

## SESSION 2.1: ACTIVITY: THE HOMESTEAD ACT - 60 minutes

### News Reporter (non-fiction)

You will deliver the facts below to your classmates. After reading them you can each choose parts to explain to your classmates as if reporters on the news. Some of you may be holding the maps or showcasing the information on posters. Some of you are to read the facts and explain them to the best of your ability from what you know about homesteading.

### A. Map / Land / Facts:

Image: Map of the U.S. showing the 270 acres available through the Homestead Act in Nebraska)

Source: Friends of Homestead: The Homestead Act, 1862-1986

The Homestead Act of 1862 has been called one of the most important pieces of Legislation in the history of the United States. Signed into law in 1862 by Abraham Lincoln after the secession of southern states, this Act turned over 270 million acres, or 10% of the area of the United States, to those who claimed and settled under this act.

Homesteads in Nebraska to date:

Nebraska (104,260 homesteads)

Total acreage in Nebraska: 49,201,920

Total homestead acreage: 22,253,314

Total percentage: 45% of land in Nebraska was homesteaded

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

<https://www.census.gov/dmd/www/resapport/states/nebraska.pdf>

### B. Government for the People:

The Homestead Act of 1862 was one of the most significant events in the westward expansion of the United States but it wasn't the only government action. The Homestead Act granted 160 acres of free land to claimants. Many believed it allowed nearly any man or woman a chance to live the American dream. It took courage and tenacity to settle the land.

The success of the Homestead Act was hastened by the passage of several other laws including the Emancipation Proclamation and the Railroad Act. Thomas Jefferson's Land Ordinance of 1785 also influenced it. All these laws were instrumental in the settlement of the western United States, including Nebraska.



### C. Homestead Act

The Homestead Act of 1862 gave 160 acres of land away to individuals who met certain requirements. In order to file a claim, an individual had to be 21 years of age or older and be head of their family. This vagueness in wording allowed women to file claims and own land. The act also required a person to be a citizen of the United States or declare intention to gain citizenship. This allowed many European immigrants to stake claims as well. Many railroads and western towns sent representatives to European countries to entice people to move to the United States. These representatives showed pictures of beautiful towns with tree-lined streets and rich soil for farming. The applicant of a claim had to file an affidavit with the local land office stating they met the conditions required by the law. At this time, the claimant would pay a fee of \$12 for filing the paperwork. Once the filing was complete, there were additional requirements to meet in order to receive the patent and title to the land.

A person had to build a home, live on the land, make the land his/her permanent residence, and work the land for a period of 5 years. Many people who came to claim land paid for the services of a locator. This person would help them in finding an unclaimed tract of land. After living on the land, building a home, and farming the land for 5 years, it was time to “prove up.” To do this, the homesteader had to find two people who would serve as witnesses. The witnesses had to sign a paper and help “prove” that they knew the homesteader for 5 years, and that the claimant had build a home on the land, and knew the claimant had tilled and worked so many acres of land for crops. There was another \$6 filing fee for this. Afterwards, the claimant would receive a final certificate, called a patent, to the land signed by the president at that time.

### D. “Proving Up” included building a home:

Homesteaders built a home based on the land they were staking a claim on and what was available. If there was a hillside they could build a dugout. Homesteaders would dig out a space and then cover the top of the hole with poles, grass, and earth. Space was left at one end which was used for a door. The homesteaders who lived in dugouts usually put the door facing south to protect their home from the north winds. If there was no wood available, a buffalo robe or a blanket might be used to cover the doorway until a wooden door could be built. If there were enough trees the homesteaders used them to build log cabins. If there were no trees or hills, they built their houses out of the prairie sod. Before the homesteaders arrived, the prairies had never been plowed, so the grass grew very thick. The roots held the soil together very tightly and could be used to make sod “bricks.” Using a plow or sod cutter, the homesteaders would cut the sod into large pieces - twelve to eighteen inches wide, two to three feet long, and four inches thick. These pieces were placed on top of one another just as bricks are laid for a house today. The roof was built by running a long pole across the center of the house. Then poles or boards were laid to the sidewalls. On top of these, more sod was placed to keep out the rain and snow. The roof of a sod house was built to slant very sharply so the rain would run off quickly. The walls on the inside of the sod house were covered with a kind of plaster made from the clay soil. The floor was dirt, but in time, with wear, it became very hard and smooth. It could be swept and even mopped if it was done quickly.

Source: Homestead National Monument of America, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior