

America's School Trust Library

A building made of records.

AN OREGON NONPROFIT PUBLIC BENEFIT CORPORATION • SCHOOLTRUSTS.ORG



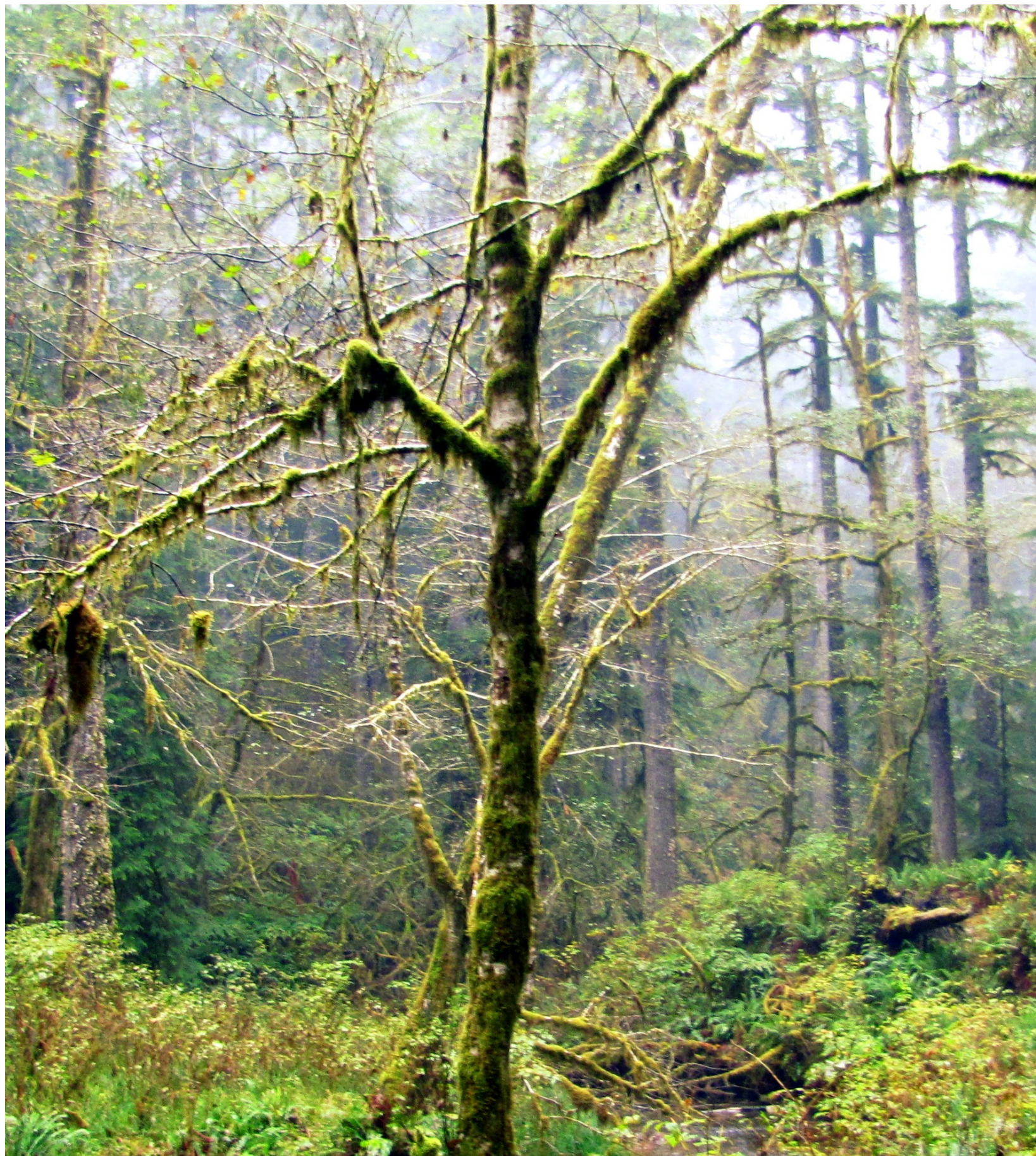


FIGURE 1. The Elliott, Coos County. School trust land for most of a century. In 2022 the State Land Board decoupled the Elliott from the Common School Fund; a \$221 million payment ended its obligation to earn for Oregon's schools. The Library keeps the record of it and takes no position on it. – Oregon Department of Forestry photograph (cropped); Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.0

