



In the field, land surveyors mark changes in the bearings along the boundaries of tracts being surveyed by setting an iron rod or other type of permanent marker at each point of change.

To assist recovery of the point by future owners or surveyors, nearby trees may be marked to bear witness and referenced in field books and on maps. A common marking is an “X” with three horizontal “hacks” beneath. (On federal lands, the marking may be a circle cut around the tree trunk with or without horizontal “hacks.”)

As years pass, the cuts heal, and the original markings may disappear into the thickening bark.

In 1912, surveyor John Walter Babbitt marked a cypress tree as a witness on a survey deep in Breaux Swamp in Wilkinson County, MS. Over time, the mark faded into the bark. The tree, weakened by disease, fell.

In 1981, a local survey crew led by the late Tom Hendley was surveying the old property line. Hendley spotted the remains of the tree on the ground, pieces of trunk, decayed limbs. He noticed a pattern of growth

common to old witness trees on a piece of the trunk.

As the tree was already compromised as a witness, Hendley slashed the piece of trunk above and below the tell-tale pattern. A slab of bark fell off. On its inner surface, as the above photo of the mounted slab shows, is an “X.”

What pattern did Hendley see on the trunk? If you look closely at the above photo of the outer surface of the slab, you’ll note a slight swelling over each of the four arms of the “X” hacked on the inner surface.

To the uninformed, the swellings are simply four slight humps in a roughly square pattern.

To the experienced land surveyor, the swellings are signs of a trail through time, identifying a reliable witness to an earlier deed.

Please note! Witness trees and corner markers are important evidence of ownership. Never move or remove markers. Never mutilate, destroy or harvest witness trees.