“Planted in the Soil”: The Homestead Act, Women Homesteaders, and the 19th Amendment

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Introduction

Many know the major moments in the early years of the Women’s Suffrage Movement in the United States: Seneca Falls, 1848 – the first women’s rights convention; Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony forming the America Equal Rights Association in 1866 to fight for universal suffrage; Annie Wittenmyer founding the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in 1874, which became a major partner in the struggle for suffrage. But not many realize the role that the Homestead Act of 1862 and the women settling across the Western and Midwestern states had in crusading for votes for women in America.

The story of the Homestead Act of 1862 and those who settled under its provisions, known as homesteaders, is closely connected to the story of women’s suffrage. Almost all of the states granting women full voting rights prior to the Nineteenth Amendment (the sole exception being New York) gave away land under the Homestead Act.¹ Some of the most heavily homesteaded states were the earliest adopters of women’s suffrage: Wyoming, Montana, Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Colorado, South Dakota, Kansas, and Oklahoma. (Nebraska, the most heavily homesteaded state, allowed women to vote for president prior to the Nineteenth Amendment, but did not allow full voting rights).

In fact, fifteen of the sixteen homesteading states west of the Missouri River granted women at least limited suffrage prior to the Nineteenth Amendment.² Historians have found that women represent around ten percent of all homestead claims, a number which significantly increases around the turn of the twentieth century. These Western and Great Plains states clearly illustrate a link between homesteading and the women’s suffrage movement.
Women, Citizenship, and Property Rights:

American women in the mid-nineteenth century possessed few legal rights. Women did not have the right to vote, and lost their legal independence after marriage. Until 1848, with the passage of the Married Woman’s Property Act, any property a woman owned prior to her marriage became the property of her spouse. The Homestead Act was an almost unprecedented piece of legislation because of its democratic approach. All citizens were welcome to claim land under the act, regardless of gender. With the passage of the 14th Amendment in 1866,
Homesteading was opened to African-Americans as well. Immigrant men and women were able to claim land while they met the residency requirement to become citizens.

With the Homestead Act, the United States government established legal property rights for women at the federal level. This gender neutrality was adopted by state and territorial legislation in the West, in large part, because of the tremendous population increases driven by the flood of people seeking land under the Homestead Act. Further, it provided opportunity and access to land for a previously landless group, with enormous and far-reaching social and political impacts. The most significant of these impacts was suffrage, a foundational right of democracy.

The passage of the Homestead Act in 1862 greatly increased the ability of a woman to obtain real estate under her own name. This, combined with evolving property laws that favored women’s rights led to a higher rate of female property owners. Estimates suggest that approximately ten percent of all homesteaders were women, meaning that hundreds of thousands of women sought land from the government, and more than one hundred thousand successfully “proved up” claims. As property and suffrage were historically linked, then it follows logically that that the right to vote might be extended to these newly landed women.

Previous federal legislation had failed to grant this fundamental right. Reform came from the state level first. The Territory of Wyoming first guaranteed suffrage to women in 1869, followed by the territory of Utah (1870), the state of Colorado (1893), and the state of Idaho (1896) by the close of the nineteenth century. The influx of homesteaders seeking free land significantly boosted the populations in these new territories and states. Landowners had long
held substantial political clout in the United States, and this was no different in the developing West and Midwest. For the first time in American history, however, under the Homestead Act, women were obtaining land and seeking an equal share in their political future on a large scale.

Victories by the women’s suffrage movement in these states bolstered the national suffrage movement, as leadership in the east looked on with rapt attention. Thirteen of the sixteen homesteading states west of the Missouri River had granted full suffrage to women prior to the passage of the 19th amendment. Two of the remaining three allowed women to vote in presidential elections. Homesteading offered women more than just the opportunity to own land; it was a powerful catalyst in the women’s suffrage movement, especially in the twentieth century. These homesteading women were trailblazers and pioneers for the women’s suffrage movement, leading the way to the Nineteenth Amendment.

Amelia Jenks Bloomer and Early Suffrage in Nebraska:

Suffrage in the Midwestern and Western states often predated their statehood, and suffragists were actively promoting the cause across the continent, far from the spotlight in the East. Amelia Jenks Bloomer addressed the Nebraska territorial legislature in 1856, well before its admittance to the Union as a state in 1867. Bloomer was well aware of the blossoming women’s rights movement. After marrying David Bloomer, she moved to Seneca Falls with him, where she engaged in social reform movements there, including the Seneca Falls Ladies Temperance Society. ¹ She attended the Seneca Falls Women’s Rights Convention, held on July 19 and 20,
1848. This convention was a veritable “Who’s Who” of figures in the movement, including: Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Frederick Douglass. At this point, Bloomer was focused solely on the temperance cause, and had not yet adopted the issue of women’s rights (she was not among those at the convention who signed the Declaration of Sentiments). However, the conference inspired her – shortly afterwards, she began publishing the first newspaper for Women, *The Lily*.  

Bloomer moved from the “birthplace” of Women’s Suffrage in Seneca Falls to Council Bluffs, Iowa in 1855, and brought her ideas and ideals with her. There she served as the president of the Iowa Woman Suffrage Society. Council Bluffs at that point was very much a “frontier”
town. It was a launching point of migrations and wagon trains full of settlers bound for westward trails. These same paths also served as a vector for new ideas to spread. Just across the Missouri River from Council Bluffs was the new town of Omaha in Nebraska Territory. In January 1856, when Omaha was just a year old, Bloomer was invited to address the Nebraska territorial legislature on Woman’s Rights, following an earlier presentation of hers in Omaha on July 4th of the previous year. From the very beginning, Nebraska, like much of the Midwest and West, took careful note of women’s suffrage. As the legislature was adopting laws to govern the territory, Bloomer stressed “the importance of the Woman’s Rights movement, and its bearings upon the welfare of the whole human race – realizing most deeply the injustice done to woman by the laws of our country in relation to the property rights of married women.”

Her address was well received, with newspapers around the country reporting on her persuasive demeanor. A bill for woman’s suffrage was considered by the legislature. If approved, Nebraska would have been the first in the nation to ensure women’s right to full enfranchisement. However, as the potential bill was placed on the last day of the session, it died without a vote. Wyoming, instead, would become the first territory or state in the country to pass a full woman’s suffrage a full fourteen years later, and more than a half-century before the eventual ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment.

While predating the passage of the Homestead Act by six years, Bloomer sowed the seeds of women’s rights in the minds of many Midwestern women and men who would continue to take up the cause as they spread across the homesteading states on those trails, and on the rails after Council Bluffs and Omaha became the eastern terminus of the Transcontinental Railroad in
the 1860s. While the failure of the territorial legislature to adopt women’s suffrage in 1856 was the first time the subject was brought to a vote in Nebraska, it was far from the last, and its proponents continued to fight on earnestly.

