

LASTING IMPRESSIONS

A SAMPE OF THE TRADE OF PRESIDENTS



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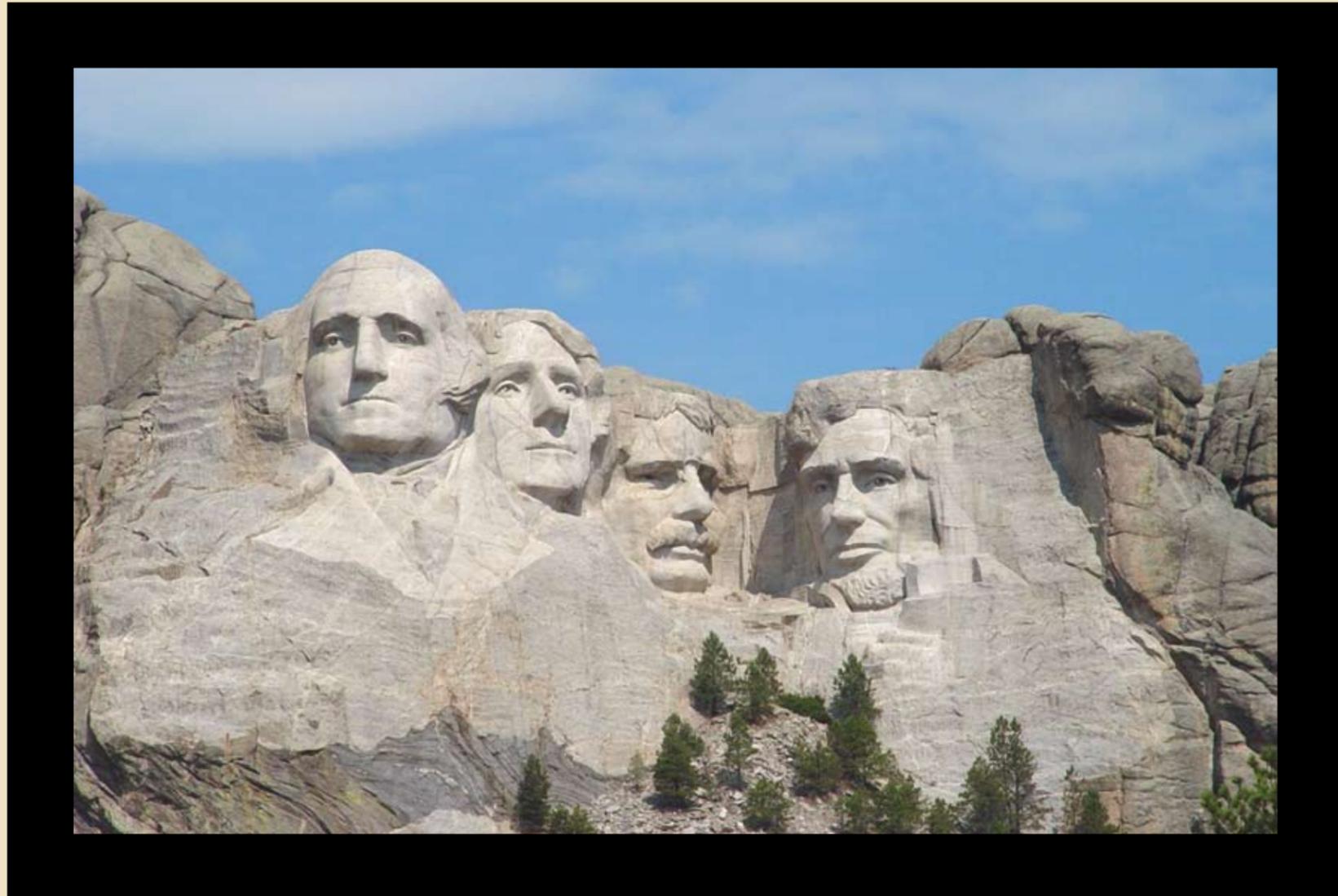
