

Homestead

Official Map and Guide



Solomon D. Butcher Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society

It seemed purely democratic, the idea of land for the people. The Homestead Act of 1862, along with the sale of undeveloped railroad land grants, brought millions of settlers to the western prairies and plains in the last decades of the 19th century. 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, such as the 1886 immigrants pictured above in Custer County, Nebraska, who were surely a match for whatever ordeals the land could muster.

"Uncle Sam is Rich Enough to Give Us All a Farm"

—1850s popular song

From the beginning, the west has exerted a pull on the American spirit. In colonial times those who dreamed of family farms went from the coastal plain to the foothills, across the Appalachians to the Ohio Valley. George Washington's words in 1784 were prophetic: "The spirit for emigration is great." By the 1850s, huge land acquisitions had filled out the continental United States. The country's sheer vastness strengthened the conviction that the public domain rightfully belonged to the people. The grassy interior between the Missouri and the Rocky Mountains was designated Indian Territory in the 1830s and was bypassed by emigrants on the Oregon Trail. But as the east and far west closed to settlement, expansionists pushed through the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which opened that territory to farmers.

Distributing land west of the Mississippi became an enormous project. The inability of small farmers to compete with larger concerns precipitated a series of anti-speculation laws. The Pre-emption Act, championed by Missouri Sen. Thomas Hart Benton in 1841, legitimized squatting by letting farmers claim unsurveyed plots and 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. The bill was signed by President Abraham Lincoln in 1862 after the Southern states had 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 filer was still on the land, it was his property, free and clear. One of the first takers was a Union scout from Iowa named Daniel Freeman. Daniel and his wife Agnes joined the post-Civil War wave of homesteaders who hailed



Sallie Cover painted this idealized soddy homestead in the 1880s.



Nebraska State Historical Society



U.S. railroads advertised abroad (left), sparing no hyperbole in praise of land they intended to sell to homesteaders. Land offices (above) were often swamped with claimants.

Homestead National Monument of America
Nebraska

U.S. Department of the Interior



Senator Thomas Hart Benton (below) of Missouri first proposed giving free land to the people in 1825.



Kansas State Historical Society

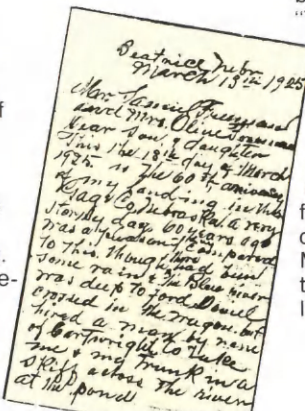
mostly from the Ohio and Mississippi valleys. Later came European immigrants lured to America by railroad companies eager to sell off millions of acres of grant land and to provide farm-to-market transportation—at a price.

The Homestead Act's lenient terms proved the undoing of many settlers. Claimants need not own equipment or know anything about farming. The quarter sections, adequate land in humid regions, were too small to support plains settlers west of the 100th meridian where scarcity of water reduced yields. Newer laws allowed homesteaders additional land if they planted 40 acres of trees, a practical impossibility. Or they could buy cheap land in the arid high plains, requiring costly irrigation. Speculators still got hold of homestead land by hiring phony claimants or buying up abandoned farms.

Then there were the natural barriers. In the eastern reaches (where Homestead National Monument is today) there was water for timber. Not so toward the west, in the rain shadow of the Rockies. Settlers built homes of sod which they prayed might withstand hailstorms, drought,

The Louisiana Purchase in 1803 doubled the size of the country. By the 1850s, the Oregon Territory and the former Mexican holdings expanded the area to about 3 million square miles. The Washington Map of the United States shows the extent of the country in 1862, the year the Homestead Act was passed. The patchwork east of the Missouri contrasts with the more open territory of the West, though it was not long before survey lines divided the free range into tidy parcels for sale.

Library of Congress



Daniel Freeman persuaded the Brownville, Nebraska, land agent 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 regiment. Daniel and Agnes Freeman and six of their children are shown at right. Above is Agnes' 1925 letter to son Samuel.

Adelaide Freeman Staupel

prairie fires, blizzards, and relentless wind. From 1874 to 1877, swarms of locusts darkened the skies and consumed just about everything in sight, including leather boots. If natural disasters were not trouble enough, there were the human struggles. Cattlemen resisted the dividing up of the open range by farmers. In the end it was barbed wire—cheap fencing—that decided the war in favor of the homesteaders. Indian attacks were rare; nevertheless, Agnes Freeman kept the peace while her husband was away by giving visiting 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 that breed of settler willing to cope with adversity. "You must make up your mind to rough it," advised an English emigrants' guide. Eventually frame and brick houses replaced the soddies, trees grew high to shield dwellings, windmills pumped water from deep underground, and a host of technological advances made farming profitable. Today the endless rows of corn along the roadways show how farms have survived; many are occupied by the descendants of the original homesteaders. Meanwhile, the patches of prairie remind us that only a century and a half ago this looked like a most unpromising place to make a home.



