

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

# Homestead National Monument of America



# EXPLORING HOMESTEAD

The T-shaped claim of Daniel Freeman commemorates one of the nation's first documented homesteads. The park includes the original Freeman land and school, a historic log cabin typical of eastern Nebraska, and a restored tallgrass prairie.

You can visit the **Palmer-Epard Cabin** and **Freeman School**, see pioneer farm implements, and explore **trails** that go through the restored **tallgrass prairie**.

Special events and ranger-led programs are scheduled year-round. Click **here** for the current schedule of events. Arrange for **group tours** in advance.

The park is open daily except Thanksgiving Day, December 25, and January 1. **Hours vary seasonally**. For **directions** or to **plan your visit** to Homestead contact the park at (402) 223-3524 or visit [www.nps.gov/home](http://www.nps.gov/home).



Heritage Center

Start at the Heritage Center for information, exhibits, and a bookstore. View the award winning film *Land of Dreams: Homesteading America*. *Land of Dreams* takes you on a journey through 30 states and 123 years of homesteading history.



# THE HOMESTEAD ACT OF 1862

It seemed purely democratic, the idea of land for the people. The **Homestead Act of 1862** opened millions of acres across the nation to settlement and cultivation. Eventually over 270 million acres in **30 states** were turned over from government to private ownership. The romanticism cultivated by promoters in the East was soon tempered by the reality of life in the Great American Desert, "where it rains grasshoppers, fire and destruction," according to one sodbuster who gave up. Yet there was no shortage of resolute souls who were surely a match for whatever ordeals the land could muster.

This year marks the 150th Anniversary of the signing of the Homestead Act. Homestead National Monument of America will celebrate with many special activities. Click [here](#) to learn about them.

HOMESTEAD ACT OF MAY 20, 1862

Free Land!!!

MILLIONS OF ACRES!

American Dream

1862

Homestead Act's 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

Homestead National Monument of America

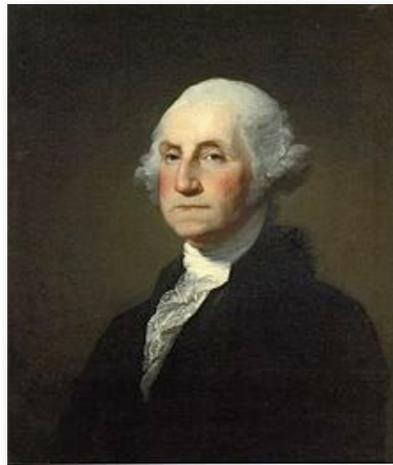
2012

<http://www.nps.gov/home>

Celebrate the 150th Anniversary at Homestead National Monument of America.

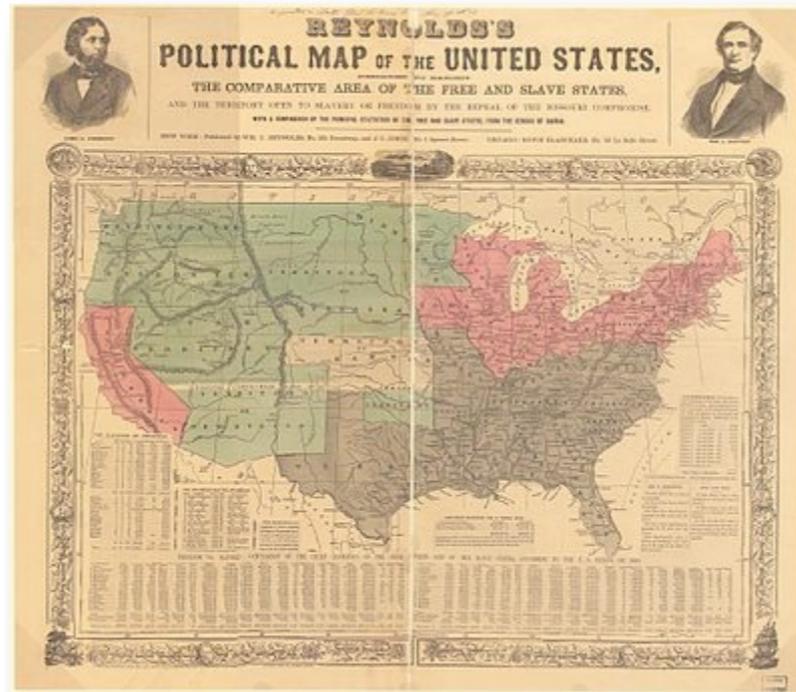
“Uncle Sam is Rich Enough to Give Us All a Farm” -1850s popular song

From the beginning of pioneer settlement the West exerted a pull on the American spirit. In colonial times those dreaming of family farms went from the East Coast to the foothills, and then across the Appalachians to the Ohio Valley. George Washington’s words in 1784 were prophetic: “The spirit for emigration is great.” By the 1850s land acquisitions had filled out the continental United States.



