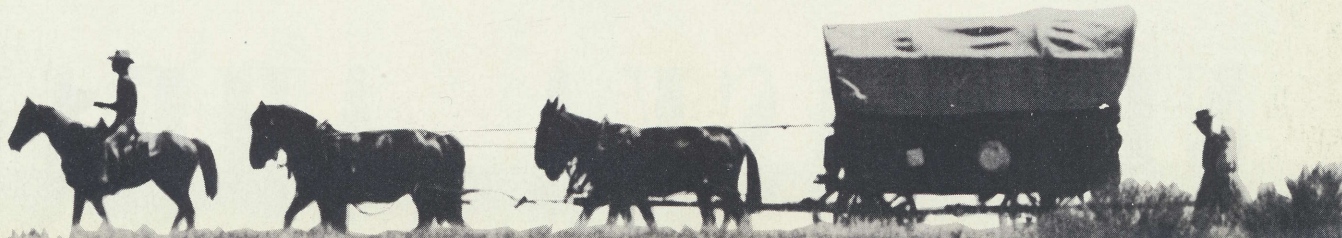


Homestead

National Monument
Nebraska

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Free Land!

The cry echoed through the halls of Congress, and was either voiced or scorned by a growing America. Hotly debated throughout the first half of the 1800s, the issue could not be ignored.

America—a new country, young and bold, stretching ever westward. The People's Land; the Public Domain; vast, wild, and beckoning to men and women, firing their dreams. They came eagerly to settle on land of their own. Their lot was not an easy one. Tiny, primitive homes at first; hard, exhausting work; loneliness; disappointment; drought; failure. And eventually, for some, success.

Homestead National Monument, a T-shaped quarter section of prairie and woodland near Beatrice, Nebraska, is located on the claim of Daniel Freeman, one of the first applicants to file under the Homestead Act of 1862. The monument, commemorating the influence of the homestead movement on American history, is a memorial to the pioneers who braved the rigors of the prairie frontier to build their homes and fortunes in a new land.

The Growing Agitation

Some settlers had acquired free land during colonial times, but in the first decades of the Republic, little land was given away outright. Western congressmen were early advocates of a homestead act. In 1825 Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri asked Congress to consider donating land to settlers.

Between 1840 and 1860, the movement for a homestead law intensified, but several bills that came before Congress were killed by Southern opposition. A bill that did pass in 1860 was vetoed by President James Buchanan.

The Homestead Act of 1862

Events after 1860 gave the homestead proponents a more favorable position, however. The Republicans had won the election, and the Southern States seceded from the Union. On May 20, 1862, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Homestead Act into law, making it possible for settlers to claim farms of 64 hectares (160 acres) by paying a minor filing fee. To become full owner, a homesteader was required to build a house, live

on the land, and cultivate it for 5 years. Later acts made homesteads easier to get. Legitimate settlers, however, often found themselves competing with speculators, claim-jumpers, and railroads for their land.

After the Civil War, thousands of veterans took advantage of the Homestead Act, as did numerous European immigrants who were attracted by the availability of free land in a democratic country. Black families, many of them ex-slaves, also headed west to stake their claims. Population soared in Kansas, Nebraska, the Dakotas, and Montana, particularly, with the free distribution of public lands.

By 1935, when the supply of suitable areas was exhausted, remaining Federal lands were withdrawn from homesteading. Occasionally until the 1960s, certain areas in Alaska were open for veterans' claims. Today, many descendants of the original homesteaders continue to farm the land, with a degree of success unimagined by their ancestors. And the remaining public domain still serves the needs, both material and spiritual, of an older America.

Homestead Today

We suggest that you begin your visit to Homestead National Monument at the visitor center near the monument entrance. On exhibit are artifacts of pioneer days and graphic accounts of life during the settlement period. A 2.4-kilometer (1.5 mile) self-guiding trail leads to points of interest in the park. Just outside the visitor center is the **Palmer-Epard Cabin (1)** which was originally built a few miles away in 1867 and moved here in 1950. Look inside the door and pause for a moment. Think of what it was like to raise a family of several children in a cabin this size a century ago.

A footbridge crosses **Cub Creek (2)**. From the bridge look down at the water below. Cub Creek, meandering sluggishly through the

grounds, was a key element in the selection of this particular homestead.

