

2008 National Council on Public History Annual Meeting
Session 30 Working Group: Finding Common Ground between
Interpreters and Historians

CASE STUDY: *Interpreting the History of the Homestead Act from Multiple Perspectives*

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President Abraham Lincoln signed the Homestead Act on May 20, 1862. The law was the culmination of decades of agitation for federal distribution of millions of acres of the public domain. The Homestead Act allowed any qualified applicant to claim up to 160 acres of federal land for the purposes of settlement and cultivation. If the claimant fulfilled all legal requirements during a five- to seven-year residency period, the government transferred ownership of the land to the homesteader. Between 1863 and 1986, the U.S. government transferred to private ownership over 270 million acres of land in 30 different states via the Homestead Act.

Homestead National Monument of America (HOME) is a unit of the National Park Service located in Beatrice, Nebraska, that is charged with interpreting the history of the Homestead Act. HOME is located on the original homestead claim of Daniel Freeman, who claimed his land on January 1, 1863, and vocally proclaimed himself as “the first homesteader.” In 1999, the National Park Service approved a plan to construct a new “heritage center” at HOME. The new facility would contain all new interpretive history exhibits designed to challenge popular conceptions of homesteading and explore the law’s impacts on a number of different aspects of American life: agricultural production, industrialization, immigration, the natural environment, American Indian cultures, gender, and race.

Previous interpretations of the Homestead Act have tended to focus on either the positives of the homesteading experience (“the good old days” interpretation) or the rampant fraud that took place throughout the government’s administration of the homesteading program (found largely in academic treatments). Interpretation also focused on the story of the “first homesteader,” Daniel Freeman, on whose claim HOME now stands. This approach caused visitors to think of homesteading simply in the context of farming in eastern Nebraska. In reality, the length of the Homestead Act’s life and the complexity of the experiences of the many groups affected by it necessitated a new approach to planning the new building and exhibits. Park managers recognized the need to include historians in the development of a new visitor experience from the very start of conceptual planning. Collaboration between interpreters and historians was absolutely critical to ensuring that multiple perspectives were presented and proper techniques employed to make the exhibits both historically accurate and interpretive in nature. In addition, scholars helped the project by providing historical context and pointing out the negative outcomes of homesteading experienced by many homesteaders. The participation of historians pointed us toward the interpretation of homesteading throughout the process’s long history.

When compiling our design team, we strove to ensure that those participating in the discussions came from varying backgrounds, professional fields, and perspectives. As someone who deals with both the history and interpretation of the Homestead Act, HOME's staff historian was an important team member. The Midwest Region's Senior Historian was also deeply involved, as was the region's Chief of Interpretation and Education. A well-known western historian and college professor was contracted to also be a part of the team. The Chief of Interpretation from another Midwest Region park that has an American Indian theme and is herself an enrolled member of the Choctaw nation was also brought in to ensure the presence of American Indian perspectives. Throughout the four-year design process, the historians, interpreters, and other professionals on this team met regularly to discuss, debate, and ensure that the goals for the museum exhibits and interpretive film were being achieved. These collaborations began on day one and were maintained until the new facility opened on May 20, 2007, and the interpretive film had its premiere on April 5, 2008. The success of the approach has been evident in the increased visitation to the monument and the many positive comments received about the museum exhibits and interpretive film. The interpretive film features interviews with a number of historians, American Indians, living homesteaders, and homesteader descendants. They provide a multitude of perspectives on the Homestead Act and present a much more balanced interpretation than either "the good old days" or the "fraud" approaches that have been so inaccurately overused in the past.

In May 2007, just before the opening of the Homestead Heritage Center, HOME partnered with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to present a scholarly symposium on the theme of *Homesteading Reconsidered*. This conference generated much interaction and collaboration between interpreters and historians. The symposium featured over 40 papers on a wide range of views on homesteading in both the United States and Canada. Women, immigrants, American Indians/First Peoples, agriculture, prairie restorations, economics, and national politics all were subjects of presentations at the conference. The symposium provided another opportunity to link HOME to current scholarly approaches to history. HOME and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln are confident that this event may lead to a rebirth of scholarly interest in the complex history of the Homestead Act and homesteading experiences. In addition, the symposium further encouraged the interpretive staff at HOME to incorporate the varied scholarly perspectives of homesteading into their interpretive programs. HOME has included presentations by historians into its very active special events program. This will ensure one way for the park continues its fruitful relationship between interpretation and history. The challenge ahead concerns the successful incorporation of current scholarship into HOME's interpretive programs through the training and coaching of the interpreters by the park historian and chief of interpretation.