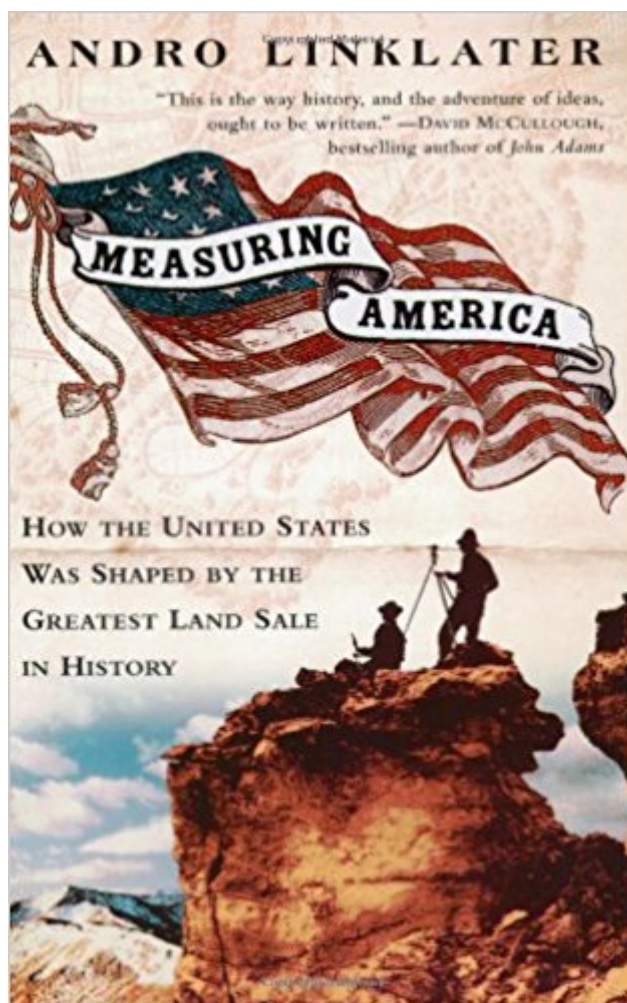


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# Measuring America: How The United States Was Shaped By The Greatest Land Sale In History



## 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

"[Linklater] has the talent not just to let us know how things work, but to make us want to know...A magical mystery tour that leaves the reader both mildly footsore and exhilarated by unexpected connections." *The New York Times* "What's great about history, when done well, is how even the most familiar topics, from the American Revolution to WWII, can be revisited again and again, not just to retell stories but to offer a fresh perspective. That is what Andro Linklater does in *Measuring America*." *USA Today* "Remarkable...Linklater traces with unusual elegance and a keen wit the epic story of measuring our nation, charting the process by which, with each length of the surveyor's chain, new states were literally bought into being." *Los Angeles Times*

Andro Linklater studied history at Oxford University and is a full-time writer and journalist, and author of several books.

This is an interesting book covering the way in which the US switched from the traditional plat descriptions of Europe, 'metes and bounds' which used physical descriptors, to the 'township' concept which was based on orthogonal N-S and E-W lines and a 6-mile fundamental square. There is a long section on the questions of units of measurement and rival proposals for which to use. The actual measurement activity falls into the background even though it was a massive task, covering thousands of miles of primary alignments and tens of thousands of townships; subject to surveying error and fraud. If you are interested by the surveying aspect the Great Arc is an amazing description of the triangulation survey of India, and there are good accounts of the same surveys of England and France and their jointure across the English Channel, plus the cutting of the Mason-Dixon Line is a great tale.

