40 Sections of the Public Land Survey System

Edgar Rodriguez

An ORDINANCE for aſcertaining the Mode of diſpoſing of LANDS in the WESTERN TERRITORY.

the territory ceded by individual ſtates, to the United States, which has been purchaſed of the Indian inhabitants,

divide the ſaid territory into townſhips of ſix miles ſquare, by lines running due north and ſouth, and others croſſing theſe at right angles,

two dollars for every mile in length

The firſt line running north and ſouth as aforeſaid, ſhall begin on the river Ohio.

ſhall extend throughout the whole territory

The geographer ſhall deſignate the townſhips or fractional parts of townſhips, by numbers progreſſively from ſouth to north; always beginning each range with No. 1;

The lines ſhall be meaſured with a chain

the townſhips reſpectively, ſhall be marked by ſubdiviſions into lots of one mile ſquare, or 640 acres,

The geographer and ſerveyors, ſhall pay the utmoſt attention to the variation of the magnetic needle; and ſhall run and note all lines by the true meridian,

Running across 70 percent of the territory of the United States, a reticular arrangement of invisible lines defines the American landscape. The Public Land Survey System is a series of rectangular surveys that had the initial objective to subdivide and describe the lands owned by the Federal government of the United States. These areas of land originally included the territories ceded by the thirteen original states and the acquisitions from native Indians and foreign nations and were considered public domain. Today, most of the surveyed land, which includes the area of 30 southern and western States, has now been sold and converted into private property.

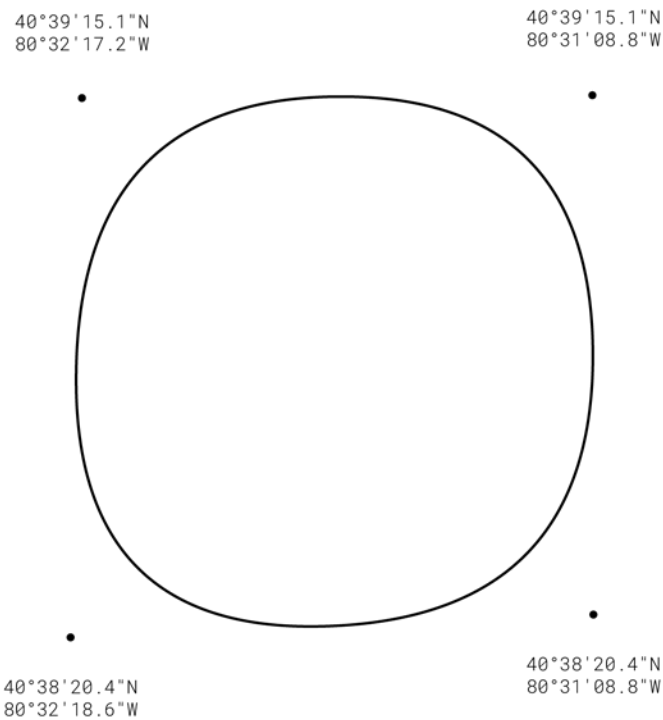
The implementation of this survey project was first described in the Land Ordinance of 1785 (fragments pictured on the opposite page.) This three-page document proposed by Thomas Jefferson contains, in a very succinct and practical way, the directions through which the surveys were to be executed. According to the Ordinance, the surveyors had to measure and divide the land into equally-sized squares and place permanent monuments at each section corner. The expected result was a 1-mile-square grid that expanded throughout the territory. This work was done with a compass, a Gunter's chain, and a few other surveying instruments.

This utopian protocol became the most influential ever in terms of the arrangement and the design of a country. Now, after 200 years of measuring, the grid has become a reality but not without a few modifications. Due to the curvature of the earth, it is geometrically impossible to preserve the strictness of the grid throughout the entire territory: The lines running parallel to the meridians tend to converge to the north. For this particular reason, adjustments that distort the geometry of some sections of the grid had to be applied.

Through a selection of 40 sections of the Public Land Survey System, this graphic essay makes visible the fluid and variable nature of a seemingly rigid concept like the grid. The geolocation of the four corners of each section determines the geometry of the curves depicted in this book. The legal ID of each section gives a name to its corresponding drawing following the format:

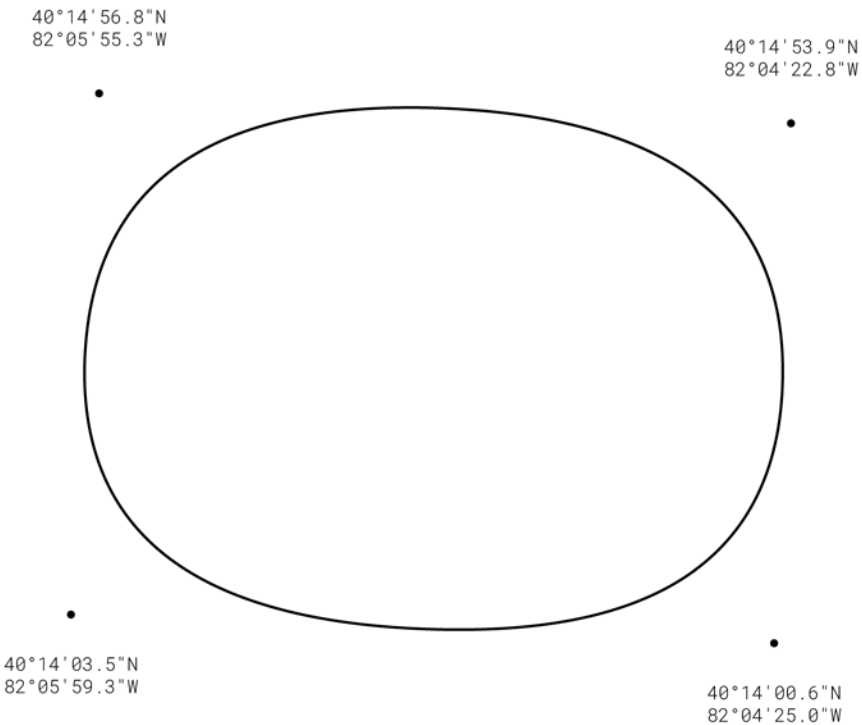
State/Principal Meridian Code/Township/Section Number