**Statehood: National and Local Suffrage Efforts**

In the late 1860s, several of the leading national suffragette figures, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony, arrived in Omaha to campaign and assist in the development of state and grassroots suffrage groups. Early results were promising, when the Nebraska Legislature passed school suffrage for women on July 24th, 1867. *The Omaha Republican* heralded the event by stating that “the entire wedge is thus driven for universal suffrage in Nebraska.” *The Nebraska Advertiser* called for further action: “Lucy Stone and Elizabeth Cady Stanton had better look to it.” Shortly thereafter, suffragist efforts lead to a petition seeking the vote after the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868, which extended the vote to all male citizens over the age of twenty-one. The topic was one of bittersweet frustration for many suffragettes – glad that their decades-long crusades for social reform had achieved results, but not for themselves.

This petition sent to the State legislature for Nebraska’s state constitutional convention sought “to omit the word “male” from the constitution’s clause on suffrage. The petition was signed by about 1,000 women and received “respectful attention from the legislature.” *The Nebraska State Journal* reported on February 8, 1871 that “the popular branch of the Nebraska Legislature is fully committed to the great reform. We congratulate the ladies of Nebraska upon this step in advance.” Buoyed by this strong show of support, Nebraska’s constitutional
convention in 1871 considered resolutions on suffrage and married women’s property rights. A Mr. Strickland introduced a resolution before the Committee on Suffrage to “prepare an article conferring upon females the right to voting in all general or special elections…and that if a majority of both male and female voters sustain it, to be incorporated into the constitution.” Governor David Butler, in a message to the legislature, advocated in favor of granting female suffrage.

Male voters resoundingly voted down the proposed legislation, 12,668 against and 3,502 in favor – only 21% voted in favor. In fact, only two Nebraska counties voted in favor of women’s suffrage in that election – Dawson, with 4 votes for and none against, and Fillmore, with 34 votes for and 8 against. Both counties were small and sparsely settled in 1871, but a rushing tide of homesteaders would change that. Dawson’s population grew from 103 to 16,000 between 1870 and 1920. While the 1871 campaign fell far short of the mark, this second effort demonstrated a continued commitment and effort in Nebraska to secure the vote for women.

After the national campaign failed early in the 1870s, a local grassroots movement sprung up in Nebraska. While population centers like Lincoln and Omaha contained many suffragists, the most influential leaders of the movement in the 1870s lived in Thayer and Gage counties. These counties had a core of young, progressive women seeking reform, but in a distinctly different way from their sisters in the cause farther east. The “new Midwest” of Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas was settled largely through the Homestead Act of 1862, and the power that act afforded to Midwestern and Western women forever linked suffrage and homesteading. With almost half of the total land area of Nebraska claimed and settled under
the Homestead Act, its impact on social and political identity in the state between 1867 and 1920 afforded women new, powerful opportunities. These women included Ada Bittenbender, Harriet Brooks, Clara Bewick Colby, and Lucy Correll. They continued working to advance the cause, both with national leaders, and on their own terms.

Ada M. Bittenbender understood the importance of extending the suffrage movement to rural Nebraskans. Ada and Henry Bittenbender were lawyers, as well editors of the *Osceola Record* – the ability of newspapers and farm journals to mobilize a core group of suffragists in the Midwest was demonstrated time and time again. Bittenender also established the Polk County Agricultural Association, and edited the first Farmers’ Alliance newspaper in the state of Nebraska. 18

Clara Bewick Colby, a British-American migrant, came of age in the homesteading frontier of Wisconsin in the 1860s. She was a college educated woman who moved to Beatrice, Nebraska with her husband, Leonard Wright Colby, a former Civil War general. Historians of Nebraska suffrage efforts noted that “the success of the suffrage measure was very largely due to the efforts of … Mrs. Clara B. Colby,… and other ladies. The first mentioned ladies worked almost incessantly to obtain favorable vote, and too much praise cannot be given for their tact, perseverance, and ability.” 19 Her contemporaries in the movement wrote to Dr. Inez Philbrick, the President of the Nebraska Woman Suffrage Association in 1882 that “[Colby] was ablest and best equipped of the state leaders in that campaign,” citing her efforts in founding and editing the *Woman’s Tribune*, a newspaper focused on bringing feminism to the rural women of America between 1883 and 1909. 20
She, like the other Nebraska women of the movement, was a college-educated, “middle-class” woman who had ties to national progressive women’s networks - in Colby’s case, the Association for the Advancement of Women.\textsuperscript{21} Colby contacted Susan B. Anthony to speak in Beatrice in 1877. Anthony’s lecture was a success, and she implored Clara Bewick Colby to continue her feminist activism, writing “Such women as you… have individual work to do – to lift the world into better conditions - & I hope you will not allow anything to stop you from doing what seems to be your duty – I long to see women be themselves – not the mere echoes of men.” \textsuperscript{22}

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\caption{Clara Bewick Colby. Courtesy of Library of Congress.}
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Men were active in the suffrage movement in Nebraska, too. Erasmus Correll, a journalist, edited and published the \textit{Hebron Journal} as well as the \textit{Western Woman’s Journal}, the first woman suffrage paper in Nebraska. In 1879, he invited Elizabeth Cady Stanton to lecture in Hebron – a lecture which led to the birth of the Thayer County Woman’s Suffrage Association,
the first permanent woman suffrage association in the state. After being elected to the Nebraska House of Representatives in 1880, he introduced a bill for woman suffrage that was the focus of a major campaign by suffragists. That bill, as well as Nebraska’s links to these national women’s networks soon brought Nebraska to the forefront of the next generation of suffragettes as the battlefield squared up again for another statewide vote on a constitutional amendment. In September 1882, Omaha hosted the American Woman Suffrage Association, and the National Woman Suffrage Association. Both organizations collaborated with the Nebraska Women Suffrage Association, which had been founded just the previous year, to arrange speakers and meetings.

That year, both the AWSA and the NWSA held their annual conventions in Omaha, in another serious attempt to make Nebraska the first state to allow women to vote. The American Woman Suffrage Association conference included, amongst its many dignitaries from across the country, Lucy Stone, Henry B. Blackwell, and the Governor of Wyoming Territory, J.W. Hoyt. Erasmus Correll and Mrs. A.M. Bittenbender represented the local chapter. The National Woman Suffrage Association convention was held from September 26th through September 28th. Susan B. Anthony, Olympia Brown, Virginia Minor, and Clara Bewick Colby were among the representatives of the National Woman Suffrage Association in attendance. Anthony remarked, “when I came here three months ago, I found the women more awake to the importance of the movement than in any other state I have visited.”