Where the record lives now

In 1785, two years before the Constitutional Convention, Congress decided that one square mile in every township of the western surveys would belong to the schools. Not to a church. Not to a governor. To the children who would live there.

The land was surveyed, granted, sold, leased, bought back, and in many places forgotten (Figure 1). Roughly 20 states still hold school trust lands today. The money still moves. The obligations are still live. But the record of all of it sits scattered across state agencies, county courthouses, university basements, and the hard drives of volunteers who mean well and will not live forever.

America's School Trust Library exists to gather that record and keep it. Freely. Neutrally. Permanently. It takes no side in any case or campaign.

That last sentence is not modesty. It is the whole design.

“Better an empty shelf than an unearned label.”

AMERICA'S SCHOOL TRUST LIBRARY, 2026

1785: a square mile in every township

The Land Ordinance of 1785 solved a practical problem. The new nation had land and no money. It decided to pay for schools with the one asset it had.

The Ordinance directed that the western lands be surveyed into townships six miles square, and that Section 16 of every township be reserved for the support of public schools within it. Congress kept the reservation as each new public-land state entered the Union, and wrote the terms into the act admitting it (Figure 2, Figure 3).

As the surveys moved west, one section no longer raised what a school needed. Congress doubled the grant: Sections 16 and 36.

Oregon entered the Union in 1859. Its Admissions Act carried the grant, and the Oregon Constitution accepted it as a trust: the land and its proceeds held for the common schools, and for nothing else.

This is the part that surprises people. These were not appropriations, to be renewed or cut. They were grants with conditions attached, accepted by the states in their own founding documents. A promise made once, meant to run forever.

Six decisions of the United States Supreme Court have said what that promise requires. They span 137 years of unbroken authority, and they are the reason a library about this can be built at all.



FIGURE 2. “Schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.” — Northwest Ordinance, 1787, Article 3. The sentence is easy to quote and hard to enforce, which is most of the history of the school lands in one line. — 19th-c. commemorative broadside; Wikimedia Commons, public domain

