

Creating a lasting legacy

"Florida Surveying and Mapping Society Endowment for Historic Maps and Surveys Preservation"

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Background

Over the last 20 years, many of the oldest and most respected surveying firms in Florida have disappeared – some by retirement or passing of the owner with no exit strategy and some by being bought out by larger, multidisciplinary firms. Their records were either put into storage and not fully integrated into the new firm, or else they may have been lost, discarded, or otherwise disposed of, whether through lack of storage space or a lack of understanding of their significance. The fact remains: these records are becoming increasingly difficult to find and use for the purpose of “following in the footsteps” of those who came before us.

Many individual surveyors and firms out there have a wealth of knowledge of the particular geographic area in which they work. Some have copies of surveys that they have used to perpetuate historical boundaries and solve boundary issues that date back to the early 20th century, and before. Some of those issues that, if one did not know existed, would cause one, as a Surveyor, to accidentally *create* problems that may affect private or public ownership even as one tried to solve them.

One would hope that, if asked by another professional, this historical information would be shared openly, insofar as wanting others to see how one made one’s decisions would result in an agreement with one’s results. While Surveyors in the Public sector do this as a matter of course, not everyone in the private sector has done so.

The goal of this proposal is to create a safe, accessible, and searchable repository for the historical survey records of those individual Florida Surveyors and Firms that came before us, creating a legacy honoring the surveyors whose footsteps we follow. This initiative, and the accompanying investment by FSMS, will help to initiate a process that will define how these records are collected, documented, and preserved for future generations.

Historical Records – Public Information

One of those Public Sector individuals who has been at the forefront of finding, collecting, documenting, and providing historical survey records to anyone in need is Howard Ehmke, PSM. Howard worked at South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) for 47 years before going into private practice. His tenacity and due diligence in finding historical and useful survey records goes back decades, and anyone would be hard-pressed to put a number to the individual surveyors he has helped with these records. For years, he has maintained a weblink called “Map of the Week” <http://www.mapoftheweek.net> where he collaborated with other Surveyors to exhibit important historical documents, anecdotes, or other Survey information.



Howard's work in this area encompassed his entire career in the public sector regardless of which agency he was working with (SFWMD, FDEP, ACOE, etc.). At SFWMD he put together a spreadsheet that has web-links to all of the Publicly available different R/W maps and surveys for all of the Districts Canals & Levees. He has also put in hundreds of hours of personal time into reviewing all of the CCRs in all of the Townships of Florida, diligently forwarding errors or missing data to Stephen Hodges at [FREAC - Florida Resources and Environmental Analysis Center - Geospatial Data Services](#) at Florida State University to update the Labins website data. Last (but certainly not least), he has collected several terabytes of public survey data across the state—organized by Section, Township, and Range—and will be donating that as a cornerstone of this initiative.

Like with Howard, all of the Public Agencies (FDOT, FDEP, Water Management Districts, County and City Surveyors, etc.) that we rely on for Survey information have historical survey data: it is just a matter of knowing who to contact and what data is available.

Once this initiative gets off the ground, it will be able to expand to reference other survey information sites as well. Through this initiative and the proposed investment by FSMS, via an endowment at the University of Florida Foundation, the hope is to provide a permanent, secure place to store the wealth of available knowledge pertinent to all of us in the Surveying profession and also enhance the Geomatics program at UF for the foreseeable future.

With the creation and upfront funding of this endowment, with members of FSMS on the Advisory Committee, and with definitive goals set for the endowment, we can get this started as soon as January of 2027, and it will be self-funding from then on, supported by the work of the new cadastral and boundary law faculty position's extension program for historic boundary surveys.

Background FSMS "Historic Survey Records – Working Group"

In 2024, at the Joint North Central Florida / UF Geomatics Student Association meeting, in a discussion with Marla Horn, a senior student in the Geomatics program, Brian Murphy proposed she create a GIS of Historical Surveys for her Senior project. Her project was successful; and despite the small sampling of historical documents it involved, her project helped to show the need for this Group.

Brian, together with assistant director for Geomatics extension Katie Britt at UF, proposed the idea of having this project hosted by UF, which then advanced further at the FSMS Strategic Planning Meeting in March 2026, on discussions with Howard and Rick Pryce to work together to promote this in FSMS.