Though the Omaha Daily Bee described it as “the liveliest campaign ever known,” the time was not yet ripe. The Nebraska State Journal reported on the election November 8th, 1882
that “Female Suffrage [was] Buried Under An Avalanche… Probably 25,000 Majority Against It.” 29 The final vote was 25,756 in favor, and 50,693 against. Still, that was progress – nearly ten times as many votes overall voted in favor of women’s suffrage in 1882 than in 1871, increasing to about 36% of the vote. Much of this increase can be attributed to the rapidly increasing number of homesteading families in Nebraska, as will be demonstrated later.

Third Time’s the Charm?

The early twentieth century saw a massive surge of not only homesteading, but also suffrage activity, with unprecedented success across many of the homesteading states. Wyoming, Colorado, Idaho, and Utah all guaranteed women’s suffrage before 1900. Washington, California, Oregon, Arizona, Kansas, and Montana followed between 1910 and 1914. A massive uptick in efforts towards suffrage brought forth a tidal wave of success. Nebraska women mobilized for a concerted campaign once more.
The Nebraska Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) voted unanimously at its 1912 convention to begin work on a petition for an amendment to the Nebraska state constitution. According to Mary H. Williams, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union agreed “drop all other work and help, letting the prohibition campaign rest until the campaign for suffrage is over.” To campaign on the issue of suffrage, NWSA sought to connect with successful campaigners in their neighboring states which had already passed women’s suffrage. NWSA President Mrs. Draper Smith (Henrietta Ingram Woodward) wrote the organization’s Executive Secretary, Viola Harrison in December of 1913, “Have you asked any of the Kansas women [during the campaign] to come and help? I am tremendously eager to have you get the full number of petition signatures very soon, so that Nebraska will be a genuine campaign state, for
then we can include Nebraska as one of the beneficiaries of a series of campaign state mass
rallies, which we are planning to hold in the various big centers of the country…” 31

Viola then tapped into the nationwide suffrage network in New York City, writing Mrs.
Mary Ware Dennett to report that by December 17th of that same year, that half of the required
40,000 voters on the petition had been secured. She sought additional assistance, but from
women familiar with the conditions on the ground: “Women who know only the East, and cities,
would of course do us little good. While by no means so rural as so many people east of Chicago
look upon us, Nebraska is an agricultural state, and naturally has fewer city and factory
problems.” 32 This mindset would be a sign of things to come.

Their hard work in organizing and mobilizing paid off. A proposed suffrage amendment
went on the ballots in Nebraska once more in November of 1914. That proposal was Initiative
Petition No 3: Woman’s Suffrage, which would have granted the vote to “Every person of the
age of twenty-one years or upwards… who shall have resided in the state six months… citizens
of the United States […and] persons of foreign birth who shall have declared their intention to
become citizens]” – almost the exact same wording as in the Homestead Act of 1862.33 Women
were optimistic about their chances this time for the third appearance of the suffrage issue on the
ballot.

However, after the ballots were tallied, that optimism turned to shock – the amendment
was defeated, 90,738 in favor, and 100,842 against.34 More than 47% of the total 191,580 votes
cast were in were in favor – a very near miss. In a generation, suffragists went from being
outvoted 4 to 1, to an almost dead heat. Even more than the 1882 ballot, suffragists had
increasingly won over the hearts and minds of Nebraskan men and women, including the surging population of homesteaders and their families. But that progress wasn’t enough for the dedicated adherents of the cause. While the vote was much closer, why had the 1914 effort, just like those in 1871 and 1882, fallen short?

**Remember the Friend on the Homestead**

Mrs. Draper Smith sent out a memorandum to all the officers and organizers of the Nebraska Woman Suffrage Association following the failed 1914 vote. She called for an immediate convention the following month, saying “We must have a report from each county. If your county chairman cannot come, be sure that her representative is there… First: If you carried your county, what contributed most to that end? If you did not carry it, can you locate the trouble? Second: What method of campaigning was most effective in your county? Third: What are your suggestions for the next campaign?” There was no quit in the Nebraska Woman Suffrage Association – they were eager to get back to campaigning immediately, and figuring out where and how to improve.

After urban-based suffrage organizations in Nebraska suffered defeat after defeat from 1856 to 1914, the movement took on a different approach – it reached out to rural Nebraskan women. Suffragists wrote articles and publications, organized grassroots campaigns, and targeted homesteading women and the wives of male homesteaders. Record numbers of women in 1914
had joined the suffrage cause – but they had neglected to reach out fully to their “more numerous, widely scattered sisters” across Nebraska.

These sisters, of course, were the homesteader women, wives of farmers, and the hundreds of thousands of rural Nebraskans whose voices and votes would be needed to effect change. *The Suffrage Messenger*, a Nebraska suffrage newspaper which played a significant role in the last years of the movement, recognized how important these women could be.³⁶ The editor of *The Suffrage Messenger*, Mrs. F. A. Harrison, noted: “You can afford to remember the friend on the homestead, and help her to keep up on suffrage news and in time gather her neighbors into a suffrage club.”³⁷ After all, Harrison wrote of these homesteading women, “Women who own
property are fairly in accord with the well-known American principle, ‘Taxation without representation is tyranny.’”

This campaign sought to bring in the entire state, and every precinct – including, like never before, the rural and isolated areas of the state – especially those who lived on remote homesteads. An advertisement for the fundraising effort for the planned 1918 campaign appeared in the Suffrage Messenger, calling for PIGS FOR SUFFRAGE. The campaign noted that “The Nebraska pig is a notoriously kind old fellow. He sends hundreds of boys and girls to school… build schools and churches, good roads and telephone lines, and is fact largely responsible for Nebraska’s wealth and prosperity. What is more appropriate than that he should be called upon to give his aid in leading Nebraska into an equal suffrage victory in 1918?”

Finally, the suffragists of Nebraska were looking to the friend on the Homestead – to ally with their economic and political clout in the state. The campaign was organized by Harriet C. King of Benson, Nebraska, whose extended family had deep homesteading and farming roots. Her father, Charles W. King purchased 160 acres of land in Gage County in the late nineteenth century, before paying $10,000 for an 80 acre farm just north of Beatrice in 1904. Her father-in-law Thomas L. Armstrong had a 160-acre homestead claim in nearby Johnson County, issued in 1873. Harriet’s husband Thomas W. Armstrong worked on that family
homestead a young man. She was no stranger to the importance agriculture and homesteading had on Nebraska life, and sought to connect what had largely been an urban movement with the immense rural population of the state.