Beginning Point, East Liverpool, Ohio



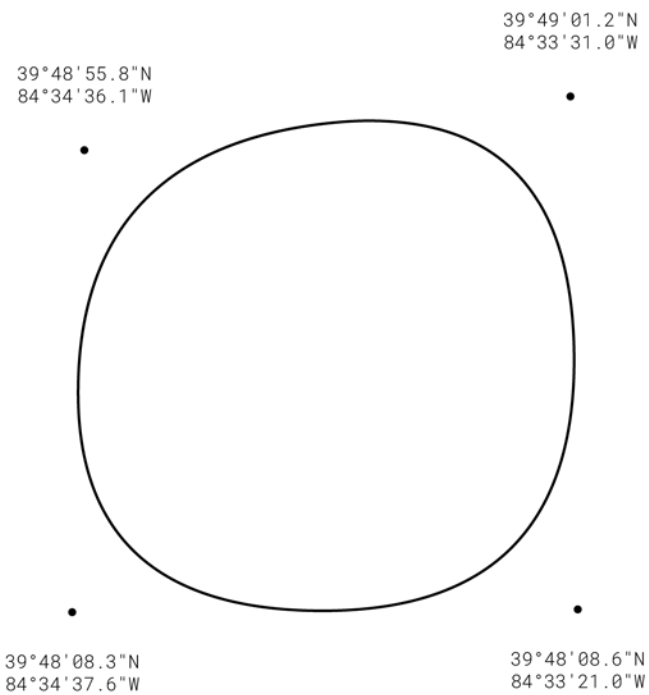
OH380060N0010W0S36

West Bedford, Ohio



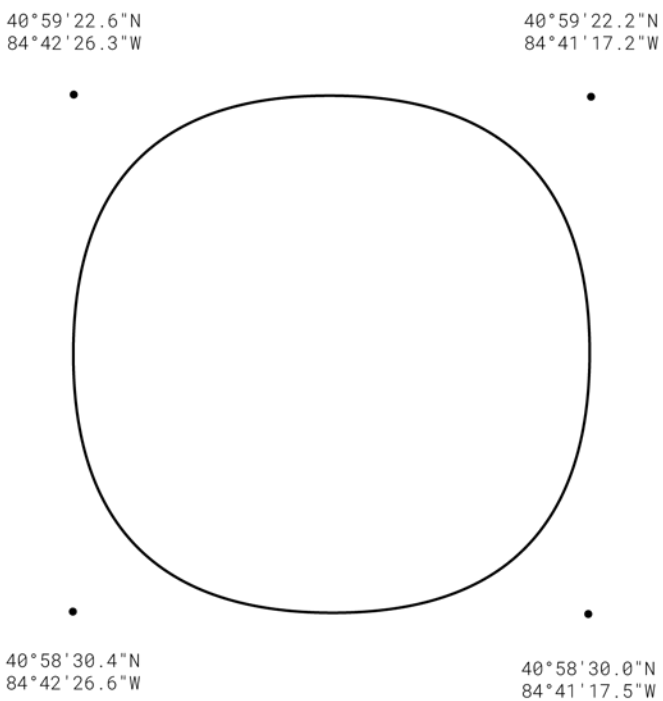
OH480050N0080W0S25

Lewisburg, Ohio



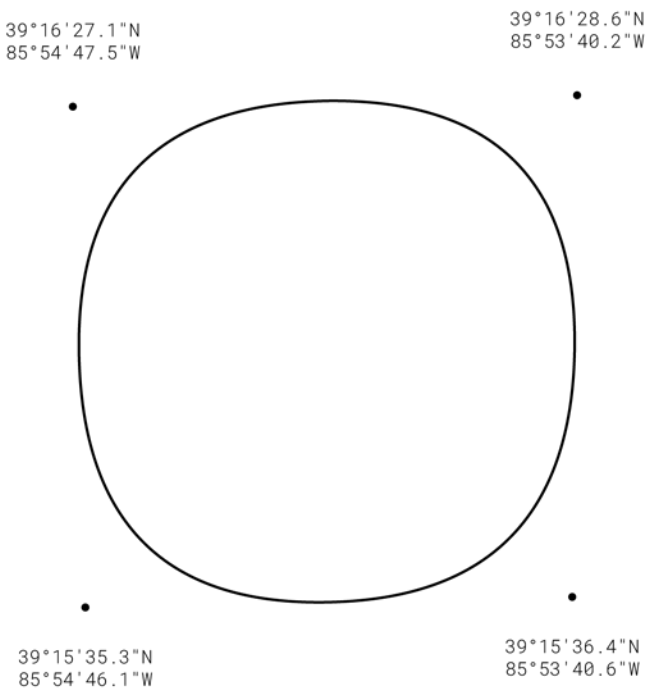
OH470060N0030E0S8

Logtown, Ohio



OH010010S0010E0S1

Columbus, Indiana



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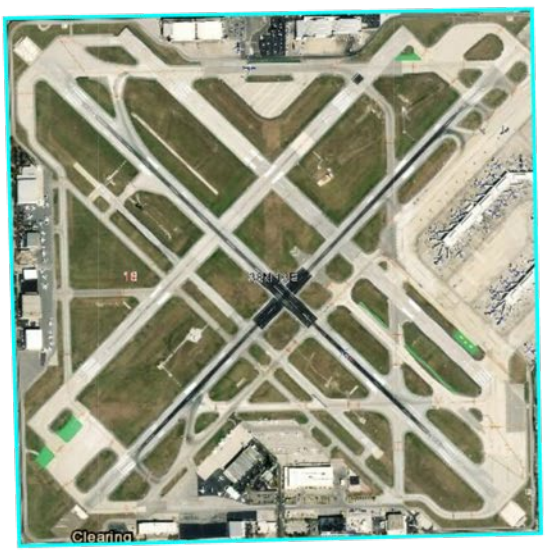
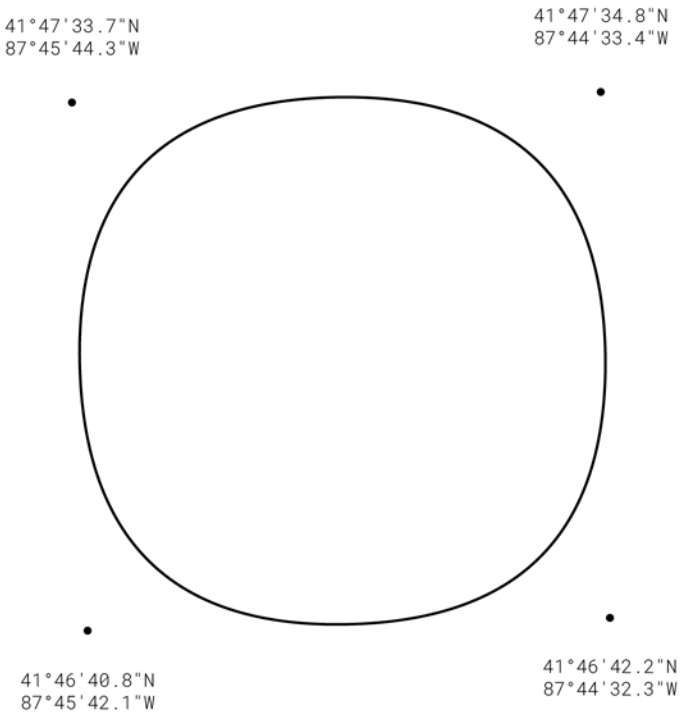


Chicago, Illinois



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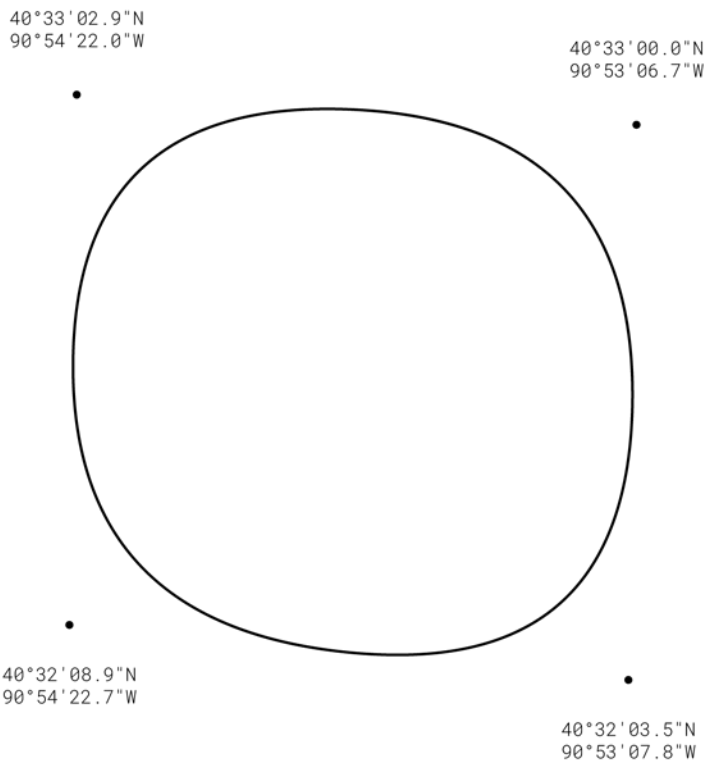
Blandinsville, Illinois



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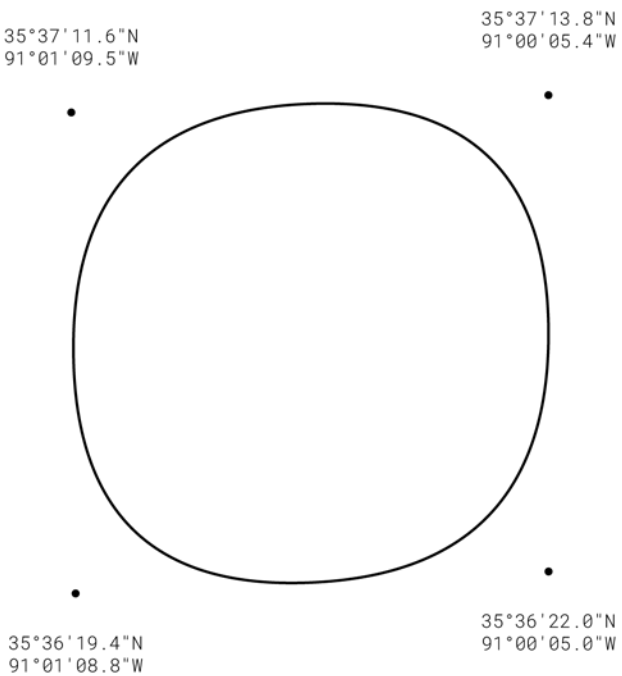
Grubbs, Arkansas



