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A MASTERPIECE ETCHED IN HISTORY: HOW THE 1862 HOMESTEAD ACT RESHAPED RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES IN AMERICA

He Ni [1]

[1] William A. Shine Great Neck South High School, NY, USA

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Abstract

This paper examines how the 1862 Homestead Act intertwined rights and responsibilities by granting settlers the right to claim land in exchange for the obligation to cultivate it and reside on it. The study argues that the act democratized land ownership by extending land ownership opportunities to African Americans, women, and immigrants, thereby advancing ideals of self-reliance and perseverance. By expanding land access and promoting an ethos of individual diligence, the Homestead Act significantly propelled westward expansion and reinforced core national values of independence and progress. At the same time, the study addresses the act's unintended consequences, including the displacement of Native American communities, widespread land fraud, harsh environmental challenges for settlers, and persistent economic inequities. By situating the Homestead Act's implementation within the broader context of 19th-century westward expansion and federal land policy, the paper highlights the complex legacy of a law that was transformative yet fraught with moral and practical complexities. The analysis underscores the Homestead Act's historical significance as a pivotal policy that reshaped American society. The study demonstrates how the balance of granted rights and assumed responsibilities can yield both profound opportunities and enduring challenges.

Keywords: *Westward Movement, Manifest Destiny, the Homestead Act (1862), Native Americans, Land fraud*

Introduction

In 1858, Republican Senator Abraham Lincoln delivered the famous "Divided House Speech" in Washington. Lincoln's speech highlighted the deep sectional divisions over slavery. (Thompson 6; Hacker 1) As the majority of the Democratic Party withdrew from the Union, the Republican Party gained congressional dominance after Southern Democrats withdrew, enacting transformative legislation. (Robbins 41) During this time, Republicans passed one of the most transformative land laws – the Homestead Act, took effect on January 1, 1863. Its objective was

to catalyze westward expansion by granting citizens the right to claim public land in the West as long as they cultivated it and met residency requirements. However, this expansion came at the expense of Native American land rights.

Expansion into the west was driven by a number of factors over the course of centuries. In the mid-19th century, U.S. westward expansion accelerated through territorial acquisitions like the Louisiana Purchase and the U.S. justified expansionist policies under the guise of "freedom" and "civilization." (Scott) Railroads, such as those developed by the Baltimore and Ohio Company, complemented westward migration. (Brinkley et al. 231–32) In 1848, the discovery of gold in California ignited the California Gold Rush and journalist John L. O'Sullivan coined "Manifest Destiny" in 1845, arguing that America was divinely destined to expand. Rooted in white supremacy and Christian mission, this ideology spread rapidly. In 1846 Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton openly declared in a congressional speech that only the white race was divinely ordained to settle and develop the new lands. (Benton) Literature also served as a powerful medium in promoting westward expansion. For example, N. Stephens's Malaseka: The Indian Wife of the White Hunter explored interracial marriage and frontier conflicts, subtly reinforced the idea of Manifest Destiny.

Unlike the rapid pace of westward expansion, U.S. land law evolved gradually. Early laws like The Land Ordinance of 1785 established a survey system, requiring a minimum purchase of 640 acres at $1 per acre and The Public Land Act of 1796 further increased this price to $2 per acre for 640-acre tracts. By the following century, The Land Act of 1804 reduced the minimum tract size to 160 acres and introduced credit payments and The Preemption Act of 1841 granted squatters the first right to purchase 160-acre claims at $1.25 per acre. Later, the Donation Land Claim Act of 1850 offered free land in the Oregon Territory to white settlers and Indians of mixed blood who agreed to cultivate the land for four years. By May 1862, the Homestead Act became law. The Act granted land to U.S. citizens or those who declared their intent to become citizens, provided they were heads of households or at least 21 years old. The Homestead Act was one of the most transformative land policies in American history because unlike earlier policies, this act democratized land ownership, reshaping the economic and social fabric of the frontier.

Rights

The Homestead Act allowed land acquisition regardless of race, gender, or immigration status, benefiting vulnerable groups, including freed African Americans in the South. However, many freed slaves remained impoverished. Black farmers rented land and tools from white landowners, repaying them with a portion of their harvest – a system known as sharecropping. Additionally, the crop-lien system trapped farmers in debt, as seed suppliers charged interest rates as high as 40% to 50%. (Brinkley et al. 231–32) Sharecroppers also faced crop failure risks, while landlords profited without the same financial risks. (Ochiltree 361–62) Within the context of Reconstruction, racial violence was rampant. Seeking refuge, over 40,000 African Americans migrated to Kansas by 1880, establishing Black communities such as Nicodemus. By 1900, over 30 all-Black towns existed in Oklahoma (Durant 579–82) ю The Homestead Act helped African Americans break free from sharecropping and acquire land for self-sustenance, yet economic struggles remained. Women and immigrants also took advantage of the Homestead Act. Women gained legal land ownership, challenging traditional gender roles, with a homesteader gender ratio of 1.2 to 1 in many states (Durand 588).

