



Was Free Land a Good Deal? Mystery

From 1863 to 1872, the federal government sold 10 times more acres for cash than it gave away through the homestead program.

Why would farmers choose land they had to pay for over free land?

Congress enacted many pieces of legislation to help the original Homestead Act

Timber Culture Act of 1873

Allowed settlers to claim an additional 160 acres if they planted 40 acres to trees

Desert Land Act of 1877

Permitted settlers to claim up to 640 acres if they irrigated the land

Enlarged Homestead Act of 1909

Increased the basic claim to 320 acres

Stock Raising Homestead Act of 1916

Increased the basic claim to 640 acres

Over half of all the people who homesteaded never acquired a deed to their land.



Railroad land highly desirable

- Close to rail transportation
- Farmers could ship easily to eastern markets
- Railroads wanted farmers for business
- Prices for land sold represented current revenue
- Needed settlers to provide future revenue
- Railroads encouraged immigration by distributing brochures about western agricultural opportunities



Choices Homesteaders had to consider:

- Pay cost of travel
- Transporting or buying tools, equipment, seed and livestock
- Needed money to live on
- Could they make a living on the land?
- 160 acres was enough land to grow corn and wheat in central U.S.
- Further west – drier the climate
- Wheat-growing and livestock-grazing - needed more land

Goals of the Homestead Act

- To get votes
- Provide opportunities for poor people in the eastern states to move west and become independent farmers
- To populate the states between the eastern states and the west coast
- Reduce the control of Native Americans over the western lands

- Historians once thought the Homestead Act was a “safety valve” for the eastern poor who, when economic times were bad, would go west to become independent farmers.

Research has discarded this theory since:

- More people homesteaded in good times than in bad, particularly since there were costs involved which were difficult to pay in bad times.
- Urban workers, a large percentage of eastern poor people, often lacked the agricultural knowledge to succeed in farming.
- The Homestead Act did, however contribute substantially to populating western lands and unifying the nation.

- Homestead Act represented a different way of allocating scarce resources – deciding who gets to use resources.
- Prior to 1862, government land had been sold for \$1.25 an acre.
- Now it was given away.
- Over half of the Homesteaders abandoned their claims before they met the five-year residence requirement.
- Economic historians have argued that the government's free-land policy encouraged people to settle on parcels of land that were inadequate to support them.
- These people would have considered more carefully if they had been required to pay a price for the land.
- At \$1.25 per acre, 160 acres of land would have sold for \$200.

Was the Homestead Act a good piece of legislation?



- Many people did lose their land that they had put substantial effort into developing.
- Also, a large number of farmers did keep the land they homesteaded.
- Many of these would not have been able to pay all the costs involved in setting up a farm.
- The government's goal of populating the western part of the United States was accomplished.

Imagine that it is 1880 and you are considering going west to claim a homestead.



What are some factors you should consider before making your decision?

- How far will you have to travel to the land you want to claim?
- How much will that travel cost you?
- How much money will you need to sustain yourself until your first crops are ready for market?
- How good is the land where you are intending to go?
- What kinds of crops and /or livestock will you raise?
- What transportation is available to take your crops or livestock to market?
- How far do you have to travel to get supplies?

In your opinion, was the Homestead Act a success or a failure? *Explain your answer.*

- It was a failure in the majority of homesteaders did not complete the requirement to live on and farm their claim for five years, and thus did not get a deed to the land.
- Many scholars and environmentalist believe that the Act also encouraged settlement of lands that were not suitable for farming.
- However, a substantial minority of homesteaders did succeed, and many of them could not otherwise have afforded to buy land, even at low government prices.
- The Homestead Act did contribute to populating the western part of the United States.



If the opportunity were available, would you choose free land over buying a piece of land?

Free Land – A Good Deal?

(Use this grid to evaluate the Free Land Sites—make notes in the cells and use + or – to indicate how each alternative site rates against the criteria.)

Site	Distance to Free Land	Land Use: Crops/Graze	Distance to Town	Market for Crops	Personal Costs	Net Value
1 Eastern Nebraska						
2 Northeastern Montana						
3 Southern Idaho						
4 Western Washington						
5 Western Iowa						

Decision: _____