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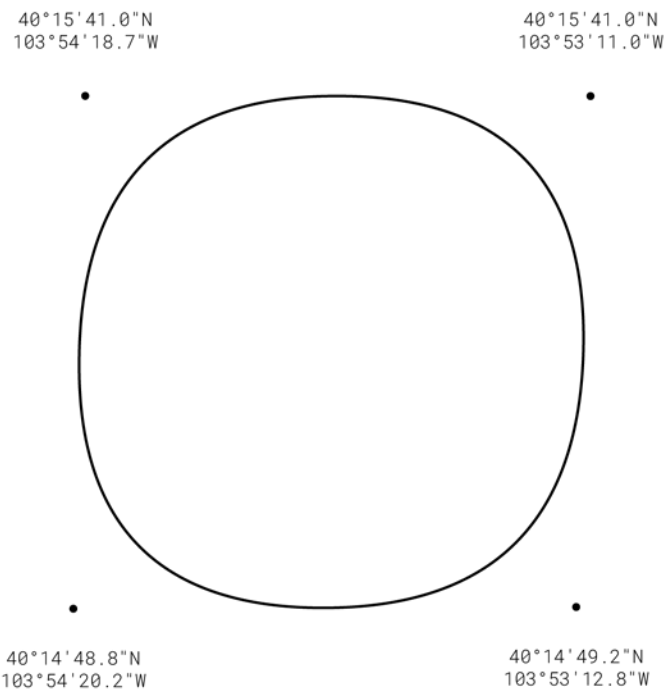
Fort Morgan, Colorado



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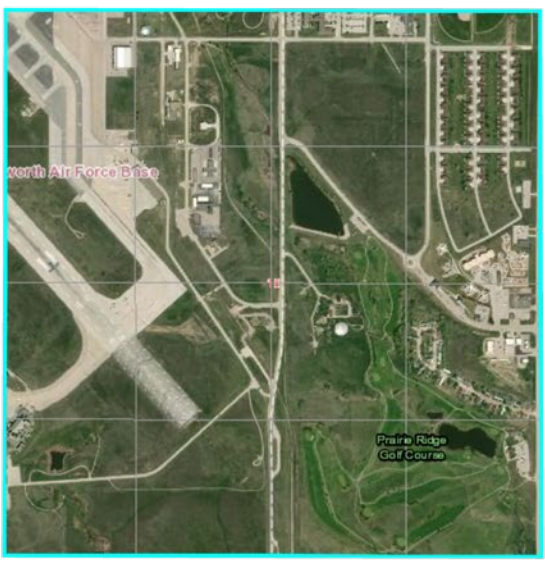
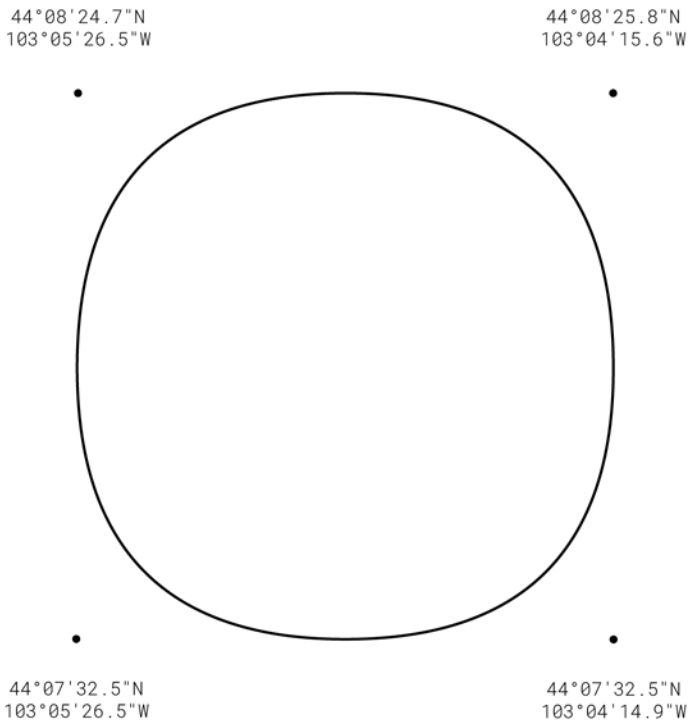
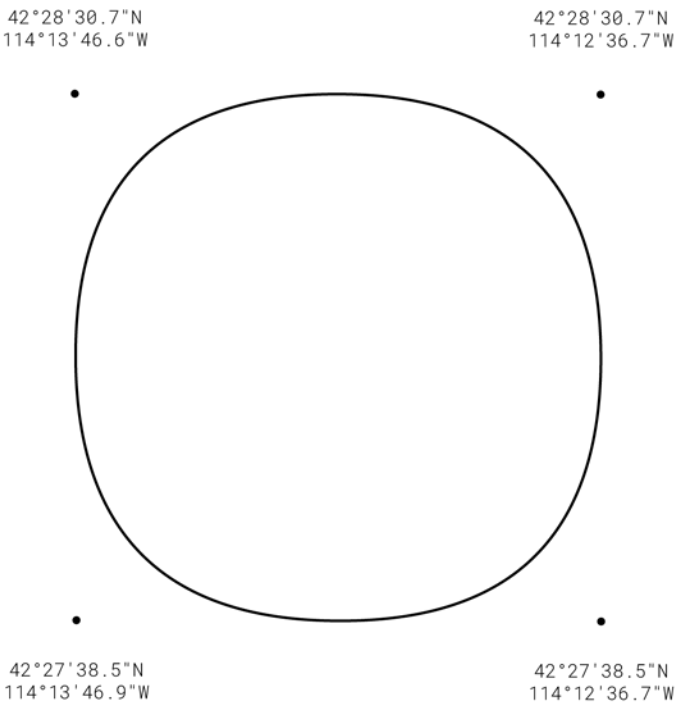


Ellsworth AFB, South Dakota



SD070020N0090E0SN180

Murtaugh, Idaho



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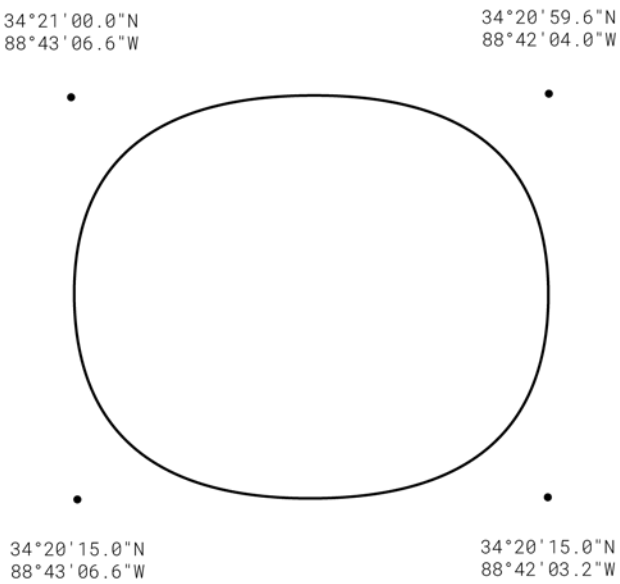
Saltillo, Mississippi



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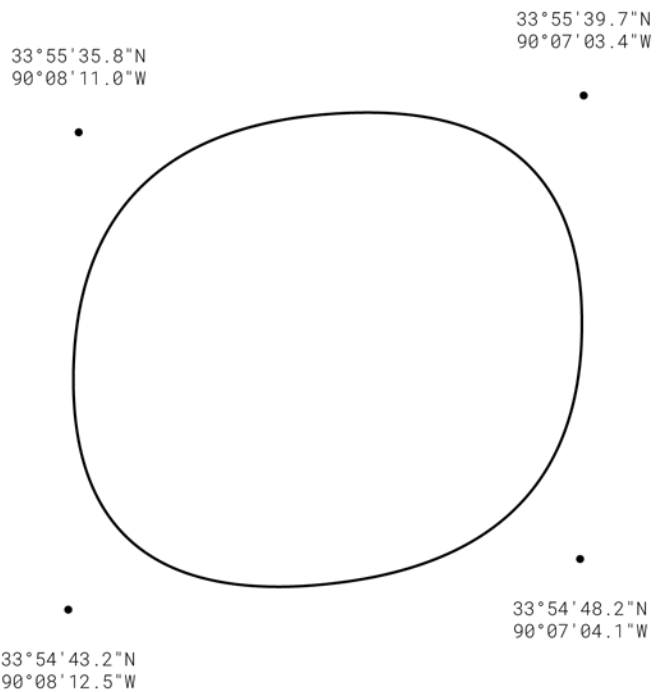
Effie, Mississippi



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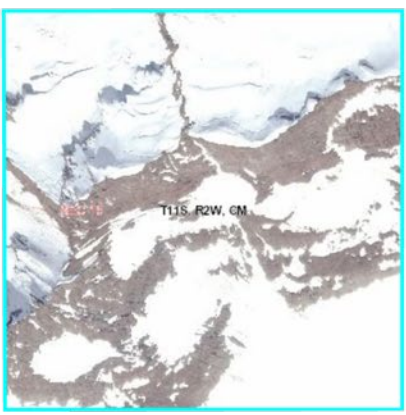
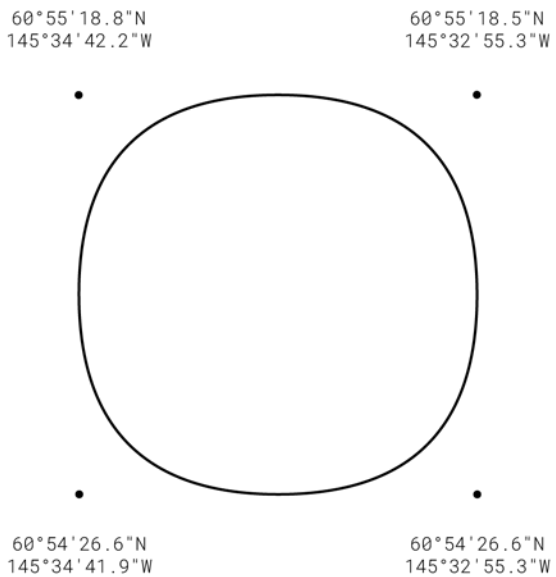


