

Explore the Homesteading Timeline

1776 – September 16, 1776: The Congressional Act offered those who enlisted in the Continental Army to fight in the Revolutionary War for American independence, a parcel of land ranging from 100 to 500 acres, depending on the rank achieved. This began the principle of offering free land, termed “bounty land,” as payment for military service. A series of bounty land acts would follow into the next century addressing needs of later veterans of other wars while allowing “free” land to pass from federal ownership.

1785 – May 20, 1785: Congress, acting under the Article of Confederation before adoption of the Constitution, enacted the first law to manage the newly established Public Lands that resulted from the newly independent 13 states agreeing to relinquish their western land claims and allow the land to become Public Lands, the joint property of all citizens of the new nation. The 1785 legislation enacted a Land Ordinance (law) for the public lands northwest of the Ohio that provided for their survey and sale but in tracts no smaller than 640 acres. The 1785 ordinance established principles of federal land policy with the next significant change resulting from the passage of the Homestead Act in 1862.

1801 – March 3: Passage of the 1801 Act was the first of many laws passed by Congress giving pre-emption or preference rights to pioneer settlers on Public Lands to acquire the lands on which they had settled without prior purchase.

1812 – April 25, 1812: Passage of the 1812 Act established the General Land Office that was given broad responsibilities for all actions involving the public lands. These responsibilities would eventually include the administration of the 1862 Homestead Act 50 years later.

1820 – April 24, 1820: Passage of the 1820 Sale Act made it possible for the first time that public land in smaller amounts (down to 80 acres) could be sold to individuals for \$1.25 per acre. Later this act was used when homesteaders took the option written in the 1862 Homestead Act for “commuting” their homestead claims and getting them faster by purchase.

1841 – September 4, 1841: Passage of the 1841 Preemption Act expanded pre-emption (preference rights) for pioneer settlers, promoting the division of public lands into small farms of up to 160 acres at not less than \$1.25 per acre. When the 1862 Homestead Act was later passed, it contained provisions making it possible for settlers who had initially filed for homestead claims to retain their preemption rights enabling them to buy the land and thus obtain it sooner.

1848 – August: The Free-Soil Party was formally organized during a convention in Buffalo, New York in August of 1848 to establish it as a new national political party. While its origin was primarily related to rising national opposition to the extension of slavery into any of the territories new acquired from Mexico, it was also the first national political party to advocate passage of a homestead law providing free federally owned land to settlers.

1850 – September 27, 1850: Passage of the Donation Land Act provided free land to all white or mixed-blood settlers who arrived in Oregon Territory before December 1, 1855. The main requirements were four years of residence and cultivation of the land. This, and later donation land acts, foreshadowed terms in later homestead legislation.

1852 – May 12, 1852: An early version of homestead legislation introduced to Congress was voted down on this day in the House of Representatives. Similarly, another homestead bill introduced in 1853 would also fail passage in Congress. The 1852 and 1853 acts were early attempts to pass a national homestead law that would not succeed until 1862.

1854 – July 1854: The passage of two acts within 3 days extended similar Donation Land Claim benefits beyond Oregon Territory. On July 19th similar benefits went to early settlers in the newly created Washington Territory that was split off from Oregon Territory in 1853. On July 22nd, another Act extended the same to early settlers in New Mexico Territory, thus further spreading the idea of free federal land.

1855 – March 3, 1855: The Bounty-Land Act of 1855 allows for warrants being issued to military veterans who could redeem them personally at any federal land office for a certain size of federally owned land. The amount was related to the veteran's specific military service. The warrant could be sold to anyone else who could similarly obtain the land. Thus, this Act and other certain earlier bounty land acts provided in various way opportunities for settlers to obtain lands in the west beside by homesteading.

1860 – June 22, 1860: President Buchanan vetoes the first version of homestead legislation to be passed by both houses of Congress for many reasons including: 1) questioning its constitutionality in disposing of federal land, and 2) fearing that the price of twenty-five cents per acre (thus the homestead land was not to be free) might fuel land speculation and not benefit the people.

