

History Comes Alive!

~ Tales From the City Archives ~



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More About Surveyors

Early surveyors played important role in setting the City's western border.

Many profound changes occurred in the City of Los Angeles between 1869 and 1872. The population had grown to approximately 5,500 people. The government made great strides in education, protection of its citizens and salaries for City officials. Major railroad transportation in Los Angeles had begun. Los Angeles was also becoming the recipient of two new buildings in the historic Plaza. One magnificent edifice was the very modern Pico House, and the other was the erection of the famed Merced Theater. But, one of the most defining moments in the growth of the City was when Frank Lecouvreur was given orders by the Common (City) Council to investigate the City's western boundary in late 1868. He had been the third major land surveyor in Los Angeles since the 1840s. This assignment followed two previous surveyors hired by government entities: Lt. Edward O.C. Ord and Major Henry Hancock, hired to lay out the perimeters of the City of Los Angeles.

~ Lt. E.O.C. Ord ~



~ Lt. Edward O.C. Ord ~

Until sometime in the 1840s, Los Angeles was unable to define its land boundaries. The story goes that back to the 1780s, when government maps were either lost or misplaced. In 1848, the Ayuntamiento (Mexican Council) in this community asked the Territorial Governor to name a surveyor to determine the boundary lines of this area. His choice was Lt. E.O.C. Ord, U.S. Army, who had recently completed a similar survey in Sacramento. The former Fort Ord in Monterey, Calif., was named in honor of this important Union military figure.

On July 18, 1849, Ord proposed making a map of the future city, marking the boundary lines of the municipal land. From a publication, Four Square Leagues, found in the City Archives, is the following description of what the local politicians requested "as sixteen leagues (two leagues in each cardinal direction) as had been fixed by the Mexican Territorial Legislature in 1834. The U.S. Land Claims Commission...later reduced the city's allocated area to the original Four Square Leagues." There are some variations as to the length of leagues. Most common definition is three miles per league. But the City was to use 2.63 miles per league.

Edward Ord's map, the first official diagram of the City, was submitted in 1849. His presentation included the identification of many adobe buildings, vineyards, trails, dirt roads, orchards and irrigated fields. According to Leonard and Dale Pitt in their encyclopedic volume, Los Angeles A to Z, "The main door on the Plaza Church marked the center of the city. For the area north of Main Street (Calle Principal), he indicated city-sized blocks and lots for future development."

On Feb. 5, 1856, the United States Land Commission confirmed the four square leagues, using 2.63 miles per league, for the City of Los Angeles, with the Plaza Church as the center of the City.

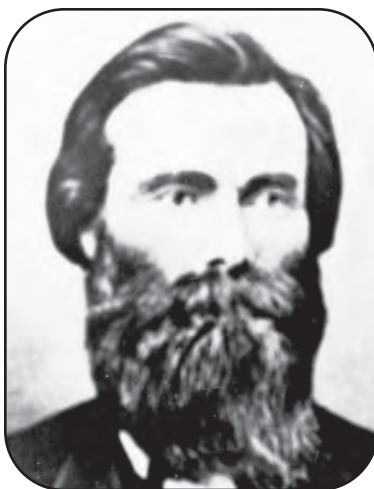
~ Major Henry Hancock ~

In 1858, a United States Deputy Surveyor and prominent local citizen and surveyor, Henry Hancock, was given the responsibility by the federal government to survey the City lands confirmed by the United States Land Commission Patent of 1856. Hancock, a New Hampshire attorney and surveyor, arrived in Southern California in 1852. In time he acquired Rancho La Brea ("Tar Rancho") from Antonio Rocha, to whom it was issued in 1828. Hancock was a veteran of the Mexican War, and in the California militia he rose from captain to major. In his early years he was not well to do, but he and his prominent wife from San Francisco "royalty" amassed great wealth in Los Angeles from oil and real estate.

