CULTURAL HISTORY

The Texas version of the U. S. Public Land Survey System

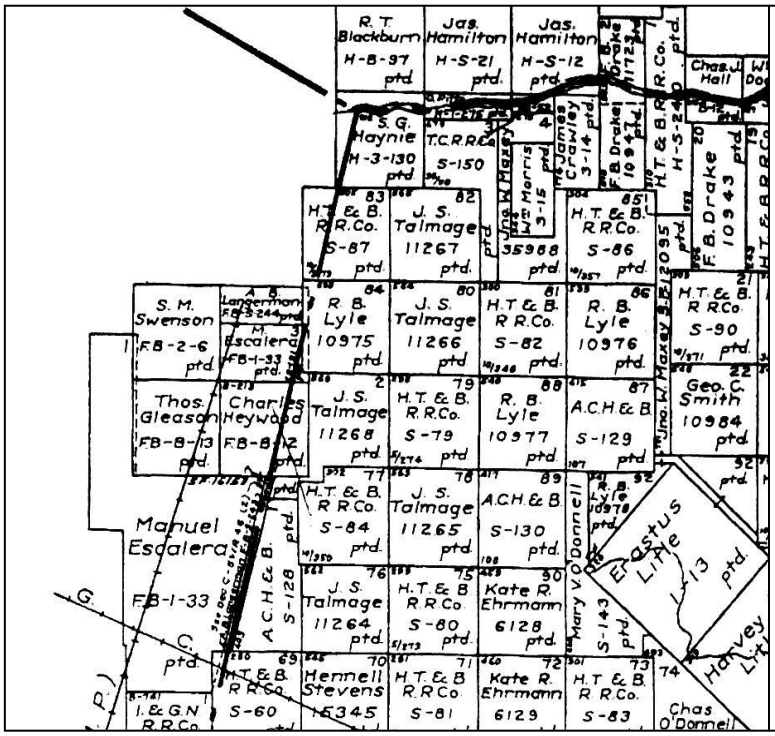
By Neal McLain

Texas is not a Public Land State as that term is used in the United States Public Lands Survey System. The public lands in the 30 Public Lands States were owned by the United States Government, but Texas retained ownership of its public lands even after annexation to the United States.

Nevertheless, Texas adopted a similar measuring system for lands that had not been surveyed as Empresario Grants. Even before statehood, while Texas was still a Republic, it had abandoned the old Spanish and Mexican system of measurement, with its varas, leagues, and labóres, and began using the English system of feet, miles, and acres. When lands were subdivided for sale, they were often sold in 640-acre (one square mile) parcels. Subsequent owners resold them in smaller parcels, often in 40-acre pieces.

During the mid-1800s, railroad companies were building railroads throughout Texas. To encourage railroad construction the state government issued charters that included grants of land. An 1852 charter called for a land grant of eight sections of land for each mile of railroad. A general land grant law was passed in 1854 that authorized sixteen sections per mile.

Here in Brazoria County, a major landowner was the Houston Tap and Brazoria Railway Company, chartered in 1856 to build a railroad from Houston to Columbia (now East Columbia). Under its charter it received some 500,000 acres from the State and held them for resale. These parcels are evident today as one-square-mile parcels scattered throughout the northern part of the county. A detail view of the Texas General Land Office map of the original surveys shows numerous 640-acre parcels marked "H.T.&.B.R.R.Co."



Brazoria County Map of Original Land Surveys (detail)

Texas General Land Office, Austin, Texas, August 1947. Printed March 2003. [16]