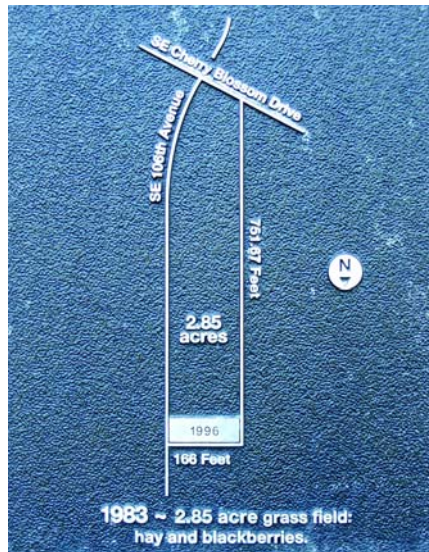
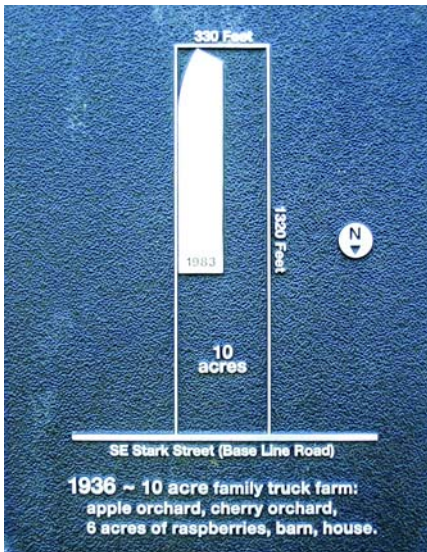
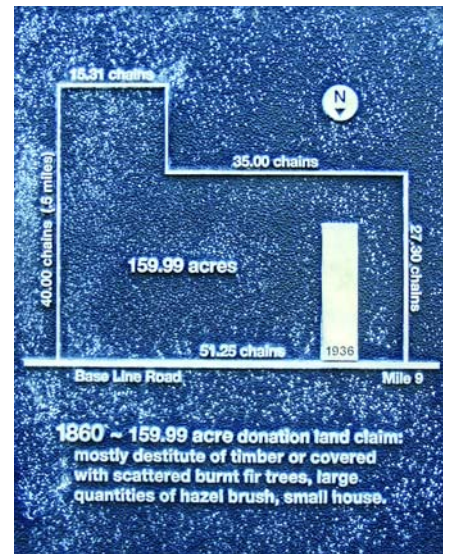
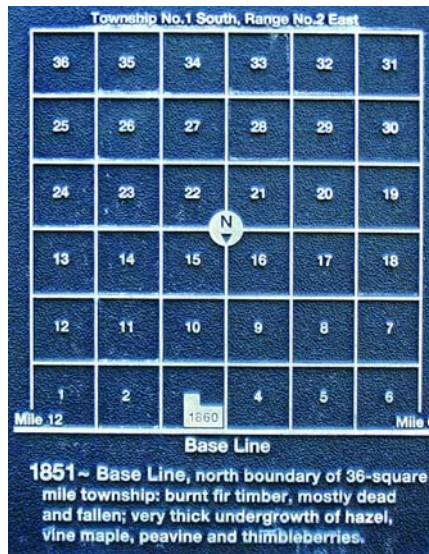
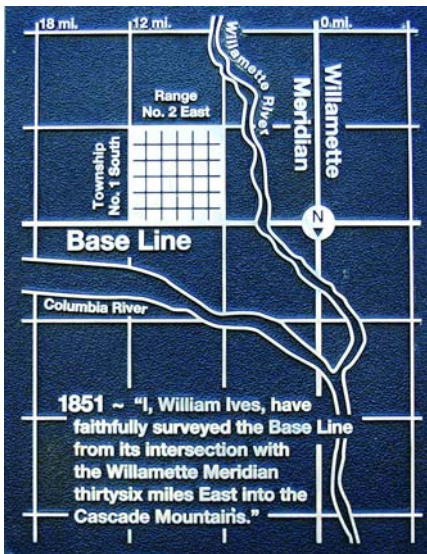




Above: Artist Jerry Mayer

Left: Brass caps designed by school children





MEASURE, MARK, INVENTORY AND PATTERN
1996

The design of this public plaza is inspired by the measuring, marking, inventorying and patterning of the surrounding land and its uses since 1851.

