

# LEGACY OF THE HOMESTEAD ACT

*'There are certain things we can only do together. There are certain things only a Union can do. Only a Union could harness the courage of our Pioneers to settle the American West, which is why President Abraham Lincoln passed a Homestead Act giving a tract of land to anyone seeking a stake in our growing economy.'*

Barack Obama, February 12, 2009



## Time Needed

One class period

## Materials Needed

Copies of the Presidential Quotes

Presidential Quotes may also be accessed on Homestead National Monument of America's website at:

<http://www.nps.gov/home/historyculture/presquotes.htm>

## Introductory Set

Ask students to identify some events or documents in American History that are important – write responses on a board. Students should then be asked how they know that these events or documents are important – responses should include how much people talk about it or how often officials refer to it. Tell students that they will identify how Presidents of the United States have remembered the Homestead Act.

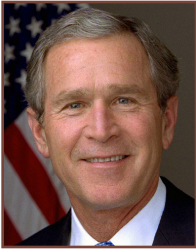
## Process

Provide students with copies of the Presidential Quotes. Students may be divided into groups and allowed to evaluate the quotes. Students should be instructed to select the words or phrases that describe how that President referred to or regarded the Homestead Act. Conduct a class discussion of how the Homestead Act is remembered and do students agree or disagree with the ideas expressed by the Presidents.

## Culminating Activity

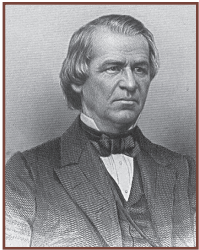
Students will produce their own short Presidential speeches. Have students choose a current event that can relate to their view of the Homestead Act and create a short speech that makes reference to the Act in a manner that they feel best “remembers” the importance of this historical document.

# PRESIDENTIAL QUOTES



In America's ideal of freedom, citizens find the dignity and security of economic independence instead of laboring on the edge of subsistence. This is the broader definition of liberty that motivated the Homestead Act, the Social Security Act, and the GI Bill of Rights.

*George W. Bush, January 20, 2005*



An allusion has been made to the Homestead Law. I think it worthy of consideration, and that the wild lands of the country should be distributed so that every man should have the means and opportunity of benefitting his condition.

*Abraham Lincoln, February 12, 1861* [replying to comments made by Frederick Oberkline, chairman of a committee representing eighteen German industrial associations that called in a body to pay their respects as Lincoln's "Inaugural" Train stopped in Cincinnati, Ohio]

The homestead policy was established only after long and earnest resistance; experience proves its wisdom. 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.

*Andrew Johnson, December 4, 1865*

The report of the Secretary of the Interior exhibits the condition of those branches of the public service which are committed to his supervision. During the last fiscal year 4,629,312 acres of public land were disposed of, 1,892,516 acres of which were entered under the Homestead Act. The policy originally adopted relative to the public lands has undergone essential modifications. Immediate revenue, and not their rapid settlement, was the cardinal feature of our land system. Long experience and earnest discussion have resulted in the conviction that the early development of our agricultural resources and the diffusion of an energetic population over our vast territory are objects of far greater importance to the national growth and prosperity than the proceeds of the sale of the land to the highest bidder in open market. The preemption laws confer upon the pioneer who complies with the terms they impose the privilege of purchasing a limited portion of "unoffered lands" at the minimum price. The homestead enactments relieve the settler from the payment of purchase money, and secure him a permanent home upon the condition of residence for a term of years. This liberal policy invites emigration from the Old and from the more crowded portions of the New World. Its propitious results are undoubted, and will be more signally manifested when time shall have given to it a wider development.

*Andrew Johnson, December 3, 1866*

# PRESIDENTIAL QUOTES



Now, let me start with a story, a bit of history -- 1862, the middle of the Civil War. And on May 20th of that year, Abraham Lincoln sat down with pen in hand and signed into law the Homestead Act of 1862. And that bill gave 160 acres to any family who wanted to make a go of it in the wilderness and reach for the American dream.

It is one of the most successful endeavors in American history, causing the great land rush to the Wild West and forming the vision for a new homesteading program in urban America today. Because Abraham Lincoln's Homestead Act empowered people, it freed people from the burden of poverty. It freed them to control their own destinies, to create their own opportunities, and to live the vision of the American dream.

*George H.W. Bush, November 28, 1990*



In the midst of the Civil War, President Lincoln signed into law two visionary programs that helped our people come together again and build America up. The Morrill Act helped states create new land grant colleges. This is a land grant university. The university in my home state was the first land grant college west of the Mississippi River. In these places, young people learn to make American agriculture and industry the best in the world. The legacy of the Morrill Act is not only our great colleges and universities like Rutgers but the American tradition that merit and not money should give people a chance for a higher education.