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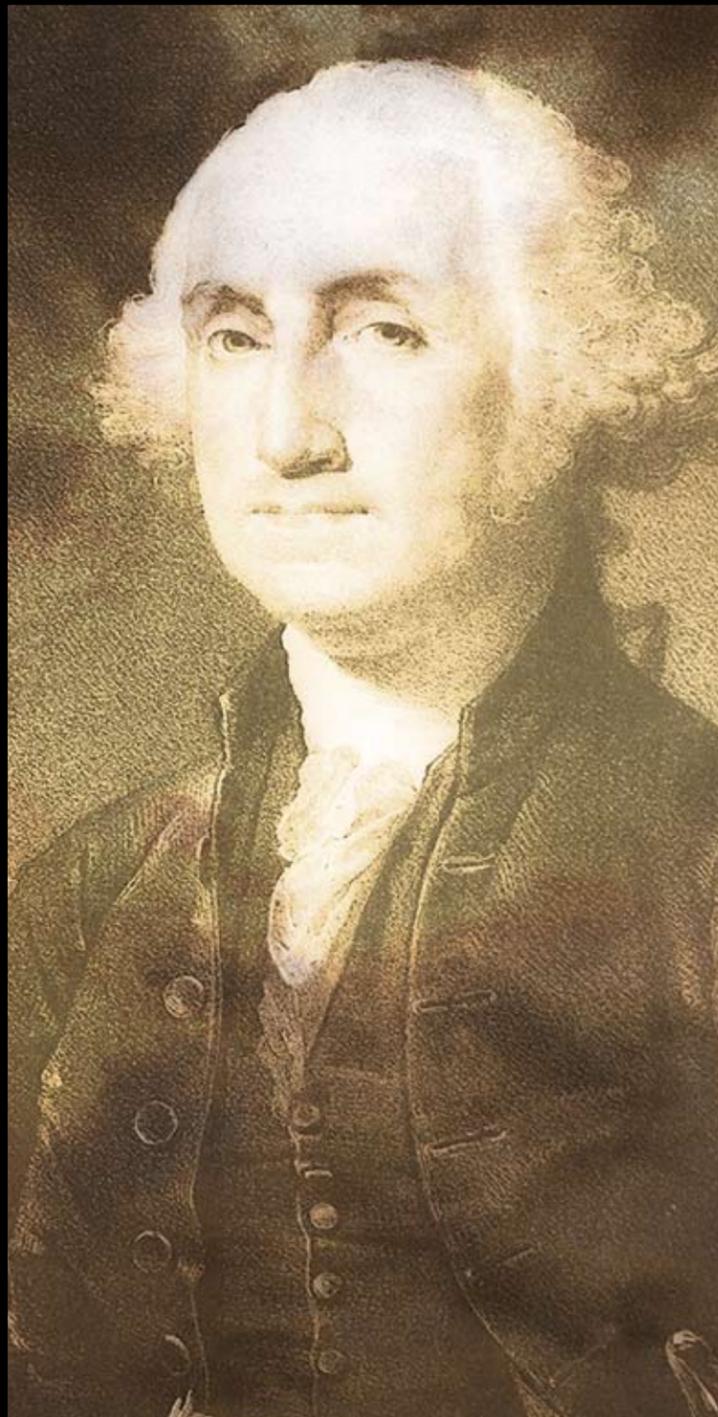
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THE TRADE OF PRESIDENTS

