

Free Land! Homesteading Records and Resources

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Call of the West: Free Land Was the Cry!

- What is Homesteading?
- What were the requirements?
- What was the application process?
- What was life like on the frontier?
- Where can we find records today?
- The other frontier



Homesteading by Numbers

- Total number of acres distributed by the Homestead Act: **270,000,000**
- Number of Homesteading states: **30**
- State with the largest land percentage of homesteads: **Nebraska 45%**
- State with the largest number of homesteads: **Montana 151,6000**
- State with the fewest homesteads: **Indiana 30**
- Number of years the Homestead Act was in effect: **123 (1862-1975)**
- Number of Presidents during the Homestead Act: **24 (Lincoln to Reagan)** *Alaska continued to accept Homestead grants until 1986*

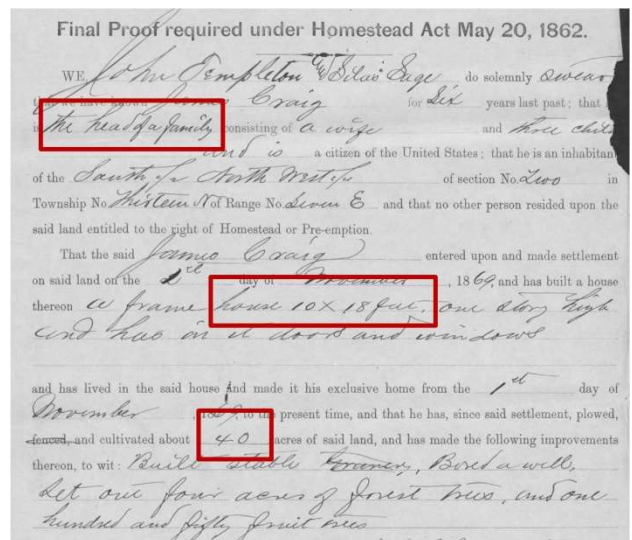
What Were the Requirements?

- You had to follow three steps to officially be granted a homestead
 - File your homestead application to the land office with required fee

- Live on and improve the land for 5 years
- Complete and file your application to receive your deed of title
- Any man or woman over the age of 21 was eligible to apply for a homestead
- You needed to be an American citizen with verifiable proof of citizenry by the time your homestead application was complete
- Only 1 homestead could be awarded per person, but widows, spouses (who had applied before marriage) and children over the age of 21 could also apply

Application Process

- Millions of acres of government/Indian land became available through the Homestead Act on January 1, 1863. Applicant's had to complete several steps in procuring their own homestead
- Once the homesteader found his land he would file a petition with the local land office, registering his claim
- A fee of \$4.00 to \$14.00 was charged for filing the claim
- The petitioner swore that they were or had intentions of becoming an American citizen and they had never raised arms against the United States government
- Claimants were required to be over the age of 21 and a head of household
- The homesteader was required to build a 12X12 foot home (or one of reasonable size to support a family) on the claim
- Each applicant had to live on the land for a minimum of 6 months every year and could have no other permanent residence
- At least 50% of the land had to be 'improved' or readied for crops. Crops had to be planted and harvested within the 5-year application period
- Affidavits from 2 neighbors were required as well as a personal affidavit detailing the improvements done to the land. The homestead application was not considered complete without this form



Enticing the Masses

- How do you get millions of individuals to uproot their families and head west? Advertisements!
- Advertising by railroad companies and land speculators ran in virtually every newspaper and magazine coast to coast
- Whole books were written to extol the virtues of homesteading
- Some companies even paid all or part of the transportation costs to get homesteaders to their land
- Specific ads were run to appeal to immigrants, women & African-Americans