The following FSMS Board meeting in May, the idea was brought up as New Business with a request to move forward. Many sidebar conversations about collecting, documenting, preserving, and accessing historic survey records followed and we created the Historic Survey Records Working Group within the "Florida Surveying and Mapping Society" (FSMS). The group has since been meeting virtually on a monthly basis, and over time it has grown in size to include additional stakeholders from both the public and private sector, and with a geographical range across the state. We looked at many different scenarios and the requirements that would be involved with this type of operation, including equipment (scanners, printers, etc.), computer software, storage and retrieval capabilities, staff and/or volunteers needed, and preliminary costs.

After much debate, our group submitted a proposal to FSMS to utilize a portion of the FSMS General Reserves account, which has grown considerably over the last two decades, to create a new Endowment at the University of Florida (UF), which would be used to support this critical mission. This step also involved collaborating with the UF/IFAS School of Forest, Fisheries, and Geomatic Sciences and the UF Foundation to assist in defining what was needed to create an endowment, how it would work and how the funds could be used.

On September 2nd, 2026, a Special Board Meeting was convened by Executive Director, Rebecca Porter and our current President, Brion Yancy, where we discussed the proposal with the entire Board and—after considerable discussion—the following motion was put before the Board.

“The Historic Survey Preservation Working Group of FSMS, led by Rick Pryce, Howard Ehmke and Brian Murphy, with the assistance of Katie Britt (UF/IFAS Geomatics Extension) is working closely with the University of Florida, to create a GIS enabled repository/library of old historic surveys and related data, which will be used for the benefit of the public. We are hereby requesting FSMS to fund \$316,000 to be contributed to the “Florida Surveying and Mapping Society Endowment for Historic Maps and Surveys Preservation” to be held and managed by the University of Florida Foundation. Spending for this endowment is directed by the UF School of Forest, Fisheries, and Geomatic Sciences which is advised and overseen by the UF Geomatics Program Advisory Committee, most of the members of which are also FSMS members. The proceeds of the \$316,000 will be earmarked to be used for the purposes of paying for ongoing part-time staff support and data hosting in support of the proposed Historic Survey Preservation effort.”

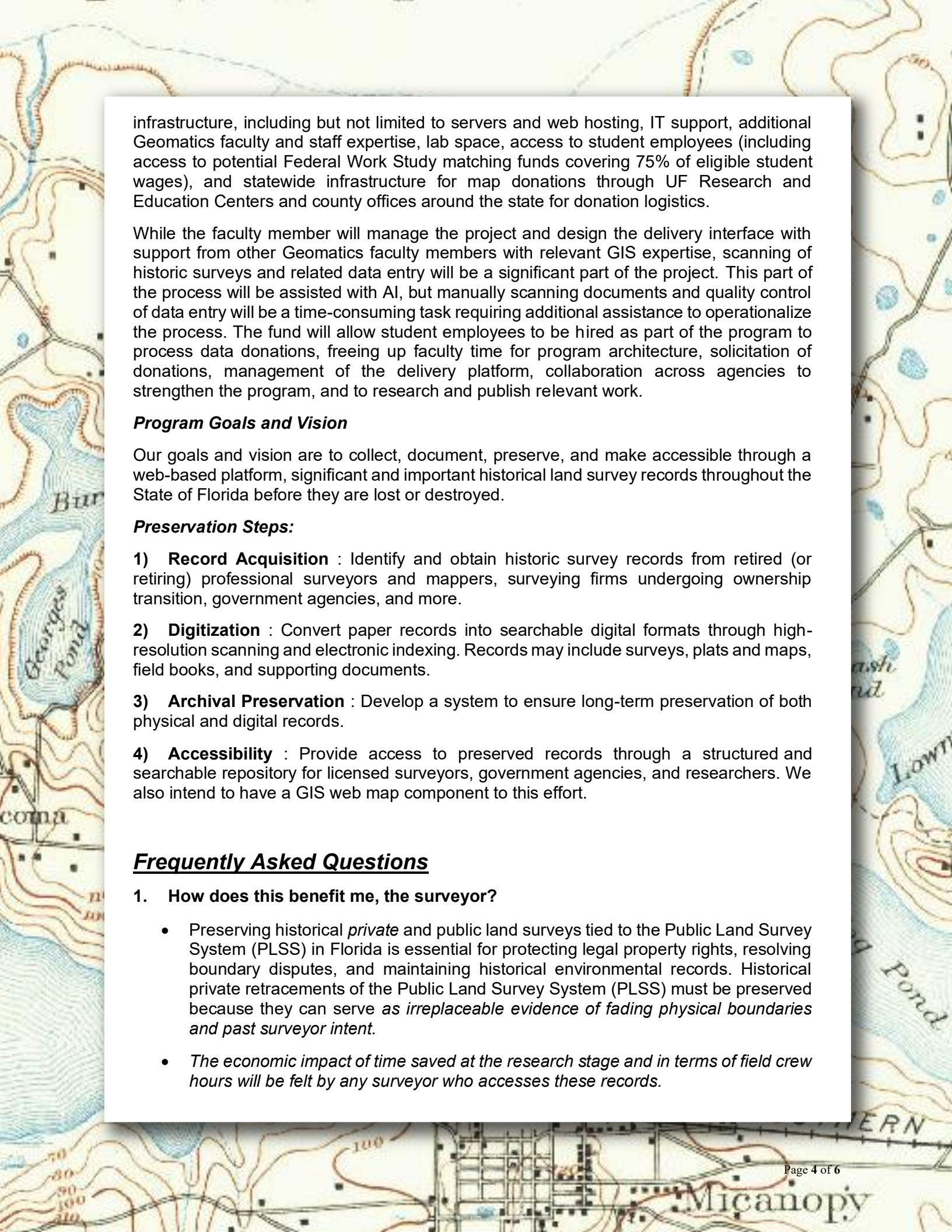
A decision was made to table the vote until the next official board meeting in November in order to have time for the Directors to bring this up at the Chapter meetings for the membership to learn more about the initiative, and to allow participation in a town hall discussion on the topic.