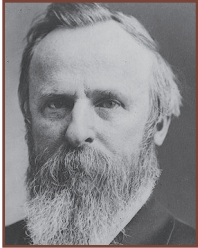
Mr. Lincoln also signed the Homestead Act that offered 100 acres of land for families who had the courage to settle the frontier and farm the wilderness. Its legacy is a nation that stretches from coast to coast. Now we must create a new legacy that gives a new generation of Americans the right and the power to explore the frontiers of science and technology and space. The frontiers of the limitations of our knowledge must be pushed back so that we can do what we need to do. And education is the way to do it, just as surely as it was more than 100 years ago.

*Bill Clinton, March 1, 1993*

In answering this call our people are following a proud history. More than a century ago President Abraham Lincoln signed the Homestead Act, and the frontier of this country was settled by countless families who took up the challenge in exchange for 100 acres to call their own. In the 1930's President Roosevelt enlisted millions of young people to restore the environment through the Civilian Conservation Corps. FDR gave others a chance to support themselves through the buildings made possible by the Works Project Administration. I was in the United States Justice Department just yesterday, a building built in 1934 by people who were giving service to their country, and it's still a beautiful monument to the legacy of that kind of service. The parents of the baby boom had the GI bill, which was one of the best investments our Government ever made. A generation ago, the young people of my generation saw suffering in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, and many rushed to the challenge laid down by President Kennedy when he created the Peace Corps, which became our country's greatest ambassador, building bridges of understanding to far off cultures. And now, three decades later, a challenge has been presented to all of you, a new challenge and an old one, as old as America and as new as your future.

*Bill Clinton, April 30, 1993*

# PRESIDENTIAL QUOTES



I see no reason why Indians who can give satisfactory proof of having by their own labor supported their families for a number of years, and who are willing to detach themselves from their tribal relations, should not be admitted to the benefit of the Homestead Act and the privileges of citizenship, and I recommend the passage of a law to that effect. It will be an act of justice as well as a measure of encouragement.

*Rutherford B. Hayes, December 3, 1877*

I also repeat the recommendation made in my first annual message, that a law be passed admitting Indians who can give satisfactory proof of having by their own labor supported their families for a number of years, and who are willing to detach themselves from their tribal relations, to the benefit of the Homestead Act, and to grant them patents containing the same provision of inalienability for a certain period.

*Rutherford B. Hayes, December 1, 1879*



The America to which these Swedish settlers came was a land that needed the hardy qualities they brought. It was not a land that was particularly softhearted towards newcomers, but everyone believed that each should have a fair chance regardless of his origin.

The newcomers quickly learned their way about and soon felt at home. The Homestead Act of 1862 provided them, as well as many other pioneers, with an opportunity to acquire land and establish family farms. To the land-hungry immigrants, the tough prairie sod seemed a golden opportunity and they conquered it by hard work.

*Harry S. Truman, June 4, 1948*



And the Republican Party was--and is--very much alive. A fact easily forgotten is that through all those years--from the first year of War Between the States in 1861 to the first year of the New Deal in 1933--the Republican Party was in office three-fourths of the time. It helped mold each age and was itself molded by each age--the extremist Party in one day, the champion of something called "normalcy" in another. With America and with the times, it restlessly changed; sometimes growing, sometimes faltering, sometimes partially divided--in short, behaving like a normal, healthy political party in a vital, thriving Republic.

The ascendancy of the Party through the great part of this great century is the clearest answer to the feeble but persistent myth that the Republican Party is simply a conspiracy against change. The century abounds with such answers. They begin with the Emancipation Proclamation. And they continue:

In the 1860's and '70's: the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments; the purchase of Alaska and the Midway Islands; the First Homestead Act;

*Dwight D. Eisenhower, September 21, 1953*

# PRESIDENTIAL QUOTES



My friends, it comes down to this simple statement: It is the problems that change; the principles do not.

Let us look at several examples in government.

Agriculture. Because of the unique exposure of the farmer to economic forces over which he has no control, and the dependency of the nation upon our agricultural economy, the Federal government must concern itself in practical ways to assist in assuring a sound farm economy and income. That's the principle.

Now, one application of this principle a hundred years ago: A Federal Homestead Act, passed under Lincoln, providing free quarter sections of land to settlers. That's what they did a hundred years ago.

The application today: a new set of Federal actions, such as sensible price supports, the Soil Bank, stepped-up Federal research, and development of markets.

*Dwight D. Eisenhower, June 7, 1957*



IN JULY 1862, in the darkest days of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln signed two acts which were to help to mold the future of the Nation which he was then struggling to preserve.

The first of these, the Homestead Act, provided, in Carl Sandburg's words, "a farm free to any man who wanted to put a plow into unbroken sod."

The second, the Morrill Act, donated more than one million acres of Federal land to endow at least one university in every State of the Union.

Thus even as the Nation trembled on the brink of destruction the vast lands of the American West were open to final settlement. A new America of unparalleled abundance began to grow, and the most ambitious and fruitful system of higher education in the history of the world was developed.