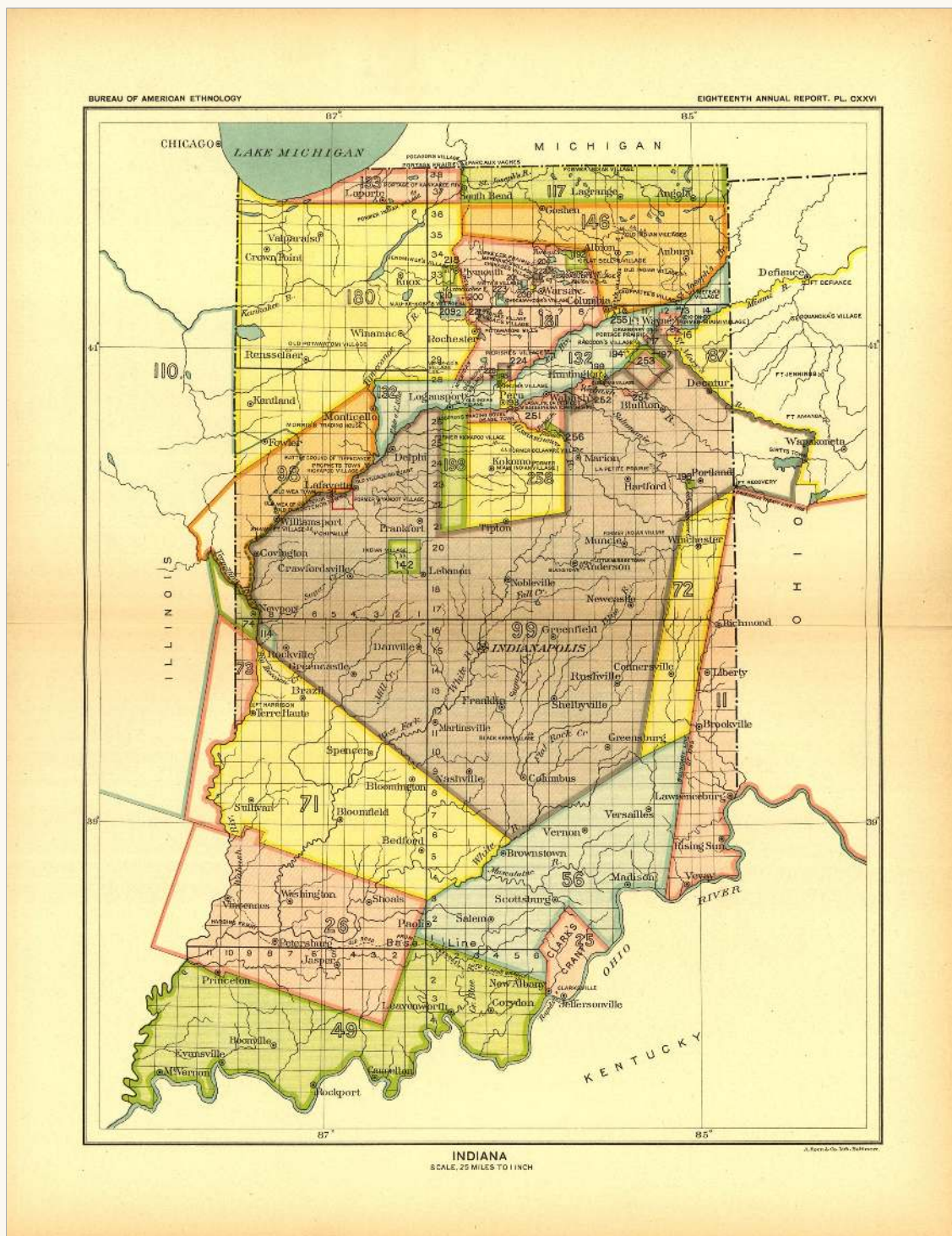


FIGURE 3. Charles Royce compiled the maps of the Indian land cessions that made the public domain; they were published in 1899. Nearly every school section in this booklet begins somewhere on a sheet like this one. – C. C. Royce, *Indian Land Cessions in the United States* (1899), plate 32; Wikimedia Commons, public domain

The grid is the deed.

A township is a survey unit, not a town (Figures 4 and 5). It is a square six miles on a side, divided into thirty-six sections of one square mile each, 640 acres apiece, numbered back and forth beginning at the northeast corner (Figure 4).

Section 16 sits near the middle. Section 36 sits at the southeast corner. In Oregon and the other states admitted under that later standard, both were set aside for the schools before a settler filed a claim or a town was platted. The reservation came first. Everything else was laid out around it.

This is why the promise is legible on the ground. The corners are still findable in a hayfield or a road ditch, marked by posts, stone mounds, and later brass caps. Where the trust land was sold, the proceeds were to stay in a permanent fund and only the earnings be spent. Where it was kept, the state manages it as a trustee.

Either way, a square mile of ground is the origin of the obligation.

THE UNIT OF THE PROMISE

A township, numbered

Six miles square, thirty-six sections, numbered back and forth from the northeast corner, reversing at every row.

6	5	4	3	2	1
7	8	9	10	11	12
18	17	16	15	14	13
19	20	21	22	23	24
30	29	28	27	26	25
31	32	33	34	35	36

ONE MILE — THE WIDTH OF ONE SECTION
One section is one square mile — 640 acres. A township holds thirty-six of them.

Sections 16 and 36, reserved for the support of common schools.
Section 16 was reserved from 1785. States admitted from 1850 — Oregon among them, in 1859 — received section 36 as well.