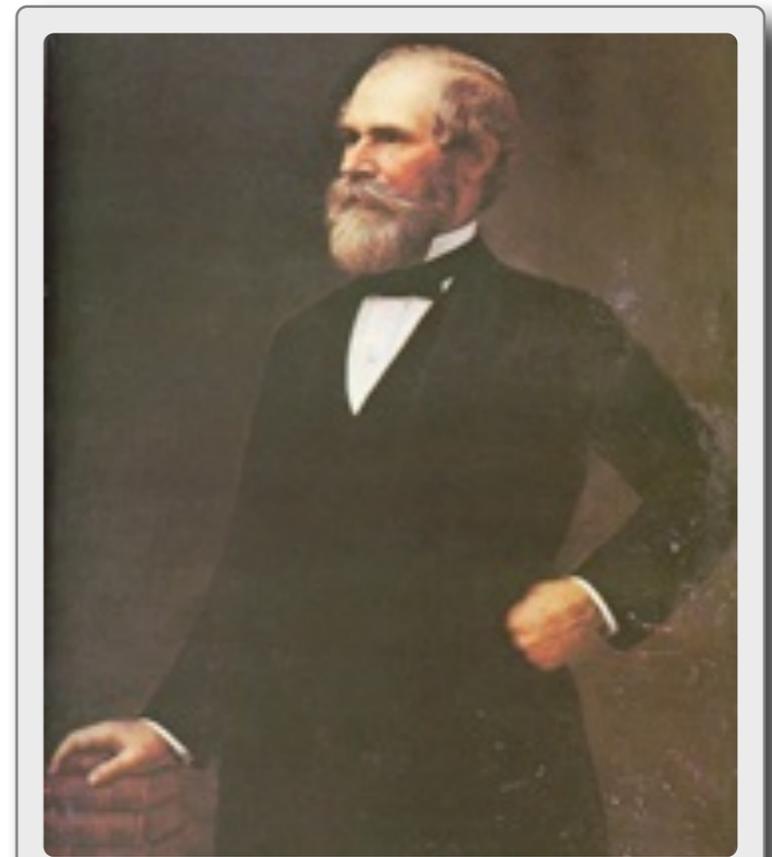
The country’s sheer vastness strengthened the conviction that the public domain belonged to the people. The interior between the Missouri River and Rocky Mountains was designated Indian Territory in the 1830s and bypassed by emigrants on the Oregon Trail. As the East and far

West closed to settlement, expansionists pushed through the **Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854**, opening Nebraska Territory to farmers.



Distributing land west of the Mississippi was a huge project. The inability of small farmers to compete with larger concerns precipitated a series of anti-speculation laws. The 1841 Pre-emption Act, championed by Missouri Sen. Thomas Hart Benton, let farmers claim unsurveyed plots to later buy from the government. But didn’t working people have a right to free land? Tennessee Congressman Andrew Johnson took up the cause in the 1840s. Southerners opposed Johnson’s

land giveaway as benefitting working-class whites who were unlikely to vote slavery into the new states. When President Abraham Lincoln was elected in 1860, southern states began to secede, forming the Confederate States of America.



Galusha Grow, a congressman from Pennsylvania and Speaker of the House of Representatives from 1861 to 1863, authored the Homestead Act of 1862.



In 1862 Galusha Grow wrote the bill that was signed by President Lincoln after the southern states left the Union. The Homestead Act declared that any citizen or intended citizen could claim 160 acres—one-quarter square mile—of surveyed government land. Claimants must improve the plot with a dwelling and grow crops. After five years, if the original people who filed were still on the land, it became their property, free and clear.

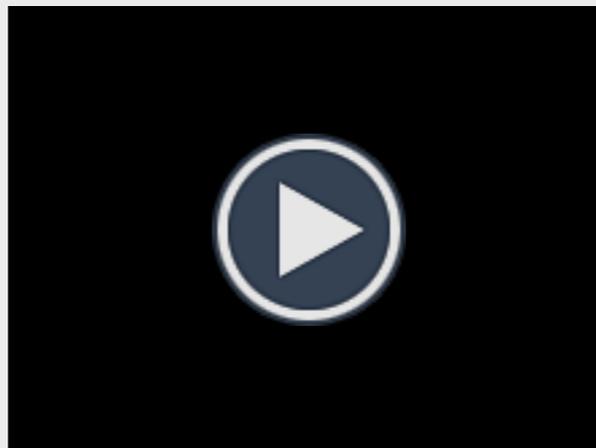
One of the first takers was Daniel Freeman, a Union scout from Iowa. Daniel and wife Agnes joined the post-Civil War wave of homesteaders who hailed from the Ohio and Mississippi valleys. Later came European immigrants lured by railroad companies eager to sell millions of acres of grant land and provide farm-to-market transportation.

