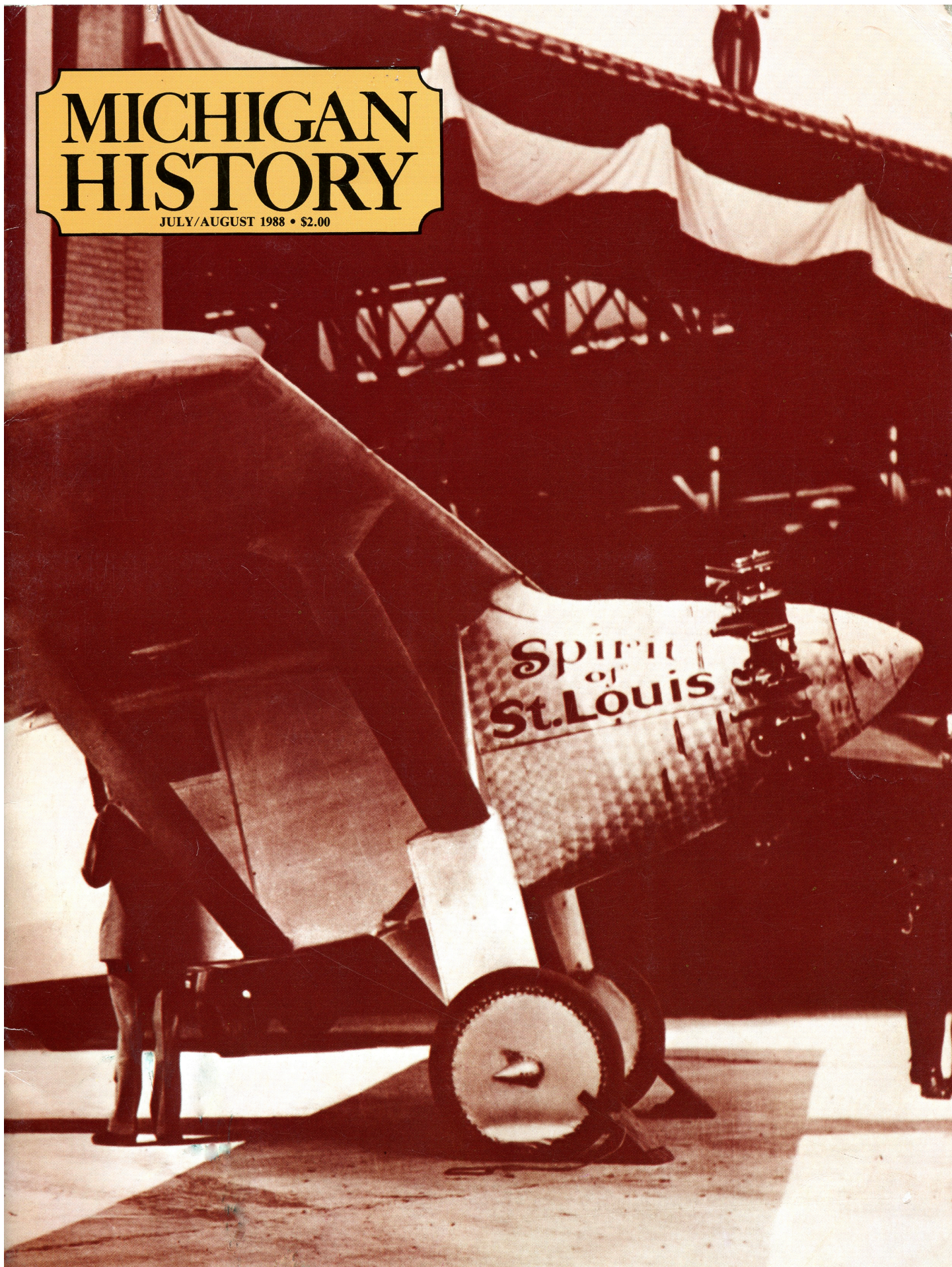
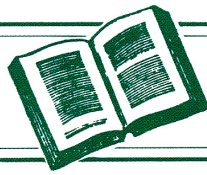


# MICHIGAN HISTORY

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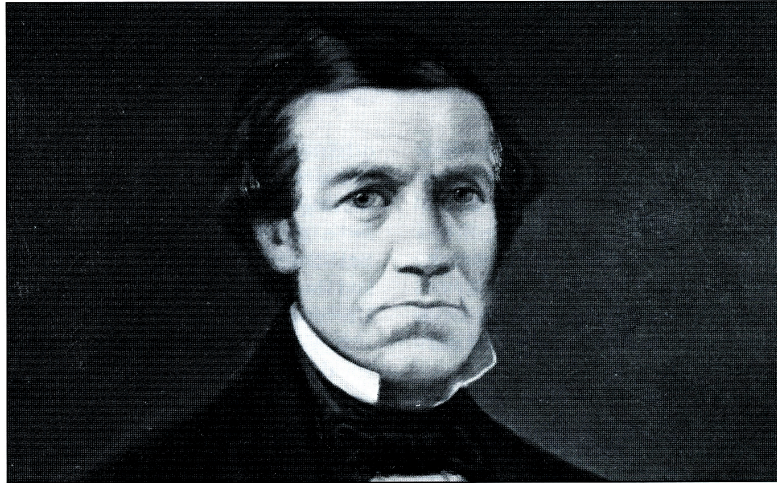
## Books



*They Left Their Mark: William Austin Burt and His Sons, Surveyors of the Public Domain.*  
By John S. Burt (Rancho Cordova, CA: Landmark Enterprises, 1986, Illus. xix, 188pp. \$35.00 plus \$3.00 shipping.)