Drawn for the Library after the U.S. Public Land Survey System convention (Act of May 18, 1796, and s

FIGURE 4. Thirty-six square miles, numbered back and forth from the northeast corner. Section 16 near the center, Section 36 at the southeast, reserved for schools before the first claim was filed. — Drawn for the Library; PLSS convention

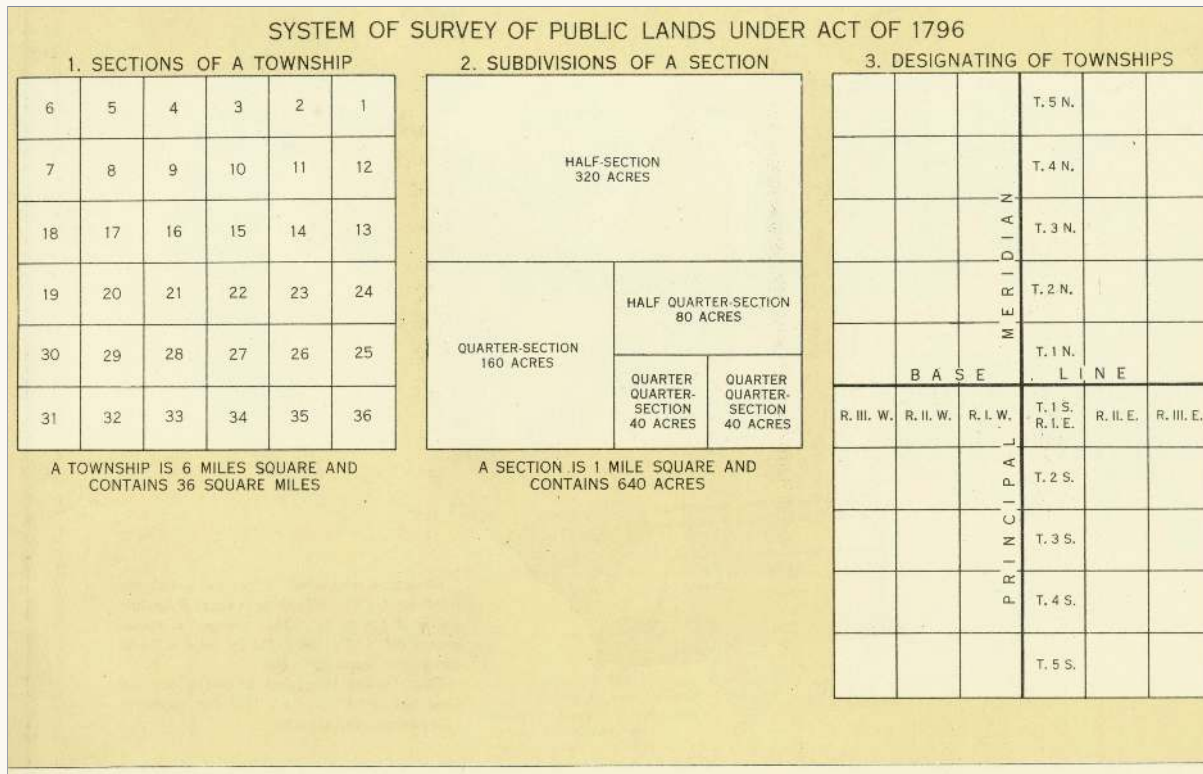


FIGURE 5. The survey's own textbook. A period plate of the system of survey of the public lands under the Act of 1796 — the township, the subdivision of its thirty-six sections, and their numbering, as the General Land Office taught it. — Wikimedia Commons, public domain

The land kept its history. The paperwork did not.

Every state that holds school trust lands has a record of them, and almost none of those records live in one place.

The granting act is in a federal statute book. The constitutional language is in a state code. The conveyances are in county deeds and land patents (Figure 6). The fund balances are in annual reports that change format and address every few years. The decisions are scattered through court reporters, and the tools that make them searchable were built for lawyers. The history, the part that explains why any of it happened, is in the files of researchers, retired agency staff, and volunteers (Figure 7).

