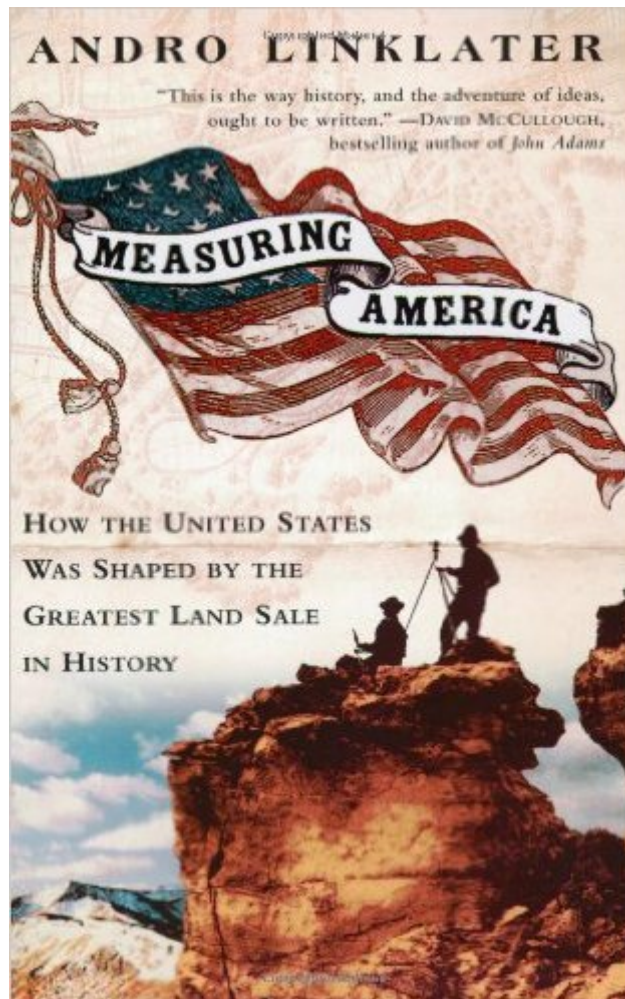


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Measuring America: How The United States Was Shaped By The Greatest Land Sale In History



Synopsis

In 1790, America was in enormous debt, having depleted what little money and supplies the country had during its victorious fight for independence. Before the nation's greatest asset, the land west of the Ohio River, could be sold it had to be measured out and mapped. And before that could be done, a uniform set of measurements had to be chosen for the new republic out of the morass of roughly 100,000 different units that were in use in daily life. *Measuring America* tells the fascinating story of how we ultimately gained the American Customary System—the last traditional system in the world—and how one man's surveying chain indelibly imprinted its dimensions on the land, on cities, and on our culture from coast to coast.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The subtitle of this highly readable book is a bit purple -- "How an Untamed Wilderness Shaped the United States and Fulfilled the Promise of Democracy" -- but what the author has to say makes a good case. It's also an amazingly action-packed adventure story. Any genealogist learns early the practical ins and outs of frontier settlement and the titles, grants, and other documents that land claims inevitably produce. In this country, there are two distinct methods of recording those claims: "metes and bounds" in the original colonies and some of their western lands (such as Kentucky) and in Texas, which describe the boundaries of one's land in terms of the points at which it adjoins or "meets" a neighbor's land, and the rectangular survey system developed for use in the public land states created from the nation's later territorial acquisitions. The latter is far more rational and allows

a claim to be filed based on geographical location without having actually set foot on the land -- but it also requires preliminary measurement by a party of government surveyors. Linklater lays out in much detail, and with colorful anecdotes, how the first surveys were decided upon and carried out (more or less) in the Northwest Territory, and later in the Plains states and the West. He describes how, thanks to the efforts of Thomas Jefferson, the U.S. nearly adopted a rational metric system early in its history (which in France and Prussia was an instrument of centralized government policy), and how that goal was waylaid by clinging to Edmund Gunter's English chain/furlong system, which had the virtue of being easily understood by semi-literate surveyors with minimal mathematical skills.

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