Learn about Daniel Freeman's Land



The Homestead Act's lenient terms proved the undoing of many settlers. Claimants need not own equipment or know how to farm. The quarter sections, adequate in humid regions, were too small to support settlers west of the 100th meridian, where scarce water reduced yields. Newer laws allowed homesteaders additional land if they planted 40 acres of trees, a

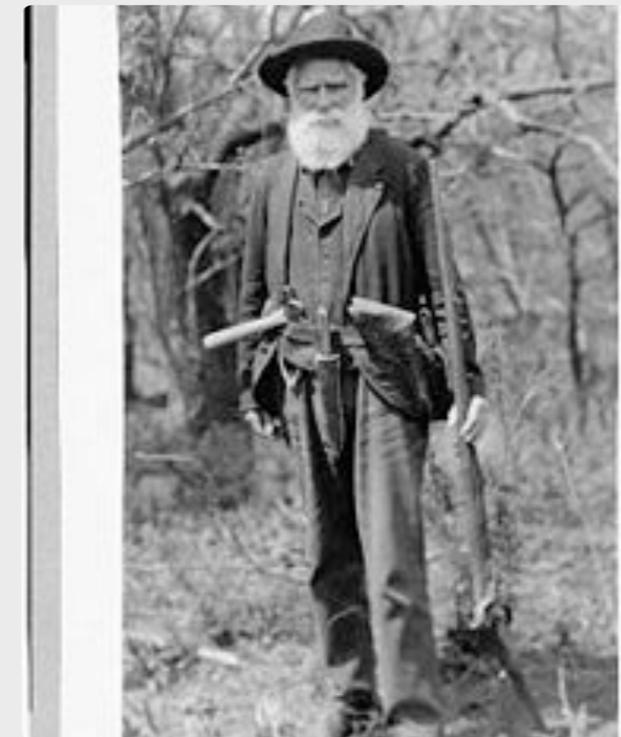
Make a Homestead Claim



practical impossibility. Or they could buy cheap land in the arid high plains, requiring costly irrigation. Speculators got homestead land by hiring phony claimants or buying abandoned farms.

Then there were natural barriers. In the eastern reaches (where Homestead National Monument of America is

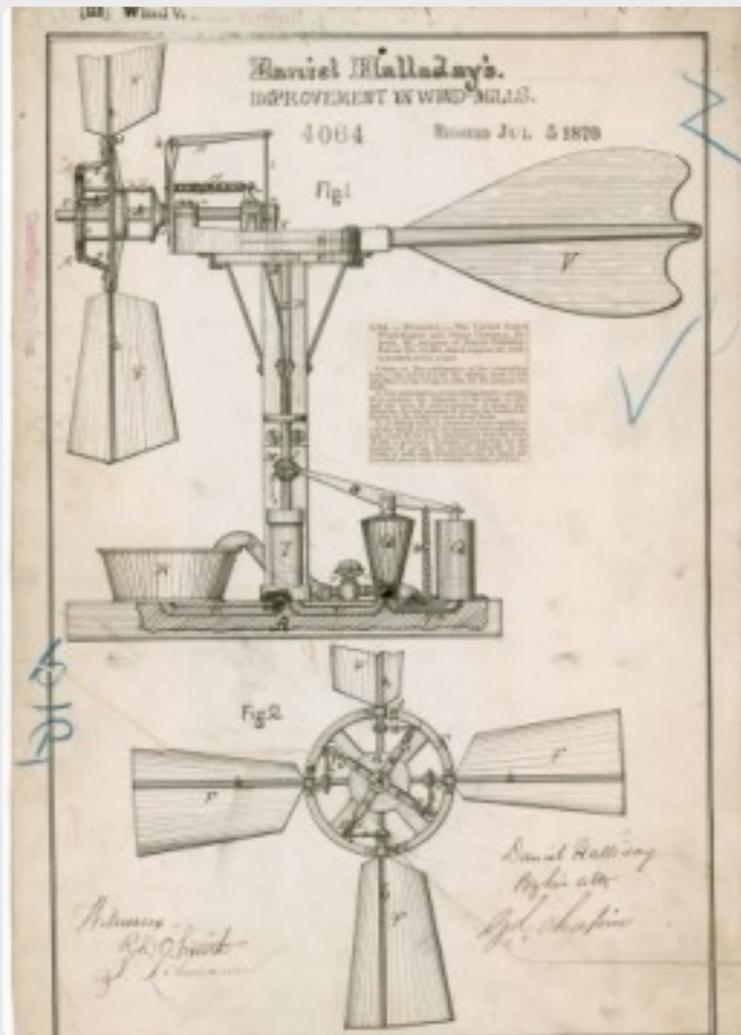
today) there was water for timber. But in the West the Rocky Mountains blocked prevailing winds and rain-bearing clouds, resulting in relatively dry conditions. There settlers built sod homes that they prayed might withstand storms, drought, fires, blizzards, and wind. From 1874 to 1877 locusts consumed everything in sight, including leather boots.