Those files do not survive a move, a failed drive, or a funeral. This is not a failure of care. It is the ordinary fate of a record with no keeper.

A generation that wants to know what its state did with the school lands should not have to reconstruct it from scattered boxes. This one did.

“A record bound to any outcome dies with it.”

WHAT THE LIBRARY SEEKS, 2026

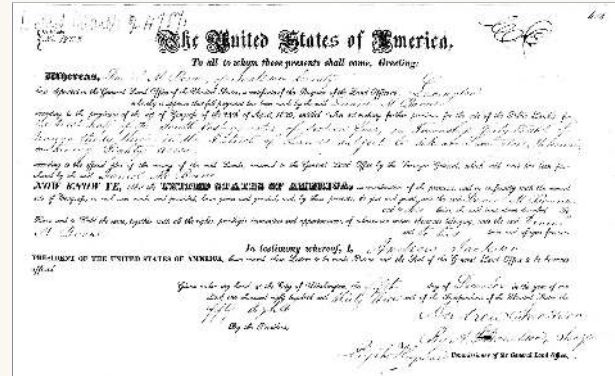


FIGURE 6. A patent is the moment land leaves the public domain. Documents like this one — an 1833 General Land Office patent — decide whether a section was granted, sold, exchanged, or never conveyed at all, and they are held in more places than any one reader can visit. — Bureau of Land Management records; Wikimedia Commons, public domain



FIGURE 7. Santiam country, 1920. Logged-over land near Mill City, photographed for the federal record. Trust land pays by being used. What a fund report records as revenue, a photograph records as this. Both belong in the file. – U.S. Forest Service; National Archives (299198), public domain

THE MAP

One township, then a continent

The survey that began with one square mile in 1785 reached the Pacific. Roughly 20 states still hold school trust lands today (Figure 8). The shading shows which; the count moves as states dissolve or restore their trusts.

Behind every shaded state is the same architecture: a federal grant, a state constitution that accepted it, land or a permanent fund that remains, and a record of what was done with both.

HOW TO READ THIS MAP

-  Still holds school trust lands granted by the United States of federal origin.
 -  Holds school trust lands under a state-created or special statehood-act trust (Texas, Hawaii).
 -  Received a federal grant of school sections and no longer holds the land.
 -  Never received a federal grant of school sections.
-  Oregon, outlined heavier, received sections 16 and 36 of every township of federal origin in 1859.

Boundaries: U.S. Census Bureau cartographic boundary files, public domain. Albers conic equal-area, composite; Alaska and Hawaii repositioned, Alaska at a

FIGURE 8. The states still holding school trust lands, drawn from the Library's own state files. Legend and notes on the plate. — Drawn for the Library

THE MAP — 11

Seventy-two holdings

America's School Trust Library is an Oregon nonprofit public benefit corporation. Its Articles of Incorporation were filed on July 21, 2026, Oregon Registry No. 259005891. It holds Oregon Department of Justice charitable registration No. 72571. Its Bylaws, its Conflict-of-Interest policy, and its Constitution with a Readers' Bill of Rights are published in full, in their adopted text, at schooltrusts.org/governance.

The whole Library serves at schooltrusts.org: 439 pages, full-text search, and a public corrections ledger. There are reading rooms for the cases, a map room, counting-house pages for the state funds, and a file for each state (Figures 9 and 10). Inside a state's file the order holds: the federal grant, then the state's constitutional and statutory language, then the decisions, then the money and what it pays out, then the gaps the Library has flagged for further research.

As of August 3 the catalog stood at 72 holdings.

Its long-term work is a hornbook of school-trust law: a single citable reference to the law of the roughly 20 trust-land states, built in public with its sources shown. That work today holds a first claim set, 13 claims drawn from the six governing decisions of the United States Supreme Court, every quotation machine-checked against the source text and the failures held out for repair rather than quietly fixed.

