

The Homestead Movement

In 1862, Congress passed and President Abraham Lincoln signed the Homestead Act. The act provided 160 acres to the head of a household, or to an applicant at least 21 years old, including former slaves, single women, and immigrants. The homesteader had to pay a minimal application fee, live on the land for five years, and make improvements, such as cultivating a farm and building a house. The applicant had to be a U.S. citizen (or a declared candidate for citizenship) who had never borne arms against the United States. Confederate soldiers could not apply.

The Union Pacific Railroad was chartered on July 1, 1862, when President Lincoln selected a route that would pass through Kansas and Nebraska. When the Union Pacific met up with the Central Pacific railroad in 1869, the transcontinental railroad made transportation more affordable. The federal government gave railroad companies large amounts of land to provide incentives for more development. These companies then advertised the sale of cheap land in foreign countries, which often led to unrealistic expectations among non-English-speaking immigrants. These changes—along with the 1862 Morrill Act authorizing land grant colleges to educate farmers—led thousands of eastern Americans and even more Europeans to move to Nebraska and Kansas.

For all its virtues, homesteading had a tragic side. Native Americans were pushed aside as the

homesteading wave moved westward. Land fraud was common, especially as non-English-speaking families tried to negotiate with native businessmen or farmers. Large companies applied for multiple homesteads, each one signed for by a company representative until sufficient acreage was amassed for large-scale ranching. Failure was a constant companion. As the homesteaders moved westward into the dry plains, 160 acres was insufficient for a family farm. The land was not always cooperative, and heads of families—like Mr. Shimerda and Willa Cather's father—were not necessarily successful farmers. Over 60% of homestead applicants never stayed the required five years to get their deed.

The original 1862 act was later amended to accommodate the harsh realities of life on the Plains. Land grants were expanded to a more reasonable 640 acres, and the residency requirement was lowered from five years to three.

The Homestead Act and the transcontinental railroad were benchmarks of American history. By the end of the 19th century, over half a million homestead farmers had claimed more than 80 million acres of America. The West was forever changed by the settlement of families who left their native soil for a chance to obtain land to call their own.