Another important right given to pioneers by The Homestead Act was that it clearly stipulated that land which had been received and developed could be legally inherited. According to the Homestead Act, if the applicant died, the widow or children would inherit the land (United States, "Homestead Act (1862)"). This provision provided Homesteaders with a relatively stable living and economic environment, allowing them to focus on developing the land. "No, I shall not lose my lands," wrote Elinore Pruitt Stewart, a Wyoming homesteader, in a family letter. "Although it will be over two years before I can get a deed to it. The five years in which I am required to 'prove up' will have passed by then." (Stewart) This inheri-

tance right also ensured that income generated from the land could be passed onto the next generation, making long-term investments possible. Uriah W. Oblinger, an early Nebraska homesteader, expressed regret in his memoir for not homesteading sooner, noting that if he had started earlier, "I would have a farm of my own now pretty well improved… I am just where I was then just starting. It is going to be rough starting… but when started it will be ours." (Oblinger). In 1892, The New York Tribune compiled a list of American millionaires. (The New York Tribune 2–93) Overwhelmingly, the major source of these fortunes was real estate, and a significant portion of their initial capital came from land acquired through the Homestead Act. (Hansen 23) In sum, the inheritability of property rights provided by the Homestead Act increased American enthusiasm for development.

The Homestead Act also granted Homesteaders the right to independently operate and dispose of land after the five-year period. According to the terms of the Act, once the land was successfully developed and certified, it would be entitled to the property, free and clear except for a 2.5 dollar registration fee. (United States, "Homestead Act (1862)") This provision gave Homesteaders greater flexibility and autonomy, more resources and population flow into the west. Statistics indicate that in 1868, there were only 2,772 homestead entries, covering 355,085 acres. However, by 1913, the annual number of entries had increased to 53,252, distributing 10,009,285 acres. (Hormay 218) The total land granted continued to grow annually, and between 1913 and 1917, the amount of homesteaded land patented was approximately fifteen times that of 1868–1872, reaching around 42 million acres. (Hormay 219) In addition, some Homesteaders chose to migrate further west after selling their developed land which further promoted population mobility in frontier areas. According to the statistical data, one-third of Homesteaders resold their land within twelve years, regardless of whether they obtained the land through homestead aliquots or purchased aliquots. (Hauck et al. 4) The circulation and development of land introduced more capital and markets, driving the expansion of the capitalist economy into the West. For example, in 1870, Chicago-based meatpacking company Armour & Co. opened a major meatpacking plant in Kansas City. After two years of development, by 1872, Kansas City had transformed into a booming "cowtown". (Connelley 228) Over the following decades, by 1900, more than half of U.S. economic output came from the broad western regions. (Vandenbroucke 19) Through this mechanism, the operational and disposal rights granted by the Homestead Act significantly contributed to the development of the economy of the Western frontier. The influx of capital and large-scale markets successfully replaced small-scale agrarian economies to some extent, providing the United States with new commercial opportunities.

However, some lost their existing rights in the process. During the westward expansion, Native American territories were continuously reduced and tribes were forcibly displaced. The Indian Appropriations Act of 1851 forced many Native Americans to relocate to reservations in the West. Subsequently, the Homestead Act of 1862 granted land ownership across 30 states, many of which overlapped with Native American tribal lands or treaty-designated territories. In order to fix this issue, In 1887, Massachusetts Senator Henry Dawes introduced the Dawes Act, which divided Indian reservations into 160-acre allotments ((United States, "An Act to Provide for the Allotment of Lands in Severalty to Indians on the Various Reservations"). This policy allowed the federal government to further divide tribal lands, granting portions of it to Homesteaders, while only Native American families who accepted individual land allotments were granted U.S. citizenship. As a result, Native American landholdings were drastically reduced. The total reservation land area shrank from 138 million acres in 1887 to just 48 million acres by 1934. (National Park Service, "*Native Americans and the Homestead Act*") The Dawes Act marked the official dismantling of tribal communal land ownership, causing Native Americans to lose vast amounts of ancestral land and collective sovereignty.

Responsibilities

The Homesteaders not only gained rights under the Homestead Act, but they were also required to meet specific objectives in order

to obtain land ownership and permanent residency. It stipulated that Homesteaders had to pay a $5 registration fee, reside on the land for five years, and successfully develop it before acquiring full property rights. If they successfully lived and improved the land for five years, they were required to visit the local land office to complete the title transfer process. (United States, "Homestead Act (1862)") According to records from the U. S. Senate, by 1890, the federal government had issued approximately 373,000 homestead patents, covering 48 million acres of previously undeveloped western land. Between 1862 and 1904, about 80 million acres of land were obtained by Homestead applicants. (United States Senate) However, in practice, these responsibilities were often difficult for Homesteaders, and they had to overcome significant challenges to secure their land.

