

Homesteading the Prairie

Just after midnight on New Year's Day 1863, Union army scout David Freeman paid a \$10 filing fee and staked his claim as the nation's first official homesteader. Fifty years later, in 1913, Isabel Proctor, a young single teacher living in Stanley, North Dakota, received a letter from her brother in Montana. "Come out and homestead," he wrote. "The government is giving land away." Isabel moved to Rapelje, Montana, a remote community in the Stillwater County flatlands, and staked her claim. Every weekday during the school year she rode her horse fifteen miles to and from town to teach her class, often riding through heavy snow and bitter cold. By living on her land, she fulfilled the Homestead Act's residency requirement, allowing her to prove up her claim. She owned the 160 acres the rest of her long life.

Isabel Proctor and nearly two million others continued what Daniel Freeman started. (Freeman's farmsite in Beatrice, Nebraska, is now the Homestead National Monument of America.) Under the 1862 Homestead Act, formally "an act to secure homesteads to actual settlers on the public domain," the federal government offered settlers like Proctor and Freeman free public land—all one had to do was live on it for five years, build a small house, and make "improvements," usually by plowing ten acres. It was open to male citizens over 21, war veterans of any age, widows and single women, married women who were heads of households, even new immigrants who swore they intended to become citizens. After 1866, when a civil rights act recognized them as citizens, African Americans could homestead too.

The idea of free land created a frenzy, and settlers poured into states where land was available. Yet in practice the land was hardly free. Successfully creating a farm required years of labor, plus investments in a house and fields, livestock, a barn, and fencing. Settlers paid in other ways too, enduring brutal conditions, long freezing winters and hot searing summers, often losing crops to drought or wind or disease, and suffering deep social isolation. As one homesteader put it, "The government bets you a quarter-section that you can't survive on the land for five years." Roughly half who tried it failed. Despite the obstacles, 1.6 million successful homesteaders earned title to some 270 million acres of the public domain.

In most of the thirty homesteading states, homesteading occurred long after Indian land titles were settled, and the Act served to regulate who among whites (and a few blacks) obtained public land. Previous laws allowed big investors, political insiders, and speculators to claim much of the public domain by exploiting land sales, railroad grants, warrants for veterans, and agricultural college scrip. With the Homestead Act, by contrast, Congress conferred these benefits mostly on actual settlers.

In Dakota Territory (later North and South Dakota) and Indian Territory (Oklahoma), however, would-be homesteaders targeted existing Indian land holdings. Land-seekers agitated to extinguish Indian land titles, lobbied their congressmen, and squatted on tribal lands. A series of congressional acts, treaties, and presidential executive orders deprived Indians in both territories of extensive lands which were then opened to homesteaders.

One hundred and fifty years after Freeman filed the first claim, homesteading has become a cherished part of our national narrative, cited favorably by presidents, scholars, and citizens. President John F. Kennedy declared it to be "probably the single greatest stimulus to national development ever enacted." President George W. Bush linked the Homestead Act to "a broader definition of liberty." The author Mari Sandoz observed in 1963 that "The Homestead Act was the hope of the poor man," and columnist George Will in 2005 enthused, "Rarely has a social program worked so well." Those judgments rest on the achievements of a Civil War Congress

and President, as well as Daniel Freeman, Isabel Proctor, and millions of other homesteaders who fulfilled this American promise.

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