The brass marker images are original creations by Floyd Light Middle School art students Jon Brown, Bruce Cunningham, Alex Finnikov, Jenine Marriot, Matt Matthias, Anghéla Pavlenko, Mike Ruffell, Amber Stout and Sath Yang.

The artist's collaboration and artwork in this plaza is funded by the City of Portland's Percent for Art Program, administered by the Regional Arts & Culture Council.

Jerry Mayer, Artist
Mayer/Reed Landscape Architects
Group MacKenzie Architects

he set about to create the public artwork—appropriately entitled *Measure, Mark, Inventory and Pattern*.

Awarded a One Percent for Art commission by the Regional Arts and Culture Commission, Mayer joined forces with the Mayer Reed landscape architecture firm (no relation), whose landscape design emulated the grid-like nature of the site's prior cherry orchard.

Now schooled in the time-honored methods of cadastral surveying, the artist's own overriding concept dovetailed nicely with Mayer Reed's spatial layout. Their dialogue resulted in both landscaping and walkway purposefully arranged as a gridwork. Since the contractors would on occasion stray a foot or two from the envisioned pattern, a bit of vigilance was required during

Starting at the top and moving left to right, this series of six plaques traces the evolution of the land on which the park sits.





Stark Street Story Baseline Road's Beginnings

When artist Jerry Mayer began to research the area commemorated in *Measure, Mark, Inventory and Pattern*, he was introduced to Howard Horner, former superintendent of David Douglas School District. Horner and his wife Grace had avidly documented the former Russellville and its settlers, some of whom tilled the very land where Mayer's piece now stands.

When those settlers petitioned the county commissioner in 1854 for a third road on Portland's present-day eastside, there was still wilderness with virgin forest. On a clearing where one Oregon pioneer had been buried stood a solitary tree. Thus began Lone Fir Cemetery—Portland's oldest—whose retaining wall still houses an obscure milestone meant to guide intrepid travelers along their newly built thoroughfare. Baseline Road, staked along the lines of William Ives' survey baseline, remained a daunting

installation. With his newfound appreciation of cadastral surveying, such precision mattered to Mayer.

Just as survey grids represent intersections of time and place in our nation's history, Mayer also intersected communities and lives in the creation of this project. He even spanned the generations. A book on Russellville's past led him to interview Marjorie Hadley

destination for those who ventured from their westward hub across the Willamette. To reach it required first a ferry ride to the river's eastern bank, then a further trek by trestle. Then, for 15 solid miles obelisks marked the way.

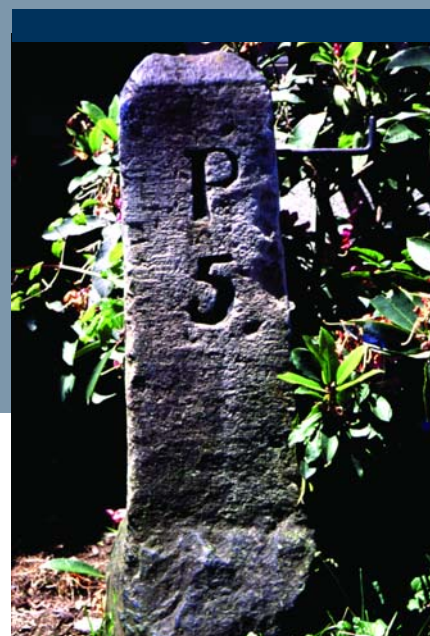
Today's urban pioneers have rescued from obscurity nine of the original 15 obelisks and secured them in (or near) their rightful place. Through the efforts of history buffs like the Horners—and other enthusiasts who patrol what is now SE Stark Street to monitor the welfare of these old stone monuments—their fate is more treasured now than sealed. With some mileposts literally unearthed from landfills, or snatched from a bulldozer's burial, they now reclaim their historical significance to the early Baseline Road.

To further appreciate this road—and its relation to the initial survey point of Willamette Stone Meridian—interested parties may turn to the Cadastral Survey Office of BLM Oregon and Washington. "With Ives' baseline survey completed in 1851, the Oregon Country settlers had his already identified lines to follow in creating a road that offered a straight line of passage through their growing town, linking west to east across the river. These milestone markers were an added benefit for those who made the journey. They were like beacons for them to follow as the area expanded beyond the initial point

at the Willamette Stone," says Tim Kent, Cadastral Survey Section Chief of BLM Oregon and Washington.