*John F. Kennedy, November 12, 1961*

One hundred and fifty years ago the vacant lands of the West were opened to private use. One hundred years ago the Congress passed the Homestead Act, probably the single greatest stimulus to national development ever enacted. Under the impetus of that Act and other laws, more than 1.1 billion acres of the original public main have been transferred to private and non-federal public ownership. The 768 million acres remaining in federal ownership are a valuable national asset.

*John F. Kennedy, March 1, 1962*



# PRESIDENTIAL QUOTES



Now the other course is the course of opportunity. If we choose that, we say that empty fatalism has no part in the American dream. Like the lawmakers in our past who created the Homestead Act, some of them who wrote the Land-Grant Act, some of you out there who helped write the Farmers' Home Act, we say that it is right and that it is just, and that it is a function of government, and that we are going to carry out that responsibility to help our people get back on their feet and share once again in the blessings of American life. We say that we are not helpless before the iron laws of economics, that a wise public policy uses economics to create hope--and not to abet despair.

*Lyndon B. Johnson, August 26, 1965*

Americans have always built for the future. That is why we established land grant colleges and passed the Homestead Act to open our Western lands more than 100 years ago.

*Lyndon B. Johnson, February 1, 1966*

We may never live to see an America without poverty. But we may see an America:

--where a lifetime of poverty is not the inevitable fate of a child born into it;

--where there is a genuine opportunity for every child and young person to live in decency and security;

--where the means of liberation and the understanding of how to use them are available to all of us.

If we reach that America it will be because we did not grow tired. It will be because we gave Americans a chance to help themselves.

That is in the finest and oldest American tradition: the same tradition that established the land grant colleges and public education, and the GI bill of rights; the same tradition that passed the Homestead Act; the same tradition that established the NYA more than 30 years ago.

*Lyndon B. Johnson, May 8, 1967*

And just as surely, today's immigrants to modern America--the Negroes, the Spanish-Americans and the Puerto Ricans--are going to make it.

In part, they are going to make it because the rest of us, acting through our Government, or acting privately, are going to help these people get on their feet so that they may make the long march that so many others have made to freedom and prosperity.

They are going to help make it on their own.

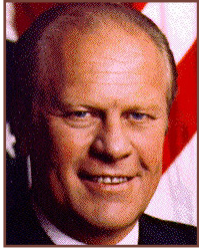
That is the oldest and the finest of all of America's traditions.

The Homestead Act gave land to those who wanted it.

The Morrill Act set up the land-grant colleges so that Americans could get an inexpensive higher education.

*Lyndon B. Johnson, September 22, 1967*

# PRESIDENTIAL QUOTES



I think all of us recognize that America's future depends upon America's farmers. Our national heritage was created by farmers. All Americans--actually, the entire world--today depend more than ever upon all of you.

Abraham Lincoln signed the Homestead Act, which embodied our fundamental belief in the importance of the American family farm. Lincoln was so right.

Thomas Jefferson, George Washington had shared the same great vision. They were convinced--so am I--that a man with a stake in his own land is a free man. His family is a free family, and together the family farm is the basis of our free society.

*Gerald R. Ford, April 3, 1976*



Free people build free markets that ignite dynamic development for everyone. And that's the key, but that's not all. Something else helped us create these unparalleled opportunities for growth and personal fulfillment: a strong sense of cooperation, free association among individuals, rooted in institutions of family, church, school, press, and voluntary groups of every kind. Government, too, played an important role. It helped eradicate slavery and other forms of discrimination. It opened up the frontier through actions like the Homestead Act and rural electrification. And it helped provide a sense of security for those who, through no fault of their own, could not support themselves.

*Ronald Reagan, October 15, 1981*

Thomas Jefferson said his criteria for honor and status was not wealth, but virtue and talent. In "Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years," Carl Sandburg wrote that Lincoln believed "the accent and stress was to be on opportunity, on equal chance, equal access to the resources of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. To give man this equal chance in life was the aim, the hope, the flair of glory, spoken by the Declaration of Independence."

Through the years, this promise was made real, thanks to the hard work, the dedication, and commitment to freedom of the American people. Our commitment to freedom has meant commitment to the rule of law, and commitment to the law has created opportunity: for example, historic legislation like the Homestead Act; passage of the 14th amendment to strengthen the guarantee of civil rights for every citizen, regardless of race, creed, or color; and, more recently, Brown vs. Board of Education, which emphatically decreed that race can never be used to deny any person equal educational opportunity. No future will outshine ours if we hold tight to the torch of freedom, if we remain true to the rule of law, and if we meet the challenge of providing opportunity to all our people.

*Ronald Reagan, August 1, 1983*

I've long believed that one of the mainsprings of our own liberty has been the widespread ownership of property among our people and the expectation that anyone's child, even from the humblest of families, could grow up to own a business or a corporation. Thomas Jefferson dreamed of a land of small farmers, of shopowners, and merchants. Abraham Lincoln signed into law the Homestead Act that ensured that the great western prairies of America would be the realm of independent, property owning citizens—a mightier guarantee of freedom is difficult to imagine.

*Ronald Reagan, August 3, 1987*