Daniel Freeman convinced the land agent in Brownville, NE, to let him sign up shortly after midnight on January 1, 1863, the day the Homestead Act took effect, so Freeman could return to his Union regiment.



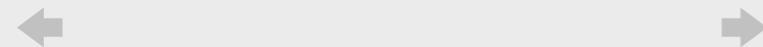
If natural disasters were not trouble enough, there were human struggles. Cattlemen resisted the dividing up of the open range by farmers.



Patent for Daniel Halladay's improvements in windmills. 7/5/1870

Records of the Patent and Trademark Office

National Archives Identifier: 4688450



Indian attacks were rare, but Agnes Freeman kept the peace by giving Indians food and goods. Farmers faced heavy debt, lack of cash, expensive rail transportation and grain storage, and market fluctuations. Though never the paradise lauded in popular myth, the plains finally became home to settlers willing to cope with adversity. "You must make up your mind to rough it," advised an English emigrants' guidebook.

Eventually frame and brick houses replaced soddies, trees grew to shield dwellings, windmills pumped water from underground, and technology made farming profitable.

Today corn along the roads shows how farms have survived; many are occupied by descendants of the original homesteaders. Meanwhile, patches

of prairie remind us that only 150 years ago this looked like a most unpromising place to make a home.

Listen about the Freeman School at Homestead



"Residence of G. L. Rule Feb. 18, 1898. Have lived here since Sept. 1893." Family stands in foreground; sod building and cabin in background, Arizona Territory.

2/18/1898.

Records of the Office of the Secretary of Interior  
National Archives Identifier: 516435