1861 – December 2, 1861: Galusha A. Grow (1822-1907) of Pennsylvania, serving as Speaker of the House of Representatives, introduced homestead legislation that would be signed into law as the 1862 Homestead Act. Grow is called the “Father of the Homestead Law” for his long advocacy of this type of legislation since the 1850s and his primary authorship of the 1862 Act.

1862 – May 20: Abraham Lincoln signed the Homestead Act, fulfilling a Republican Party campaign pledge.

1863 – January 1: The first homestead claims were filed at land offices just after midnight on January 1, 1863. Daniel Freeman of Beatrice, Nebraska is often acknowledged as the first person to file a homestead although several others also filed quickly after it became possible.

1865 – March 3: An 1865 appropriations act for expenses of the Indian Department extended the first possibility for some Indians to receive homesteads under the 1862 Homestead Act, but under conditions of essentially giving up their cultural affiliation. It was also one of the earliest laws outlining the course by which Indians (though just for the Stockbridge Munsee Tribes of Indiana) could become U.S. citizens.

1866 – June 21: Passage of the 1866 Southern Homestead Act allowed ex-Confederates, former slaves, and other citizens to homestead in the five public land states that had formerly been part of the Confederate States of America (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, and Mississippi). The Act also prevented the further sale of these lands principally to timber interest so as to allow homesteaders a preference.

1872 – April 14: Canada passed the Dominion Lands Act, a homesteading law in effect until 1918. It was based on the United States's 1862 Homestead Act but had some differences. The act only applied to male farmers and allowed them to buy an adjacent tract of land to their initial 160 acres for the same \$10 administration fee. Also, it initially allowed homesteading only in areas distant from railroad lines and only applied to certain lands in Canada.

1873 – March 3: Passage of the Timber Culture Act enabled homesteaders to gain patent of up to another 160 acres of public land, if a percentage was planted in trees. This was the first legislation to try to address problems faced by homesteaders moving onto the Great Plains with less rainfall and limited or no timber availability.

1874 – June 18: Passage of the Relief Act for homesteaders in Minnesota and Iowa due to grasshopper destruction of crops was the first of many later homestead laws passed to aid homesteaders encountering natural disasters and adverse weather conditions preventing or delaying their ability to prove up their claims.

1875 – March 3, 1875: A section within an appropriation act for the first time extended to all Indians the possibility of getting a homestead if they would “abandon” their “tribal relations” and thus become acculturated into non-Native society.

1877 – March 3: Passage of the “Desert Land Act” allowed settlers in some arid regions to acquire up to 640 acres of public lands by purchase if they irrigated the land. It was legislation that had some of the same purposes of homestead laws in encouraging settlement and development of western lands.

1884 – July 4, 1884: Another section within an appropriations act further defined how Indians could homestead, with their homesteads to be held in trust by the federal government for 25 years.

1887 – February 8, 1887: Passage of the Dawes Act provided for the division of tribally held lands under treaty into individually-owned tracts, with “surplus” lands being opened up to homesteading and other forms of disposal. Over the 47 years that the law was in effect until 1934, about 90 million acres of land left Indian ownership.

1889 – March 2, 1889: Passage of new homestead legislation made several important changes to the 1862 Homestead Act, including allowing homesteaders who had claimed less than 160 acres, to make another homestead claim for the remaining acreage needed to achieve a full 160 acres.

1894 – August 18, 1894: Passage of the “Carey Act” was an unsuccessful attempt to promote the use of desert lands by granting of up to one million acres of public lands to states for creating reclamation systems allowing settlers to succeed in farming desert lands.

1898 – May 14, 1898: Passage of legislation extended the use of homestead laws in Alaska, although homestead size initially was limited to a maximum of 80 acres.

1902 – June 17, 1902: Passage of the Reclamation Act (“Newland Act”) placed the federal government, instead of states, in charge of creating reclamation projects to bring water to dry areas, after which homesteading could occur.