Everything is free. There is no fee, no paywall, and no account required to read. A person who disagrees with everything the advocates believe can use the same shelves and find them unchanged.



FIGURE 9. The same arithmetic, a thousand miles east: a one-room school in Ohio. Roughly 20 states still hold school trust lands. The states that sold theirs early kept only the fund, and the fund is what is left to audit. — Photograph by Nyttend; Wikimedia Commons, public domain

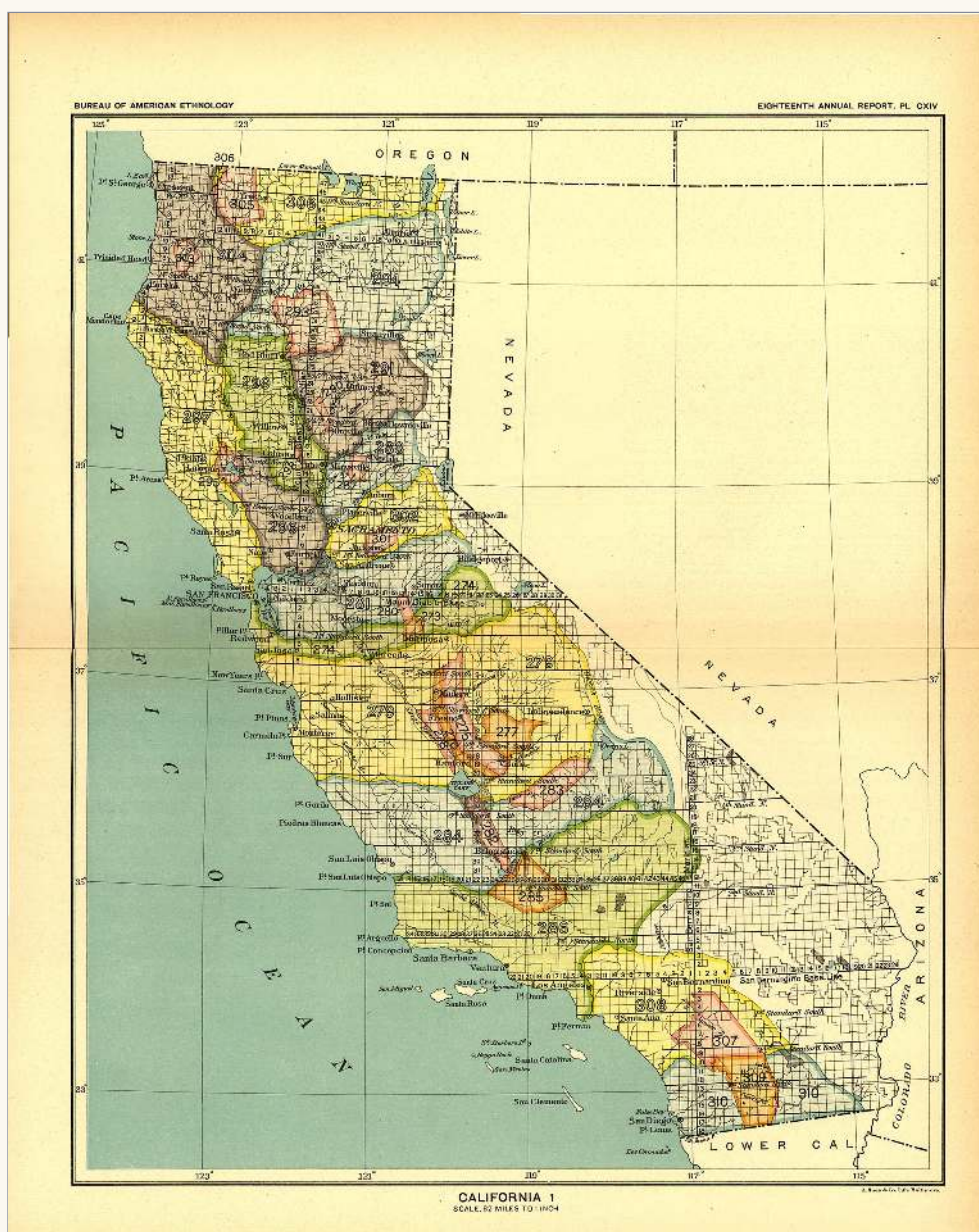


FIGURE 10. One state, one cession record, one date. A state file in the Library starts here and works forward: the grant, the constitution, the decisions, the money, the gaps. – C. C. Royce (1899), California; Smithsonian Institution report; Wikimedia Commons, public domain