Chugach Schools, Alaska

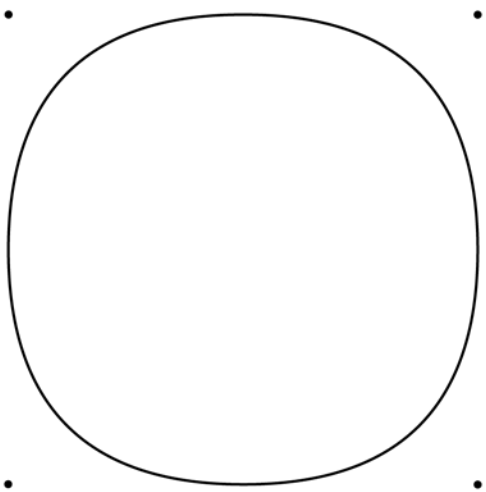


120110S0020W0SN15

Yukon Flats, Alaska

65°37'42.6"N
148°18'18.4"W

65°37'42.6"N
148°16'12.4"W

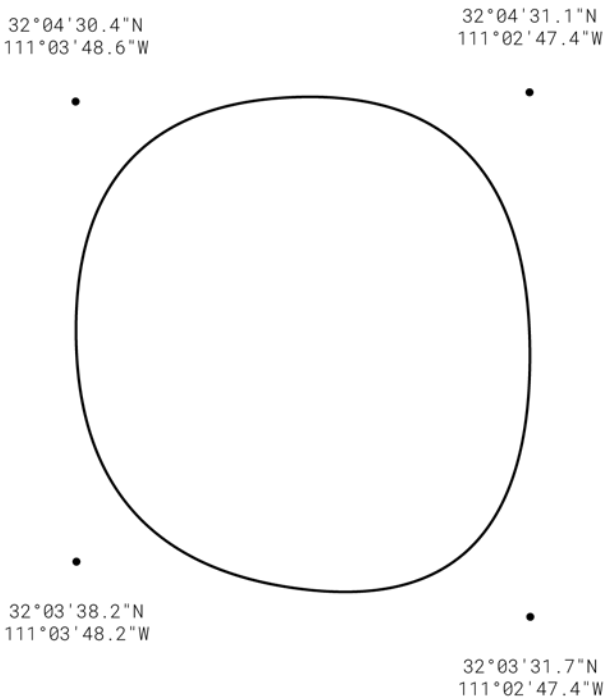


65°36'50.4"N
148°18'18.4"W

65°36'50.4"N
148°16'12.7"W

130090N0040W0SN12

Drexel Heights, Arizona



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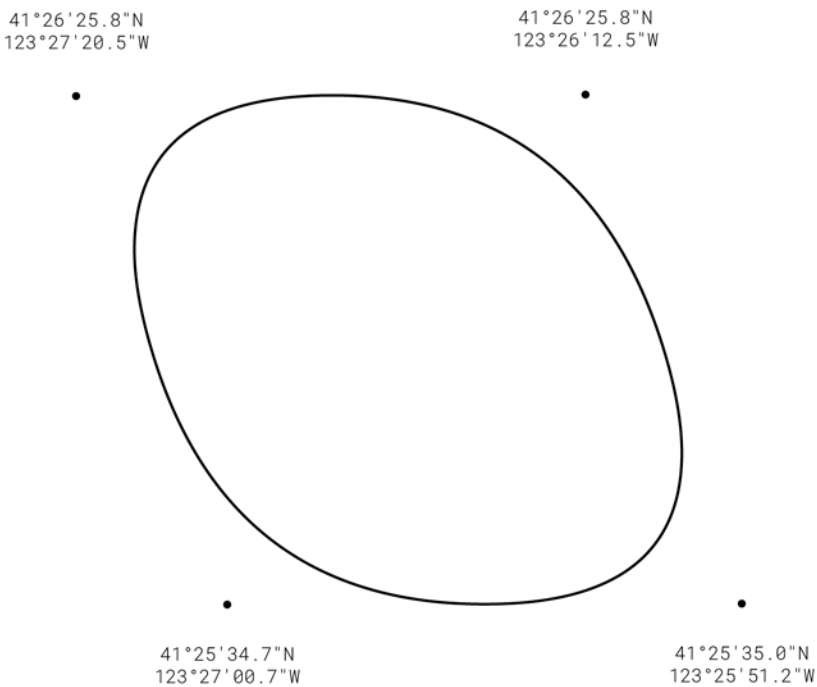
Somes Bar, California



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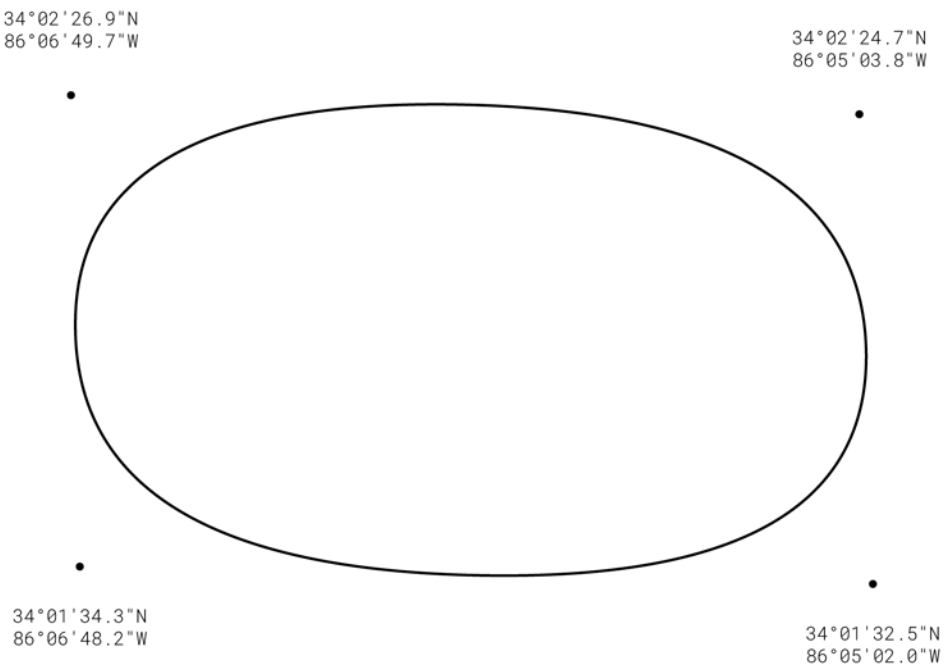
Attalla, Alabama

