

THE HOMESTEAD ACT



What was the Homestead Act?

Grades: 7-8

Objectives: Students will learn the basic history of the Homestead Act of 1862 and organize notes for discussion.

What's Inside?

- Historical Essay
- Graphic Note Organizer

Sources: Britannica

The Homestead Act of 1862



The Homestead Act of 1862 was a significant U.S. law that promoted the settlement and development of the American West. It was notable for the opportunity it gave African Americans to own land

The U.S. government passed the Homestead Act to encourage western migration. President Abraham Lincoln signed the act into law on May 20, 1862, and it took effect on January 1, 1863. The act granted 160 acres (65 hectares) of public lands to anyone who paid a small filing fee and agreed to work on the land and improve it, including by building a residence, over a five-year period. Hundreds of thousands of people moved to the Great Plains in an effort to take advantage of the free land.

The only personal requirement of the Homestead Act was that the homesteader be either the head of a family or 21 years of age. Thus, U.S. citizens, formerly enslaved people, new immigrants intending to become naturalized, single women, and people of all races were eligible. The potential for free land attracted settlers to move to Kansas, Nebraska, the Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma), Dakota Territory, and elsewhere in the West.

Many African Americans living in the South took advantage of the Homestead Act. After the American Civil War ended in 1865, most people who were freed from slavery in the South were left penniless. In order to survive, the majority became sharecroppers,

farming the land for white owners while receiving little in profit. The opportunity for free land thus enticed a wave of African Americans to move to the West. They also sought to escape the oppression of the South, including the Jim Crow laws, which enforced racial segregation.

More than 25,000 southern Blacks moved to Kansas during the 1870s and 1880s. In 1879, at the peak of the movement, some 6,000 African Americans arrived. They were part of the Exoduster Movement. The movement was so named because of the migration or "exodus" of African Americans from the South to escape racial discrimination. In the end, they did not fully get away from white hostility in the new regions. However, the Black farmers who took advantage of the Homestead Act found the West more welcoming than the South. Although Black access to land never equaled that of whites, the Homestead Act gave thousands of formerly enslaved people the opportunity to own their own land.

In all, some 270 million acres (109 million hectares) were handed out under the 1862 Homestead Act. The act remained in effect for more than a century. The last claim made under it was granted in 1988 for a parcel of land in Alaska.

The success of the Homestead Act spurred Congress to pass additional bills encouraging settlement of U.S. land. The Southern Homestead Act of 1866 opened up millions of acres of land in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, and Mississippi. The act, designed to help formerly enslaved people, was soon expanded to include white Southerners. The Timber Culture Act of 1873 allowed free land in the West for those willing to plant trees on some of the acreage. The Desert Land Act of 1877 promoted the irrigation and development of arid lands in the West.

Source: <https://kids.britannica.com/students/article/Homestead-Act-of-1862/629870>. Retrieved 06.08.22

Name: _____ Date: _____ Period: _____

Cornell Note Taker

Topic:

Main Points

Evidence and Detail