

factory jobs for blacks, the authors say. And many of the most militant civil rights activists within the unions were Communists, who were forced out as anti-communist sentiment grew. And, finally, the unions themselves abandoned ideological

militance and simply tried to win for their members a greater share of the nation's postwar abundance. As a result, the authors observe, unions played only a small role in the "second" civil rights movement during the 1950s and '60s.

Checkerboard, U.S.A.

"Patterns on the American Land" by Vernon Carstensen, in *Publius* (Fall 1988), 1017 Gladfelter Hall, Temple University 025-25, Philadelphia, Pa. 19122.

In 1785, Congress passed a law, now obscure, that was to change the face of America during the next century.

The Land Ordinance of 1785 provided for the division of the nation's then-limited public lands west of the Appalachian Mountains into townships six miles square, subdivided into 36 one-mile-square (or 640-acre) "sections."

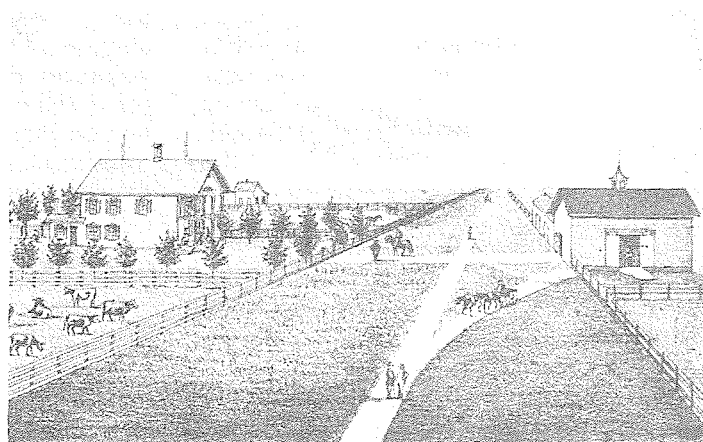
"Like bees or ants or other well organized societies, Americans, once they fixed upon the rectangular survey, were inflexible in their devotion to the idea," writes Vernon Carstensen, of the University of Washington. Gradually, Congress extended the rectangular grid westward, eventually encompassing 69 percent of the land area of the continental United States.

In the original 13 colonies, as in most places throughout history, land was divided more or less haphazardly, which "invited a host of misunderstandings about boundary lines between individual holdings." However, between 1800 and 1900, more than five million rectangular farms and ranches were marked out in the West under the section system, as were many towns and counties. Because, as poet Robert Frost put it, "good fences make good neighbors," much conflict was avoided.

In 1804, Congress allowed the sale of "quarter sections" of 160 acres, and that

came to be viewed as the ideal size for the family farm. (Today, many Western and Midwestern farmers and ranchers refer to their holdings simply as "half sections," "forties," or "eighties.") Rectangular fields "virtually decreed straight-line tillage," says Carstensen, until 20th century researchers discovered that it spurred soil erosion.

The 1785 Land Ordinance also set aside



The ruler-straight "section" roads of the West and Midwest, as in this view of 19th-century Minnesota, are a legacy of the 1785 grid survey. Curves would have chopped up farmers' square fields.

one section in each township for the common schools. Much of this land was sold "early and cheap," and the proceeds wasted by local officials. But the precedent later allowed educators and others to demand and win local government support for public schools. That, writes Carstensen, may be the chief legacy of the little-known law that left much of the American landscape a checkerboard.