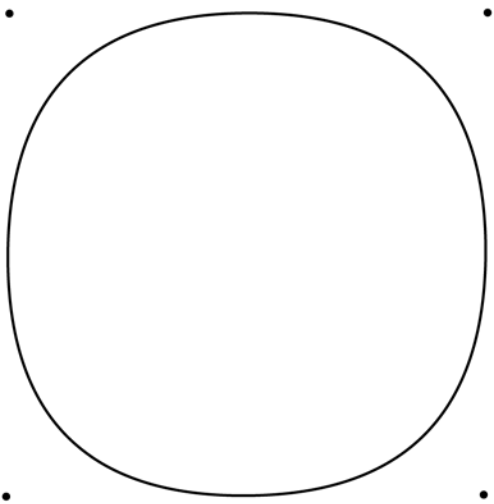


AL160110S0050E0SN340

Perkins, Oklahoma

36°01'44.8"N
96°59'53.9"W

36°01'44.8"N
96°58'49.8"W

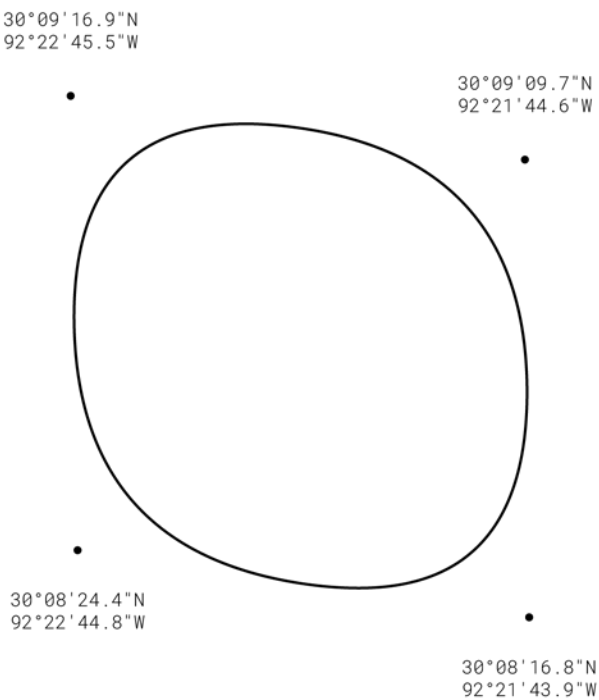


36°00'52.2"N
96°59'54.2"W

36°00'52.6"N
96°58'50.2"W

OK170180N0030E0SN210

Crowley, Louisiana



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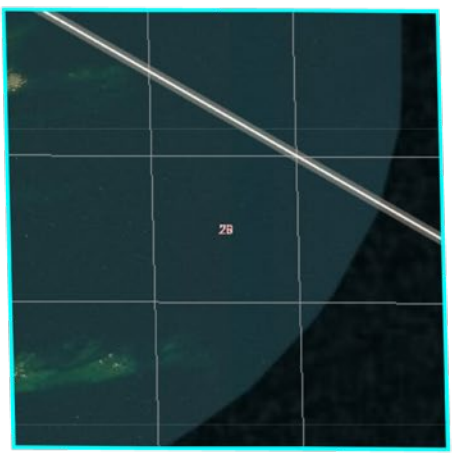
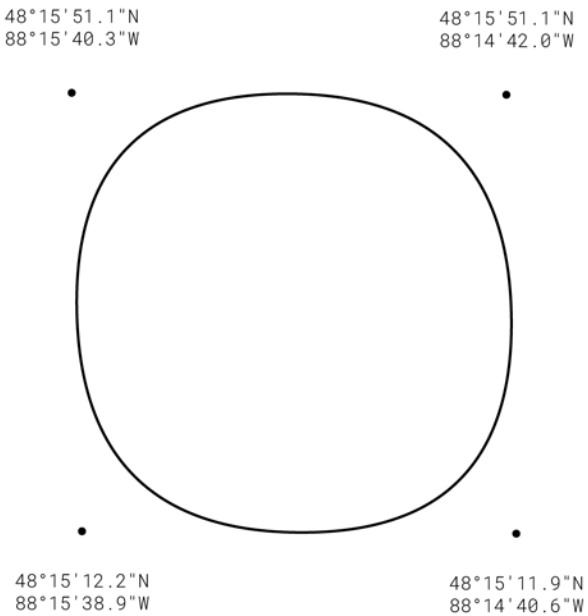
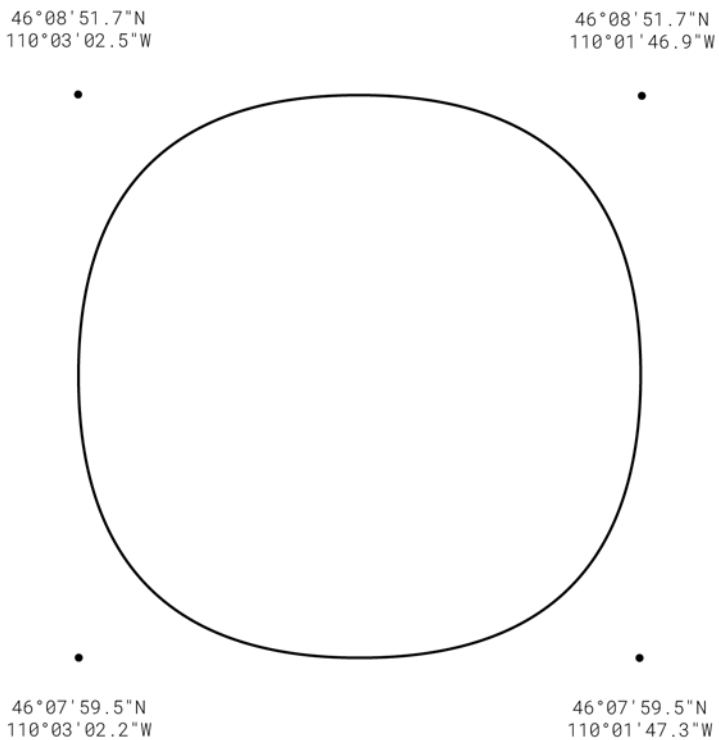


Lake Superior



MI190680N0310W0SN290

Melville, Montana

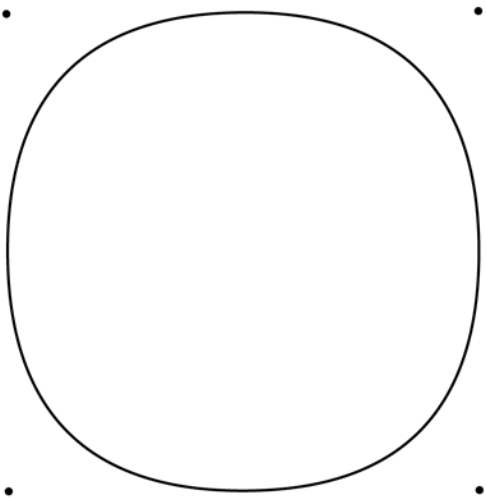


MT200050N0130E0SN360

California City, California

35°11'04.6"N
117°48'31.0"W

35°11'04.9"N
117°47'27.6"W

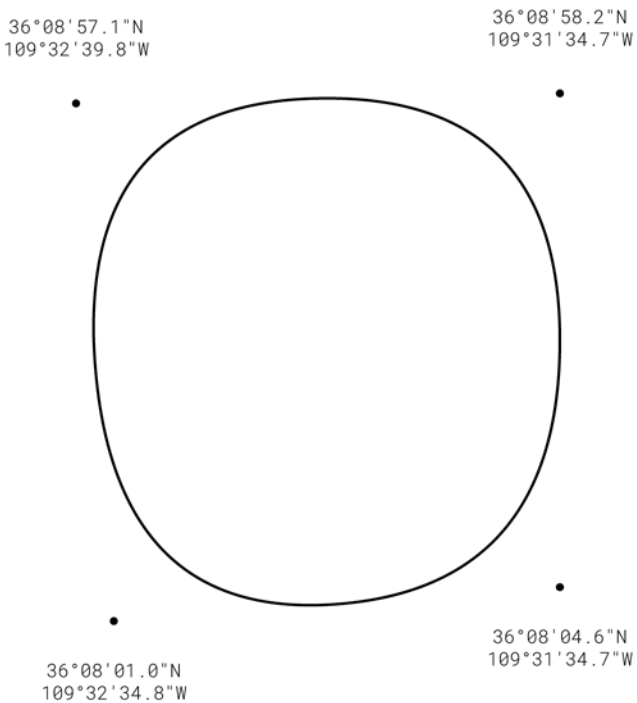


35°10'12.0"N
117°48'31.0"W

35°10'12.4"N
117°47'27.6"W

CA210320S0390E0SN040

Chinle, Arizona



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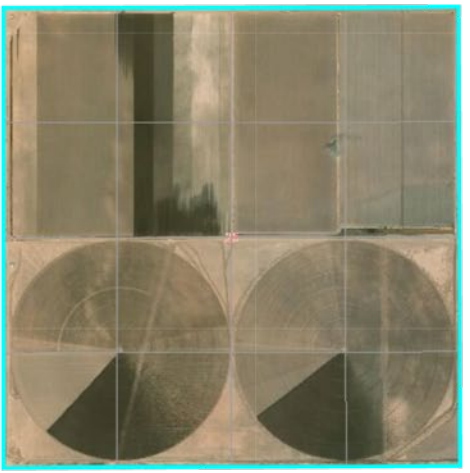
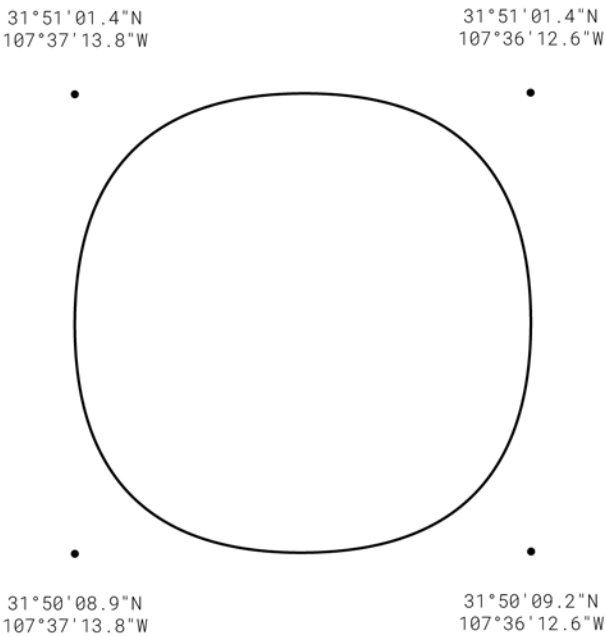


