

0. FREE LAND! - Story Preface
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This image depicts “American Progress,” a work which John Gast created in 1872. It reflects the concept of “Manifest Destiny,” an ideology which Americans used to justify their expansion across Native-American lands. The angel, holding a school book and stringing telegraph wire, is “Columbia”—personifying the United States—leading civilization west. The painting reflects the attitudes of the time which included a belief that Divine Providence and national superiority, among other things, allowed Americans to “Go West and settle the country.” Click on the image for a detailed view.

During the American Civil War, Abraham Lincoln approved a law which would further fuel westward expansion (and America's concept of “[Manifest Destiny](#)”).

The [Homestead Act](#)—these images depict the [original two-page document](#)—allowed U.S. citizens (and those who had declared their intent to become a citizen) to acquire a 160-acre tract of [surveyed public land](#) in the western territories.

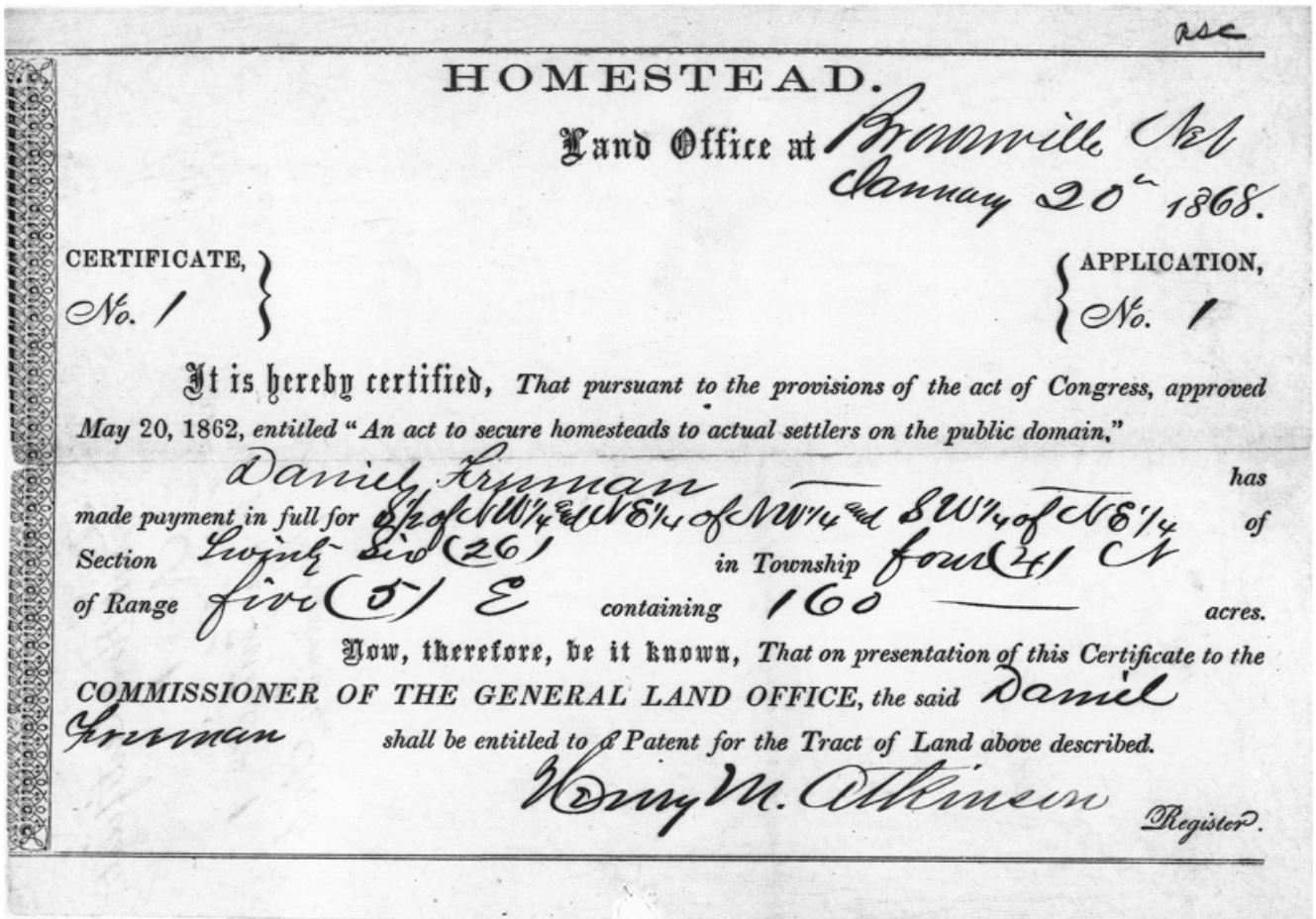
The head of a family, who had never borne arms against the United States government, could take title to the land in one of two ways:

- Build a home on it, farm it, and pay a minimal registration fee after occupying the land for five consecutive years; or
- Make minor improvements to the land, live on it for six months, and pay the federal government \$1.25 per acre.

