**The Civil War and the Settlement of the Great Plains**

**Jacob Blum**

**Dickinson College – Mastering History**

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American history teachers at the junior high and high school level across the country teach about the [Civil War](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2010/10/29/opinion/20101029-civil-war.html?ref=civilwarus) and the [Homestead Act of 1862](http://www.nps.gov/home/historyculture/abouthomesteadactlaw.htm) in the classroom. Students learn that both of these subject matters were watershed moments in the history of the United States. The Civil War marks the [bloodiest war](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/03/science/civil-war-toll-up-by-20-percent-in-new-estimate.html?_r=1&ref=science) that our nation has ever fought in and the Homestead Act provided over a million individuals with free public land west of the Mississippi River. Despite the undeniable importance of these two topics, they are often taught as though they were two completely separate events that are unrelated to one another. In fact, most American history textbooks written at these levels seem to encourage teaching these events separately because they place these topics in separate and seemingly unrelated chapters. Consequently, the potential exists that many students might fail to properly connect the historical dots that interlink these two events.

The idea for distributing free public land was an old idea by the time that [Abraham Lincoln](http://www.papersofabrahamlincoln.org/) signed the Homestead Act into law on May 20, 1862. There had been four previous attempts to get similar homestead bills passed through Congress. Southerner Democrats in the Senate, which acted as the bastion of Southern power, blocked the first three attempts because they feared that providing settlers with land would eliminate the possibility of slavery spreading into western territories.[[1]](#endnote-1) President [James Buchanan](http://www.lancasterhistory.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1256&Itemid=282), who “was the consummate doughface – a Northern man with Southern principles” vetoed the fourth attempt.[[2]](#endnote-2) Consequently, future homestead legislative efforts would have probably always have been stymied as long as Southern sympathizers remained in control of the Senate and the Presidency.

The [election of Lincoln](http://blogs.dickinson.edu/hist-288pinsker/2012/02/20/understanding-the-election-of-1860/) as President in 1860 and the resulting secession of eleven Southern states not only sparked the outbreak of the Civil War but it also removed Southern opposition to the Homestead Act in Congress. Furthermore, [Lincoln](http://www.nps.gov/home/historyculture/lincolnandwest.htm) seems to be the perfect President to support the Homestead Act because of his belief that “all working people, black and white alike, had a right to the fruits of their own labor.”[[3]](#endnote-3) The Homestead Act seems to be the quintessential law for providing individuals with an opportunity to achieve social mobility through the “fruits of their own labor.” Moreover, supporters of the Homestead Act argued that providing citizens, or people willing to become citizens, with up to 160 acres of free land would significantly increase agricultural output in the United States and thereby increase national wealth (see [House](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llcg&fileName=059/llcg059.db&recNum=76) debate). Perhaps President [Andrew Johnson](http://millercenter.org/president/johnson) summarized this sentiment best when he proclaimed in 1865 that “the lands in the hands of industrious settlers, whose labor creates wealth and contributes to the public resources, are worth more to the United States than if they had been reserved as a solitude for future purchasers.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

The wording used in the [Homestead Act](http://www.nps.gov/home/historyculture/upload/MW,pdf,Homestead%20Act,txt.pdf) also makes it interconnected with the Civil War. Following the war’s conclusion, Union veterans were able to subtract their years of military service away from the five years that were required to provide evidence that they were effectively improving the land.[[5]](#endnote-5) Furthermore, Union veterans who had not reached the age of twenty-one, which was the minimum age requirement for homesteaders, were allowed to file homestead claims regardless of their age. While the Homestead Act rewarded Union veterans, it initially punished individuals who had not remained loyal to the Union. In fact, three separate passages in the Homestead Act exclude individuals who were disloyal to the United States during the Civil War from filing homestead patents.[[6]](#endnote-6)

A little over a month after President Lincoln signed the Homestead Act into law he signed two additional acts that were also significant to the eventual settlement of the Great Plains. On July 1, 1862, Lincoln signed the [Pacific Railroad Act](http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=32&page=transcript) into law. The Pacific Railroad Act paved the way for the construction of the [Transcontinental Railroad](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/tcrr/), which when it was completed in 1869 finally linked the East Coast with the West Coast. Moreover, the railroad provided would be homesteaders with access to America’s heartland. On July 2, 1862, Lincoln provided homesteaders, or more likely the children and grandchildren (or in my case the great-great-great grandchildren) of homesteaders, with access to higher education by signing the [Morrill Act](http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?doc=33&page=transcript). The Morrill Act set aside large tracts of land for the purpose of establishing state universities and state colleges. Proponents of the Morrill Act believed that educating farmers would result in increased national wealth because farmers would be able to cultivate the land more efficiently.[[7]](#endnote-7)

The combination of the three acts helped improve the prospects of achieving social and economic prosperity for millions of Americans. These acts attracted not only Civil War veterans to the Great Plains but also Easterners looking for better opportunities, [former slaves](http://www.nps.gov/home/historyculture/exodusters.htm), and immigrants. The exact number of Civil War veterans who filled Homestead claims is still a matter of historical debate. However, the [National Archives](http://www.archives.gov/) in conjunction with the [Homestead National Monument of America](http://www.nps.gov/home/index.htm) is currently in the process of estimating this figure.[[8]](#endnote-8)

As somebody who has grown up in a small rural community in Eastern Nebraska, I never really made a connection between my hometown and the Civil War. Nebraska did not become a state until after the war ended and I tended to associate the Civil War with mostly the East Coast. As I was doing research for this blog, I was astonished when I stumbled upon the fact that [137 Civil War veterans](http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~necolfax/oldsoldiers.html) are buried in Colfax County, Nebraska (population of 10,558 in 2010).[[9]](#endnote-9) Obviously, not all of these veterans were homesteaders but it is plausible that a significant number of them were. Knowing that my ancestors, who were immigrant homesteaders, farmed adjacent to the fields of Civil War veterans helped me feel a connection to the Civil War that I never felt before. It also reaffirms that the events of the Civil War and the settlement of the Great Plains are unquestionably interconnected.

1. <http://beatricedailysun.com/news/article_f382f592-67cb-11e0-a3f8-001cc4c03286.html?mode=story> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Leonard L. Richards, *The California Gold Rush and the Coming of the Civil War,* (New York: Vintage Books), 198. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. James Oakes*, The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics,* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.), 44. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. <http://www.nps.gov/home/historyculture/presquotes.htm> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. <http://beatricedailysun.com/news/article_f382f592-67cb-11e0-a3f8-001cc4c03286.html?mode=story> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. <http://www.nps.gov/home/historyculture/upload/MW,pdf,Homestead%20Act,txt.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?doc=33&page=transcript> [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. <http://beatricedailysun.com/news/article_f382f592-67cb-11e0-a3f8-001cc4c03286.html?mode=story> [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~necolfax/oldsoldiers.html>

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   <http://www.archives.gov/> - The National Archives

   <http://www.nps.gov/home/index.htm> - Homestead National Monument of America [↑](#endnote-ref-9)