Draft Endowment Fund Language

The “Florida Surveying and Mapping Society Endowment for Historic Maps and Surveys Preservation” (the “Fund”) supports the Geomatics program of the School of Forest, Fisheries, and Geomatic Sciences (SFFGS) through the preservation, stewardship, accessibility, and long-term conservation of historic maps, surveys, and related archival materials. In addition, the Fund may support related workforce development initiatives and educational activities that advance the surveying, mapping, geomatics, and cadastral professions. The Fund shall be used to support expenses associated with the Historic Maps and Surveys Preservation Initiative including but not limited to operational expenses required to locate, acquire, evaluate, preserve, or promote historic maps and surveys determined by the Director of SFFGS.

University of Florida’s Role:

The proposed endowment will support operations for a long-term extension program run by the incoming cadastral and boundary survey faculty member currently posted by the UF/IFAS Geomatics program. The new faculty member will have a significant extension appointment, allowing this program to be a major focus of their work. The university’s commitment to this faculty position includes up to 40% of the faculty member’s time, meaning support for salary plus benefits, amounting to a significant annual financial commitment to this project. Additionally, the project will have access to the university’s



infrastructure, including but not limited to servers and web hosting, IT support, additional Geomatics faculty and staff expertise, lab space, access to student employees (including access to potential Federal Work Study matching funds covering 75% of eligible student wages), and statewide infrastructure for map donations through UF Research and Education Centers and county offices around the state for donation logistics.

While the faculty member will manage the project and design the delivery interface with support from other Geomatics faculty members with relevant GIS expertise, scanning of historic surveys and related data entry will be a significant part of the project. This part of the process will be assisted with AI, but manually scanning documents and quality control of data entry will be a time-consuming task requiring additional assistance to operationalize the process. The fund will allow student employees to be hired as part of the program to process data donations, freeing up faculty time for program architecture, solicitation of donations, management of the delivery platform, collaboration across agencies to strengthen the program, and to research and publish relevant work.

Program Goals and Vision

Our goals and vision are to collect, document, preserve, and make accessible through a web-based platform, significant and important historical land survey records throughout the State of Florida before they are lost or destroyed.

Preservation Steps:

- 1) Record Acquisition** : Identify and obtain historic survey records from retired (or retiring) professional surveyors and mappers, surveying firms undergoing ownership transition, government agencies, and more.
- 2) Digitization** : Convert paper records into searchable digital formats through high-resolution scanning and electronic indexing. Records may include surveys, plats and maps, field books, and supporting documents.
- 3) Archival Preservation** : Develop a system to ensure long-term preservation of both physical and digital records.
- 4) Accessibility** : Provide access to preserved records through a structured and searchable repository for licensed surveyors, government agencies, and researchers. We also intend to have a GIS web map component to this effort.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. How does this benefit me, the surveyor?