Since shortly after the Mount Rushmore National Monument was completed, land surveyors have delighted in pointing out that three of the four men memorialized practiced surveying at some point in their lives and have tended to wonder what Theodore Roosevelt was doing up there. It's a bittersweet joke – presidents today are more likely to be former lawyers. Perhaps that's appropriate; in the early, relatively underpopulated days of our republic, it must have seemed that there was a lot more land than law, and more opportunities for the surveyor than the lawyer. In fact, three great presidents worked as land surveyors, and there are other similarities besides: all had fathers who surveyed, all served stints as county surveyors, and all viewed surveying not as an end in itself, but as a vehicle by which to achieve greater goals.





THE TRADE OF PRESIDENTS

G E O R G E W a s h i n g t o n

By any standard, George Washington's surveying career was long, remarkable, and distinguished. It began with a survey of his brother Lawrence's turnip fields in 1747, when George was 16, and continued until his death in 1799. During that time he surveyed more than 200 tracts of land and assembled one of the great estates of his day – more than 65,000 acres divided among 37 locations.

Washington's father, Augustine, was a surveyor, and when he died in 1743 some of his equipment, including a compass, staff, and drafting instruments, passed to George. This was fortuitous, as Washington had a flair for mathematics and the outdoors (He was said to be the finest horseman of his time.) that even today is recognized as essential for successful surveyors. Lawrence probably taught George the basics, and further instruction may have come from the County Surveyor of Prince William County, George Byrne. He applied himself very diligently, and in 1748 was selected for a spot on a month-long expedition across the Blue Ridge Mountains, surveying land for Lord Fairfax. It was more than just his formal initiation into land surveying, it was also his introduction to the Fairfax family, the beginning of a relationship that introduced George to many of the influential men of his day.

The young man must have made an outstanding impression; in 1749 the Fairfax family arranged for George, then 17, to be appointed as County Surveyor of newly formed Culpeper County, Virginia, on the frontier. This was a prime opportunity. Not only were frontier surveyors well paid, they also had many opportunities to purchase good land. Because they represented the largest landowners, they were even socially prominent.

Washington made good use of his time on the frontier. Like County Surveyors today, he also worked privately in neighboring counties and began to establish his reputation as a man of

outstanding character. His continuing association with the Fairfax family was probably a major competitive advantage, but many of Washington's surveys survive to our day and show that he did excellent, careful work, consistent with the highest standards of colonial surveying. He spent three years on the frontier, made a lot of money, and came to the notice of many as a competent young man.

Washington's surveying career was only nominally interrupted by his five year stint (1753-1758) as a lieutenant colonel during the French and Indian War. In fact, the mapping and backcountry skills he developed on the frontier were crucial to his military success in that campaign. His ability to write clear reports of his activities was also useful and made him well known throughout the colonies and in London. Sketch maps prepared by Washington were far and away the best available at the time. He even prepared maps of the French threat that were frankly intended to raise public support for the war – in effect, propaganda.

Just before induction, Washington purchased 1,459 acres in Frederick County, Virginia, the beginning of a lifelong purchasing spree that made him one of the emerging nation's most significant land owners. It also marked the end of his public surveying; from that point on, Washington was a private surveyor and land developer, with breaks for war and politics.