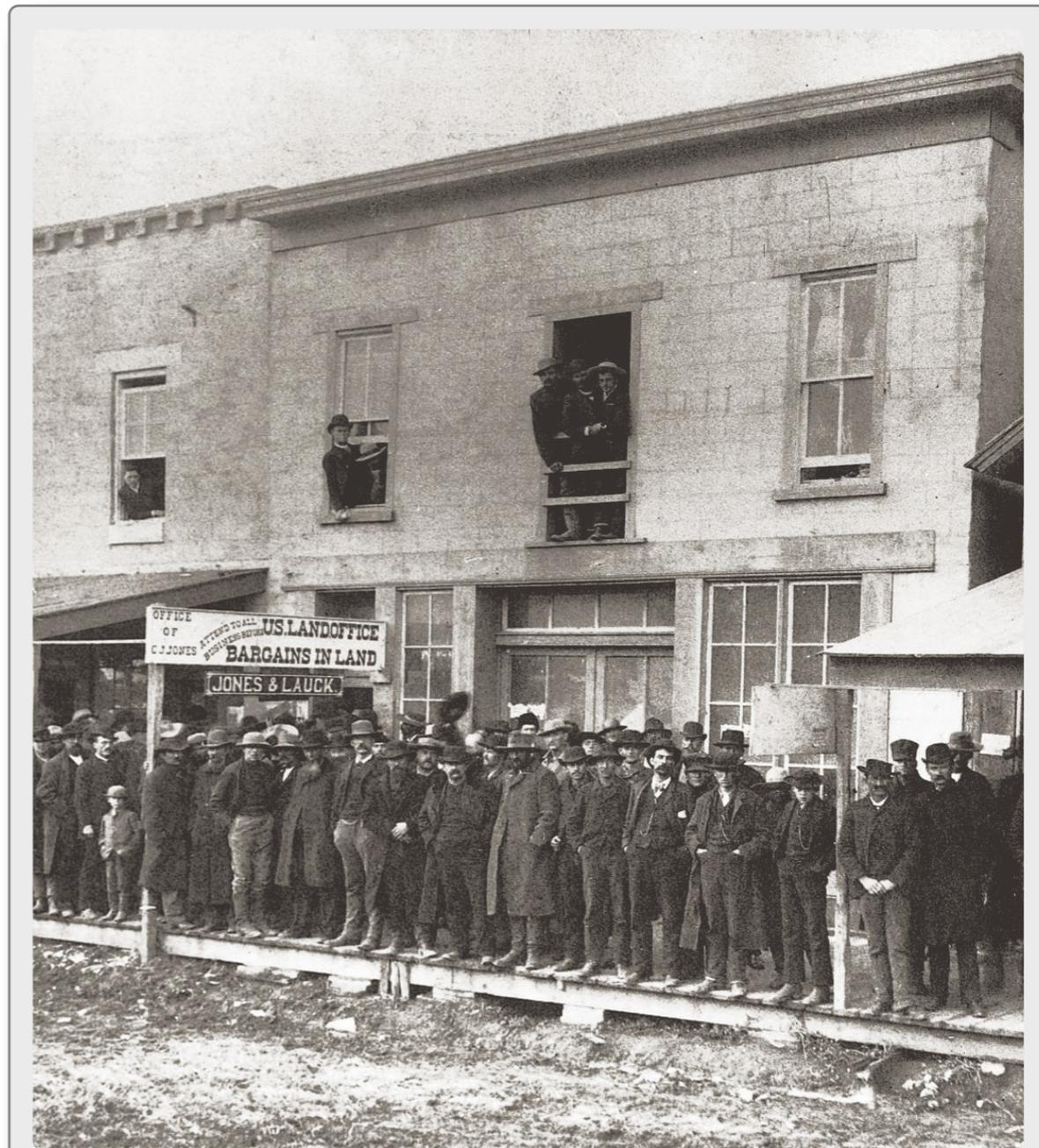
# THE WORLD OF A HOMESTEADER

As the frontier pushed west to the high plains, many new emigrants found themselves getting off a train into a sea of grass and little else. “There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made,” recalled **Willa Cather** in *My Antonia*. “I had the feeling that the world was left behind.”



Homesteaders used what they had—sod bricks for construction, buffalo chips for fuel, and the ceaseless wind to pump water from deep underground. Eventually homesteaders progressed from living off—and sometimes in—the land to changing the land to suit their needs. Their innovations came to symbolize mastery over nature, however tenuous that might be.

Listen about homesteading communities.



U. S. Railroads advertised abroad. Land offices were often swamped with claimants such as in this picture.

Kansas State Historical Society



## “We cannot raise too much corn.”

A state agriculturalist announced this in 1876 about the cash crop that became synonymous with Nebraska. By the 1890s, after several failures of traditional crops—oats, barley, and wheat as well as corn—it became clear that plains farmers needed to rethink their methods. Irrigation, dry farming techniques, strip planting, and summer fallow fields, along with a hardy strain of winter wheat introduced by Russian Mennonite immigrants, revolutionized grain production on the northern plains. In the 1870s a typical Nebraska farmer produced enough food each year to feed four people;



Woman gathering buffalo chips for fuel.



100 years later such a farmer produced enough for nearly 60 people.

## The Comforts of Home

Whether hillside dugouts, grassland soddies, or log cabins common to eastern Nebraska (shown at right), homestead dwellings were a contrast of makeshift implements and finery salvaged from the old life. Cooks used dried buffalo manure as heating fuel, then served meals on French china.

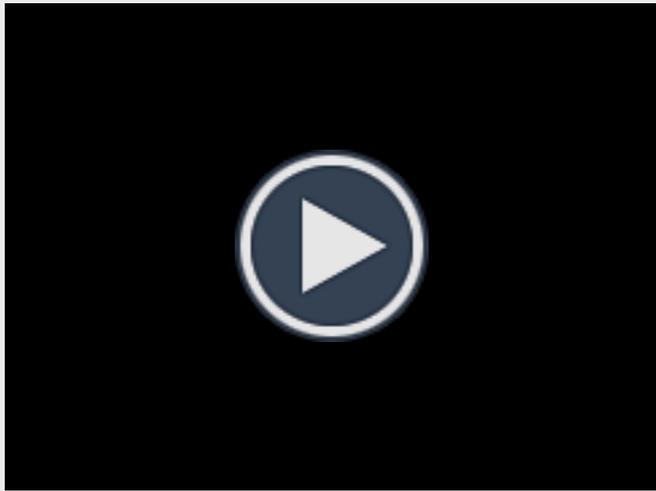
Potted geraniums in windows competed for attention with wildflowers atop a sodhouse roof. Homemakers tacked up muslin sheets to catch falling debris from sod roofs and covered floors with cattle skins. Packing crates served as tables and trunks as cradles. Cisterns collected rainwater. Children collected fuel. Meals included anything from a wild prairie chicken to store-bought coffee, along with corn, corn, and more corn.

### INTERACTIVE 3.1 Lorem Ipsum dolor amet, consectetur



Crude as they were, settlers' dwellings became beloved homes. Lydia Lyon, for one, had fond memories of her family's Kansas cabin: "The wind whistled through the walls in winter and the dust blew in summer, but we papered the walls with newspapers and made rag carpets for the floor, and thought we were living well."

#### Building a Sod House



### Prairie Palaces of

### Nebraska Marble

On the eastern prairie homesteaders could live in shelters burrowed in hillsides while building their wooden cabins. Farther west newcomers to the flat, treeless grasslands found a durable building material beneath their

feet. Buffalo grass was short, tough with a dense tangle of roots, and it held its shape when cut. Using a special plow homesteaders could shave enough sod from half an acre of prairie for a 16- by 20-foot house. They cut sod strips about one foot wide and four inches deep, sliced them crosswise into



Emergence of towns like Comstock, Nebr., in 1904, and social institutions like the Freeman School (next) signaled the end of the frontier and the beginning of a sense of permanency.