The “pig plan” allowed homesteaders and farmers who may not have been able to donate much money to the cause to contribute financially, by donating a pig instead. An article in the July 1916 edition of the *Suffrage Messenger* by an anonymous woman continued the effort of reaching out to homesteading women, noting that “The woman farm owner is considered a citizen only when the taxes fall due, but on election day she may not say how these taxes are spent.” – a sentiment echoed by the ever-growing number of women homesteaders proving up in their own name, but without a legal voice.

**Homesteaders Leading the Way**

Dawson County, in south-central Nebraska became a county in 1871, just in time for the first statewide vote on suffrage. It holds the unique distinction of being the only county in the entire state to vote in favor of suffrage in all three elections (1871, 1882, and 1914). Like much of the state, it was heavily settled by homesteaders – there are a total of 1,975 patents for the county listed in the General Land Office Records, and more than 1,370 of those are Homestead entries. The earliest homesteaders arrived in the late 1860s – the first to “prove up” was John S. Wilson in October 1873. At that first 1871 vote, the population of the county was miniscule – only 103. Only four ballots were cast, all in favor of women’s suffrage.
However, in a pattern exhibited across the state, homesteaders swarmed in increasing numbers in the late nineteenth century. Dawson’s population exploded from 103 in 1870 to 12,264 in 1900. During that same period, a total of 1,303 homesteads were proved up in the county. 45 Using national averages, for a conservative estimate the average household size in 1900 was around 4.75, then homesteaders should account for approximately 6,200 residents of the county – just over half the population. 46 In reality, the number was probably even higher. Deborah Fink of the University of Iowa and Alicia Carriquiry of Iowa State University found that children were a boon on Nebraska homesteads: they eased the loneliness many felt, and they provided invaluable labor for the never-ending farm work.47 By their calculation the average Nebraska nuclear farm family in 1900 was 5.59 people.48 With that figure, we get approximately 7,300.

While Dawson County, Nebraska is an exceptional example in that it voted YES on all three attempts, it represents the broader trend of the homesteading areas of Nebraska adopting the call of women’s suffrage. Figure Six illustrates the three elections putting suffrage to the vote in Nebraska between 1871 and 1914. The counties in gray never voted in favor for women’s suffrage. The counties in purple voted “Yes” in 1871 or 1882.49 Most significant, however, are the counties in red, blue, and green. Seven counties voted “YES” in both 1882 and 1914, but not 1871 (RED): Buffalo, Custer, Nance, Polk, Red Willow, Valley, and Wheeler. Eleven more voted “YES” in 1914 only (GREEN): Adams, Antelope, Clay, Keith, Harlan, Hitchcock, Lancaster, Lincoln, Merrick, Nuckolls, and Phelps. Finally, the 24 counties illustrated in blue voted in 1914, but did not exist for either of the other votes.
It is no coincidence that most of the state west of Polk County voted “Yes”, while the earlier settled eastern counties overwhelmingly did not – only in Lancaster, home of the state capital of Lincoln, did an eastern county vote for Suffrage in 1914.50

The 1871 vote, for the most part, came too early to have returns from a large number of homesteaders. Though the Homestead Act was passed in 1862 and enacted the following year, the earliest individuals would not have received their patents for another five years – and comparatively few settled so early on under the Homestead Act. None of the original nine counties of Nebraska ever voted in favor of women’s suffrage, and only 25% (11 of 44) counties that existed in 1871 or earlier voted in favor in at least one election.

However, by 1882, the rush was on. Settlers increasingly filed in, filling county after county, in a westward moving tide. Of the 93 counties in Nebraska, 39 were created after the 1871 election, counties which came of age with this homesteader population boom.51 An impressive 82% (32 of 39) of those counties voted in favor of women’s suffrage. Homesteading in Nebraska occurred in two waves, the first between 1863 – 1894 (with two peaks, one in the 1870s and one in the 1880s) in the eastern and central counties, and then a second in the northern and western counties between 1905 and 1917. 52

The eastern third of the state was heavily settled by other public land laws (agricultural college scrip, military warrants, cash sales, and purchases of Indian allotments), and largely locked up before the flood of homesteaders entered the state in the 1870s.53 But for those counties in the central and western of the Nebraska, homesteading dominated – and they brought
with them an increased willingness to vote for women’s suffrage, in no small part because of the importance and influence of women homesteaders.

Figure 7 – Suffrage Elections by County, Nebraska – 1871 to 1914. Courtesy of MapChart.net

1917: Immigration, Prohibition, and Suffrage

Between 1860, just before the passage of the Homestead Act, and 1910, the population of Nebraska exploded. It grew over 4,000% - from 28,841 to 1,192,214. As might be expected from the state with the highest percentage of land area claimed by homesteaders, Nebraska at this time was heavily rural – 73.9% of the state. With 104,260 homesteads claimed in Nebraska
spanning 22,000,000 acres, homesteaders represented a large percentage of Nebraskans during this era. Using the same conservative estimate as before, with an average household at 4.75, those homesteads represent 495,235 people. If applying the larger household sizes on homesteads at Fink and Carriquiry’s 5.59 figure, that number jumps to 582,813 – 49% of the population of the state, for just the first generation of homestead households, without accounting for their descendants.

The states of the Midwest and the West were heavily populated by immigrants, as the Homestead Act served in many ways as an accommodating piece of immigration legislation. Many residents of Nebraska were immigrants – approximately 20 percent of the population. Even more were the children of immigrants.\textsuperscript{55} The three highest foreign populations were German at 37.5 percent of all immigrants, Austrian with 11.7%, and Swedish with 10.9%.\textsuperscript{56} A recent study of 621 homestead claimants in central and western Nebraska noted 325 that had previously lived in the Midwest, 109 migrated from Europe, 87 came from the U.S. Northeast, 30 from the U.S. South, and two from Canada.\textsuperscript{57} Thus, 52% of claimants were Midwesterners and 17.6% were European. With this rapid influx of population growth, there were many different cultures, ethnicities, and religious backgrounds contributing to the rich political discourse in this era. The regional complexity of the debates over suffrage played out against that multicultural, multiethnic background in the Midwest – broader debates about immigration and an individual’s “fitness” to vote.\textsuperscript{58}

Many German immigrants saw the women’s suffrage movement as a threat to “traditional family dynamics” and to their culture. The German-American Alliance campaigned both in
Nebraska, and nationwide, against both women’s suffrage, and prohibition – members of one movement were often involved in the other. The 1910s and 1920s were a particularly intense battleground over the question of immigration, with many taking anti-immigrant, or “Nativist”, stances. The eruption of World War I heightened feelings of suspicion, mistrust, and prejudice. “Native-born” Americans begin to see the large German immigrant population in a whole new light. A relatively tame article from the *Omaha Daily Bee* in March 1917 noted, “we should respect the foreigners who come into this country, but we should see that they do not keep alive their traditions of their native countries.”

