

Reading and Understanding Deeds

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SEARCHING FOR DEEDS – County Clerk's Office

- Computerized Search

Some Counties now have computerized search options. Check with your County Clerk for details.

In Tompkins County, we can search by Case Name, Case Number, Tax ID number, Name or Address to find Deed Instrument Number or Deed Book (Liber) and Page. We can then view scanned deeds, zoom in to read them, and/or print them, and/or e-mail them to ourselves. Contact the County Clerk or the Cayuga Heights History Project to help get you started. *Be sure to Log Out when done.*

- Manual Search

For early deeds, and for those that have not been indexed, you will have to use Grantee (Buyer) and Grantor (Seller) Indexes. These are generally organized by Town, with several volumes to cover the various years. Listings within each volume are arranged alphabetically by last name as well as chronologically by year. Hardcopies of the deeds themselves are bound in large books filed in the Clerk's office. (In Ithaca, this is in the basement of the Tompkins County Courthouse, 320 N. Tioga St.)

INFORMATION CONTAINED IN DEEDS

- Description of Property – may or may not be included
- Date of Transaction
- Date Recorded
- Where Recorded – older deeds: Book and Page, newer deeds: Instrument Number
- Party of First Part (Seller)
Name, place of residence
- Party of Second Part (Buyer)
Name, place of residence
- Selling Price

May be mentioned in Deed. If not, can be calculated from Transfer Tax Paid:

Selling price = Tax Paid ÷ Tax Rate

Tax Rate in Tompkins County: (Note: Rate is different in each county, check with your Clerk)

\$1.10 per \$1000 until 4/30/1983

\$4.00 per \$1000 from 5/1/1983 to 11/31/2006

\$6.00 per \$1000 from 12/1/2006 to present

Example: The property that my house is built on was sold to my parents in 1954 (raw land). The deed shows \$6.05 in tax stamps. Thus,

Selling price = Tax Paid ÷ Tax Rate

Selling price = \$6.05 ÷ (1.10/1000) = \$5500

- Acreage

1 sq mile = 640 acres

1 acre = 4 roods = 10 sq chains = 160 sq rods = 43,560 sq ft

1 rood = 2½ sq chains = 40 sq rods = 10,890 sq ft = ¼ acre

1 sq chain = 4356 sq ft = 1/10 acre

1 sq rod = 1 perch = 1 pole = 272¼ sq ft = 1/160 acre

- Previous Transaction – may or may not be mentioned

- Metes and Bounds

Direction:

There are 60 minutes in a degree. Thus, S49°15'W means 49¼ degrees west of due south. See protractor below. Errors in direction are often off by 180 degrees. Thus, N36°W is reported as S36°E.

- True North vs magnetic North. See below.

Declination has changed some during the past 200 years, but has generally been 10 to 15 degrees:

- Magnetic north is 10 - 15 degrees to the west of true north (in Tompkins County)
- True north is 10 - 15 degrees to the east of magnetic north (in Tompkins County)

Directions may have been copied from a previous deed, or may be from a survey made at the time of sale, or a confusing mix of both. Most deeds (and maps) that include directions fail to indicate whether they are using true north or magnetic north. Some deeds include a mix of both.

Distance:

1 chain = 100 links = 4 rods = 66 ft

1 rod = 1 perch = 1 pole = 16½ ft

1 link = 0.66 ft ≈ 8 inches

0.01 ft ≈ 1/8 inch

Referential Property Boundary Descriptions:

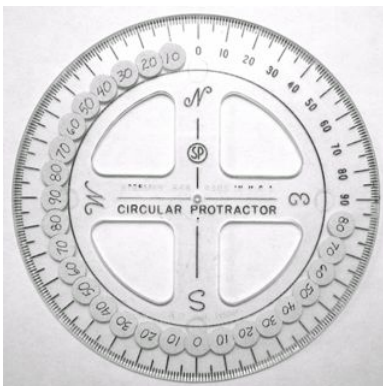
Example: Deed 6/459: "Bounded on the north by the School House Lot and land of said Cradit; East by Fall Creek; South by Henry Preswick's land; West by the highway running north and south"

- Other Information

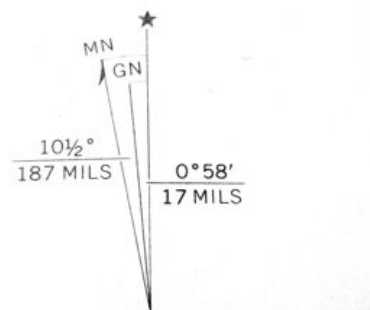
References to people (owners, adjoining property owners, etc), what is on property (houses, mills, etc), road names, community name, deed restrictions, etc

MAPPING DEEDS

- Fixed points aren't always fixed
 - Trees die
 - Road centerlines creep
 - Stream banks and centerlines can change abruptly
 - Street names and address numbers can change
- Distances measured in chains tend to be more accurate than those measured in rods
- Many counties had Atlas and Gazetteers published in mid- to late 1800s. These are generally old enough to show Military Lots (for those towns and counties in the Military Tract), Great Lots, Purchases, etc, but are new enough to show most current roads. This can help you locate a property.
- Aerial photos
 - Fencerows and hedgerows tend to be along property lines
- Tax maps (available through your County Assessor's office)
 - History of subdivision and consolidation



Protractor modified for use in mapping.



UTM GRID AND 1978 MAGNETIC NORTH DECLINATION AT CENTER OF SHEET

Declination, from the 1978 Ithaca East USGS topographic map.