

# “ORIGIN UNKNOWN”: REALLY?

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The Kansas Minimum Standards for Boundary Surveys requires the surveyor to reference the source of found monuments. The requirement is located at item 5 in the Section on Plats, which states as follows: “5. All pertinent monuments found or set with a notation indicating which were found and which were set, and identified as to size and type. Found monuments shall be accompanied by a reference to their origin, or noted “Origin Unknown.” The relationship of monuments to the surveyed lines and corners shall be indicated.” This article addresses the misunderstanding and the near epidemic overuse of the term “Origin Unknown”.

The minimum standards state “Found monuments shall be accompanied by a reference to their origin.” Some surveyors have interpreted this statement to mean who physically set the monument, but that is not what the standard states. Reference to the origin of a monument is simply the origin as it relates to the current survey and surveyor. If we know who set the bar, then certainly that should be stated on the plat. If we do not know who set the bar we still need to state a reference to the origin as it relates to the current survey and surveyor. In other words, what do you know or presume about the marker? A simple example would be a bar found at a section corner with references on file at the county engineer’s office in a “section corner tie” book that is not directly attributable to any specific surveyor. A surveyor should then note on his plat and Land Survey Reference Report that the marker was “located from references at county engineer’s office”. Labeling the corner “origin unknown” is incorrect as the origin for the current survey or surveyor would be from ties in the county engineer’s office. Be aware that for any marker that is accepted and held by the surveyor and then labelled as “origin unknown” could unnecessarily casts doubt on the survey, and might cause future surveyors to think that it is not the same monument for which there were references on file.

Another example would be when you found a marker used by a previous surveyor, Jim Smith. Jim Smith on his plat labelled the monument as “origin unknown”. So the two options are to label the found marker as “origin unknown” or “marker used by Jim Smith.” The later statement is accurate and more helpful than “origin unknown.”

A third example would be when you are retracing a previous survey. The original surveyor, Tom Jones, set a ½” bar and ID cap at each of the four corners of a tract. You find 4 bars with 4 plastic caps, but on one of the bars the plastic cap is damaged and you cannot read the inscription on the cap. You would not want to label the bar with the damaged cap as “origin unknown” as this would cast unnecessary doubt on the bar and your survey. A more proper notation would be “bar presumed to be set by Tom Jones found with damaged cap in harmony with the other found Smith bars”.

Professional Surveyors often have to speculate or hypothesis on both the source and the reputation of markers we find based on our experience and knowledge of the area. We are detectives uncovering evidence to use on our survey. We are required to form a professional opinion on the origin of any found monument based on research, monument characteristics, knowledge of the area, and the types of monuments set by previous surveyors that worked in the area. A surveyor can demonstrate his knowledge of the area and previous surveyors by explaining the presumed origin. For instance, Moser & Associates surveyed around Newton in the 1970’s and 1980’s and always used ½” rebar cut very smooth, evidently by a power saw. Their bars are easy to distinguish from those cut with a hacksaw or rebar cutter.

So in the Newton area a reference to the origin might be “Found smooth cut rebar similar to the size and style set by Moser and Associates in the 1970’s & 1980’s”.

The City of Marion has many 1” solid steel markers at the block corners that had to have been set in the late 1800’s or early 1900’s, and have been used by surveyors since that time. No one alive knows who set the block corners.

When doing a survey in Marion it would be a misleading to label them just “origin unknown”. A more accurate reference to the origin would be “standard block corner commonly found in the area.”

There a number of purposes for a plat of survey. One of those purposes is to sell your survey to others, especially following surveyors. Surveyors should do that by telling them what you did and why you did it. This gives future surveyors the confidence to accept and use the same markers that you accepted. The use of the term “Origin Unknown” raises red flags. A red flag that perhaps the surveyor didn’t do a good job of research, a red flag the surveyor wasn’t sure of the monument, a red flag that the surveyor wasn’t familiar with the area and what previous surveyors commonly set for markers. So avoid using “Origin Unknown” unless you have absolutely no clue on the history of the monument. In explaining your survey almost any statement is of more value to the following surveyors than “Origin Unknown”. Acceptance of found monuments is predominantly based on reputation and acceptance by land owners and the mere fact that we do not know which surveyor physically set the bar should never be the primary reason to disregard an existing monument.

In summary, “origin unknown” refers to the source of the monument based on the professional opinion of the surveyor as it relates to the current survey and surveyor. It literally means how the surveyor knew that there was something there to find. It does not mean we don’t know who physically placed the marker. “Origin unknown” is of little value and may send up red flags to future surveyors that the current surveyor never meant to do.

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