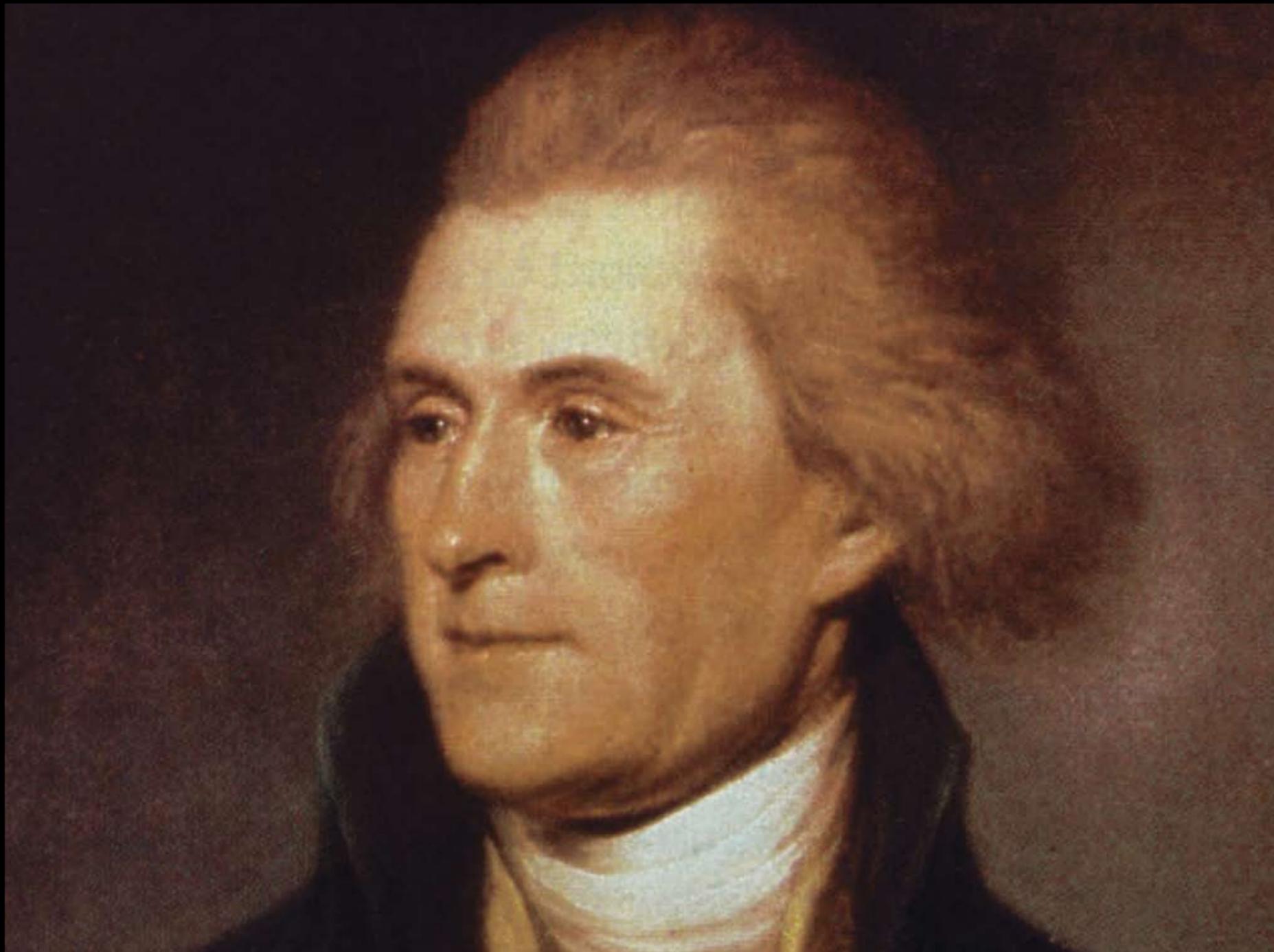
In 1759, Washington married widow Martha Custis, and the couple settled at Mount Vernon. Martha brought a considerable fortune to the marriage, and Washington rapidly turned it into land. He applied all of his surveying experience to land development, often mapping the land himself and assigning acreage to various parcels, and creating plans to facilitate better use of the properties purchased. He

was a superb agriculturalist, and some of his last letters were related to farm matters.

But Washington was not simply a farmer hungry for land. He also engaged in land speculation, acquiring large tracts in expectation of future increases in value. One project that brought together his concern for fellow veterans (of the French and Indian War), his surveying and developing skills, and his lust for estate building was his effort to ensure that land promised to veterans actually got awarded. The matter was complicated by a Royal Proclamation that seemed to undercut promises made by colonial officials, but Washington worked diligently for more than 20 years to see that the land was actually transferred. Fellow veterans were very grateful, but Washington also benefitted – 19,383 prime acres were awarded to him.

