

Name: _____

Date: _____

Answers Historical Perspectives

The Homestead Act

The Homestead Act was a document signed in 1862 that allowed settlers to claim land in the west. The Homestead Act turned over acres and acres of public land to private citizens. Homesteads, the name for the large spaces of land that people could claim, could be up to 160 acres in size. Almost anyone could apply to claim land under the Homestead Act—in order to be eligible, a person only had to be 21 or older and the head of a household. This meant that people of all types were afforded the right to claim their homestead. Women, immigrants, African-Americans, and other groups of people who did not have many rights at the time were able to legally own the land claimed by the Homestead Act. After living on the land for five years, the land would officially become theirs. Most homesteads were in the Great Plains, in what are now states like Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Kansas. Most homesteaders (people who claimed land under the act) used their land for farming. People who lived on the homestead often did not have much money, and lived in small, one-room sod houses, or houses made of soil and dirt. The Homestead Act was one of several events responsible for making the western United States what it is today.

Think like a historian!

1. In what ways was the world different in the early 1800s than it is now?

The United States was much smaller than it is today. Many Native American tribes still lived freely on their own lands. Many Europeans were still interested in exploring and claiming land.

2. What would your life be like if you lived during that time period?

I would not have running water or electricity. My house might be made of dirt! Depending on the color of my skin or my gender, I might be treated badly.

3. What different points of view are represented in the three texts above?

Europeans, white American men, Native Americans, women, immigrants, and African Americans are all discussed in the texts.

4. Who was happy about westward expansion? Who was not?

Explorers and homesteaders were probably happy about the westward expansion. Native Americans were probably very angry.

Answer this prompt on a separate piece of paper:

How did westward expansion change people's lives?

Student writing responses will vary.