1903 – March 3, 1903: An amendment to the 1898 Homestead Law for Alaska allowed homesteads up to 320 acres. This was the first time that an amount larger than the original 160-acre-size established under the 1862 Homestead Act was allowed.

1904 – April 28, 1904: The “Kincaid” Act for the sand hills of western Nebraska allowed up to 640-acre homesteads.

1906 – May 17, 1906: The Alaska Native Allotment Act allowed certain Alaska Natives heading households to select up to 160 acres of public lands in Alaska for purposes of obtaining individual land tracts similar to homesteading rights granted to Indians earlier in the contiguous United States.

1909 – February 19, 1909: The Enlarged Homestead Act allowed homesteads of up to 320 acres in most western states and territories.

1912 – June 6, 1912: The Three-Year Homestead Act decreased the time needed to reside on a homestead claim from five to three years.

1913 – This was the peak year for the most homestead applications filed throughout the USA. An estimated 11 million acres were claimed that year (an amount nearly twice the size of New Hampshire).

1916 – July 8, 1916: The Homestead Act amendment for Alaska decreased the maximum size of a new homestead claim from 320 acres to 160 acres.

1916 – December 29, 1916: The Stock Raising Homestead Act allowed homesteads not based on farming land but instead on raising cattle, with the subsurface mineral estate reserved for the federal government.

1927 – March 3, 1927: An amendment to the 1898 Homestead Law for Alaska created a new form of homesteading where up to five-acre tracts could be claimed under terms similar to homesteading but without doing any agriculture. Payment of \$2.50 per acre was also required.

1934 – June 28, 1934: The Taylor Grazing Act passed resulting in millions of acres of public lands being placed into new grazing districts, thus removing them from any new homestead claims. This effectively ends most new homesteading in most of the contiguous United States.

1937 – July 22, 1937: The Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act authorized the federal government to buy back certain farms, including some failed homesteads, which had not been economically viable. The claims were filed on marginal lands where farmers could not make a living.

1938 – June 1, 1938: The Sale and Lease Act for Small Tracts, although not a homestead act, nonetheless allowed a new way for persons to acquire small homesites of up to five acres in size on the public lands without having to performing agriculture.

1946 – July 16, 1946: The Bureau of Land Management was created from a merger of the General Land Office and the Grazing Service, with BLM subsequently given to responsibility to administer homesteading in the United States.

1940s-50s – Some limited post-World War II homesteading continues in the contiguous United States but mostly just in reclamation project areas, such as the Columbia Basin Project of Washington State where water from the Columbia River was used to irrigate desert lands.

1964 – August 31, 1964: Congress passed an act ending the use of land script rights after January 1, 1975, for soldiers obtaining homesteads. This ended a benefit to soldiers that began in 1873, with roots back to awarding free “bounty” lands to Revolutionary War veterans for their service.

1970s – The very last homestead claims in most of the western contiguous United States are patented in this decade, with only a very few lingering due mostly to legal issues.

1976 – October 21, 1976: Passage of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act repealed all homestead laws in the contiguous United States, but allowed for a 10-year extension in Alaska.

1984 – October 18, 1984: Elizabeth M. Smith of Alaska became the last woman to receive a homestead in the United States, with her 116.32-acre tract located near Big Delta, Alaska.

1986 – October 21, 1986: The last possible day for homesteading in Alaska, with the last claims made that same month under the special 1927 Homestead Law for Alaska allowing 5-acre “homesites.”

1988 – May 5, 1988: Kenneth W. Deardorff of Alaska received the last homestead issued in the United States for a nearly 50-acre homestead near Lime Village in Western Alaska.

1998 – October 21, 1998: Passage of the Alaska Native Veterans Allotment Act extends selection rights to certain public lands in Alaska for qualifying Alaska Native military veterans under terms of the earlier 1906 Native Allotment Act that was a form of homesteading for Alaska Natives.

2000 and beyond – Infrequent use of the 1862 Homestead Act as a legal authority for conveying lands continues, but now only to clear up title to older land transactions. Also, final patents being issued for the last claims made in Alaska under its special 1927 Homestead Law allowing 5-acre “homesites.”