Life on the Frontier

- Early homesteaders had to bring their own water, or collect as much rainwater as they could—using spare barrels, until a well could be dug. Very few homesteads contained water resources
- Windmills were often constructed to harness the wind as a way of raising water to the surface
- Materials such as wood and iron for building were scarce and had to be carted in from great distances. Prices were at a premium for copperware and ‘luxury’ household goods
- Many homesteaders built “soddies” or sod huts to house their families until they could afford wood. Hut walls were typically 3 to 4 ft thick to keep cool in the summer and warm in the winter. They were very efficient
- Blizzards were common in winter along with draughts in the blazing hot summer
- Plagues of grasshoppers destroyed millions of acres of crops in the 1870s, but other pests such as rodents, fleas and snakes were an everyday nuisance
- Maintaining hedges was a full-time job. If you took the time to maintain your hedge, it was taking away valuable time hunting for food and harvesting crops. Most homesteaders were pressed to let their hedges grow naturally after a few years



- The most common tree used for hedges in the Midwest and Plains states was the Osage Orange tree which is still used as an effective property boundary 150 years later
- Wood was scarce so barbed wire was an accessible alternative for homesteaders to protect their fields and animals from harm
- Homesteading was not for the faint of heart. in one year 30,000 homesteaders gave up their claims and moved back east

Locating Homestead Records

- The National Archives in Washington D.C. is the primary repository for Homestead records.
 - Land Entry Case Files
 - Tract Books
 - Bureau of Land Management-General Land Office Files
 - State Archives
 - Indexes and Abstracts of Land Patents can sometimes be found listed by county
- Local County Courthouses
 - Patents, deeds, mortgages and other subsequent transactions were recorded locally
- Tract books for all patents except Alaska are housed at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. They are organized by:
 - State
 - Land Office
 - Legal Land Description
 - Patents filed after 1908 (called serial patents) are filed numerically by the order in which the patent was filed
- 60 % of homesteaders never completed their homestead. The people who applied, but never completed their applications are filed in the Application Papers at the National Archives
- The 40 % of applicants who were awarded Homestead Certificates can be found in the tract books and in the BLM Land patent search

Locating Homestead Records Online

- Few indexes exist for Homestead applications. Online locations include:
 - www.ancestry.com applications for 10 states
 - The Bureau of Land Management www.glorecords.blm.gov has records for Government Land Patents (excluding Pennsylvania)
 - Broken Bow Nebraska Homestead Records Index <http://cdrh.unl.edu/homestead>
 - www.familysearch.org has the Bureau of Land management tract books for 27 states
 - www.fold3.com has application files for Nebraska homesteads
 - Homestead National Monument www.nps.gov/home/index.htm
- Minnesota Homestead and Cash Entry Patents (Pre 1908) www.ancestry.com
- Missouri State Land Patent Index: www.sos.mo.gov/archives/land
- National Archives and Records Administration Land Record by Record Groups: www.archives.gov/research/land
- Nevada Division of State Lands: <http://lands.nv.gov/patents/patents.htm>
- Texas General Land Office Online: www.glo.texas.gov/what-we-do/history-and-archives/index.html
- Wisconsin Bureau of Land Management: www.wigenweb.org/blm-toc.html



County Land Books

- Finding county property records may be the faster way to trace your homesteading ancestor
- Copies of land patents were usually filed with the county to establish provenance
- Each filing lists the patent number and the tract book where the original record can be found
- Mortgages, mortgage releases, affidavits and subsequent sales would all be recorded on the county level helping you trace the history of the property forward

Canada: The Other Frontier

- Canada also offered free land to those hearty individuals willing to tackle their western frontier. Manitoba and Alberta were both extremely popular destinations for Illinois families seeking free land
- Alberta Genealogical Society Index to Alberta Homestead Records: <http://abgensoc.ca/homestead/index.htm>
- Use the index above to find the microfilm reels at Internet Archives: www.archive.org. They digitized the Alberta Homestead Application microfilms. Download the entire reel to find your claim.
- Saskatchewan Homestead Records Index: www.saskhomesteads.com
- British Columbia Homestead Records

www.bcarchives.bc.ca/BC_Research_Guide/BC_Pr_Emptn_Hmstd.aspx

