



SECTION
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Settling on the Great Plains

MAIN IDEA

Settlers on the Great Plains transformed the land despite great hardships.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

The Great Plains region remains the breadbasket of the United States.

Terms & Names

- Homestead Act
- exoduster
- soddy
- Morrill Act
- bonanza farm

One American's Story

When Esther Clark Hill was a girl on the Kansas prairie in the 1800s, her father often left the family to go on hunting or trading expeditions. His trips left Esther's mother, Allena Clark, alone on the farm.

Esther remembered her mother holding on to the reins of a runaway mule team, "her black hair tumbling out of its pins and over her shoulders, her face set and white, while one small girl clung with chattering teeth to the sides of the rocking wagon." The men in the settlement spoke admiringly about "Leny's nerve," and Esther thought that daily life presented a challenge even greater than driving a runaway team.



A PERSONAL VOICE ESTHER CLARK HILL

"I think, as much courage as it took to hang onto the reins that day, it took more to live twenty-four hours at a time, month in and out, on the lonely and lovely prairie, without giving up to the loneliness."

—quoted in *Pioneer Women*

As the railroads penetrated the frontier and the days of the free-ranging cowboy ended, hundreds of thousands of families migrated west, lured by vast tracts of cheap, fertile land. In their effort to establish a new life, they endured extreme hardships and loneliness.

▲ Plains settlers, like this woman depicted in Harvey Dunn's painting *Pioneer Woman*, had to be strong and self-reliant.

Settlers Move Westward to Farm

It took over 250 years—from the first settlement at Jamestown until 1870—to turn 400 million acres of forests and prairies into flourishing farms. Settling the second 400 million acres took only 30 years, from 1870 to 1900. Federal land policy and the completion of transcontinental railroad lines made this rapid settlement possible.

RAILROADS OPEN THE WEST From 1850 to 1871, the federal government made huge land grants to the railroads—170 million acres, worth half a billion

dollars—for laying track in the West. In one grant, both the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific received 10 square miles of public land for every mile of track laid in a state and 20 square miles of land for every mile of track laid in a territory.

In the 1860s, the two companies began a race to lay track. The Central Pacific moved eastward from Sacramento, and the Union Pacific moved westward from Omaha. Civil War veterans, Irish and Chinese immigrants, African Americans, and Mexican Americans did most of the grueling labor. In late 1868, workers for the Union Pacific cut their way through the solid rock of the mountains, laying up to eight miles of track a day. Both companies had reached Utah by the spring of 1869. Fifteen years later, the country boasted five transcontinental railroads. The rails to the East and West Coasts were forever linked.

The railroad companies sold some of their land to farmers for two to ten dollars an acre. Some companies successfully sent agents to Europe to recruit buyers. By 1880, 44 percent of the settlers in Nebraska and more than 70 percent of those in Minnesota and Wisconsin were immigrants. **A**

GOVERNMENT SUPPORT FOR SETTLEMENT Another powerful attraction of the West was the land itself. In 1862, Congress passed the **Homestead Act**, offering 160 acres of land free to any citizen or intended citizen who was head of the household. From 1862 to 1900, up to 600,000 families took advantage of the government's offer. Several thousand settlers were **exodusters**—African Americans who moved from the post-Reconstruction South to Kansas.

Despite the massive response by homesteaders, or settlers on this free land, private speculators and railroad and state government agents sometimes used the law for their own gain. Cattlemen fenced open lands, while miners and woodcutters claimed national resources. Only about 10 percent of the land was actually settled by the families for whom it was intended. In addition, not all plots of land were of equal value. Although 160 acres could provide a decent living in the fertile soil of Iowa or Minnesota, settlers on drier Western land required larger plots to make farming worthwhile.

Eventually, the government strengthened the Homestead Act and passed more legislation to encourage settlers. In 1889, a major land giveaway in what is now Oklahoma attracted thousands of people. In less than a day, land-hungry settlers claimed 2 million acres in a massive land rush. Some took possession of the land before the government officially declared it open. Because these settlers claimed land sooner than they were supposed to, Oklahoma came to be known as the Sooner State. **B**

Posters like the one shown here drew hundreds of thousands of settlers to the West. Among the settlers were thousands of exodusters—freed slaves who had left the South.

