

In Favor of Multiple Stamps



BY R. LEE HIXSON, PLS

Modern collaboration calls for laws to be updated.

For the past five years or so, I have been thinking about the organizational nature of the way we approach projects and how this has changed over time. While there are still many small- and medium-sized surveying firms that employ one or two licensees who take on a broad range of survey projects, the number of medium-sized and larger firms with hundreds and even thousands of employ-

ees is far greater than in years past. At these large firms, which combine separate departments for surveying, engineering, land development and architecture, surveyors increasingly specialize in certain disciplines, such as field crew supervision, calculations, data adjustment, staking computations, geodetic analysis, etc. In addition, more firms have developed

specialties in such areas as public land surveys, photogrammetry, geodetic surveys, water boundaries, construction staking and laser scanning.

The growing trend towards specialization, at both the employee level and the firm level, has led to an increasing amount of collaboration on modern projects, especially large-scale projects. Instead of one firm handling all the surveying for a large project, it is now common for two or three firms to team up to produce the final product (see sidebar on page 41 for sample scenarios).

Collaboration among private surveyors, small firms, large firms, government agencies, etc., has become much more common, and this trend will continue in the future. But this move towards greater collaboration presents a strange dilemma for the surveyor: virtually all states have laws that only recognize one surveyor as being in “full, responsible charge” of a project.

The Disconnect Between Law and Practice

Although the wording varies from state to state, the laws governing the stamping and signing of our work products typically assume that **one surveyor**, regardless of the complexity of the project or the number of licensees involved, must take on the responsibility for **all** phases of the surveying done on that project. This disconnect between law and practice is getting greater every year. In my opinion, allowing only one stamp on the final deliverable is not only unnecessary, but also counterproductive to our proclaimed interest in serving the public.

Why should one surveyor take full responsibility when, as a matter of fact, two or three other licensed surveyors have handled other clearly defined portions of the work? The common answer is that the “surveyor in responsible charge” is expected to closely monitor all important decisions and phases of the work, either making the key decisions herself or himself, or at the very least analyzing and approving all important decisions made by everyone else.

To me, this is a great pretense. I have worked on projects while another licensed surveyor handled all the field work, and I did the boundary analysis. In the first place, it makes no sense that I should attempt to closely monitor all the decisions made by

other licensed surveyors. They are licensed professionals, and I trust their work from past experience. It is professional—as well as logical and practical—for me to respect other surveyors and, once we are both in agreement on the basic approach and methods we are going to use, to allow them the professional space to do their work on their own.

At the end of the project, I believe that each of us should stamp the map and then add a note describing the division of our work responsibilities. When you get right down to it, none of us actually take “full responsible charge” over other co-licensees on large projects. I am convinced that this phrase was created with the small- and medium-sized firms of the last century in mind. Under those conditions, it makes sense. With modern projects that involve collaborative teaming among multiple professionals, the phrase has become an anachronism.

Why Do We Stamp Our Maps?

This brings me to an essential question: why do we stamp our maps? The practice of stamping is an unusual custom that other professionals do not bother with. Why do surveyors and engineers stamp their work? Why don't doctors and lawyers do it as well? When did surveyors begin the practice of stamping their maps? When and where did stamping originate, and why did the first surveyors to stamp do it?

After examining old copies of recorded maps in my home county of Sutter, California, I realized that stamping didn't get started locally until the late 1800s. Then, from that time period until around 1950, it was an unevenly practiced custom: some maps were stamped, others were not. The laws were changed mid-century, and now all maps are required to be stamped in California. Similar patterns may exist in other states.

Going back further into history, stamps traditionally served two purposes. First, stamps identified the origin and authenticity of a document, and second, stamps literally sealed a container. (See sidebar on page 42 for more on the ancient history of stamping.) What is of most importance to our profession is the fact that stamp seals were used as the primary means of authenticating a document. But they were also highly regarded as a very personal—perhaps the *most* personal—means of identification for a person.

This historical chain of use was eventually adopted by surveyors and engineers. Today we stamp our maps to give notice to the world that we are the people behind the work being represented. This is the motive behind the state statutes requiring stamps—they are a way to authenticate our work products. However, there is a second reason with roots in the history



This ¾" Egyptian Ramesses IV seal from the 20th dynasty (1153-1147 B.C.) is made of terra cotta and inscribed for “Ramesses, beloved of Amun.” Courtesy of Medusa Art.

Team Project Scenarios

More than a few of us have worked on, or have heard about, projects that involve cooperative teaming with multiple firms. These are some of the many possible scenarios for the modern project:

