

# No Land is Free

*The utmost good faith shall always be observed towards the Indians; their lands and property shall never be taken from them without their consent; and, in their property, rights, and liberty, they shall never be invaded or disturbed, unless in just and lawful wars authorized by Congress...*

-The Utmost Good Faith Clause from the 1787 Northwest Ordinance

When Congress passed the Oregon Donation Land Claim Act of 1850, it broke promises made in the 1787 Northwest Ordinance. Federal officials never approached Rogue Valley tribes to negotiate land cession until 1853.

The 1850 Act encouraged emigrant settlement by providing for ownership of up to 640 acres of “free” land to Americans staking claims between 1850 and 1855. Free land! Gold in the rivers! Settlers and miners streamed into the valley carrying more than baggage. Many brought with them intense prejudice toward the Indians whose land they were invading.

The most attractive areas to claim as farmlands were those maintained with fire by tribes. Settlers fenced pastures, tilled the camas meadows, and reduced deer and elk populations. Mining left silt in the waterways, destroying native fisheries. Cultures collided—both sides wanting desperately to protect their homes and their way of life.



Congress passed the Oregon Donation Land Claim Act in 1850 to encourage settlement of the Oregon Territory. Pioneers could claim 320 acres per person, 640 acres per couple, for “free.”  
Southern Oregon Historical Society

## The Price to Pay

*The animosity of a few settlers, the fear of many others, and the cruelty and hatred of unprincipled men fed the tension that gripped the inhabitants of southern Oregon the first week of October [1855].*

- *Requiem for a People* by Stephen Dow Beckham

At dawn, October 8, a mob of over 100 white men attacked a small band of native women, children, and old men encamped just upriver from the Table Rock Reservation. The deadly assault led Table Rock Reservation Indians to split into two factions. A small group went to Fort Lane and sought protection by the US Army. The larger population left the reservation, split into groups, and fled to the mountains for sanctuary—attacking and burning ranches as they went.

### Applegate Trail

George and Mary Harris left their home in Missouri in the spring of 1852 and traveled by wagon on the Oregon Trail to the Willamette Valley. In 1854 they decided to move to the Rogue River Valley.

Following the Applegate Trail southward, they settled near here with their children Sophia, 13 and David, 10. Harris worked his farm with partner Frank A. Reed, also from Missouri.



Mary Ann Harris Chambers 1860  
Southern Oregon Historical Society

### Attack on Harris Homestead

On the morning of October 9, George was making shingles in the yard while Mary was behind the house washing clothes. He looked up to see Indians pouring out of the forest. Harris ran to his cabin but was shot as he closed the door. Daughter Sophie rushed out the front door and was shot through her right arm, but she made it back inside.

As Harris lay dying, he instructed Mary to bar the door and load the guns. Alone with her wounded daughter, Mary defended the cabin for over five hours. George died, son David was never found, and Frank Reed was killed. Altogether, 30 settlers were slain that day.

### Expulsion

The killing of George Harris and Mary's defense of the cabin was cited in many motivational speeches that demanded the extermination of the remainder of the Rogue River tribes.

On November 9, 1855, the request to establish a reservation reached President Franklin Pierce. He signed the order establishing a 1.1 million-acre reservation on the Oregon coast, extending from Cape Lookout to and including the Siltcoos River north of the Umpqua River.

As the Rogue River Wars ended in June and July 1856, western Oregon Indians were marched by land or brought by ship to a place that was to be their home.