Suffragists often latched on to the fears and hysterias of anti-German sentiment. The nationally renowned suffragist and president of the National Woman Suffrage Association President Anna Howard Shaw, who was promoting the cause in the Midwest during the war years, claimed that foreign-born men were taking advantage of naturalization and undermining the United States. In a speech she noted that “all over the country today on account of the war in Europe… [foreigners are] very anxious to take out their first papers of citizenship.” Many suffragists blamed foreigners after the failures on the ballot in 1914 – that Germans had “masterminded the defeat of woman suffrage.”

The temperance movement continued to be a major factor in the women’s suffrage movement into the twentieth century. Just like Amelia Bloomer decades before, activists from one movement often joined and campaigned for the other – “Midwestern suffrage groups focused on morality, piety, and domesticity – the values women promised to bring to the political arena.” The temperance crusade also blended into the debates over nativism and immigration –
many prohibitionists and suffragettes were Protestant Anglo-Americans, especially Methodists and Presbyterians who associated alcohol with immorality. Immigrant German Lutherans and Catholics feared prohibition and suffrage, viewing them as potential assaults on their culture. Anti-suffragists organized at the national and state levels, warning that if women were to enter the political realm, it could lead to a collapse of their traditional gender roles.

**Limited Suffrage and Continued Legal Battles**

Senator John N. Norton introduced House Roll No. 222 before the Nebraska state legislature in 1917. This law called for guaranteeing the right for women to vote in any election except for United States congressional representatives – a limited suffrage bill. The bill passed on April 21, 1917, at almost the same time as a law prohibiting the sale of alcohol in Nebraska – which had received the full support of the Nebraska Women Suffrage Association, continuing a long alliance with the Women’s Christian Temperance Union.

Just months afterward, the Nebraska Association Opposed to Women’s Suffrage (NAOWS) petitioned Nebraska Secretary of State Charles W. Pool to have the law instead placed on the 1918 ballot, feeling they could defeat suffrage at the ballot box. This organization, with female leadership and a large majority of female members, demonstrates the complexity of the battle for suffrage – many women felt that a woman’s place was in the domestic realm, seeing suffrage as “anti-female, anti-family, and anti-American.” NAOWS claimed to collect well in excess of the required percentage of the state population (Nebraska requires that 10% of registered voters must sign for a constitutional amendment or referendum to suspend a law to
take effect, and 5% of the registered voters in 38 of 93 counties). NAOWS canvassed especially hard in Nebraska’s largest city, Omaha, where the majority of their signatories lived. If suffrage had finally been carried through, in part, on the virtue of rural homesteader women joining the fray, anti-suffragists were seeking to push back in the urban hubs.

Edna Barkley, president of the Nebraska Woman Suffrage Association, questioned the legitimacy of the petition, doubting that NAOWS had actually received the 30,000 signatures it claimed. Barkley filed a lawsuit against Pool, alleging that 21,460 signatures were fraudulent, as signatures had been forged, addresses were incorrect or made up, some signatories were not legal voters, and some signatories were misled about the petition. According to the suit, the petition thus failed to meet the minimum of ten percent of the state’s electorate for a referendum. During the ensuing court case, many took the stand to testify that they had signed under false pretenses. Often signatories were paid, and others were told that the petition was in favor of women’s suffrage, or that it was to end prohibition.

The Nebraska Association Opposed to Women’s Suffrage knew Nebraskans were more upset about prohibition than the possibility of women’s suffrage. When individuals “hired to get signatures found it hard to get signers… some, accordingly, secured signatures by representing it as a pro-suffrage petition. Others took a short cut and signed up the petitions themselves, using city directories or telephone directories as a source of names.” Romanian immigrant Sam Popos fraudulently signed for his entire family after being told that the petition aimed to “bring the wet back.” Other testimony mirrored this sentiment. When Bucur Mein testified before the court, he related that he was told the petition was to “bring the beer and wine back”. He added
that he was in favor of women’s suffrage and would never have signed the referendum if he had known the truth.\textsuperscript{69} To this, the lawyer from the NAOWS responded, “Well, how are you going to get this beer and wine if women vote?”\textsuperscript{70}

Despite the power of the Anti-Suffragists, the Anti-Prohibitionists, and the Germans who fought to suppress the reform-minded movements of the Progressive Era, the investigation uncovered extensive fraud. The Nebraska Supreme Court nullified the petition in 1919, guaranteeing limited suffrage until the passage and ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment nationwide the following year.

\textbf{Homesteading and Suffrage Across the Great Plains:}

Nine of the thirty homesteading states (30\%) had at least a quarter of their total land area claimed by homesteaders. These states include: Nebraska (45\% of the state’s total acreage, 104,260 total homesteads), North Dakota (39\%, 118,472), Montana (34\%, 151,600), Oklahoma (34\%, 99,557), Colorado (34\%, 107,618), South Dakota (32\%, 97,197), Wyoming (29\%, 67,315), Kansas (25\%, 89,945), and New Mexico (25\%, 87,312).\textsuperscript{71} These nine states are all west of the Missouri River, where the vast majority of states passed at least Presidential suffrage prior to the ratification of the 19\textsuperscript{th} Amendment. Of these nine states, only New Mexico did not pass a suffrage bill. It is no coincidence that the states most heavily homesteaded were also the states leading the way to women’s suffrage in the United States.
While married women often are not reflected in the records of married men’s homesteading paperwork filed at the local land office in the homestead land entry case files, wives played a critical role in the success of homesteads. “Proving up” a homestead over the course of five years was a difficult task for any individual, and the extra labor a partner could provide was invaluable. Their work included “domestic tasks”: food preparation, gardening, tending to clothing needs, providing medical care, and raising a family. Mari Sandoz, daughter of the notorious Nebraska Sand Hills homesteader “Old Jules” Sandoz, noted the importance of a wife on a homestead: “Nothing happened after she arrived that did not vitally touch her. Particularly important was her place in accident or sickness, with doctors so few and far between… when drought and hail and wind came, it was the housewife who set as good a table as possible from what remained and sustained the morale of her family.”

But women weren’t just homesteading “behind-the-scenes” as partners and spouses. The Homestead Act of 1862 was a gender-neutral piece of legislation that was tied to the growing women’s rights movement of increased recognition and acceptance of a wide range of rights for women, including the right to own land. Many women saw the Homestead Act as the ideal place to acquire property.