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Causes

A How did the railroads help open the West?

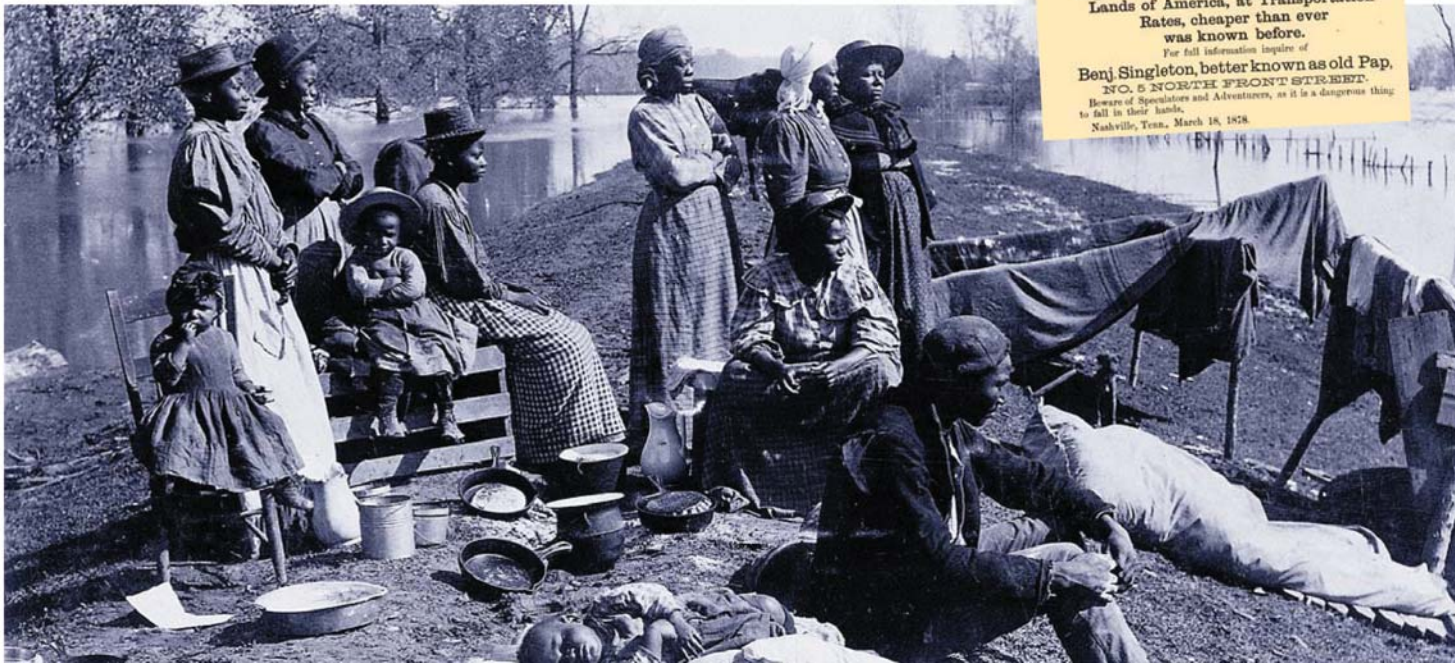
Vocabulary

speculator: a person who buys or sells something that involves a risk on the chance of making a profit

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Effects

B In what ways did government policies encourage settlement of the West?




THE CLOSING OF THE FRONTIER As settlers gobbled up Western land, Henry D. Washburn and fellow explorer Nathaniel P. Langford asked Congress to help protect the wilderness from settlement. In 1870, Washburn, who was surveying land in northwestern Wyoming, described the area’s geysers and bubbling springs as: “objects new in experience . . . possessing unlimited grandeur and beauty.”

In 1872, the government created Yellowstone National Park. Seven years later, the Department of the Interior forced railroads to give up their claim to Western landholdings that were equal in area to New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia combined. Even so, by 1880, individuals had bought more than 19 million acres of government-owned land. Ten years later, the Census Bureau declared that the country no longer had a continuous frontier line—the frontier no longer existed. To many, the frontier was what had made America unique. In an 1893 essay entitled “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” the historian Frederick Jackson Turner agreed.

A PERSONAL VOICE FREDERICK JACKSON TURNER

“American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character.”