Union soldiers, who wished to go west after [the war](#) between the states was over, could count their time in service toward the residency requirements. *Confederate* soldiers were not given that option.

Daniel Freeman, a Union Army Scout, actually filed his claim for land before the Civil War was over. Shortly after midnight —on the 1st of January, 1863—he became what the U.S. Department of the Interior later declared to be the “first claimant” under the Homestead Act.

He received his Certificate of Eligibility, for 160 acres of Nebraska land, on January 20, 1868. His application notes that it was the first: “Application, No. 1.”

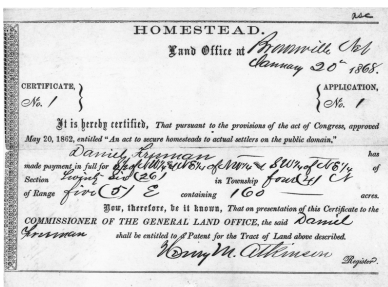


Millions of acres of land in the western territories were dispersed by the General Land Office between 1862 and 1904. Because the Homestead Act was worded so ambiguously, however, the process was tainted with fraud. Attempting to eliminate such problems, Congress amended the law but those efforts did nothing to improve the situation. Less than one-quarter of available land went to individual homesteaders. The rest was picked up by speculators, cattlemen, miners, lumbermen and railroad developers. Despite its importance, the Homestead Act was not the reason Americans and U.S. immigrants first "went west." People had started that process years before the Civil War began. But the way was difficult, the journey was treacherous, and the most popular trail to the Pacific Northwest—the "Old Oregon"—took people through the heart of "Indian country."

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/FREE-LAND-Go-West-U.S.-Westward-Expansion>

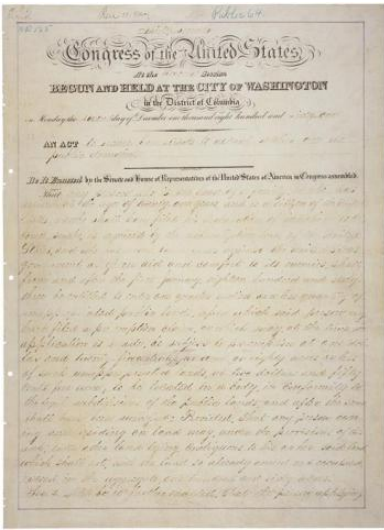
See Learning Tasks for this story online at:
<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/FREE-LAND-Go-West-U.S.-Westward-Expansion>

Media Stream



Homestead Act Certificate

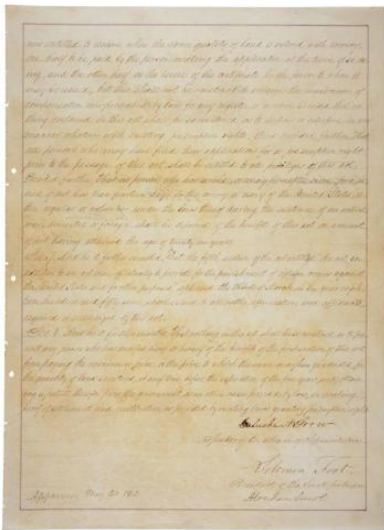
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Homestead Act

Image online, courtesy the [ourdocuments.gov](http://www.ourdocuments.gov) website.

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Homestead Act, Page 2

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Map Depicting the Old Oregon Trail

Image online, courtesy the [Library of University of Texas at Austin](http://www.libraryofutexas.com) website.

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<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Map-Depicting-the-Old-Oregon-Trail>



Government Survey Crew - Worksite Photo

Image online, courtesy Library of Congress.

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Map: The Indians in the United States

Image online, courtesy the [internationalpeaceandconflict.org](http://www.internationalpeaceandconflict.org) website.

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