Solomon D. Butcher Collection,  
Nebraska State Historical Society



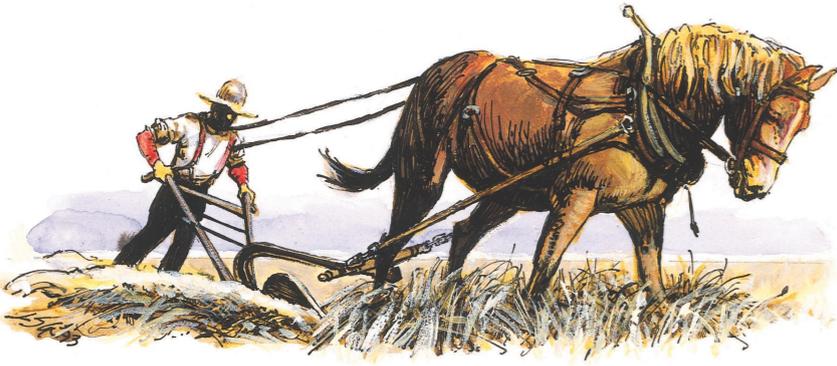
three-foot slabs, laid the slabs grass-side-down in double courses, and secured them with four corner poles. Frames reserved openings for doors and windows. A sturdy ridgepole was laid across forked upright posts. Branches formed rafters for more sod.

Certain advantages kept owners in their homes of "Nebraska Marble" long after lumber was available. Soddies were inexpensive, quick to build, well-insulated, tornado proof, and did not burn. But they needed constant repair, especially after rainstorms when roofs dropped dirt, water, and sometimes snakes.

No wonder pioneer Carrie Lassel Detrick's mother "gave way to the only fit of weeping I ever remember seeing her indulge in," when she first arrived in Kansas and saw the sod house her husband had built. Soddies remained a marvel to easterners.

Listen about the Palmer-Epard cabin at Homestead





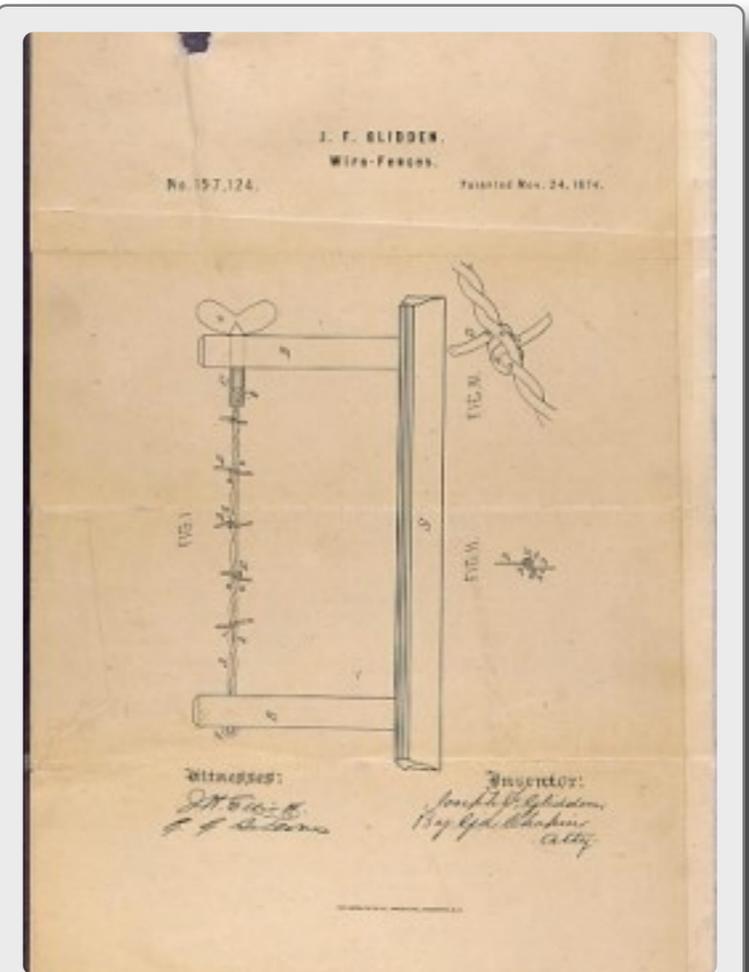
## New Tools for an Ancient Trade

Promoters of settlement conjured up pictures of a land "so fertile you only have to tickle it with a plow and it will laugh a harvest that will gladden your hearts," as one railroad ad claimed. Migrants who fell for this vision were soon disappointed. Turning the Great American Desert into the bountiful heartland took considerable ingenuity. For starters the dense mat of grass defied ordinary cast-iron plows. In the 1860s a new plow called the grasshopper appeared. Its steel blade sliced sod vertically and turned it to one side, opening a furrow for planting. Once crops were sown, sodbusters in drier climates could not count on sufficient rainfall. Pumping well water became the work of the wind. A newly invented

pivoting **windmill** with adjustable compact blades withstood high winds. By the early 1900s windmills stood sentinel over most farms. In the early days cattle herds roamed free, the bane of farmers. Enclosing a quarter section with wooden fencing—if there was wood—was costly. **Barbed wire** became the solution that divided open range in practice as well as on paper. These inventions spawned an industry based on specialized equipment for plains farms.