*“An advocate who cites a library it controls
persuades no one.”*

WHAT THE LIBRARY SEEKS, 2026

The label it will not give away

The Library has one label it will not give away.

Verified means a second, independent reviewer has checked the item against its source and signed for it (Figure 11). The Library does not yet have that reviewer. So nothing in the catalog carries the label, not one of the 72 holdings, including the ones its own founders wrote. Better an empty shelf than an unearned label.

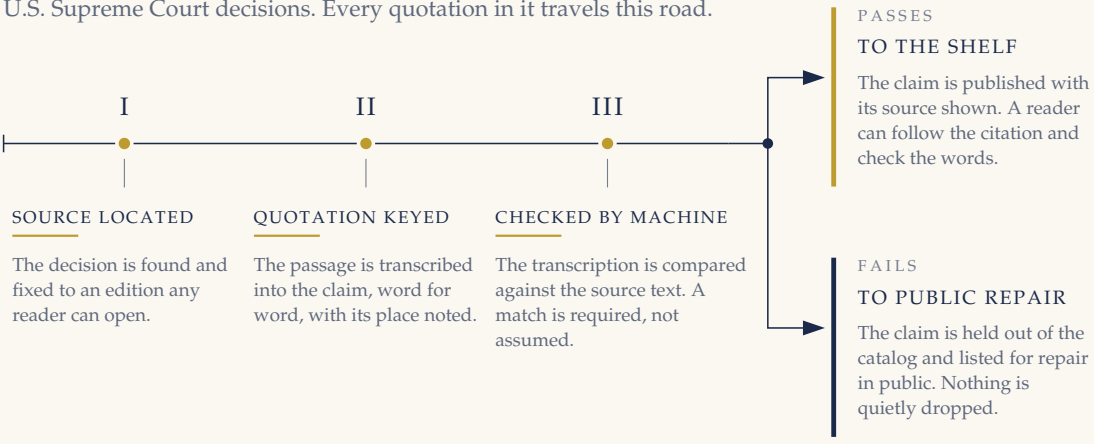
Nothing on display pretends to be finished. Drafts wear the banner on every page, and the site itself still says, at the top, that the board has not yet endorsed it. When the Library is wrong it says so in public, in a corrections ledger anyone can read. The first three entries in that ledger correct the Library's own outdated statements about itself.

Independence is built the same way. Advocates for School Trust Lands and Oregon Advocates for School Trust Lands press the case for the promise in courtrooms and statehouses. That is their work, and the Library takes no part in it. It takes no position in any litigation and accepts control from no advocacy organization, including the ones that founded the movement around it.

HOW A CLAIM GETS ONTO THE SHELF

What a claim must survive

The Library’s first claim set holds thirteen claims, drawn from the six governing U.S. Supreme Court decisions. Every quotation in it travels this road.



“Better an empty shelf than an unearned label.”

Passing this road puts a claim on the shelf. It does not earn the Verified label — that takes a second, independent reviewer the Library does not yet have. Nothing in the catalog carries that label today.

Practice described in the Editorial Standards of America’s School Trust Library, schooltrusts.org.

FIGURE 11. A claim’s journey through the Library: source located, quotation keyed, machine-checked against the source text — then to the shelf, or to public repair. – Drawn for the Library

THE PEOPLE

Three people, and a rule that does not depend on them



FIGURE 12. Dave Sullivan, president and treasurer, with Barbara K. Sullivan, the Library's founding treasurer. He came to the school lands as a reader looking for a record and found it scattered.