Columbus, New Mexico



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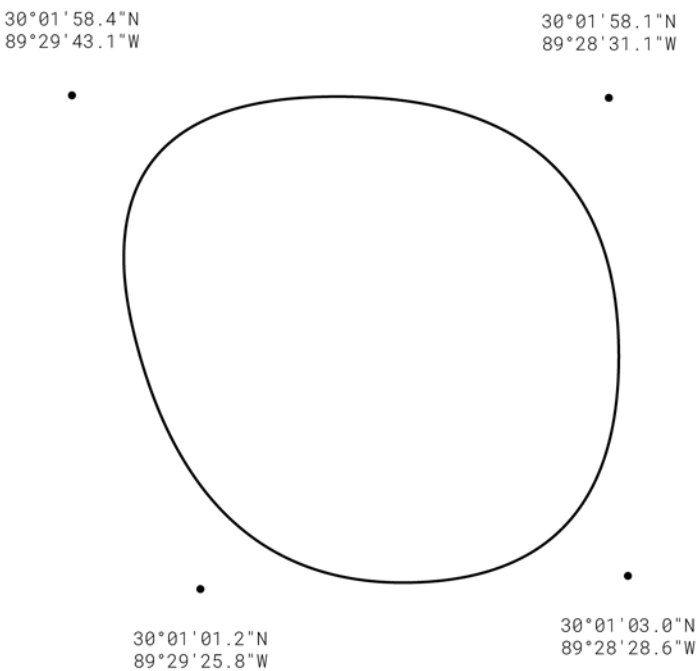
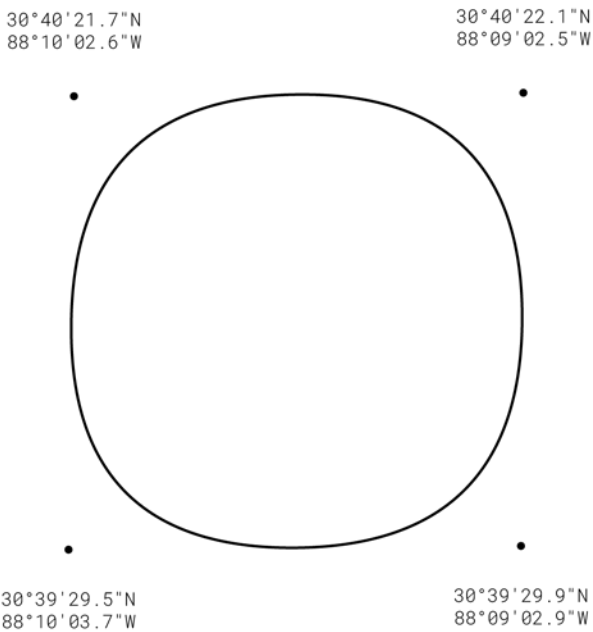
District E, Louisiana



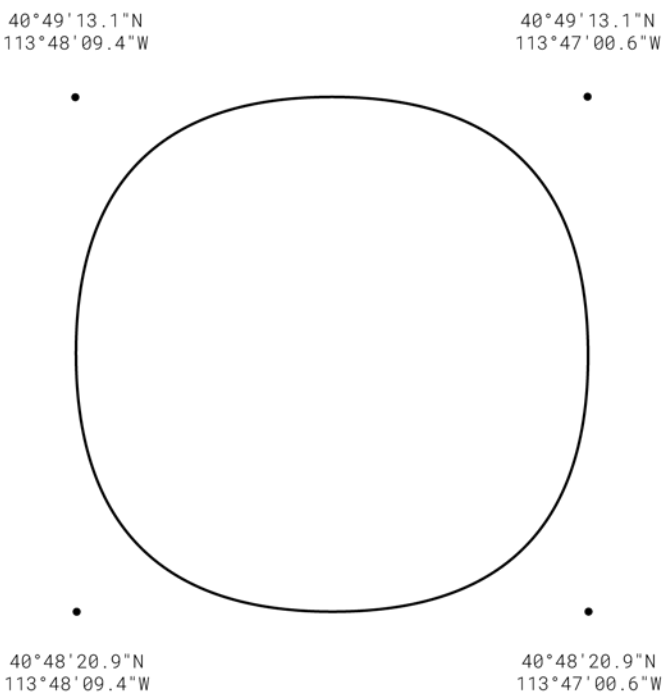
LA240120S0170E0SN10

Mobile, Alabama



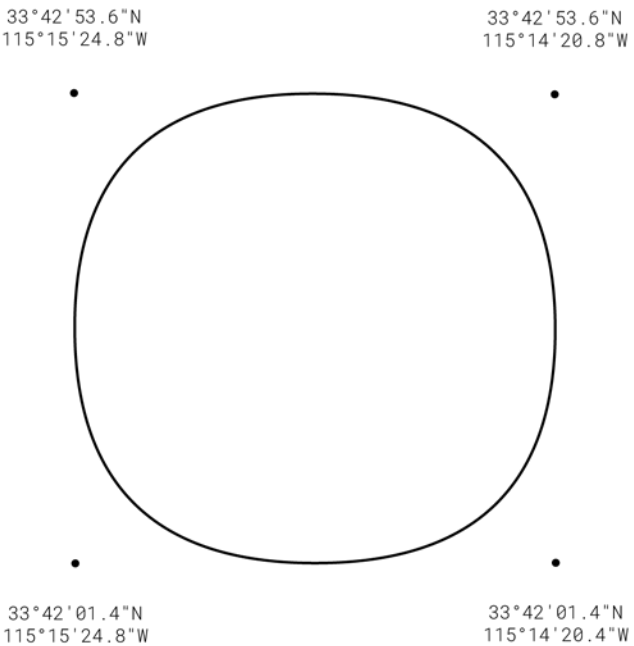
AL250040S0020W0SN380

Bonneville Salt Flats, Utah



UT260010N0170W0SN210

Desert Center, California



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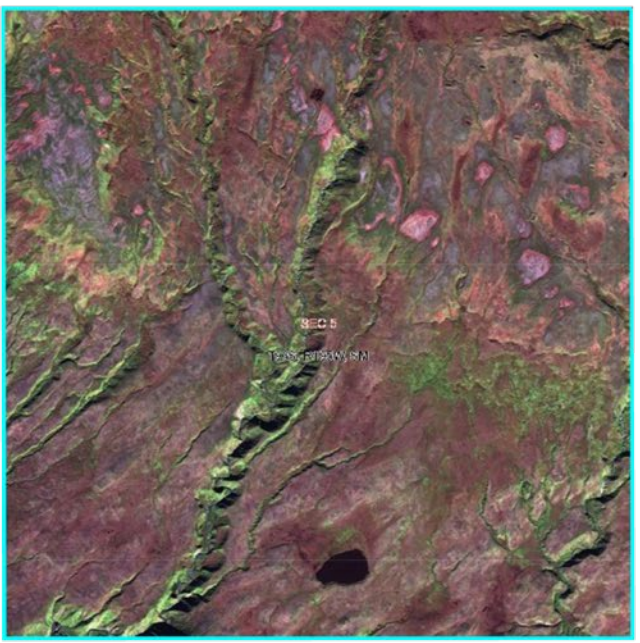
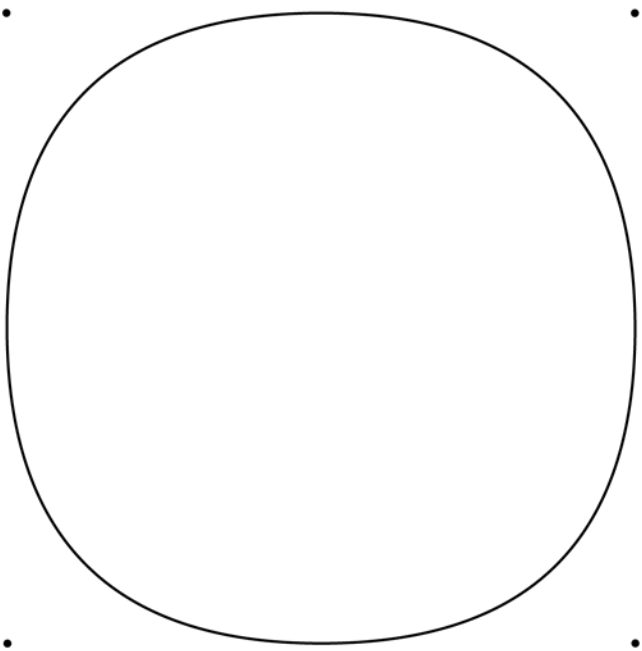