An osage orange hedgerow could also be used to help fence the prairie.

Listen about osage orange hedgerows at Homestead.



Patent Drawing for Joseph F. Glidden's Improvement to Barbed Wire 11/24/1874

Records of the Patent and Trademark Office  
National Archives Identifier: 302051

While the later half of the 19th century saw a series of patents for barbed wire, it was this one that has proven to be the most enduring. In 1874 Joseph Glidden, an Illinois farmer, patented an improved design which held the wire barbs in place. Glidden's wire was the leading barbed wire used while the West was being settled; since that time, there has been little change to his innovation.

## Closing the Frontier

"The red grass was disappearing," wrote Willa Cather in 1918. "There were wooden houses where the old sod dwellings used to be, and little orchards and big red barns." As mechanization sped the transition of grassland into farmland, some 1.6 million homestead applications were fulfilled. In 1934 the Taylor Grazing Act withdrew 75 million acres of public land from potential homesteading. The homestead law was repealed in 1976 (excluding Alaska), formally ending the pioneer era that had died long before.

### The Impacts of the Homestead Act



# REMNANTS OF A SEA OF GRASS



Between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains lies the grassy expanse once dismissed as the Great American Desert. Early in the 1800s expansion advocates urged settlers to skip the interior and go directly to the far West. A land official wrote in 1868 that the plains were “an obstacle to the progress of the nation’s growth . . . in not yielding that sustenance for increasing population.” When homesteaders settled in, they discovered what the native Plains Indians had known for centuries: that the desert was a mosaic of different regions, each with its own climate, vegetation, and character.

Throughout the plains and prairie, different varieties of grass indicate different climatic regions. In the drier area east of the Rockies is the high plains shortgrass, consisting of foot-high buffalo, blue grama, and needle grasses that need little water. Eastward in the wide belt of land bisected by the 100th meridian (near Willa Cather’s home in Red Cloud, Nebr.), shortgrass combines with other varieties, including June grass and western wheatgrass, in the mixed-grass terrain. This is the land of the mid-1800s cattle empire and later the homestead sod-dies. Farther east toward the lower Missouri valley, thriving on increased moisture, reigns the tallgrass that the Freeman family encountered when they moved from Iowa to southeastern Nebraska in the 1860s.

Tallgrass prairie, a complex ecosystem, includes flowers, trees, birds, mammals, insects, and microorganisms. But grass dominates. Like other grasses, tallgrasses do not form woody tissue or increase in girth. Their stems are hollow except where the leaves join, leaves are narrow with parallel veins, and flowers are small and inconspicuous. Tallgrass prairie is so-named because the component grasses—big bluestem, little bluestem, Indiangrass, and switchgrass—can reach 8 or 9 feet tall.

Your eyes see only half the prairie; the other half is underground. Roots several feet deep tap moisture in times of drought. Deep roots also store energy that produces new growth. Because grass grows from below (like human hair) rather than from its ends, plants survive weather extremes, mowing, grazing, and fire.

Once this prairie covered millions of acres; now only isolated remnants exist. Homesteaders saw it as a nuisance to be replaced as soon as possible with

crops that paid their way. Today prairie is being restored in places using a land management technique borrowed from the Plains tribes: controlled burning. Spring fires clear out non-native grasses before the later sun-seeking native grasses begin to grow. Fire burns up dead plant debris, allowing the sun and rain to penetrate the soil, and releases nutrients, promoting growth and increasing seed yields. This and other prairie restoration methods help ensure that, at least in some places, we can look out over a sea of grass and feel the wonder of the first homesteaders.

Big bluestem

- Grows from 3-10 feet tall
- Also called "turkey foot"
- Deep, thick roots help form sod