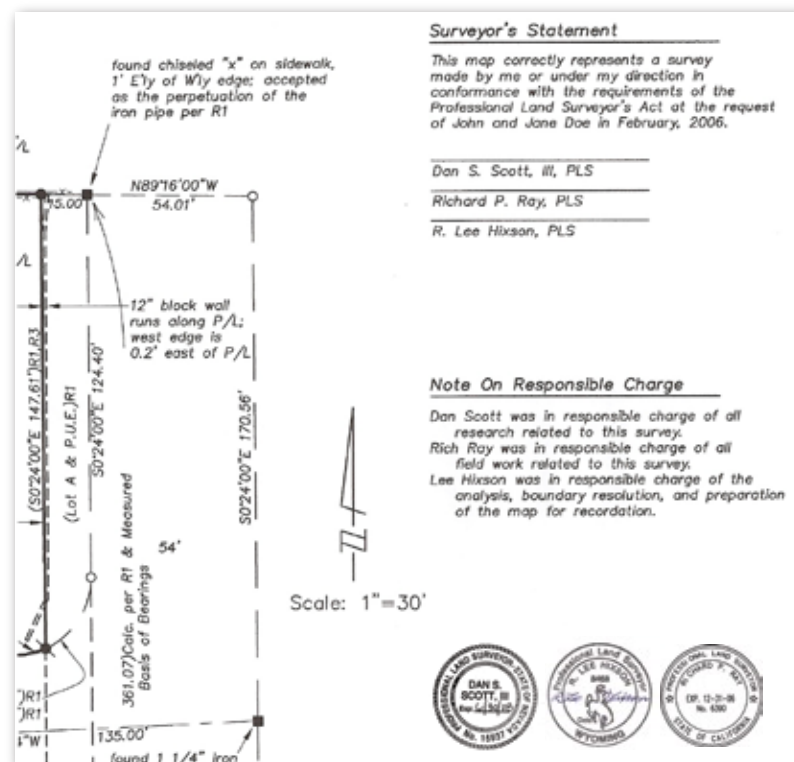
- **Scenario 1:** Firm A does all the field work; Firm B does research, analysis and resolution, and produces the map product.
- **Scenario 2:** Firm A does the large GPS control network (under licensee Jones); Firm B (under licensee Smith) uses conventional equipment to extend the control and make land net ties. Firm A (under licensee Martinez) analyzes the field data and resolves the boundary; Firm B sets the pins. Firm A (under licensee Walker) prepares the legal descriptions and accompanying plats.
- **Scenario 3:** Firm A (or a government agency) handles the entire project, but under four licensees: one does the research, records calculations, performs analysis and makes the resolution; a second works with the crews and handles all of the data manipulation and adjustments; a third serves as the party chief; and the fourth writes the legal descriptions and does the CAD work for the final map.
- **Scenario 4:** A Department of Transportation (DOT) does the field survey and completes the boundary resolution; private Firm A acts as a subcontractor and uses the DOT-resolved coordinate list to set the right of way monuments and prepare the record of survey to document the project.
- **Scenario 5:** Firm A performs the GPS ground control work; Firm B does the aerial photography and airborne LiDAR imaging; Firm C produces the topographic mapping.
- **Scenario 6:** Private Surveyor A specializes in large-scale right of way boundary resolutions; Firm B handles all the field work.

of this custom: it is an act of pride in our profession to stamp a map or document. Who doesn't remember the feeling when they used their stamp for the first time? We shouldn't underestimate the pride factor involved in our stamping practice.

I believe that I am not alone when I feel a sense of satisfaction and completion each time I use my stamp. It represents years—decades even—of study, testing, hard work and experience. Each surveyor who participates on a project should be allowed the privilege of sealing that product with her or his stamp.

A Call for Multiple Stamps

Because of the work ethic, symbolism and pride that are represented by the surveyor's stamp, I feel that this tradition should continue. But state laws must be modified to allow (and even encourage) multiple licensees to stamp maps and plats that are the product of their combined efforts. So far, the feedback that I have received to this idea has been largely positive. The negative responses have been either that it would complicate the liability issues or that it is not necessary since the system works best when only one surveyor takes all the responsibility.



The Ancient History of Stamping

The fascinating branch of history that studies stamping is called sigillography. It is estimated that seals and stamps were first used about 700 B.C. by the Babylonians, Egyptians and Assyrians, and were in widespread use for about a thousand years. Stamp seals were also in use during this period in Asia. The purpose was typically twofold: first, stamps identified the origin and authenticity of a document (or of a shipment being sent to a purchaser), and second, stamps literally sealed a container.

The stamps were made from brass and steel or carved from stones and they were used to make impressions in beeswax, resin, clay, lead and gold. Signet rings were an offshoot of stamp seals. Stamp seals were usually no larger than about 2 inches in diameter and were often small enough that they were worn on a necklace as a good luck charm (in addition to their actual sealing functions). The impressions usually contained an image of the owner and sometimes contained a legend of text engraved around the outside edge that would further identify the bearer.

The stamping custom started to die off about 400 A.D., but was kept alive by the leaders of the Catholic church and later by officials in the British government.



This 1" Near Eastern hedgehog seal (circa 3100-2900 B.C.) is carved stone and features an engraved gazelle on the underside. Courtesy of Medusa Art.

Sources:

<http://www.historicseals.com/aboutseals.5.html>

<http://history.fas.nyu.edu/object/history.faculty.bedosrezak.interests.html>

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/preservation/advice/pdf/seals.pdf>

I do not agree with the opinion of those who believe that multiple stamping would “muddy” the liability aspect of surveyors’ work. To the contrary, requiring all participating surveyors to stamp and sign a map, and to include a note that explains their different contributions, will go a long way toward clarifying issues of responsibility.

As for the second objection, I am convinced that the public would be better served if all responsible surveyors stamped the work product. How could it be otherwise? If two or three surveyors each handle clearly defined portions of a project, why wouldn’t we want them all to acknowledge their participation? How could it serve the public interest if the professional efforts of one or more surveyors are hidden under someone else’s stamp?

I submit that there is nothing inherently unprofessional, unethical or counterproductive to the public interest in allowing multiple stamping. On the contrary, it can only promote our professionalism to stop the pretense that only

one surveyor is in responsible charge, if that is not in fact the case. Clearly, portions of a project can be effectively delegated to separate licensees, and this is being done every day around the country, either by different licensees in the same firm, or among different licensees in different firms.

In our situation today, modern practice has outgrown the rationale behind laws created in the last century. As the profession evolves, shouldn’t we respond by updating our statutes to reflect the way that work is currently being performed? To prohibit multiple stamping is to foster a misrepresentation on projects where more than one professional contributes to the product. It’s time to acknowledge—and sanction—the collaboration that we see all around us. ●

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