

Donation of the Month

Surveyor's Compass



Surveyor's Compass
2006.15.1
Donor: Ronald Ridout

Early instruments like this compass were used in surveying land to determine boundaries of an area or the course of a road. Later, these instruments were also used for the railroad. This instrument, called a surveyor's compass, was a key to charting unknown territory.

This compass has a round brass case with a 3 ½ inch long center needle. It has a silvered inner ring and two folding sight arms, painted black. The compass fits into a leather-covered wooden case. This compass also has a ball-joint adapter that attaches to the bottom of the compass. This adapter was probably mounted on a piece called a Jacob staff. A Jacob staff is a long, straight wooden rod with a steel point on one end that can be driven into the ground. The compass adapter attaches onto the other end. The staff holds the compass in place while the surveyor uses it. Tripods with three legs are also be used to provide a firmer support for the compass.

It is thought that this particular compass was used by one of the first surveyors in Benton County, A. McKissick, from 1836 to 1838. According to Goodspeed's 1889 History of Benton County, Arkansas, McKissick was surveyor when Benton County was organized at the residence of Judge George P. Wallace, one and half miles east of present-day Bentonville.

The development of much of the United States resulted from a survey of Arkansas. In 1815, Arkansas was surveyed as part of the Louisiana Purchase. With this purchase, the United States doubled its land size. Many new settlers wanted to move westward, so surveyors were sent to mark land boundaries. Surveyors established an initial point in eastern Arkansas where the land surveys of the entire Louisiana Purchase started from and continued over thousands of square miles.

Credits: Baker, Lea Flowers. Survey of the Louisiana Purchase in 1815, lesson developed by the Department of Arkansas Heritage and the Arkansas Natural and Cultural Resources Council, accessed on www.arkansasheritage.com, 2006. Goodspeed's 1889 History of Benton County, Arkansas, 1889, Reprinted by the Benton County Historical Society, 1993. Kovener, Dennis. "Surveying in the Early Midwest," accessed from the Conner Prairie (Living History Museum) website: <http://www.connerprairie.org/historyonline/surveyin.html>. "Surveyor's Compass," accessed from the Smithsonian National Museum of American History website: <http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/surveying/type.cfm?typeid=1>; Donor file information; Rogers Historical Museum Research Library.