—“The Significance of the Frontier in American History”


Today many historians question Turner’s view. They think he gave too much importance to the frontier in the nation’s development and in shaping a special American character. 

Background

The U.S. Census Bureau is the permanent collector of timely, relevant data about the people and economy of the United States.

MAIN IDEA

Summarizing

 What was Turner’s view of the role of the American frontier in 1893?

Vocabulary

locust: any of numerous grasshoppers that travel in large swarms, often doing great damage to crops

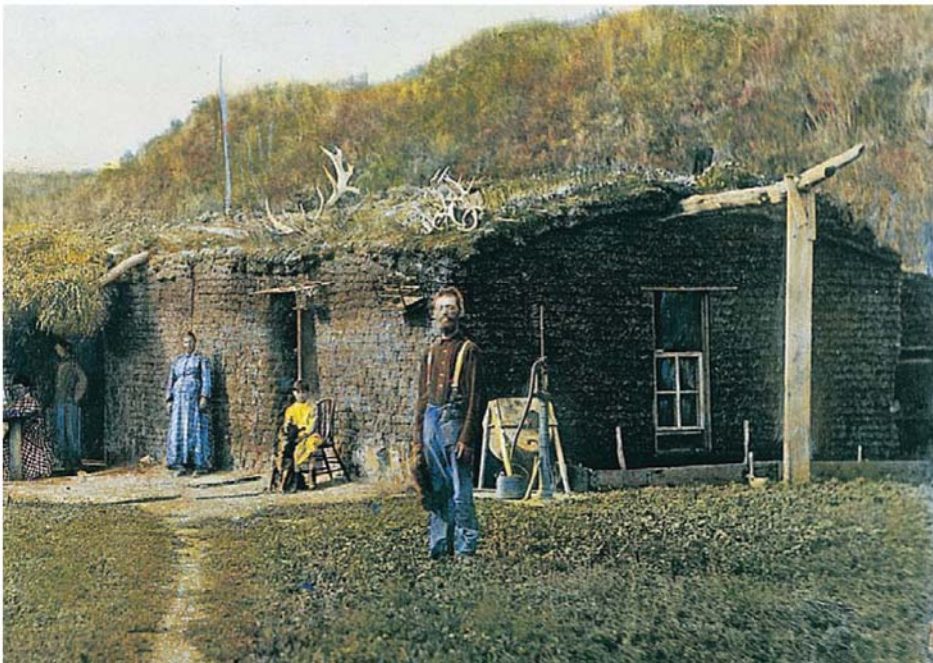
Settlers Meet the Challenges of the Plains

The frontier settlers faced extreme hardships—droughts, floods, fires, blizzards, locust plagues, and occasional raids by outlaws and Native Americans. Yet the number of people living west of the Mississippi River grew from 1 percent of the nation’s population in 1850 to almost 30 percent by the turn of the century.

DUGOUTS AND SODDIES Since trees were scarce, most settlers built their homes from the land itself. Many pioneers dug their homes into the sides of ravines or small hills. A stovepipe jutting from the ground was often the only clear sign of such a dugout home.

Those who moved to the broad, flat plains often made freestanding houses by stacking blocks of prairie turf. Like a dugout, a sod home, or **soddy**, was warm in

A pioneer family stands in front of their soddy near Coburg, Nebraska, in 1887. ►



winter and cool in summer. Soddies were small, however, and offered little light or air. They were havens for snakes, insects, and other pests. Although they were fireproof, they leaked continuously when it rained.

WOMEN'S WORK Virtually alone on the flat, endless prairie, homesteaders had to be almost superhumanly self-sufficient. Women often worked beside the men in the fields, plowing the land and planting and harvesting the predominant crop, wheat. They sheared the sheep and carded wool to make clothes for their families. They hauled water from wells that they had helped to dig, and made soap and candles from tallow. At harvest time, they canned fruits and vegetables. They were skilled in doctoring—from snakebites to crushed limbs. Women also sponsored schools and churches in an effort to build strong communities.

TECHNICAL SUPPORT FOR FARMERS Establishing a homestead was challenging. Once accomplished, it was farming the prairie, year in and year out, that became an overwhelming task. In 1837, John Deere had invented a steel plow that could slice through heavy soil. In 1847, Cyrus McCormick began to mass-produce a reaping machine. But a mass market for these devices didn't fully develop until the late 1800s with the migration of farmers onto the plains.