The Homestead Act recognized women’s property rights, opening settlement to any head of household over the age of twenty-one. Women homesteaders were an emblem of the suffrage movement’s goals embodied. Historians have found that women represent around ten percent of all homestead claims, a number which significantly increases around the turn of the twentieth century. A recent study by Richard Edwards, Jacob Friefeld, and Rebecca Wingo on
homesteading women in Nebraska found that forty percent filed, completed their requirements, and proved up entirely on their own, either as single or widowed women. Another twenty-five percent of women proved up after becoming widowed. Both single women and widowed women took advantage of this new opportunity for property ownership afforded to them, not just in Nebraska, but across the United States. These women homesteaders sought to pursue a wide variety of benefits and rights long associated with property owning citizens in the United States – including the vote.

Nebraska

Frances B. Heald married homesteader John P. Heald, who homesteaded 82.96 acres near Osceola, in Polk County, Nebraska. She was politically very active, at both the local and national level. Frances was the President of the Nebraska Women’s Christian Temperance Union, and in 1915 was elected to be a member of the national committee. The WCTU had been firmly entrenched in Nebraska politics for decades at this point, including in rural, heavily homesteaded areas. Members of the WCTU in Brewster in Blaine County circulated a petition which received 27 signatures – more than 10% of the entire precinct. The entire population of Blaine County in 1890 was only 1,146 – with more than 900 homestead entries filed in the county. Signatories on this WCTU petition included Elizabeth S. Brewster (nee Barton), her husband, George W. Brewster, and their three children: daughter Mollie L. Brewster, and sons William F. Brewster and Benjamin A. Brewster.

Brewster, seat of Blaine County, was named in honor of George W. Brewster as the “first homesteader” in the county, and his family were active homesteaders and participants in the
suffrage movement, as this petition illustrates. While Blaine County did not exist during the 1871 and 1882 statewide votes on suffrage, in the 1914 vote Blaine said “YES” on giving Nebraska women the vote, 196 to 144.77

Figure 8- Women Vote for President... Why Not In Nebraska? Courtesy of History Nebraska.

Like many women in Progressive America, she made the transition from Prohibition into supporting Women’s Suffrage. She also appears on the NWSA’s roster as presiding over the Osceola chapter in the early twentieth century – both suffragettes and the WCTU found the liquor industry as enemies in their shared causes of progress. Heald continued that legacy. *The Lincoln Daily Star* reported on March 2, 1911 that “[Mrs. Frances B. Heald] said that the government of her home town, Osceola, showed a lack of power that might be wielded by women. She read a set of resolutions, condemning the legislators and others who have said that
the women of this state are not interested in and working for equal suffrage. The resolutions were referred to the resolutions committee.”

South Dakota

The state of South Dakota, like Nebraska and so many of its neighbors, had a long history of women’s suffrage being brought to vote. (Six times before being approved.) In 1916, the “Citizens of Lawrence County” sent a petition to Congress calling for a “bill to submit an amendment to the federal constitution granting to women the right of suffrage.” Nellie Spindler (nee Farnham) was one of the signatories to that petition. Nellie and her husband Willis C. Spindler, both originally of Edgerton Ohio, were homesteaders in the Black Hills. They received their patent to 37.43 acres in 1909. Willis and Nellie’s eighteen-year old daughter Wanda was also a signatory to the petition – these women demonstrated the powerful link between homesteading and suffrage.

Elizabeth Corey, a twenty-one year old, single woman from Marne, Iowa, moved to Stanley County, South Dakota in July 1909. Seeking the benefits of homesteading, she applied as soon as she was legally able to. Even though proving up a homestead was difficult for any single individual, “Bachelor Bess” never married. She endured the same hardships most homesteaders faced, especially financial ones. She wrote back hundreds of letters to her family, chronicling her experiences, including her financial independence, property ownership, and observations and goals regarding the vote.
She had to maintain a job as a teacher, “working out” off of the homestead to bring in extra money, delaying her proving up by more than two years. She acknowledged the difficulty, writing in 1911: “My how I wish I could stay out on the claim this summer – this working out feeling the way I do is like sandpapering ones fingers clear to the bone.” 81 In 1913 Bess lamented that she would “have to teach next year or get married.” 82

Like many homesteading women, Bess became concerned with suffrage after joining the ranks of propertied Americans – perhaps upon realizing she was unable to vote on crucial financial issues like property taxes. 83 In a November 1912 letter to her mother (Margaret M. Corey), young Elizabeth writes “Say, I’ve changed my politics. I’m going to work for ‘Woman’s Suffrage’ tooth and nail and then I’m going to have ‘em make a law.” 84 She even wrote attempting to recruit other women to the cause: “Say ma, you know there is eighty acres east of me and a hundred twenty east of Fuller. Do you suppose Aunt Hat and Aunt Rae would care to file?” 85 Elizabeth Corey persisted independently, never married, and successfully proved up in December of 1916, joining the ranks of landed homesteader women engaging in the suffrage movement. 86

North Dakota

Elizabeth Preston Anderson was a young woman when her family moved from Indiana to North Dakota to homestead. Her father, Elam S. Preston, proved up a homestead claim in rural
Cass County, about fifty miles west of Fargo, in the 1880s. She worked as a teacher in rural North Dakota, and joined the Women’s Christian Temperance Union in 1889, where she quickly rose as a result of her dedication and hard work – soon she was serving in the suffrage department of the organization at both the state and national levels.

By 1900, Elizabeth had become state president of the North Dakota chapter of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. As seen time and time again, the efforts of the W.C.T.U. in North Dakota under Anderson’s leadership towards prohibition went hand in hand with the efforts towards women’s suffrage. At the annual W.C.T.U. convention in Fargo in 1916, Elizabeth Preston Anderson gave a speech after being re-elected as President. She declared that nearly all the men elected to the North Dakota legislature that year declared themselves in favor of a proposed constitutional amendment. She went on to state that “the failure of our great and powerful nation…is that the women, the mothers, the child bearers, are not represented in government, are not given power and authority to protect virtue, honor, health, and life itself.”

It was “a critical time… in both the prohibition and suffrage movements; the goal is in sight, but a mighty effort is still needed to reach it.”

That year, the Nonpartisan League (NPL) took power in the state. The Nonpartisan League was newly formed left-wing populist political party in North Dakota created by A.C. Townley in 1915. It was an offshoot of the Republican Party. The NPL was a farmer protest organization in the spirit of the Grange, Farmers Alliance, and Populist movements of the late nineteenth century. With grievances common to homesteaders and farmers across the Midwest, the organization exploded in power and popularity overnight. It sought better prices and more
control over agricultural commodities, after perceived abuses by the railroads and captains of industry. The Nonpartisan League also supported the equality of women in farm families. The NPL argued that women who could vote would be better mothers and partners for farm families.