- Preserving historical *private* and public land surveys tied to the Public Land Survey System (PLSS) in Florida is essential for protecting legal property rights, resolving boundary disputes, and maintaining historical environmental records. Historical private retracements of the Public Land Survey System (PLSS) must be preserved because they can serve as *irreplaceable evidence of fading physical boundaries and past surveyor intent*.
- *The economic impact of time saved at the research stage and in terms of field crew hours will be felt by any surveyor who accesses these records.*

2. Why Donate Survey Records?

- Leaving a legacy and having one's records permanently preserved and archived for future generations.
- Providing evidence for other surveyors of one's work and decisions on boundaries, especially in problem areas or rural areas where evidence is lacking or non-existent.

3. Can donated surveys performed by me or my company be used to file a licensure complaint with BPSM?

- Donating an unsealed copy of historical work does not create licensure exposure, because a copy is not a valid survey, as the signature is not original. Also, the donated surveys will not be sealed.

4. Can I get a Tax deduction for donating my records?

- For most donors, federal tax law limits the deduction to the cost of materials rather than the historical value of the records, since these are considered self-created business records. Donors whose records come through an estate or a documented business acquisition may have a stronger case for a fair-market-value deduction. Anyone considering a donation for tax purposes should consult their own tax advisor before relying on any deduction."

5. What about records that are electronically signed/sealed?

- Copies of electronically signed/sealed surveys are not valid by law. Only the electronic copy is valid.

6. How do you plan on organizing the data from all of these potential records?

- The faculty project lead will utilize AI to maximize program efficiency. A prototype has already been developed using AI to extract metadata has already been successfully tested and will be expanded to include metadata as directed by the program's web-based delivery architecture.

7. Can we have a watermark placed on the scanned survey "For informational use only"?

- Yes, we will create a watermark for data downloads from the platform.

8. Explain simply, how does an endowment work? How does it generate revenue, etc.?

- The money is put into a very conservative fund like other investments, and the principal is protected and cannot be touched. Only a portion of the earnings on the investment will be targeted for expenditures so that the funds can continue to grow over time. The expenditures identified in the Endowment will be administered by the school director and faculty member leading the project, whose extension program can be advised by the UF Geomatics Program Advisory Committee, FSMS members, and other stakeholders. This is a very safe investment.

9. Why spend the \$300k+ it takes to start the endowment? How are those funds going to be used?

- The amount of \$300k+ was chosen based on the returns that could be used each year for the anticipated expenditures. Starting the first full year of 2027, the spendable part of the earnings will be roughly \$10,800 and will continue to grow each year as the endowment grows. The recurring spendable funds do not draw from the principal, and will be used to support the project, as directed by the cadastral and boundary law faculty's extension program of historic survey preservation, primarily covering operating expenses associated with hourly student wages for data scanning and metadata input, data hosting and storage, and costs associated with collecting data from donors around the state. There are additional up-front expenses for creating the endowment of \$16k (a 5% gift fee) and equipment costs (printers, scanner, etc.) of \$25k. These two amounts are the cost to FSMS to start the program and are the only part of the endowment that will be spent and not put towards permanent operating expenses as part of the spendable account generated from the permanently untouched endowment principal.

10. Will the Website have a Disclaimer on the material that is accessible?

- To protect survey data donors, a disclaimer will be used on the data repository website, which users will accept before use. After consulting with various legal experts, the proposed disclaimer reads as follows (subject to finalization after input from the faculty lead): This website and database have been created for educational, historical, and informational purposes only. The contributors to this database and the former proprietors of the information within it **DO NOT** guarantee or warranty the accuracy of this information in any way, shape or form. All information provided within should be independently verified by a Florida licensed professional surveyor and mapper. "Use of this site implies tacit acceptance that the information, surveys, and documentation provided are made accessible for research and analysis, and informational purposes only". All information was provided voluntarily by others to assist the Surveyors & Mappers, and any student in a Geomatics program in the State of Florida by creating a repository of former surveys, monumentation, survey control, and other historical mapping information in Florida to be collected, documented, organized, and maintained for future generations.

Coming Soon!

A **Virtual Town Hall Meeting Webinar** is tentatively set for **October 12th, 2026**, so please plan accordingly. A Special Notification will be sent out to all members as to the **exact date, time, and associated weblink**.