At the other end of the footbridge the loop trail begins. Along the way are various building sites connected with the Freeman family. The trail reveals, close up, other key elements of a good homestead site—the woods and the prairie.

The Woods (3) were generally confined to bottom lands along the creek. Here in eastern Nebraska, trees were plentiful; they gave the homesteader lumber for building and fuel for cooking and winter warmth. The trail passes along the creek and through the woods—a cool, quiet place.

But first, walk the trail through the **Prairie (4)**. Once it was a vast, unbroken sea of grass; now only scattered remnants are found. As you look at this bit of what once was, allow yourself to transcend a century. From the hill where Daniel and Agnes Freeman are buried you can gaze out over their land and maybe feel the excitement of thousands of pioneers, as they thought, "this is my land, my home!"

The Freeman School (5), located a quarter of a mile west of the visitor center, is a furnished one-room schoolhouse that served the local community for nearly a century before it was added to Homestead National Monument in 1970. Check at the visitor center for information about visiting the school.

About Your Visit

Homestead National Monument is located in southeastern Nebraska, about 7 kilometers (4.5 miles) northwest of Beatrice and about 64 kilometers (40 miles) south of Lincoln. Take Nebraska route 4 from Beatrice to the monument.

National Park Service personnel at the visitor center will help you become better acquainted with the monument and its history. Special guide service for large groups can be arranged in advance with the superintendent.

No lodging or eating facilities are provided at the monument, but there are restaurants, campgrounds, picnic areas, and overnight accommodations in Beatrice.

Please, no smoking on the trail. The grasslands are still growing back and are subject to devastating prairie fires. Please do not pick or gather grasses, flowers, or other natural objects. Do not disturb or climb on any natural or historical feature or artifact. Keep pets on a leash; do not take them on the trail. Motorcycles, bicycles, and snow-

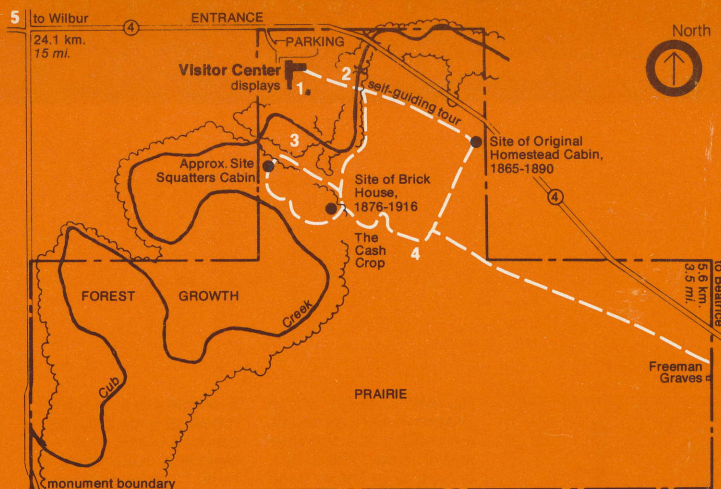
mobiles are not allowed on the trail or grounds. Report accidents, suggestions, and complaints to park headquarters.

For Your Safety

Check carefully for ticks, which are most active from May to August. Have a safe visit.

Administration

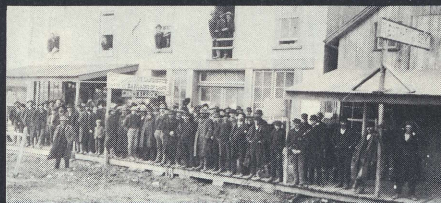
Homestead National Monument of America is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is Beatrice, NE 68310, is in immediate charge.



The Rush for Free Land
When Daniel Freeman filed the first claim at the Brownville, Nebr land office under the Homestead Act, on Jan. 1, 1863, he was only one of many eager claimants of 160 acres of public domain.

"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." *Beatrice Express*, 1871.



The photograph at left was taken at the U.S. Land Office in Garden City, Kansas, in 1885. Such a crowd, jamming sidewalks and windows, waiting for the office to open, was a common scene in early prairie townships.

THE WEST! NEBRASKA AHEAD!

Prairie Life

Imagine the excitement of a family pulling up roots in the familiar, settled East or the Ohio country, packing their prized possessions into 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 an unclaimed spot with arable land, a water supply, and, for some, trees. After staking out a suitable tract, the homesteader traveled to the nearest land office. Speed was important; delay could mean someone else might claim the same land.