Nebraska State Historical Society

Your Visit to Homestead

Since 1936 Daniel Freeman's T-shaped claim has commemorated one of the first documented Nebraska homesteads, as well as the waves of American landseekers and European immigrants who ventured west in the late 19th century to become prairie farmers. Homestead National Monument includes the original Freeman land, an historic log cabin typical of those in eastern Nebraska, the original Freeman school, and trails that wind through the restored tallgrass prairie.

Location Homestead National Monument is in southeastern Nebraska, about 40 miles south of Lincoln. Follow signs from I-80 at Lincoln to the Homestead Expressway (Highway 77). At Beatrice, turn west and follow Nebr. 4 for 4½ miles to the park entrance.

Hours The park is open daily from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. On weekends from Labor Day until Memorial Day it is open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. The park is closed Thanksgiving Day, December 25, and January 1.

Facilities There is a small picnic area near the visitor center. Food and lodging are not available at the park. Accommodations and services are available in Beatrice.

Disabled Access The visitor center and its facilities are accessible to persons in wheelchairs. Some trails are hard-surfaced and mostly level.

Touring the park Begin at the visitor center for information and assistance. Special films, talks and guided walks are scheduled in summer. Call ahead to arrange group tours.

An 18-minute video introduces the park and homesteading history. Museum exhibits and a farm implement display document pioneer life.

Just behind the visitor center is the Palmer-Epard Cabin, built in 1867 on a nearby homestead. It was constructed of mixed hardwoods (oak, hackberry, ash, locust, walnut, and elm) and homemade bricks set in lime mortar. It was occupied consecutively by the Palmer and the Epard families, then moved to this site for exhibit in 1950. Today the cabin is furnished to depict life in the 1880s.

Self-guiding trails begin across the Cub Creek footbridge and loop 2½ miles through the Freeman homestead. Guidebooks are available at the visitor center.

The National Park Service has restored more than 100 acres of the Freeman homestead to tallgrass prairie. Prairie restoration began in 1939 and restorers took on the challenge of re-creating wilderness. To prevent erosion of cleared land, sod strips from nearby prairies were laid across gullies. Native grass and flower seeds were also planted. To maintain this ecosystem, managers use a variety of techniques, including controlled fires.

The Freeman School is located ¼-mile west of the visitor center. Some of the Freeman children were taught here. Before it closed in 1967 it was the oldest operating one-room schoolhouse in Nebraska. It is restored to its appearance in the 1890s.