1/9

Prairie Plants

Listen about Homestead's tallgrass prairie



# HOMESTEAD ACT

## 150th

# CELEBRATION

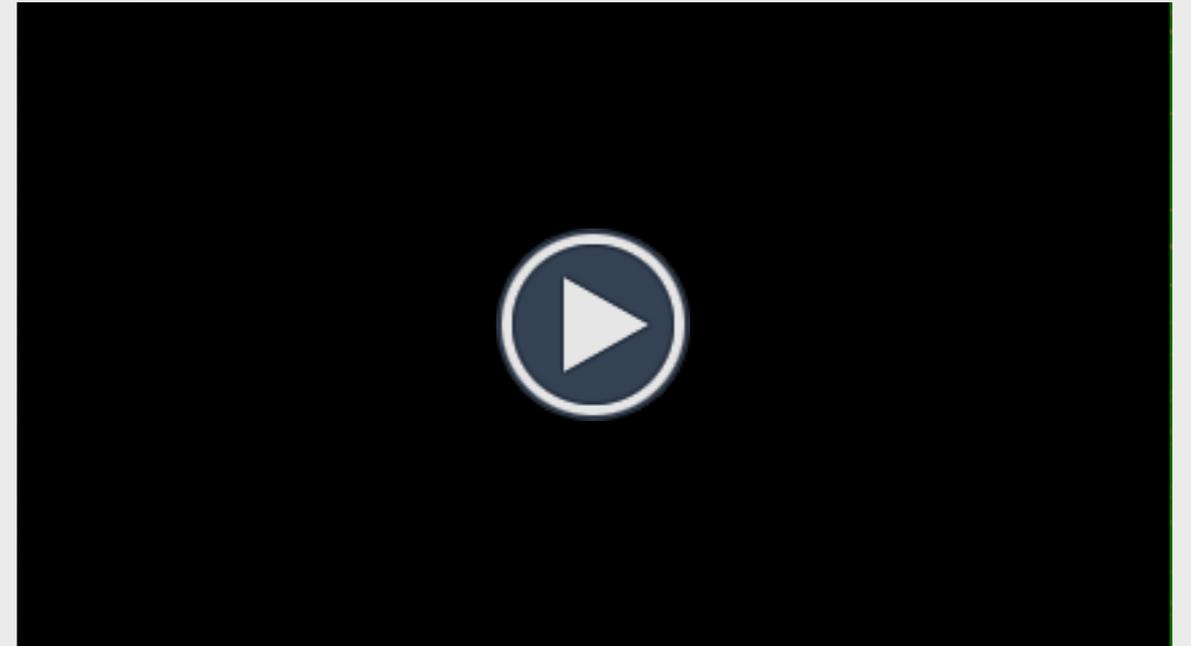
Homestead National Monument of America is proud to celebrate the 150th Anniversary of the signing of the Homestead Act of 1862. To commemorate this special event Homestead National Monument of America in cooperation with the



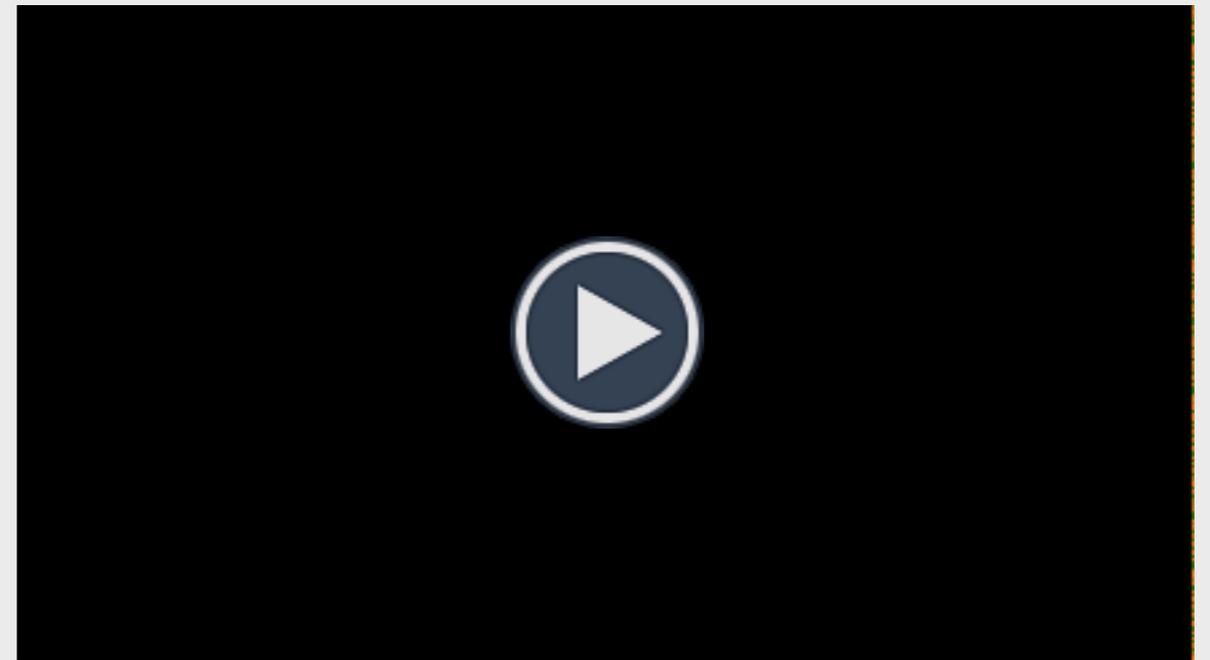
National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, D. C. produced short films on the Homestead Act and on the Homestead Records Digitization Project.

Come celebrate the 150th Anniversary at Homestead National Monument of America. For a list of currently scheduled events, please click [here](#).

Beginning of a Dream: the Homestead Act Made Law



Filled with Stories: The Homestead Records Digitization Project



# Created in Partnership with:

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