Adak, Alaska

51°53'45.2"N
176°43'21.4"W

51°53'45.2"N
176°41'57.1"W

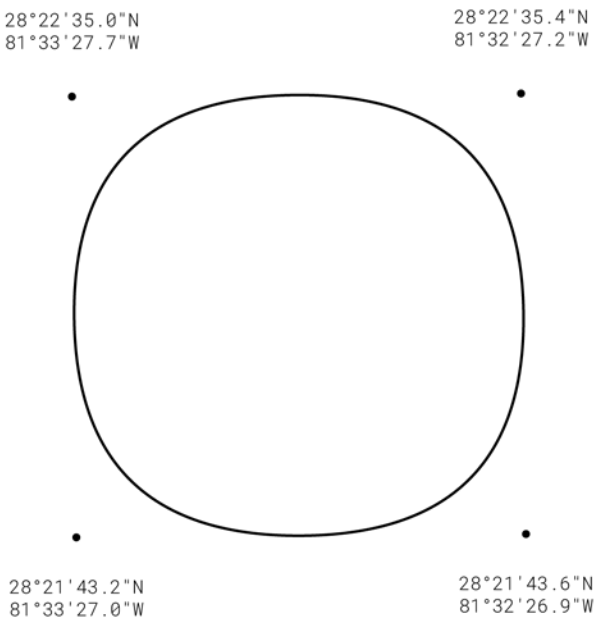


51°52'53.4"N
176°43'21.0"W

51°52'53.4"N
176°41'56.8"W

280960S1950W0SN5

Bay Lake, Florida



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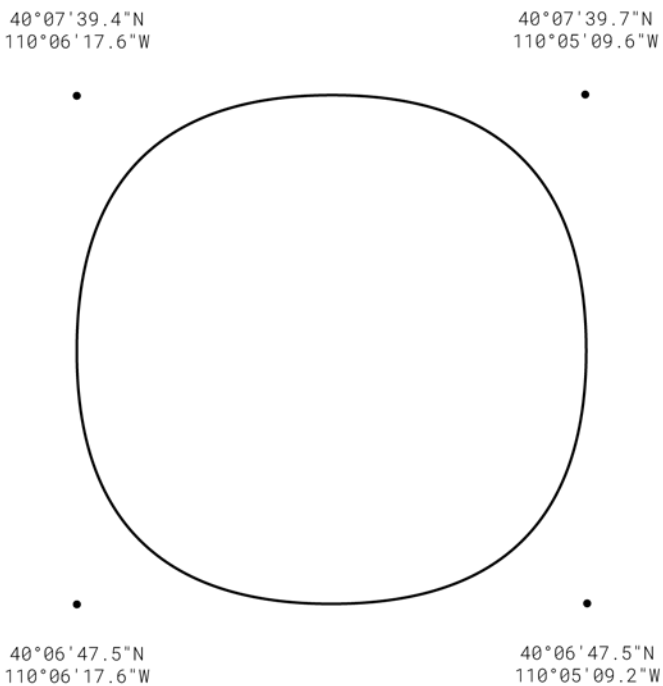
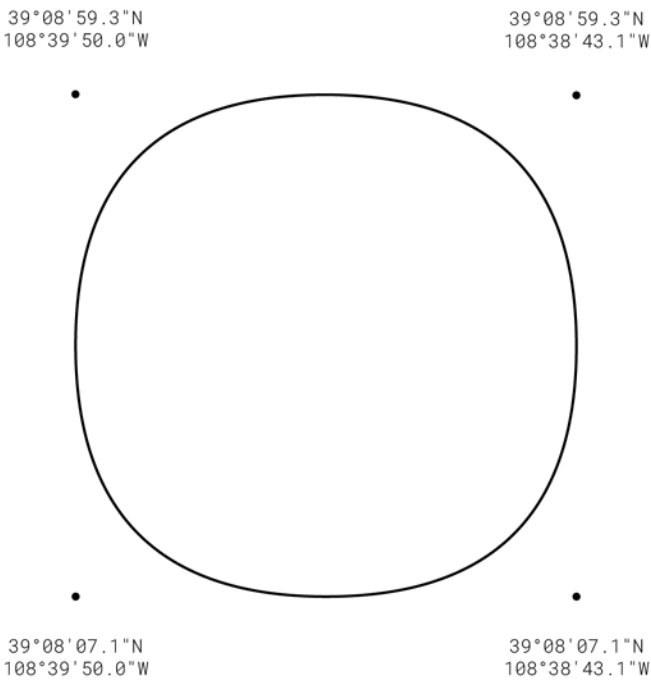
Myton, Utah