Other new and improved devices made farm work speedier—the spring-tooth harrow to prepare the soil (1869), the grain drill to plant the seed (1841), barbed wire to fence the land (1874), and the corn binder (1878). Then came a reaper that could cut and thresh wheat in one pass. By 1890, there were more than 900 manufacturers of farm equipment. In 1830, producing a bushel of grain took about 183 minutes. By 1900, with the use of these machines, it took only 10 minutes. These inventions made more grain available for a wider market. **D**

AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION The federal government supported farmers by financing agricultural education. The **Morrill Act** of 1862 and 1890 gave federal land to the states to help finance agricultural colleges, and the Hatch Act of 1887 established agricultural experiment stations to inform farmers of new developments. Agricultural researchers developed grains for arid soil and techniques for dry farming, which helped the land to retain moisture. These innovations enabled the dry eastern plains to flourish and become “the breadbasket of the nation.”

MAIN IDEA

Summarizing

D How did new inventions change farming in the West?



Science & Technology

INVENTIONS THAT TAMED THE PRAIRIE

On the Great Plains, treeless expanses, root-filled soil, and unpredictable weather presented challenges to farming.



BARBED WIRE Barbed wire prevented animals from trampling crops and wandering off.



REAPER By speeding up harvesting, the reaper saved crops from inclement weather.



STEEL PLOW The steel plow made planting more efficient in root-filled soil.

STEEL WINDMILL In regions of unpredictable rainfall, the steel windmill prevented crop dehydration by bringing up underground water for irrigation.



▲
Bonanza farms like this one required the labor of hundreds of farm hands and horses.

FARMERS IN DEBT Elaborate machinery was expensive, and farmers often had to borrow money to buy it. When prices for wheat were higher, farmers could usually repay their loans. When wheat prices fell, however, farmers needed to raise more crops to make ends meet. This situation gave rise to a new type of farming in the late 1870s. Railroad companies and investors created **bonanza farms**, enormous single-crop spreads of 15,000–50,000 acres. The Cass-Cheney-Dalrymple farm near Cassleton, North Dakota, for example, covered 24 square miles. By 1900, the average farmer had nearly 150 acres under cultivation. Some farmers mortgaged their land to buy more property, and as farms grew bigger, so did farmers’ debts. Between 1885 and 1890, much of the plains experienced drought, and the large single-crop operations couldn’t compete with smaller farms, which could be more flexible in the crops they grew. The bonanza farms slowly folded into bankruptcy.

Farmers also felt pressure from the rising cost of shipping grain. Railroads charged Western farmers a higher fee than they did farmers in the East. Also, the railroads sometimes charged more for short hauls, for which there was no competing transportation, than for long hauls. The railroads claimed that they were merely doing business, but farmers resented being taken advantage of. “No other system of taxation has borne as heavily on the people as those extortions and inequalities of railroad charges” wrote Henry Demarest Lloyd in an article in the March 1881 edition of *Atlantic Monthly*.

Many farmers found themselves growing as much grain as they could grow, on as much land as they could acquire, which resulted in going further into debt. But they were not defeated by these conditions. Instead, these challenging conditions drew farmers together in a common cause.

Vocabulary mortgage: to legally pledge property to a creditor as security for the payment of a loan or debt

Vocabulary extortion: illegal use of one’s official position or powers to obtain property or funds

SECTION
2

ASSESSMENT

1. TERMS & NAMES For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- Homestead Act
- soddy
- bonanza farm
- exoduster
- Morrill Act

MAIN IDEA

2. TAKING NOTES

Create a time line of four events that shaped the settling of the Great Plains.



How might history be different if one of these events hadn’t happened?

CRITICAL THINKING

3. EVALUATING

How successful were government efforts to promote settlement of the Great Plains? Give examples to support your answer. **Think About:**

- the growth in population on the Great Plains
- the role of railroads in the economy
- the Homestead Act

4. DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

Review the changes in technology that influenced the life of settlers on the Great Plains in the late 1800s. Explain how you think settlement of the plains would have been different without these inventions.

5. IDENTIFYING PROBLEMS

How did the railroads take advantage of farmers?