

# HOMESTEAD



NATIONAL MONUMENT • NEBRASKA



**“In regards to the Homestead law . . . I am in favor of cutting the wild lands into parcels, so that every poor man may have a home.” Abraham Lincoln**

Free Land! was the constant cry of frontiersmen who, during the first six decades of America's history, wanted the Federal Government to donate land to settlers. The response came on May 20, 1862, when President Abraham Lincoln signed the Homestead Act, destined to be one of the most important measures enacted in the history of this country. The act permitted every citizen, or any one who declared his intention of becoming a citizen, to file claim to “one-quarter section [160 acres] of unappropriated Government land.”

Homestead National Monument, a T-shaped quarter section of prairie and woodland near Beatrice, Nebr., is on the site of the claim of Daniel Freeman, one of the first applicants to file under the Homestead Act. The monument, commemorating the influence of the “homestead movement” on American history, is a memorial to the hardy pioneers who braved the rigors and scourges of the windswept prairies to build their homes and our Nation.

#### **AMERICA'S EARLY LAND POLICY**

During the early years of the Republic, which began under President George Washington in 1789, few advocated giving land outright to settlers, although some were given free land during colonial times.

The leading advocate of large sales was Alexander Hamilton. As the first Secretary of the Treasury, he was called upon by Congress to formulate a plan for disposing of public lands.

Disposal of the public domain to private owners, partly for revenue, continued until after 1900. Vast amounts of cheap land induced native and foreign-born pioneers to play a leading role in the westward expansion of the United States. Free land as a reward to pioneer settlers for their part in converting undeveloped lands into farms was gradually recognized by law.

#### **GROWING AGITATION FOR FREE LAND**

Western Congressmen were early advocates of the basic principle of the Homestead Act: free land to settlers. The earliest important supporter was Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri. In 1825 he asked Congress to inquire into the expediency of donating land to settlers. He insisted that in colonial times settlers were given land free and that a policy of deriving revenue from public lands was reactionary. Andrew Johnson of Tennessee (first as a Representative and later as a Senator), Representative Galusha Grow of Pennsylvania, and Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune*, were among the champions of the cause.

Nonsectional both in origin and during its early history, the homestead movement attracted diverse support as it gained force and popularity. First minor, and later major, political parties included it in their platforms. In 1848 the Free Soil Party advocated free land for settlers, as did the Free Soil Democrats in 1852, asserting that man had a “natural right” to the soil. Later in that decade, the newly formed Republican Party urged passage of a homestead act. Antislavery groups, who opposed extension of slavery into the territories, supported the principle of free land. Thus was homesteading entangled in the controversies leading to the Civil War.

Between 1840 and 1860, the movement for a homestead law slowly crystallized. At first it received some support from the southeastern States. As the alliance between the agrarian West and the industrial East became stronger, however, homestead proposals encountered increasing opposition from the slave States. Several bills were seriously considered in Congress, but were killed by Southern opposition. One was finally passed by the Senate and the House of Representatives in 1860, but was vetoed by President James Buchanan.

## THE HOMESTEAD ACT AND ITS EFFECTS

When Republicans won the election of 1860, Galusha Grow revived a homestead bill he had introduced in the House in 1856. Passed in the House in the last days of 1860, it died in Senate committee.

In mid-1861, Representative Cyrus Aldrich of Minnesota introduced another homestead bill. There were objections to it, though few proslavery men were still in Congress. But vigorous support by Grow, then Speaker of the House, helped push Aldrich's bill through that body on February 28, 1862, with two amendments added. One gave bounty lands to soldiers, the other set January 1, 1863, as the date the act was to go into effect.

On May 6, after many amendments, the bill passed the Senate by a vote of 33 to 7. On May 20, President Lincoln signed the Homestead Act into law.

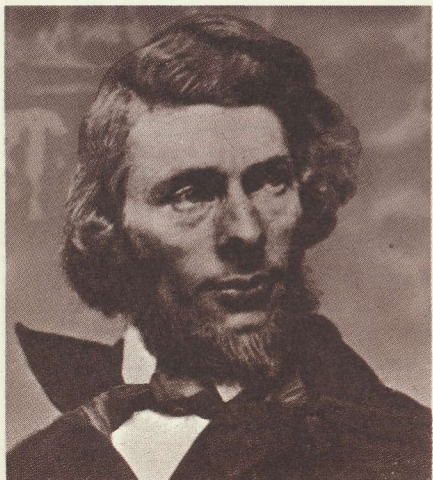
The act made it possible for settlers to acquire farms of 160 acres free of all charges, except for a minor filing fee. To become full owner, a settler had to live on the land and cultivate it for 5 years. Later acts made land even easier to get, especially for veterans of the Army and the Navy.

As settlement progressed westward into the increasingly arid land beyond the 98th meridian (along the line of Enid, Okla., Norfolk, Nebr., and Valley City, N. Dak.), Congress became more and more aware that a quarter section was not always an adequate farm unit and enacted several laws enlarging the acreage that could be taken under the original legislation.