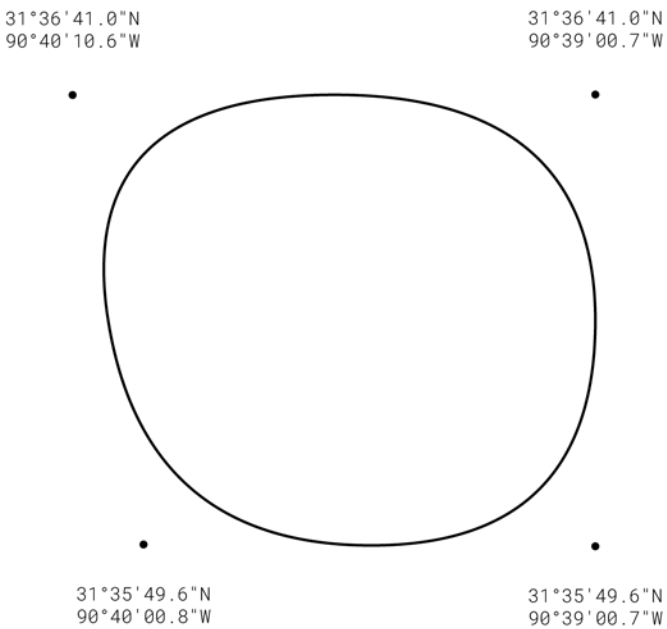
UT300040S0020W0SN220

Fruita, Colorado



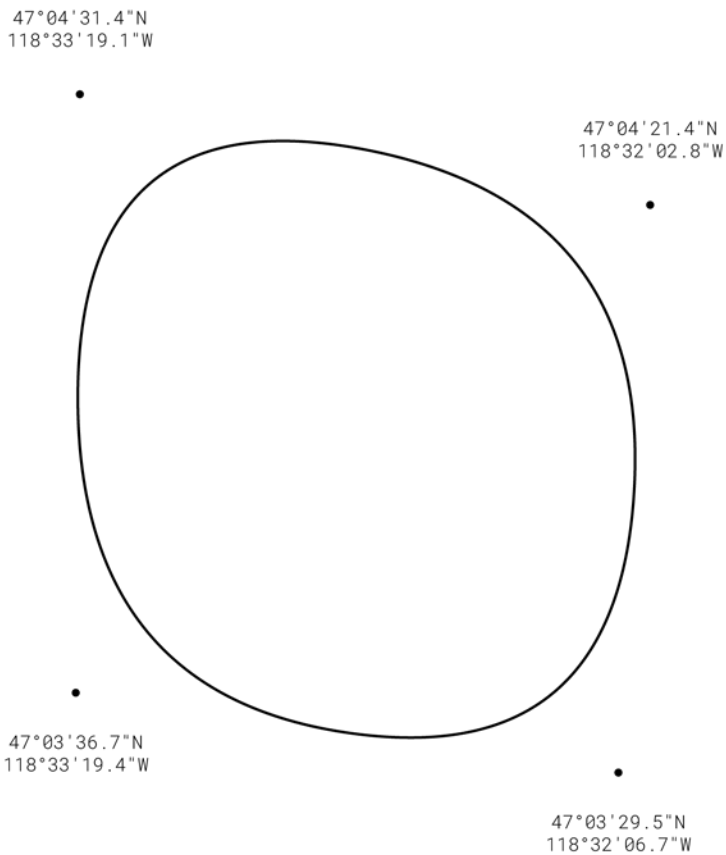
CO310010N0020W0SN240

Williams, Mississippi



MS320070N0050E0SN010

Paha, Washington



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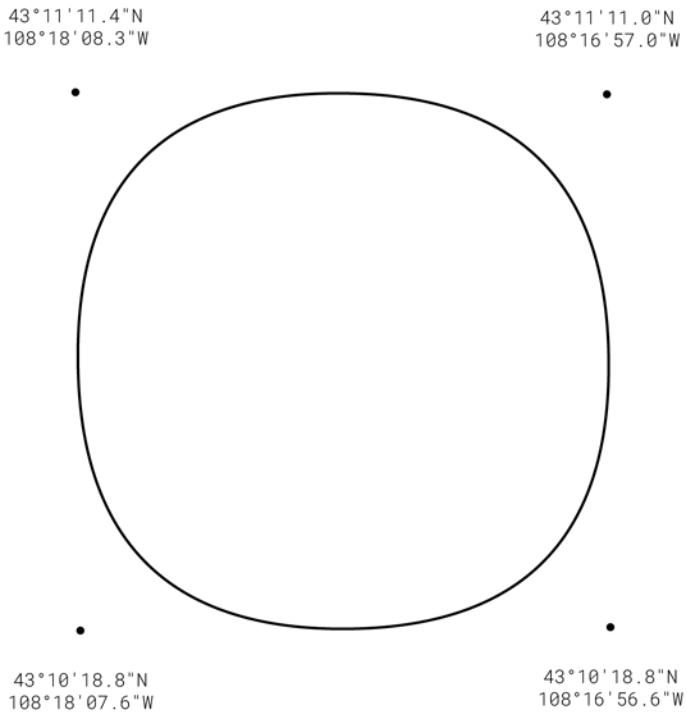
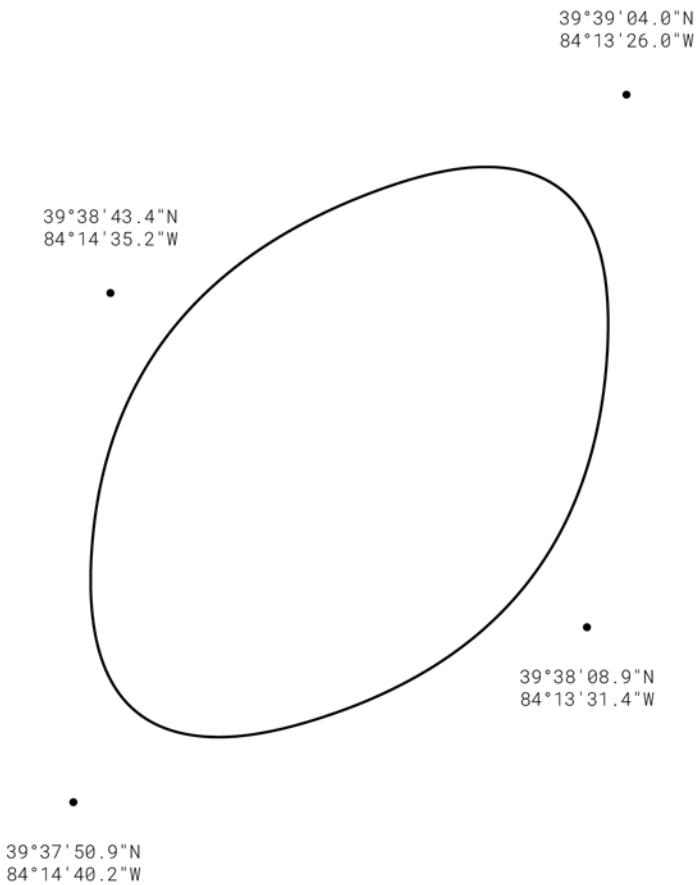
Shoshoni, Wyoming



WY340020N0050E0SN040

West Carrollton, Ohio



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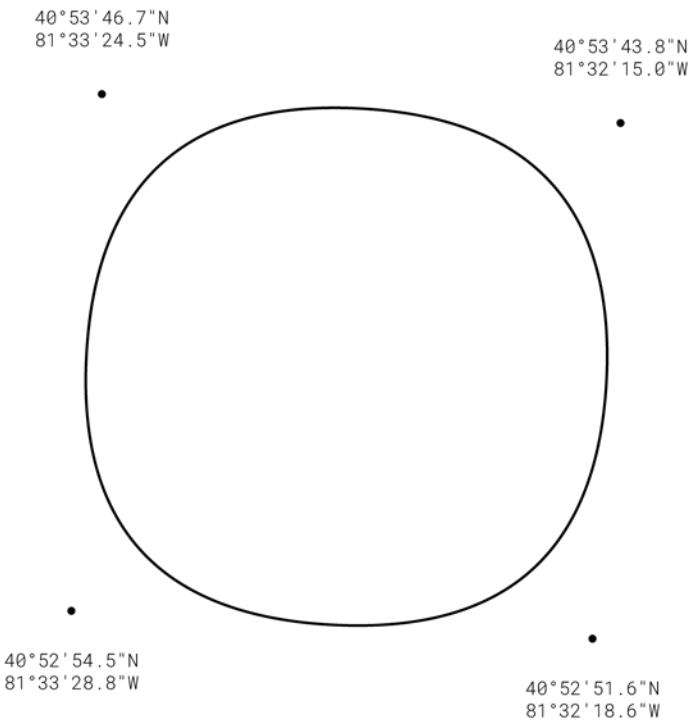
Canal Fulton, Ohio



OH370010N0100W0S12

Wales, Alaska

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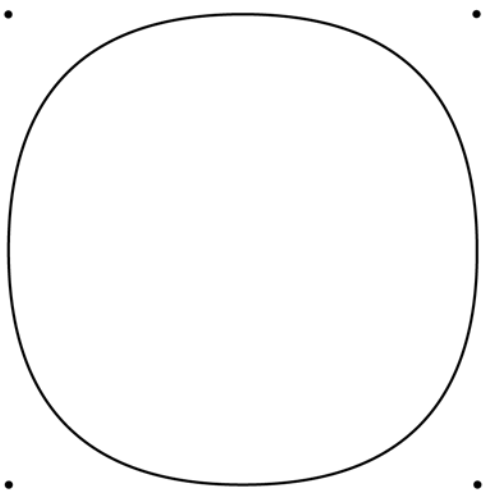
168°05'30.8"W

65°37'28.9"N
168°03'25.2"W



65°36'37.1"N
168°05'30.5"W

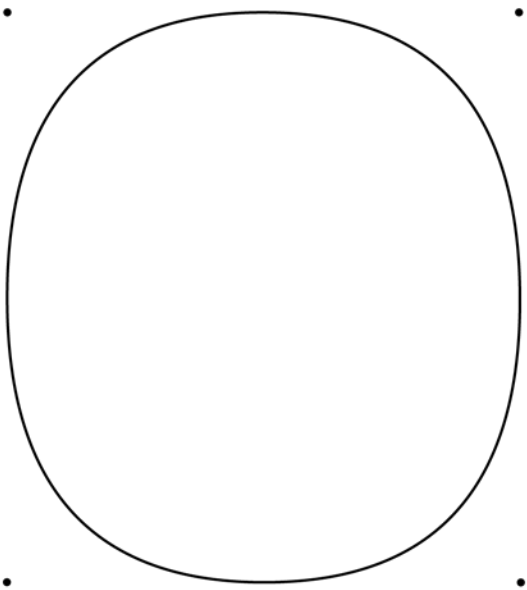
65°36'37.1"N
168°03'24.8"W

440030N0450W0SN32

Kaktovik, Alaska

70°05'01.7"N
143°30'48.6"W

70°05'01.7"N
143°28'31.4"W



70°04'09.8"N
143°30'48.6"W

70°04'09.8"N
143°28'31.1"W

450080N0350E0SN6

A List of the Principal Meridians included in this book

Pages	Name	Code	Date
4-5	Ohio River Base	38	1795
6-7	US Military Survey	48	1797
8-9	West of the Great Miami	47	1798
10-11	First Principal Meridian	01	1819
12-13	Second Principal Meridian	02	1805
14-15	Third Principal Meridian	03	1805
16-17	Fourth Principal Meridian	04	1815
18-19	Fifth Principal Meridian	05	1815
20-21	Sixth Principal Meridian	06	1855
22-23	Black Hills	07	1878
24-25	Boise	08	1867
26-27	Chickasaw	09	1833
28-29	Choctaw	10	1821
30-31	Copper River	12	1905
32-33	Fairbanks	13	1910
34-35	Gila and Salt River	14	1865
36-37	Humboldt	15	1853
38-39	Huntsville	16	1807
40-41	Indian	17	1870
42-43	Louisiana	18	1807
44-45	Michigan	19	1815
46-47	Montana (Principal)	20	1867
48-49	Mount Diablo	21	1851
50-51	Navajo	22	1869
52-53	New Mexico	23	1855
54-55	St Helena	24	1819
56-57	St Stephens	25	1805
58-59	Salt Lake	26	1855
60-61	San Bernardino	27	1852
62-63	Seward	28	1911
64-65	Tallahassee	29	1824
66-67	Uintah	30	1875
68-69	Ute	31	1880
70-71	Washington	32	1803
72-73	Willamette	33	1851
74-75	Wind River	34	1875
76-77	Between The Miamis	36	1802
78-79	Muskingum River	37	1800
80-81	Kateel River	44	1956
82-83	Umiat	45	1956

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