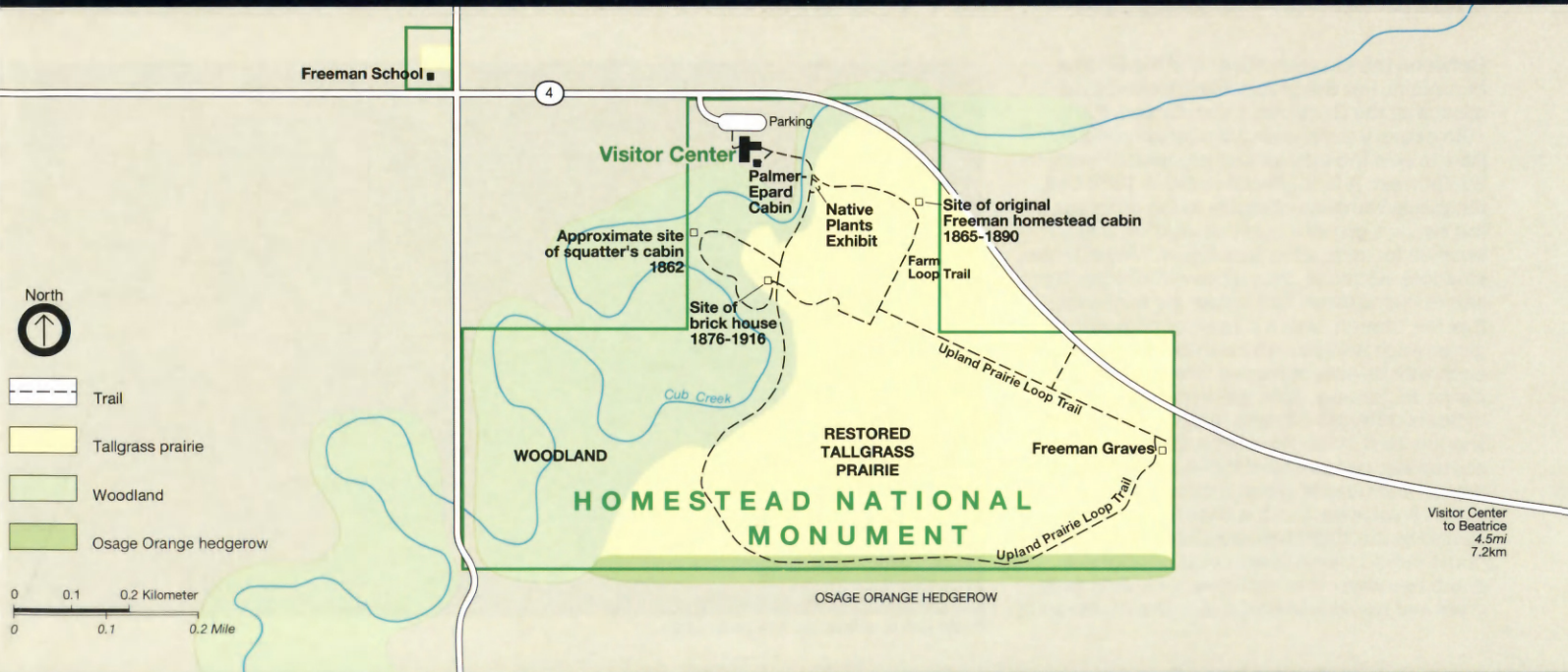
Palmer-Epard Cabin



For your safety and the park's protection: Be watchful for poison ivy and nettles along the trails. Check clothing and hair for ticks. • Stay on marked trails. There are steep dropoffs near Cub Creek. • Grasslands are fragile: do not disturb plants in any way; fires and smoking are not permitted in the park. • Pets must be restrained and are not allowed in buildings or on

trails. • Bicycles and vehicles are not allowed on trails.

Administration Homestead National Monument is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. Contact: Superintendent, 8523 W. Highway 4, Beatrice, NE 68310-6743. Internet: www.nps.gov/home.



Homestead

The World of the Homesteader

As the frontier pushed westward 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.

"We cannot raise too much corn"

A state agriculturalist made this pronouncement 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 re-think 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 food enough each year for four; a hundred years later he fed nearly 60.

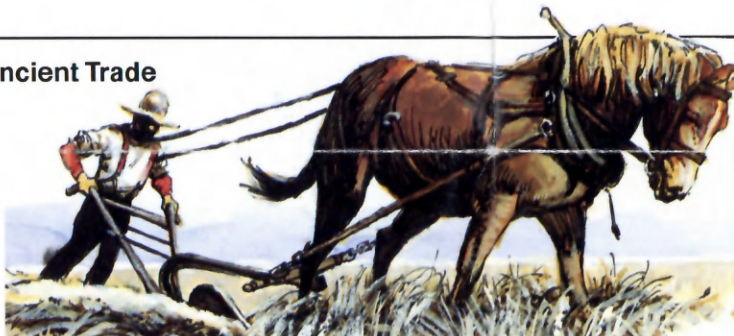
The Comforts of Home

Whether hillside dugouts, grassland soddies, or the 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 the meal on French china. Potted geraniums in the

What was it like to live in a log cabin on the prairie? The illustration below depicts settlers in eastern Nebraska, where there were enough trees to supply fuel and construction materials. The frame and siding are rough-cut hardwood, chinked with a lime-based mortar. The roof is made of cedar shakes. Like many settlers' early homes, the interior is furnished with a combination of heirlooms, store-bought goods, and items made on the premises from whatever was available.

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 succumbed to this vision were soon disappointed. Turning the Great American Desert into the bountiful heartland took considerable ingenuity. For a start, the dense mat of grass defied ordinary cast-iron plows. In the 1860s a new plow called the "grasshopper" appeared. Its steel blade sliced the sod vertically and turned it to one side, opening a furrow for planting. Once crops were sown, sodbusters in the



Grasshopper Plow

drier climates could not count on sufficient rainfall. Pumping well water became the work of the wind. A special pivoting windmill was invented with adjustable compact blades that withstood high winds. By the turn of the century windmills stood sentinel over most plains

farms. In the early days, cattle herds roamed free, the bane of farmers. Enclosing a quarter section with wooden fencing—if there was wood to be had—was costly. Barbed wire was the simple solution

that divided up open range in practice as well as on paper. All these inventions spawned an industry based on specialized equipment for plains farms.