.Historians, surveyors, sociologists, math majors, city planners, and many other readers will enjoy this well-written book about measurement as a social construct and the physical structure of America as we know it. Linklater's chronology begins in 1086 A.D. with William the Conqueror's Domesday Book which measured land according to the amount of soil needed to support one person. By 1585, Dutch engineer Simon Stevin became the first European to publish an account of decimals as a system of measuring in 1585. It was not until 1620 method of surveying land accurately with low technology equipment was developed in Europe. Gunter's Chain, composed of 100 links, was 66 feet long. Combining new ideas about a ten-unit measuring system with the much older system based on sets of four, Gunter's Chain standardized land measurement in both England and the British colonies. After the Revolutionary War, Americans began to move westward. In "Measuring America," Thomas Jefferson is presenting as a likeable, shambling, clear-thinking fellow who becomes an early proponent of the metric system. By 1785, Thomas Hutchins, first Geographer of the United States, had begun the "Geographer's Line of the Seven Ranges." Hutchins wrote: "For the distance of 46 chains and 86 links West, the land is remarkably rich with a deep, black mould, free from stone." He was Robinson Crusoe, landed in an uncharted wilderness, and his purpose was to measure the land so it could be sold. Linklater tells us that It is easy to miss the significance of what Hutchins proposed to do. Hutchins' Survey began at a critical moment in the history of ideas, when for the first time in 10,000 years traditional measurements were challenged

by systems derived from scientific discoveries about gravity and the size of the earth. As the tale moves closer to us in time, the book reads like an adventure story as more and more geologists, surveyors, land grabs and accidents are presented. Later in the book, Linklater focuses on the importance of the railroads in setting up towns and cities along the grid, using Gunter's Chain to create standardized land parcels. The very American idea that anyone could buy and sell land soon caught the attention of Germans, Scandinavians, Russians and other 19th century immigrants, who found this a novel concept and the land grid became an effective marketing tool. By 1906, President Teddy Roosevelt, entranced by the Badlands and worried about rapid development felt compelled to preserve nearly 200 million acres of the remaining public domain for forest and national parks. Linklater's chronology ends c1966 when developers began to create the concept of suburban living. Three centuries after Gunter had developed his chain, real estate was still being bought by the square 40-acre lot, house plots were sold in 10, 5, or more commonly 2.5 acre parcels, and streets tended to measure 66 feet or two chains in width. As one Illinois developer observed in 1966, "Underneath all these contemporary trappings, our basic thinking is still geared to a gridiron block system." Fascinating book. Worth the time to read, ponder, and take notes. Kim Burdick Stanton, Delaware

I read this book a year ago and I still tell people about it. It's complicated, heavy stuff, and it can be very tedious to read all the details, but it's amazing how much I learned. That's what makes a book great to me, if I take something away from it and remember it. This not a book for someone looking for a "story," but for someone looking for great history and the unfolding of real life. There were things in this book that I never thought about before, and was surprised at how complicated and difficult it was to find "universal" solutions. If I ever run out of new stuff to read, this will definitely be a RE-read.

One of the sharpest physics professors I've ever known loved quoting this material so much, that I had to pick it up and see what all it had to offer. Filled with great exerts and fun facts. For example, did you know the US was extremely close to settling on the metric system as the standard unit of measure? Jefferson was one of the greatest advocates of this. The governing entities sent him to France as an ambassador, and voted to use the English system while he was gone. Quite amusing, and thoroughly interesting read.

Measuring America is a history written about the exploration, measuring, and dividing the land in

America. The book begins with early exploration of America to 2000. The book has many biographic stories of the individuals involved in the measuring of America and the political, social, and economic issues they dealt with while measuring America. It a good book for a general overview of the measuring of America. I have added it to my cartography and geography book collection.

Charles

Really great and interesting book! Loved reading about how America was measured. The writer keeps the story moving even though there were years involved before anything really came together. Most engaging.

Well-written narrative about the laying out of townships, etc. in lands west of the original colonies. I was interested to learn that "ground zero" for range lines is in my own state of Ohio! Technical information is interspersed with relevant historical information, background on the choice of measurement scales, and descriptions of those who were instrumental in completing the monumental task of measuring and marking the land. I have recommended this book to several friends and relatives and all have thoroughly enjoyed it.

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