One of the greatest obstacles was the harsh environmental and climatic conditions of the Western frontier. While the Homestead Act nominally opened vast western lands for settlement, (Bradsher 29) a significant portion of this land consisted of mountains and deserts, making development extremely challenging. American geologist John Wesley Powell pointed out that 160-acre homestead plots were insufficient for sustainable farming in regions west of the 100th meridian due to low annual rainfall (Western Watersheds Projects). The Great Plains' unpredictable climate, with recurring droughts and extreme weather, severely impacted Homesteaders. According to early Kansas Homesteaders' accounts, during the first two decades, farmers struggled annually against scorching winds, summer droughts, and hailstorms to protect their crops. The Rocky Mountain Locust Plague of 1874 devastated Kansas and neighboring states, as millions of locusts descended upon fields like a snowstorm, consuming entire crops and leaving farmers with no harvest for the year. Similarly, severe winter blizzards, such as the Great Blizzard of 1886–1887, froze countless livestock to death, forcing many farms to shut down and severely disrupting agricultural production.

Limited available land is also a problem. In 1862, the federal government passed the Pacific Railway Act, which granted large amounts of public land to railroad companies for westward expansion. During 1850–1871, the federal government allocated approximately 131 million acres of public land for railroad construction, accounting for about 9.5% of all public land in 1850. Additionally, state governments granted another 50 million acres of land for railroads within their jurisdictions, bringing the total land granted to railroad companies to approximately 180 million acres. (Encyclopedia) The consequences of the "incongruous land system" were also severe. The overlapping legal framework enabled land speculators to exploit loopholes through dummy entrymen to fraudulently obtain land titles. (Schmidt 41) In 1912, the Oregon federal court tried the Holbrook-Aitchison land fraud case, in which a company called "Oregon Land & Water Co." was accused of hiring individuals to file fraudulent homestead claims. Witness testimony revealed that company agents recruited urban residents to submit homestead applications and pretend to reside and cultivate land along the Columbia River for six months. After that, the company paid for the land and immediately transferred ownership to the company. This scheme allowed speculators to bypass the "five-year cultivation" requirement and fraudulently acquire public land titles (*Morning Oregonian* 5). Such practices worsened land scarcity for legitimate Homesteaders and further restricted their land choices and survival prospects. And the government's weak control over such land seizures is an accomplice to social injustice.

The financial difficulties of Homesteaders also posed a major obstacle to fulfilling their responsibilities. The Homestead Act actually "proved to be no panacea for poverty", as many landless agricultural workers lacked the capital to build homes, purchase farming equipment, seeds, and livestock (National Archives). As a result, slightly less than 50% of Homesteaders ultimately abandoned their claims due to financial hardship and poor harvests (National Park Service, "Homesteading by the Numbers"). Contemporary surveys further illustrated the struggles of Homesteader farmers: many lived in sod houses, had very little cash on hand, relied on rudimentary tools to clear the land, and subsisted near the poverty line for extended periods. (M. Hansen) American economist Lisi Krall, in her work U. S. Land Policy and the Commodifica-

tion of Arid Land (1862–1920), stated Poor harvest, they can't feed themselves, her family had to sell them for $800 to buy a homestead. Lisi Krall emphasizes that this situation "was not the exception but rather the rule insofar", demonstrating that "U.S. government land policies were inadequately formulated to provide [Homesteaders] any assurance of a decent livelihood on the land" (Krall 657).

Conclusion

According to data from the U. S. National Park Service, during the implementation of the Homestead Act, approximately 270 million acres of land – accounting for 10% of U.S. territory – were ultimately distributed to pioneering settlers (National Park Service, "Homesteading by the Numbers"). Undoubtedly, the impact of this vast allocation of land on American history was equally significant. After 1862, numerous laws modeled after the Homestead Act of 1862 were enacted, further expanding its influence. These included the Forest Homestead Act of 1906, the Enlarged Homestead Act of 1909, and the Stock-Raising Homestead Act of 1916, all of which extended homesteading opportunities into new regions and industries. The Homestead Act was undoubtedly not without its limitations. It was never considered a panacea for poverty, nor was it regarded as the most equitable land policy. Moreover, its implementation directly resulted in the loss of Native American land rights. However, this simple exchange of rights for responsibilities – where the government granted land, and settlers repaid it through labor and development – served as a stabilizing force when the nation faced division, advanced the frontier during national expansion, and continued to shape economic and territorial growth after the closing of the frontier. In 1976, the U. S. Congress passed the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, formally ending the Homestead Act (with Alaska's termination occurring in 1986). After 114 years, this historic legislation – which had played a defining role in shaping the American frontier – came to a solemn and dignified conclusion, leaving behind a lasting legacy in U. S. history.

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Contact: nh3527185945@gmail.com