



JOB MARKET

Between Mosquito Bites, Getting the Lay of the Land

Vocations

As told to PATRICIA R. OLSEN JAN. 27, 2018



Tara Hartson, a surveyor at Herrick & Salsbury, using an instrument known as a total station, on the tripod, and a hand-held data collector to measure and record angles, distances and heights during a property survey. Stacey Cramp for The New York Times

Vocations

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Tara Hartson, 38, is a surveyor at [Herrick & Salsbury](#) in Ellsworth, Me.

What is surveying all about?

I perform land surveys, creating a document, or plan, of what we find, such as boundary lines, topographic features or perhaps a flood plain delineation. Our clients use the data we provide to solve boundary disputes and obtain land use permits, as examples.

How did you get this job?

I worked here part time one summer while pursuing a bachelor's degree in [surveying engineering technology](#) at the [University of Maine](#). The spring before I graduated, I emailed my boss and said, "If there's ever an opening, I'd like to be considered." He said he just assumed I'd work here when I graduated.



Ms. Hartson peering at aerial photos through a stereoscope for a three-dimensional view.
Stacey Cramp for The New York Times

What was your path to becoming a surveyor?

I got a bachelor's in biology at [St. Olaf College](#) in Minnesota and also studied geology, a second major, at its sister school, [Carleton College](#). I wasn't sure what I could do with those degrees. Then I thought landscape architecture might be my calling, so I interned at an architectural firm and planned to start a master's degree. It finally hit me that I wanted to be like the surveyors working on the architectural projects, who brought me their data to enter. So instead of a master's, I studied surveying and found my way here.

What do you like about the job?

The variety. My first project was laying out a runway at the [Hancock County-Bar Harbor Airport](#), putting stakes in the ground to mark the end of the runway and the edges so that the construction company would know where to pave. Another time, a client wanted to divide a building into condominiums, and I represented the company at a planning board meeting, reporting measurements like the height of each floor.



Property plans at Herrick & Salsbury in Ellsworth, Me. Stacey Cramp for The New York Times

What's your favorite part of surveying?

Boundary surveys can involve history going back hundreds of years, and this is the heart and soul of the job for me. It's like going on a treasure hunt, except you don't get a map. Reading a deed, we learn about the area from years earlier and the names of the people who lived there. Then we look for evidence on the property that relates to information in the deed. I might try and find a white pine that's mentioned and go from there.

What are your challenges?

I like being outside, but Maine winters can be brutal. When it's 10 degrees below zero, shady and windy, and my feet are on snow and ice, it gets really cold. But I've learned. I have heat packs in my mittens, and big boots so I can wear several pairs of socks. In the spring, when the mosquitoes and black flies are out, I get bitten all day because I have to stand still much of the time.

Do most of your jobs go smoothly?

Not always. Once we were setting corner pins in someone's lawn and found it extended well over the neighbor's boundary. The homeowner didn't like that. He thought he owned more than he did and pulled them out. Our client, the next-door neighbor who wanted to sell his land, had us return with the police and put the pins back.



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