– Sullivan family photograph, rights held

Three people sign for this.

Dave Sullivan is president and treasurer. He taught information systems at Oregon State University, where he holds an emeritus appointment, and he came to the school lands as a reader looking for a record and found it scattered (Figure 12).

Kenneth “Mike” Magee is secretary (Figure 14). He founded four Oregon companies over fifty years — software, personal computers, microprocessor upgrades, wine — and he keeps the corporate record here: the adopted texts, the certifications, the dates.

Barry Shane is a director (Figure 13).

The board is small on purpose, and its governing documents are published so that any reader can see exactly what these three may and may not do. The standard is written down because standards outlive the people who set them. The shelves are meant to outlast all three.

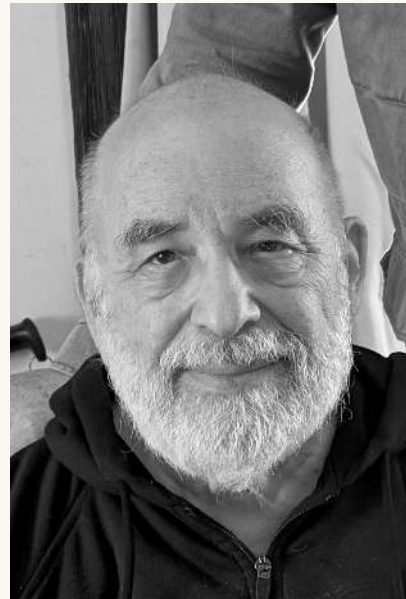


FIGURE 13. Barry Shane, director.

— Photograph supplied by the director; rights held



FIGURE 14. Kenneth “Mike” Magee, secretary. The first printing left this frame empty and said why. He supplied the photograph on August 12, 2026.

— Photograph supplied by the secretary; rights held



FIGURE 15. Washington, November 1939. Crowds file past Magna Carta, deposited at the Library of Congress for wartime safekeeping. A record kept in public is a record people come to check. – Harris & Ewing photograph; Library of Congress, public domain

Three doors

Read. Go to schooltrusts.org and search it (Figure 15). Start with your own state's file, or with the township map. Reading asks nothing of you: no fee, no account.

Correct. If something is wrong, say so. The challenge channel costs nothing and the ledger is public. A correction that names the error is the most useful thing a stranger can give a library.

Keep. The record is kept by people: librarians, archivists, teachers, retired agency staff, directors, and the person in your state who has the box of papers nobody else has. The Library wants the names of the ones you know. Every appointment and every label stays the Library's own judgment, which is what makes a recommendation worth giving. Gifts of money help. Gifts of documents and time help more.

“The question is whether Oregon’s record deserves a keeper built to outlast us.”

DAVE SULLIVAN, 2026

America's School Trust Library keeps the public record of America's school-land promise, freely, neutrally, and permanently, so that every debate, every reform, and every classroom question can rest on facts that no one controls and everyone can check.

It takes no side in any case or campaign.

72 holdings as of August 3, 2026. None yet labeled Verified.

SCHOOLTRUSTS.ORG

America's School Trust Library · An Oregon nonprofit public benefit corporation · Articles filed July 21, 2026 · Oregon Registry No. 259005891 · Oregon DOJ Charitable Activities Registration No. 72571 · Governing documents adopted August 3, 2026, published in full at schooltrusts.org/governance

This screen edition is free to every reader; a printed edition will state its run size and cost. Written and designed for the Library by its founder with AI assistance (Claude, Anthropic). Photographs and plates as credited: Oregon Department of Forestry; Wikimedia Commons contributors; Library of Congress (Harris & Ewing); U.S. National Archives; Bureau of Land Management records; C. C. Royce, Indian Land Cessions in the United States (1899); Sullivan family.

Holdings count as of August 3, 2026. Web addresses verified August 10, 2026.

Second edition, August 12, 2026: the secretary's photograph, absent from the first, is now printed.