The end of the Civil War released thousands of men to seek a livelihood in a country disrupted by 4 years of upheaval. Many took advantage of the free public lands offered by the Homestead Act. A free farm, added to the other opportunities held forth by a democratic nation, lured many Europeans to seek new homes in America. They and their descendants have taken an active part in the political and social life of the country that they have helped develop.

The doubling of the Nation's population in the four decades after 1860 was due not only to industrial development, but also to agricultural settlement of the West under the Homestead Act. Kansas, Nebraska, the Dakotas, and Montana are particularly noteworthy among States whose population growth was hastened by free distribution of Federal lands.

Largely because the supply of public land suitable for homesteading was exhausted, remaining public lands were withdrawn from homesteading in 1935. Occasionally since then, small areas in Alaska have been opened to veterans for homesteading. At such times, the number of applicants so far exceeds the units of land that selection by lot is necessary.

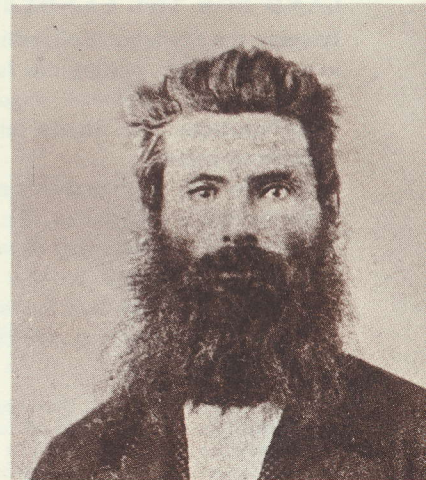


Galusha Grow

*Library of Congress*



Palmer-Epard homestead cabin



Daniel Freeman



A dugout in Custer county, Nebr., about 1880. *Nebraska State Historical Society*



*Nebraska State Historical Society*

When timber was available, log cabins were built instead of sod houses. This family lived near Victoria Springs in Central Nebraska.



"Boomers" at El Reno, Indian Territory, in 1889, soon after Oklahoma was opened to settlement.

*National Archives*

## LAND FOR THE LANDLESS

Imagine the excitement of pulling up roots in the cultured and settled East, putting the family and all their worldly possessions in a covered wagon, and heading westward! Many memoirs and diaries tell of dramatic treks to the homestead country.

The first task upon arrival was to locate a suitable claim. After finding a likely tract, the homesteader had to travel to a land office, often more than 100 miles away. To hurry was important, for if he was slow, someone else might enter a claim on the land he wanted.

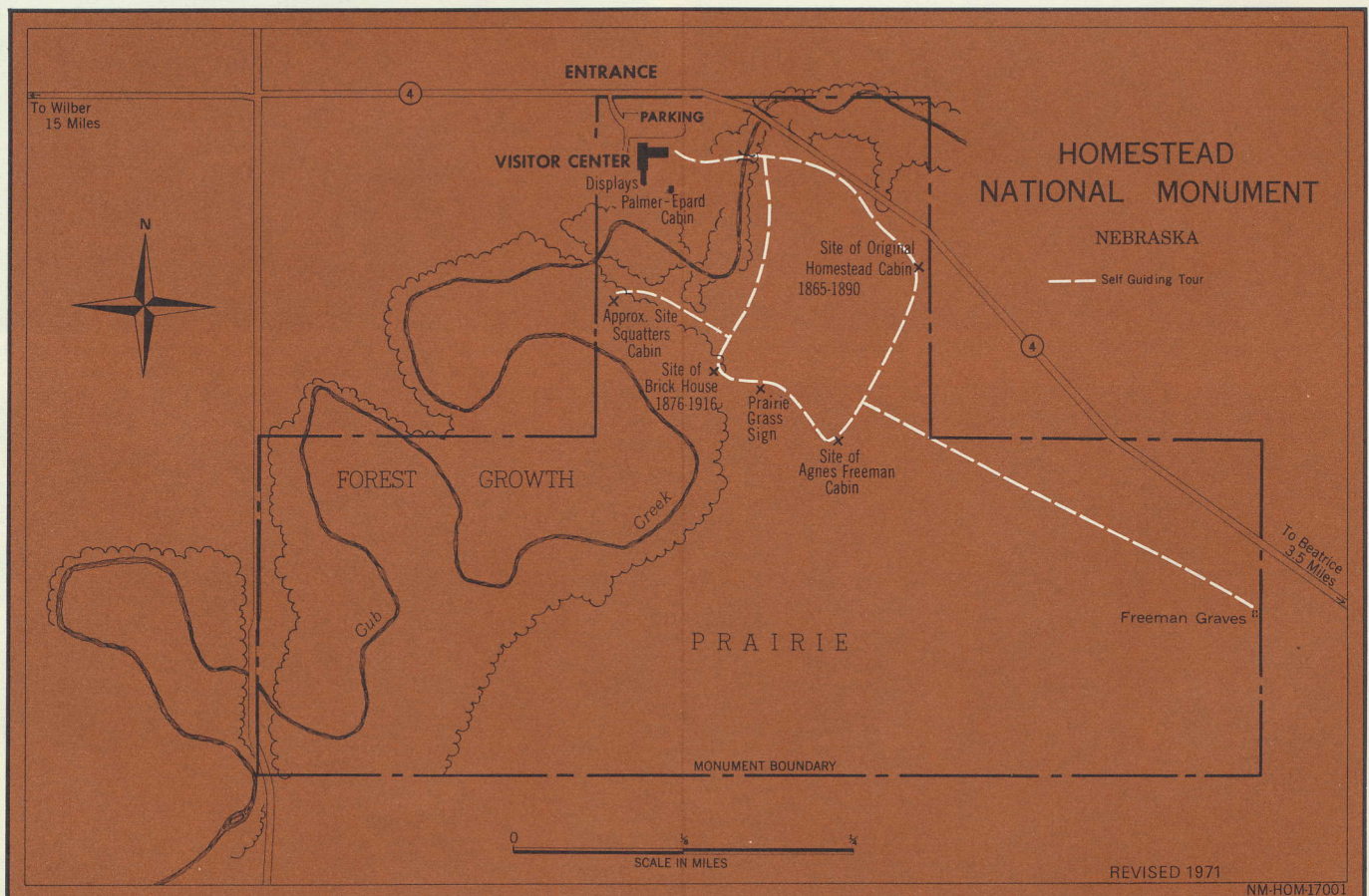
The *Beatrice Express*, describing one land office scene in 1871, said:

*The jam was terrible . . . The applications poured in as fast as they could be taken care of all day, the crowd inside and out never growing smaller, for as fast as one applicant, with papers properly fixed up, would worm his way through the crowd to the door, and be cast out, panting and dripping with perspiration, another would squeeze in, and become part of the solid surging mass within.*

Who was the Nation's first homesteader? From existing evidence it is impossible to determine who filed the first

claim, since application papers were not stamped with the minute and hour of filing, only the date. Daniel Freeman's homestead, on which the monument is located, was filed at the Brownville, Nebr., Patent Office as Entry No. 1 (dated January 1, 1863), Final Certificate No. 1 and Patent No. 1—all first entries for Brownville but not for the United States. Freeman, in common with Mahlon Gore, a printer of Vermillion, S. Dak., claimed that he filed his application for a homestead in the early hours of January 1, 1863, when the Homestead Act went into effect. Another claimant, William Young, asserted years later that his entry became effective immediately after midnight, December 31, because he filed, and had accepted, his claim at Nebraska City, Nebr., on December 26, 1862. Other claimants may also have filed at other land offices in the first hours of 1863.

Daniel Freeman and his wife, Agnes Suiter Freeman, are buried near the monument's eastern boundary, the highest point on the homestead. From the grave sites, marked by a granite stone, you can see the full panorama of the quarter section that Freeman homesteaded.



## THE MONUMENT IS ESTABLISHED

During the early 1930's, a movement was launched to set aside Daniel Freeman's land as a memorial to the homestead movement. The efforts of Senator George W. Norris, the Beatrice Chamber of Commerce, and local citizens were rewarded in 1936 when Congress authorized establishment of the monument "as a proper memorial emblematical of the hardships . . . through which the early settlers passed in the settlement . . . of the great West."

## ABOUT YOUR VISIT

Homestead National Monument is in southeastern Nebraska, about 4½ miles northwest of Beatrice and about 40 miles southwest of Lincoln. Nebr. 4 passes through both Beatrice and the monument.

The visitor center is near the monument entrance. On exhibit are historic objects of pioneer days and graphic accounts of life during settlement of the public domain. National Park Service personnel will help you become better acquainted with the monument and its history.

The Palmer-Epard homestead cabin, erected in 1867 in a neighboring township and moved here in 1950, is on display. Its furnishings and tools, which were used by pioneers in eastern Nebraska, suggest the pattern of life followed by homesteaders on the tall-grass prairie.

A 1-mile self-guiding trail, which begins at the visitor center, leads to the homestead cabin exhibit, the site of the original Freeman Cabin, and the sites of later Freeman buildings, including the brick house of 1876. You can take side trips to the Freeman graves at the eastern boundary of the area and to the Squatters Cabin site near Cub Creek. Special guide service for large groups can be arranged in advance with the superintendent.

Facilities for camping or picnicking are not provided at the monument. Restaurants and overnight accommodations are available in Beatrice.

Please help protect the monument by observing the following:

- Do not disturb any natural or historical feature.
- Be especially careful with fire. Be sure that matches and cigarettes are entirely out before you dispose of them. The grasslands are subject to devastating prairie fires.
- Keep pets on leash; do not take them on the trail.
- Keep motorcycles and bikes off the trail.

Report all accidents, suggestions, and complaints to monument headquarters.

## ADMINISTRATION

Homestead National Monument of America is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is Beatrice, NB 68310, is in immediate charge.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has basic responsibilities for water, fish, wildlife, mineral, land, park, and recreational resources. Indian and Territorial affairs are other major concerns of America's "Department of Natural Resources." The Department works to assure the wisest choice in managing all our resources so each will make its full contribution to a better United States, now and in the future.

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
U.S. DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR



Cover: "Buffalo Bones Are Plowed Under" by Harvey Dunn.  
Courtesy, South Dakota Memorial Art Center, Brookings.