From the Willamette Meridian, the survey baseline runs west to the Pacific Ocean and east to Idaho. Despite many setbacks the proficient Ives and his men did "some of their best work here in Oregon," says C. Albert White in his exhaustive reference, *Initial Points of the Rectangular Survey System*. Under White's painstaking care, these surveyors' original field notes are well documented.

No one knows exactly who set the 500-pound, 36-inch, carved basalt obelisks at every mile of Baseline Road. In *Measure, Mark, Inventory and Pattern*, Mayer pays homage to efforts both chronicled and unidentified, giving visitors an opportunity to see far beyond the measured tract.



One of the original three-foot milestone markers along what began as Baseline Road in 1854.





Mayer strategically grouped columnar basalt on the ground to represent fallen trees after a burn. Newly planted linden trees represent new growth over time.

corner of the world. The result was a number of imaginative renderings, among which he then selected ten to reproduce on the monument markers strategically embedded throughout the concrete path.

To devise a way to imprint the 7th graders' one-dimensional drawings onto the 3" diameter of the slightly domed monument caps, Mayer turned to Dick Hofland of Hofland Survey Monuments. Because the caps would be observed from an average sight distance of five feet, he selected those drawings that could be reduced and engraved in bronze without altering too much of their original concept.

In fact, Mayer did encourage the youngsters to conceptualize this project in both the concrete and the abstract. "I told them stories of David Douglas and showed them William Ives' original survey notes," he recalls, "and of Baseline Road, from which all this measurement came, right down to their present-day homes." He encouraged them to think beyond what was there now and imagine changes in the land.

The result, in Hofland's opinion, "is public art in the true sense of the word. What was in the heads and hands of

these kids became permanent through this public space. Jerry has told the story so that people can understand how this piece of property developed over time."

Once the engraving process began, Hofland rendered each noun—Measure, Mark, Inventory, and Pattern—in an elegant script. The remaining monument etchings are the students' own expressions of those words. One student drew a compass rose, cherry orchards and creative depiction of Baseline Road. Another created a Douglas fir alongside a Baseline Road obelisk, encircled by the bold initials of botanical explorer David Douglas. Yet another portrayed the frequent timber burns by sketching a tree on fire. Next to that are the grids and math symbols that caught one middle-schooler's attention. In short, various visions of both surveying tools and nature's events mark the contributions made by these youngsters to Mayer's project.

To realize the effect of fallen trees after a burn, Mayer strategically grouped columnar basalt on the ground, which he had obtained while scrambling throughout the former Interstate Rock facility in Vancouver, Washington. The landscaper's newly

planted linden trees lie strategically near the basalt "models" representing new growth over time. Vegetation regrowth is also evoked by Mayer's selection of a seeded grass mix called Fleur de Lawn. This low-maintenance grass bed is drought resistant and brings forth myriad wildflowers.

At night each of the six plaques adorning the north wall of the community center is illuminated from below by recessed lighting. "I wanted it to be dramatic," says Mayer. His intent was to create an atmosphere of "mystery, even in daytime, a quiet and peaceful public space where passersby might reflect on its inventory of changes over time."

Each plaque uniquely projects chronological stages of the land as it was used. Beginning with William Ives' original cadastral survey, Mayer designed cast aluminum reliefs to depict the transformation of the next parcel. With true north as a recurring motif on each plaque, they tell the story of how the land was transformed over time.

Passersby take note. "I often see people methodically reading the plaques," comments Richard Bixby, current director of the East Portland Neighborhood Office that is part of the attached community center." Teacher Luce Prats remarked, "Jerry pulled in a lot of different elements to create a frame of reference [for her students] and worked with them one-on-one." The result was an "authentic learning experience," which enabled them to make a connection between what they produced and its place in community.

Creative connections are part and parcel of *Measure, Mark, Inventory and Pattern*. By extrapolating on the process begun in 1851 by William Ives, Mayer has taken cadastral surveying beyond mere mechanics to encompass history, community, and sense of place. *A*

Karla Powell is a freelance writer based in Portland, Oregon.

Tim Kent is the Cadastral Survey Section Chief for the BLM Oregon State Office in Portland. The Baseline Road obelisks are one of his long-standing research projects. (See "Romancing the Stone at Willamette Meridian" in the May 2005 issue.) Kent was first introduced to the East Precinct site by Dick Hofland.