Lynn Joseph Frazier, the North Dakota Nonpartisan League gubernatorial candidate in 1916 had a good reason for having strong ties to farmers and supporting suffrage. Lynn grew up on the family homestead in northern North Dakota. Thomas Frazier, Lynn’s father, claimed and proved up the homestead in Pembina County with his wife and children in the 1880s. 92 Other than his time in politics, Lynn lived on and farmed that family homestead his entire life. The Jamestown Weekly Alert, reporting on the candidates, exclaimed “Get that – a farmer! Not an imitation farmer nor a town farmer, either, but a real farmer, who has been tilling his section of land in Pembina county for many years… He is now farming the same homestead on which his father settled in 1881.” 93

His background as a farmer was a strong part of the reason the NPL selected Frazier – they sought a candidate to represent the people. North Dakota, out of all thirty homestead states, had the second highest number of homesteads at 118,472 proved up, and the second highest percentage of land area claimed by homesteaders at 39%.94 Lynn Joseph Frazier represented the will of the people, the NPL felt, far better than a career politician or lawyer would.

The suffrage movement in North Dakota, with homesteading leadership at the very top in the form of W.C.T.U. President Elizabeth Preston Anderson and Governor Lynn Frazier, put in that mighty effort Anderson called for in 1916, and reached the goal. Frazier won the general election on November 7th, 1916 with a resounding 79% of the popular vote (87,665 to D.H.
McArthur’s 20,531 and Oscar A. Johnson’s 2,615 votes). The League took the state House of Representatives, and nearly the Senate as well.

They are pictured together here, Anderson standing at Governor Frazier’s right hand as he signs a bill for women’s suffrage in the state in 1917. Anderson served more than forty years in the W.C.T.U. in North Dakota, and was instrumental in earning women in that state the vote in 1917 – it is no coincidence that she is placed in a position of honor at Frazier’s right in the photograph celebrating the culmination of decades of effort. Frazier and Anderson, who grew up on homesteads in North Dakota, saw the movement emerge victorious, earning the vote for women of their state ahead of the ratification of the 19th Amendment.

Figure 9- Elizabeth Preston Anderson, first on left from Governor Frazier Signing Woman’s Suffrage Bill, North Dakota, 1917.
The state of Kansas, is oft-noted by historians as American history in microcosm for its roles in events with the Kansas-Nebraska Act leading up to the Civil War, cessions of Native American territory, homesteading – and an early leader in suffrage. Two politicians from Kansas are intricately woven into the story of suffrage and homesteading.

Samuel Clarke Pomeroy was a United States Senator from Kansas, elected upon Kansas joining the Union in 1861. He was elected to the 37th Congress, and on February 28th, 1862, voted YEA on the Homestead Act, becoming one of its staunchest supporters. He gave a speech in its defense, addressing President Lincoln: “…taking a homestead without expense or benefit to the Government, will produce more revenue to the country, and vastly more increase its wealth and productiveness, than any present or prospective sale… Sir, freedom was secured to Kansas by being planted in the soil, set to growing upon each quarter section of land that we are able to hold, and made as permanent as the homesteads that were secured. Hence it is that I said that I would rather have the “free homestead bill” as a measure to secure freedom to the territories.”

Senator Pomeroy, who was rewarded for his strong defense of the Homestead Act by being appointed Chairman of the Committee on Public Lands, also advocated strongly for universal suffrage – guaranteeing the vote to both women and African-Americans. As a Radical Republican, he sought universal suffrage decades before the concept enjoyed widespread popularity. He was a member of the Equal Rights Association in the 1860s – as were Susan B. Anthony, Henry Blackwell, Amelia Bloomer, William Lloyd Garrison, Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucy Stone, and Sojourner Truth, to name a few.
Locally, Pomeroy presided over the Atchison County Suffrage Association, which sought to strike both the words “male” and “white” from the state constitution, enfranchising all regardless of color, nationality, or sex. Pomeroy gave a speech noting that “[everyone] with an American heart is an American citizen, without distinction of birth or color… the enfranchisement of women was involved in the principles which our founding fathers laid down in establishing the foundation of our government.” He went on to say that “to give women the ballot was to be the consummation of the principle that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed… the vital principle of Democratic government.” He hoped to make Kansas the first state to give women the vote in 1867.

Pomeroy’s aspirations grew even larger the following year, when he proposed an amendment to the U.S. Constitution (S. R. No. 180, 1868): “Art. 15. The basis of suffrage in the
United States shall be that of citizenship, and all native or naturalized citizens shall enjoy the same rights and privileges of the elective franchise.” A report from Memphis noted that “Senator Pomeroy’s amendment proposing universal suffrage in the true sense of the word, including as it does, all the women, will not secure more than a semi-humorous debate.”

Susanna Madora Salter, a homesteading woman and member of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, was the first woman to be elected Mayor in the United States, building upon the strong legacy of women’s rights and suffrage started by an earlier generation of Kansas women, including Clarina Irene Howard Nichols. Nichols’ efforts at the Wyandotte Constitutional Convention of 1859 secured liberal property rights for Kansas women, guardianship of children, and the right to vote on school questions, paving the way for Susanna Madora Salter a generation later.  

Susanna and her husband Lewis moved to Argonia, Kansas in 1882. After the incorporation of Argonia in 1885, her father was elected Mayor. Two years later, Kansas gave women the right to vote in local elections. That same year, the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union campaigned on a platform of state prohibition, nominating sympathetic candidates for local office. A group of men seeking to discredit the WCTU nominated an identical set of candidates, but placed the unknowing Susanna Salter as the potential candidate for mayor as a prank.
The Republican Party rallied around her nomination, and she was elected Mayor, attracting the attention of suffragists around the country. Laura Johns, president of the Kansas Equal Suffrage Association, remarked: “[Argonia] has attracted the attention of suffragists by electing a lady to the mayorality. This is the first time a woman has held that office… she is an officer in the Argonia W.C.T.U., much interested in the enforcement of the prohibitory law.” She went on to contact Salter, and seek to coordinate an Equal Suffrage organization in Argonia, as well as inviting her to speak at the Kansas Women’s Equal Suffrage Association convention in the fall of 1887, where she met Susan B. Anthony and Henry Blackwell.

