

Free Land: Homesteading the American West

Sara M. Gregg

This project examines the environmental and social impacts of the move to claim “free land,” beginning with the passage of the first Homestead Act in 1862 through 1986, when Congress ended homesteading in Alaska. Blending the dynamic visualizations of the spatial humanities with deep archival research, *Free Land* provides a data-rich yet deeply personal accounting of the homestead movement. Juxtaposing personal histories with the analysis of evolving land uses, historical Geographic Information Systems (HGIS) enable the visualization of the demographic, social, and economic effects of homesteading.

Free Land: Homesteading the American West is infused with descriptions of the soils, sights, and sounds that made life on the edges of settlement at times menacing or sublime. By placing the experiences of homesteaders alongside an assessment of the law’s larger environmental legacy and cultural significance, this research returns the contingency of nature to the mythic tales of homesteading’s greatest achievements and failures by situating this movement within the context of the diverse and compelling landscapes that shaped the lives of Western farmers and ranchers. This project revisits a pivotal moment in American development, and an American story, yet the broader impacts of homesteading stretch beyond the boundaries of the United States, and *Free Land* seeks to recapture their place in the public and scholarly mind.

The homestead movement had radical environmental implications, encouraging migration on the premise that Western lands would provide new opportunities for cash-poor settlers even as local landscapes often presented unpredictable trials. Beginning in 1862, when the US Congress passed the first Homestead Act, a bill drafted to unite East and West by fulfilling the Republican campaign slogan “free soil, free labor, free men” in the United States, offered free land in the West. In exchange for the cost of filing fees (around \$20), the law allowed any man or woman who was the head of a household to file on 160 acres of the public domain and establish title by improving the land with fences, crops, and buildings. Millions of people from many nations, races, and creeds were drawn west by this promise of property, and nearly two million claimants achieved final proof, receiving title to almost 300 million acres of former public lands. Yet many aspiring homesteaders lacked the capital needed to weather the first years on new land, a challenge compounded by perennial underestimates of the extremes of climate and isolation in parts of the West. Poor soils, drought, and voracious pests could overwhelm homesteaders’ best efforts, and roughly one-half of all entries were successfully “proved up,” demonstrating nature’s power to limit development and sending hundreds of thousands of homesteaders fleeing their failed claims.

Free Land captures the experience of laying claim to the West by orienting this history around four representative stories, enlivening environmental change and clarifying the implications of “free land” for vast parts of the region. Embedding natural history within a survey of the policies and demographic trends that influenced homesteaders to try their hand in the West, it highlights the contingency of human experience, the interplay between opportunity and dispossession, and the immemorial struggle between humans and nature. This research pivots around the migration of people, and four sections employ a micro-scale approach to the places drawing the largest numbers of homesteaders during periods of concentrated migration: the 1870s in central Kansas, turn-of-the-century Oklahoma, the 1900s in North Dakota, and 1910s Montana.