Illustrations by Louis Glanzman

Prairie Palaces of Nebraska Marble

Homesteaders in the eastern prairie could burrow into hillsides before wooden cabins were built. Newcomers to the flat, treeless grasslands farther west found a durable building material beneath their feet. Buffalo grass was short and tough with a dense tangle of roots; it held its shape when cut. Using a special plow, one could shave enough sod from an acre of prairie for a 16- by 20-foot house. The sod strips were cut about a foot wide and 4 inches deep, then sliced crosswise into 3-foot slabs. Slabs were laid grass-side-down in double courses and secured with four corner poles. Frames reserved openings for doors and windows. A sturdy ridgepole was laid across forked upright posts. Branches formed rafters on which more sod was laid—this time grass side up.

Certain advantages kept owners in their homes of "Nebraska Marble" long after lumber was available for housing. Sod houses were inexpensive, quick to build, well insulated, tornado-proof, and did not burn. On the other hand, they needed constant repair, especially after rainstorms when the 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. Sod houses remained a marvel to easterners. As Mark Twain noted in *Roughing It*, "It was the first time we had ever seen a man's front yard on top of his house."

The emergence of towns like Comstock, Nebraska, (below, 1904) and social institutions such as the Freeman School (bottom) signaled the end of the frontier and the beginning of a sense of permanency. The one-room brick school, where some of the Freeman children went, served the local community for nearly a century.



Solomon D. Butcher Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society



Woman gathering buffalo chips for fuel.

window competed for attention with wildflowers in bloom atop a sodhouse roof. Homemakers tacked up muslin sheets to catch falling debris from sod roofs and covered floors with cow skins. Packing crates served as tables and trunks as cradles. Cisterns collected rainwater and children collected fuel. Meals included anything from a wild prairie chicken to storebought coffee, along with corn and more corn. Agnes Freeman concocted a remedy for ague from prickly ash bark, Peruvian pine bark, Cayenne pepper, and brandy.

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."



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The Closing of 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.

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 19th century expansion advocates urged settlers to skip the interior and proceed 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 tribes had known for centuries: that the "desert" was a mosaic of different regions, each with its own climate and vegetation, each with its own character. Throughout the plains and prairie, different varieties of grass indicate different climatic regions. In the rain shadow east of the Rockies is the high plains shortgrass, consisting of foot-high buffalo, blue grama, and needle grasses which need little water. A ways east, in the wide belt of land bisected by the 100th meridian (near Willa Cather's home in Red Cloud, Nebraska), shortgrass combines with other varieties, including June grass and western wheatgrass, in the mixed-grass

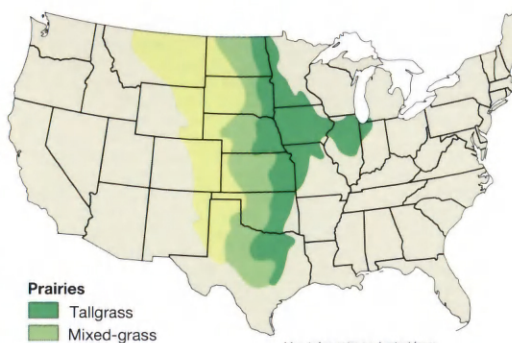


"Prairie Meadows Burning" by George Catlin.

terrain. This is the land of the cattle empire of the mid-19th century and later the homestead soddies. Still farther east toward the lower Missouri valley, thriving on increased moisture, reigns the tallgrass that the Freeman family encountered when they emigrated from Iowa to southeastern Nebraska in the 1860s.

Tallgrass prairie is a complex ecosystem, including flowers, trees, birds, mammals, insects, and microorganisms. But grass dominates. Like other grasses, tallgrasses do not form woody tissue nor 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, indiagrass, and switchgrass—can reach 8 or 9 feet!

The eye sees only half the prairie; the other half is underground. Roots several feet deep tap moisture in times of drought. Another advantage of deep roots is that they store energy



Prairies

Tallgrass
Mixed-grass
Shortgrass

Map information adapted from The Nature Conservancy



Big bluestem



Little bluestem

which can produce new growth. Since grass grows from below, like human hair, rather than from its ends, the plant will survive weather extremes, mowing, grazing, and fire.

Once this prairie covered millions of acres; now only isolated remnants exist. The homesteaders saw it as a nuisance to be replaced as soon as possible with crops that paid their way. Today prairie is being brought back 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 also burns up dead plant debris on the ground, 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.

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