In *They Left Their Mark*, Californian John S. Burt tells the story of his great-great-great-grandfather, William Austin Burt, the most accomplished and important surveyor of Michigan's public lands. This book, a labor of love and the product of years of research, will obviously be welcomed by at least two groups of readers: those with an interest in Michigan's history and development in the nineteenth century, and those who are professional land surveyors. In a more specific context, this book calls attention to a much neglected part of our state's past—the survey, sale and disposal of the public lands. Only a few articles dealing with surveys, some accounts in the *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections* and a 1952 Cornell University thesis written by Dallas Jones previously covered these subjects.

Surveying was a respected and desired profession on the American frontier. If it was not exactly a quick route to wealth, it paid moderately well and carried a degree of prestige. William Austin Burt had no aspirations for political office or worldly success beyond providing for the young family he brought to Michigan from New York in 1824. But he hoped to support that family by working as a surveyor on the public lands. When the Burt family arrived in Michigan, William Austin was



Courtesy John S. Burt

*The accomplishments of William Austin Burt, especially his invention of the solar compass, are chronicled in They Left Their Mark.*

told that the federal government had no need of additional deputy surveyors. He found other work to support his growing family and became involved in public life as a member of the territorial legislative council and as a circuit court judge for Macomb County.

By 1833, however, the flood of immigrants into the Michigan Territory had changed the situation, and Burt became a deputy surveyor with a contract to run township lines in Sanilac County. He was told by Micajah T. Williams, surveyor general of the territory northwest of the Ohio River, that he should follow the set of general instructions sent him. Indeed, "you will do well to treasure them up in your memory so as to be at no loss in reducing them to practice." He was also warned, "Surveys will not be paid for that are not faithfully executed." Williams and those who followed

him in the next twenty years never had occasion to regret letting contracts to Burt, nor to his five sons as they joined him in surveying the public lands of Michigan, Wisconsin and Iowa. The Burts were model surveyors, and on several occasions William Austin was called to resurvey areas where other deputies had produced fraudulent work.

John Burt devotes ample space to his ancestors' work as surveyors and includes enough detail to show some of the techniques of running township and section lines. He also provides an extensive account of William Austin Burt's greatest accomplishment—the invention of the solar compass. This instrument was required for federal deputy surveyors from the early 1840s through the next fifty and more years, and its use today is not unknown. The great virtue of

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this compass was that it overcame the deviation of the magnetic needle that occurred when surveyors worked in areas where mineral ores, especially iron, were present. In addition, the solar compass was more accurate and allowed faster work. Other Burt inventions included an equatorial sextant, and in 1829 he received a patent for what was without doubt the first American typewriter.

Because the Burts surveyed much of its wilderness terrain when others refused such demanding work, the Upper Peninsula should cherish their memory. William Austin Burt also ran the final segment of the line that marks the Michigan-Wisconsin boundary. However, the high point of his work in the Upper Peninsula came on 19 September 1844 when he and his party made the official discovery of iron ore near Negaunee (Township 47 North, Range 27 West) on what was to become the Marquette Iron Range. At the time

of this discovery, Burt noted that it would be necessary for a canal to be built around the rapids of the St. Mary's River at Sault Ste. Marie before these vast deposits of iron ore could be fully utilized by the nation. In 1852 he had the satisfaction of working on the preliminary survey for the canal that was completed three years later.

*They Left Their Mark* is a handsomely produced book, well-illustrated with sixty-eight appropriately chosen and placed graphics. It is clearly written and includes enough background detail to place Burt and his sons in the proper historical settings. A few episodes, such as the not-quite-accurate account of how Battle Creek got its name (with which the Burts had no involvement), could have been omitted (p. 11). Some readers might also wonder how William Austin could board the steamship *Superior* at Chillicothe, Ohio, for a trip to

Detroit (p. 7). The index, some typographical errors ("Straits of Mackinaw," p. 153) and an unorthodox system of footnote numbering could be corrected in future printings. Justice John D. Voelker's foreword could also be corrected to show that Michigan entered the union in 1837, not one year earlier. These are not major items and do not detract from the author's accomplishment in making a valuable addition to the literature of Michigan history. The research is sound enough, and no obvious manuscript collection or source seems ignored. However, it does not appear that the Burt letters in the National Archives Surveyors General record groups have been fully utilized. John S. Burt's interest in his illustrious forebears has produced a work that would win the approval of William A. Burt and his sons. □

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