Hancock's survey followed Ord's assessments in the fact that the Plaza Church was the center of the City. But with the advent of the federal government's mandating the four square leagues, some readjustment to land dimensions were necessary. From the City's bicentennial publication in 1981, City of Los Angeles City Engineers-1855-1981, comes the following description of the City of Los Angeles layout of 1858:

"He [Hancock] ran the boundaries setting markers at the corners referring to landmarks, and using compass courses and distances on the ground. The original patent boundary... bounded by Hoover Street on the west; on the north by Fountain Avenue, produced to Indiana Avenue except where it deviates from a straight line by following the channels of the Los Angeles River... and the Arroyo Seco. On the east, Indiana Avenue; on the south, the line of Exposition Boulevard produced from Hoover Street."

It must be mentioned that at the time of Hancock's survey, none of the above noted street names were in existence.



~ Major Henry Hancock ~



~ Frank Lecouvreur ~

Frank Lecouvreur, the third surveyor in this article, worked for Henry Hancock, then the County Surveyor, as a flagman in 1858. At this time there is need to mention something that is confusing. It revolves around the term City and/or County Surveyor. Henry Hancock is listed in some publications as a County Surveyor, while the City of Los Angeles records refer to him as the first City Surveyor. Frank Lecouvreur is listed in City records as a City Surveyor, while in his obituary of January 1901, his family listed him as a County Surveyor. More research is necessary.

How Frank Lecouvreur went from being Henry Hancock's flagman in the late 1850s to become the City Surveyor in 1868-69, is not known. The City Archives has in its map collection magnificent diagrams drawn by him dating back to 1863. His cartography and calligraphy are unbelievably beautiful.

Lecouvreur's background was fascinating. This information comes from a translation of his letters and diary entitled From East Prussia to the Golden Gate, published after his death and found in the Bernice Kimball collection in the City Archives. Lecouvreur was born in 1829 in East Prussia (at one time part of Poland and Germany). He was christened Theodor Maximilian Ferdinand Franz Lecouvreur. His father was French, and his mother came from a politically influential family in East Prussia. He was well educated as a linguist and civil engineer. He left by himself for California around Cape Horn in 1851. He pursued the idea of heading for the Gold Rush, worked in a saloon and arrived in Los Angeles in 1855. According to the preface in the book, he worked for a few years as a deputy for the county clerk. He was then deputized to work for Henry Hancock and the celebrated "Hancock Survey."

In late 1868, Frank Lecouvreur was ordered by the Common Council to prepare a diagram (map) of the western boundary line of the City of Los Angeles. The incredible map, found in the City Archives, bears a notation "from a point one league west of the center of the Plaza to the southwest corner of the city lands surveyed and established by order of the Common Council January 11, 1869, by Frank Lecouvreur, Surveyor." Lecouvreur was not only a surveyor but a cartographer and calligrapher as well.

His assignment, as stated above from the diagram, was to formally establish the western boundary line of the City. This line became known as Boundary Street, as seen in a City map dated 1887. In 1892, the street name was changed to either Hoover Boulevard or Hoover Street, named for Dr. Leonce Hoover, a former surgeon in the army of Napoleon and who became a local commercial vintner in Los Angeles.

Frank Lecouvreur made a number of reports about the survey of the western boundary line to the Common Council during January and February 1869. A number of reports were written about construction of what he referred to as "temporary monuments." This survey and monuments were executed from Jan. 11 to 13, 1869. He had four men working with him, two chainmen and two flagmen. There were 12 monuments constructed. They were at intervals of 20 chains (or at every quarter of a mile). In this report, Lecouvreur appears to question the Council as to their plans for the other three boundaries.

It should be noted that at the far west end of the boundary was a racetrack. In 1872, the area that included the racetrack became known as Agricultural Park. It remained in existence through 1910, when prostitution solicitation caused the closure of the park. It was then created into a county public park, known as Exposition Park, with the laying of a cornerstone on the county's first building, a museum, Dec. 10, 1910. Frank Lecouvreur was credited by his peers as setting high standards for his profession. The two previous surveys, in particular the Ord Survey, were considered almost useless 20 years later.



~ Frank Lecouvreur ~