Of course, the central episode of Washington's life was his remarkable prosecution of the Revolutionary War. He recognized the importance of accurate maps and not only created the office of Geographer to the Continental Army but appointed a knowledgeable man, Robert Erskine, to fill it. Erskine assembled a strong staff, and many of his assistants became influential surveyors in the post-Revolutionary era. Probably no military commander before or since Washington has had as much practical knowledge about the importance of maps and what is required to make a good one.

George Washington is remembered as a president, not a land surveyor, but he was a surveyor first, and from that everything else – his fortune, his military success, and his political leadership – followed. He remains a tremendously inspiring example for modern surveyors.



THE TRADE OF PRESIDENTS

T H O M A S J e f f e r s o n

Thomas Jefferson's father, Peter Jefferson, was a renowned surveyor and explorer, and it must be noted that Thomas was not his father's equal in these areas. In fact, Thomas would eventually choose law as his profession. But his early exposure to the surveyor's art had an affect: Jefferson was commissioned as the County Surveyor of Albemarle, Virginia, in October of 1773. He did not, however, register a single complete survey during his time in that office. But mapping and boundary surveying (too often considered to be the same science) were lifelong preoccupations. For example, Jefferson knew well the importance of good maps for explorers, and when the Lewis and Clark Expedition was being outfitted, he made sure that the best maps available were included. These were expensive and must have seemed like an extravagance to congressional overseers. Jefferson actually hoped that the expedition would discover a water route (the fabled Northwest Passage) across North America, but that (along with his expectation of living mastodons) was not to be.

The most important instance of Jefferson's surveying background affecting his presidential decisions was his early, strong, and unflagging support for a consistent method of survey of public lands. This project eventually became the rectangular survey system, and the then revolutionary notion of surveying lands prior to occupation and sale may well be the single greatest factor affecting America's western expansion. Arguably, it is also the planet's largest engineering project, as the Public Land Survey System (PLSS) covers much of the United States and is the reason for the square fields and straight roads that give the country a distinctive *gridded* look that is visible even from space.

Thomas Jefferson may not have spent much time in the field as a surveyor, and unlike his father, he was not much of an explorer. But it took a surveyor's son to recognize the absolute importance of the PLSS and a love of exploration to commission the Corps of Discovery. Surveyors can be proud and grateful that such a man once was president.





THE TRADE OF PRESIDENTS

A B R A H A M L I N C O L N

Among these presidents portrayed on Mount Rushmore, Abraham Lincoln probably had the least interest in surveying as a profession, and only practiced for three years, but paradoxically he may also have been the one for whom it was most personal. His childhood, though not the hardscrabble poverty described by some biographers, was difficult enough and marked by an astonishing number of relocations. Several of these relocations were forced by the land title problems that seemed to be his father's special curse. All three of Thomas Lincoln's Kentucky farms turned out to have encumbered titles, and in the process of fighting for his land, he became a competent land surveyor.

His son must have taken heed, for Abraham also became a surveyor and was appointed a deputy surveyor in Sangamon County, Illinois. By all accounts, he was competent, but the trade seems to have been something of a stopgap, a step up from running a store and his duties as postmaster at New Salem, perhaps, but short of his ultimate goals, law and politics. Still, he surveyed for three years while working toward a license to practice law. One notable job was his survey of New Boston, on the Mississippi River. Lincoln received his law license in September of 1836 and less than a month later filed his first suit, *Hawthorn v. Woodridge*, in the Sangamon County Circuit Court. There is no record that he ever practiced surveying again or even remembered the trade fondly. Still, for a wartime president, a knowledge of mapping and surveying must have been useful, and it's a little ironic that one of surveying's great achievements, the Mason-Dixon Line, so vexed his time in office.

Washington's contributions to what became the United States of America can't be overrated; Jefferson's exquisite feel for the importance of land and surveying was absolutely essential to the orderly expansion of the growing nation, and Lincoln worked hard to keep the biggest parcel of all in one piece. All three were more concerned with building a nation than winning reelection.



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