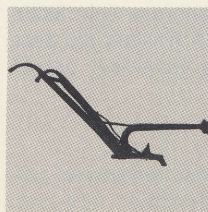


Palmer-Epard Cabin, above, was built on a nearby homestead in 1867 and moved here

in 1950. The tools and furnishings in it are typical of those used by Nebraska pioneers.

Some sort of shelter was needed right away. Often, in this area, a simple log cabin housed the family at first. Further west, settlers sometimes lived in dugouts. But usually, the densely matted prairie sod was cut into blocks and a "soddy" constructed.

Land had to be cleared, the sod broken, and enough crops planted in the spring to see the family through the first winter, if possible. Over the next few years, as homesteaders gradually improved their circumstances, brick or frame houses replaced the first crude shelters of sod



The "grasshopper" plow was designed specially for cutting sod strips for 'soddies.



Homesick settlers valued token reminders of pre-prairie life, such as this birdcage.

or logs, and large barns were constructed amid the neat patterns of cultivated fields.

Many homesteading families did not succeed, however. They were beaten by drought or insects, loneliness or just bad luck, and their farms were sold or abandoned. But other homesteaders stayed on and gradually succeeded in their dreams. They built schools for their children. Towns arose, transportation improved, and soon the "Great American Desert" became better known as the "Great Plains."



By 1886, this industrious pioneer family in Custer County, Nebraska, had installed

a windmill, added out-buildings, and increased their livestock holdings.

Nebraska State Historical Society

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People for the Prairie
A persistent myth stereotypes the homesteader as a white American male. There were other racial, ethnic, and sexual dimensions to the homestead movement, however. Many European immigrants, especially of German and Scandina-

Union Pacific Railroad Museum Collection

God for **ONE CONTINUOUS EMIGRANT Passage to SAN FRANCISCO,**

SUBJECT TO THE FOLLOWING CONTRACT:

In consideration of this Ticket being sold by the Union Pacific Railroad Company at less than regular rates, it is understood and agreed that it will be good for passage only and 10 days from and including date of sale. It is not to be used for any other purpose, and if presented by any other person than the one whose signature is attached, the Conductor will take it up and collect full fare. No baggage check will be issued on this ticket. Baggage checked to destination only.

I hereby agree to all the conditions of the above Contract.

Form E 99 Signature *Richard M. ...*
5070

vian stock, were lured across the Atlantic and onto the plains by railroad agents and advertising. Numerous black families, many of them ex-slaves, took up prairie claims. The Shores family, shown below in 1887, homesteaded in Custer County, Nebraska.

Nor was it unusual for women, like the four Chrisman sisters, right, to stake their own claims, build sod houses and begin the cultivation of their land. Most soon found husbands with similar interests and doubled the size of their homestead holdings.

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Education on the Frontier

Homesteaders in most cases assigned high priority to the education of their children. Parents in newly settled areas often hired a teacher and built a one-room schoolhouse even before their own homes were completed.

A schoolhouse served far more than formal educational needs, however. It often became the social and civic center for an isolated community. Church services, township meetings, and box socials took place in the building.

In 1868, School District No. 21 of Gage County, Nebraska, was organized. Prior to this, Agnes Freeman had taught local children on a subscription basis. By spring of 1871, a log building valued at \$5.00 was in use by the district. An eighteen-year-old teacher, Henry Wagoner, was paid \$75.00 for instructing seven students for one term while he boarded with parents of his pupils—a typical arrangement. The Freeman School, below right, was built of brick and opened to 14 students in the spring of 1872.

Most frontier schools were not so large or well-built as the Freeman School, however. Like the first district school in Gage County, most early schoolhouses were made of logs or sod. But the little schoolhouses dotting the prairie, whatever their construction, symbolized both the settlers' cooperative determination to perpetuate their educational values and their equally pervasive desire to help their children rise in a highly competitive frontier society.

Former students of the Freeman School recall a handbell like the one shown here. The bell is typical of those used to summon pupils in many early prairie schools.



A blackboard, usually made of wide boards painted black, was standard equipment in most frontier schools. At right, a schoolmarm instructs her charges at the board.

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