Susanna and her husband took part in the Oklahoma Land Rush of 1893, which opened up the Cherokee Strip, just to the south of Argonia, Kansas, to homestead settlement. This land rush was the fourth in Oklahoma following the passage of the Dawes Act in 1887, and the Indian Appropriations Act of 1889, which were passed to force tribes to accept individual allotments of
land rather than communal ownership, and sell the “Unassigned Lands” to the United States for
distribution to settlers. An estimated 100,000 individuals took part in this largest land run in U.S.
History, with four separate land offices opening to handle the tide of homesteaders seeking their
160 acre share of the land ceded by the Cherokee Nation. Lewis and Susanna claimed 160 acres
just south of the newly opened land office at Alva, and successfully proved up in July 1901.104

Oklahoma

Perhaps more than any other state, Oklahoma (and its land rushes) is tied intricately to
homesteading in American public consciousness. As already seen by the example of Susanna
Salter, suffragette homesteaders were just as eager as anyone else to join the rush – and to
continue their efforts to secure the vote for women.

Kate H. Himrod Biggers served as the president of the Oklahoma Woman’s Suffrage
Association from 1904 to 1911. Kate’s family farmed in southeast Kansas, where she married
Civil War veteran Major Thomas Benton Biggers. Together they farmed near Longton, Kansas,
where Kate – not Thomas - advertised chickens and eggs for sale, in *The Longton Gleaner.*105
They also shipped livestock as “Biggers & Himrod.”106 The newspaper also provides a glimpse
into her early days in reform politics. Kate was a member of the Women’s Christian Temperance
Union in Kansas by the 1880s. She was an elected officer of the Kansas WCTU, and participated
in conventions, addressing the organization.107
The couple moved to Indian Territory before the turn of the century, where Kate continued her activism and rose to new heights. She became the first President of the Oklahoma and Indian Territory Woman Suffrage Association when the campaign for suffrage in Oklahoma heated up in conjunction with the campaign for statehood. At an annual convention in 1905, she gave an address leaning on her own experiences as a “pioneer” wife: “As [women] shared the hardships of pioneer life, attended to their duties as wives and mothers, and many times successfully attended to business affairs, as they shared the burdens with husband and fathers, let them share the ballot.”

Kate and Thomas Biggers, who shared those pioneer hardships and business affairs in Kansas and Oklahoma, applied for 160 acre homestead claim near Marlow, Oklahoma. Though she stepped down as President of the Oklahoma Woman’s Suffrage Association, she continued to send editorials and articles to Oklahoma newspapers, and was Vice President of the Marlow Suffrage Club. The couple successfully proved up their homestead claim in August 1919, shortly before Thomas Benton Biggers passed away in October of that same year.

Kate Chapman Stafford, like Kate Biggers and Susanna Salter, was another suffragette with Kansas roots who joined the homesteading rush into Oklahoma. She and husband Irvin H. Stafford homesteaded during the 1893 Cherokee Strip Land Run, successfully proving up a 160 acre claim in Garfield County. They received the patent in June of 1902. After a divorce in which Kate received half of the family property in order to maintain her financial independence, she increasingly participated in Progressive reform organizations. First, she joined the Woman’s
Christian Temperance Union. In 1914, she joined the Oklahoma Women’s Suffrage Association, attending local and state meetings.

Stafford quickly dove in headfirst, and became a militant, ardent defender of women’s rights. *The Daily Ardmoreite* front page reported “Mrs. Kate Stafford of Oklahoma and Forty Others Arrested for Picketing at White House” on November 10th, 1917. ¹¹³ She was named the secretary of the Oklahoma chapter of the National Woman’s Party the year after it was established in 1916, and began her tenure serving a thirty day sentence in a Washington, D.C. jail after picketing the White House for women’s suffrage. ¹¹⁴

Montana

The first federally elected woman in the United States also had strong ties to homesteading and the suffrage movement. Jeanette Rankin, who was elected at the age of thirty-six to the U.S. House of Representatives as one of two congressional representatives for Montana. Rankin was the daughter of Canadian immigrants who homesteaded in Missoula County, Montana in the 1880s and 1890s. ¹¹⁵ She grew up on the family ranch, where like any child of homesteaders, she participated in the farm and household chores that required everyone to pitch in. Her experiences on the homestead lead her to reflect on the fact that though women and men worked at the arduous tasks of “proving up” a homestead side by side as equals, they did not have equal access to the vote. ¹¹⁶ Rankin attended the University of Montana, earning a degree, then attended the University of Washington, where she became active in the suffrage movement.
Rankin, as a homesteader woman who made it to Congress, represented the successes suffragists had made throughout the West and Midwest. In November of 1914, women’s suffrage passed in Montana. The suffrage amendment gained its largest support from the new homestead counties in the eastern portion of the state.\textsuperscript{117} Montana had a particularly high number of women homesteaders, as its settlement coincided with larger numbers of women choosing to homestead in the twentieth century.

![Figure 12 - Jeannette Rankin with fellow suffragists.](image)

Montana’s population growth, largely thanks to homesteading, was explosive. In Yellowstone County, Montana only 202 total patents were issued between 1881 and 1909. Then, a total of 4,066 were issued in just that single county between 1909 and 1934. Of those 4066 homestead patents, 746 were issued to women – a total of eighteen percent.\textsuperscript{118} Agriculture rapidly surpassed mining as the state’s most important industry after 1910.
In 1916, the first election year in which women in Montana could vote, ballots cast in that state doubled.\textsuperscript{119} Homesteading suffragist women were thrilled, and cast their votes and contacted their congresswoman to make their voices heard.

When Rankin cast her first vote, however, it was on a very different issue – on April 2, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson called a special joint session to propose declaring war on Germany. A devoted pacifist, she voted against the war.\textsuperscript{120} The women who lived on the ranches and farms, her homesteader constituents, wrote to her. Leotha Scott of Chester, Montana wrote of the frustration of calling men to join the military and its impact on the harvest: “Now just before the time to harvest this crop the government is coming and taking over half of these poor homesteaders and is going to… leave their crops to rot in the ground.” \textsuperscript{121} Even for the many single women homesteaders of Montana, the war meant a shortage of paid laborers to assist with harvests.
Rankin recommended homesteading to women as a method of financial and social independence. A Mrs. Jessie Nakken wrote to Congresswoman Rankin in 1917 seeking advice. She was being verbally, physically, and mentally abused by her husband, homesteader Herman Nakken. She worked the 320 acre homestead claim they had made under the Enlarged Homestead Act of 1909 in Daniels County, Montana, and sought a way out of her situation.
Rankin replied with a suggestion for financial independence: “Were you thinking of filing on a homestead for yourself?… [if you had a homestead] you could make a living raising chickens.”\textsuperscript{124} Rankin, suffragist and one of the most powerful women in America at the time, clearly understood the link between being a landowner and having political and personal rights. Jessie did just that – she divorced her husband, living on her sister’s quarter-section, where the two sought financial and personal independence through the land.

New Mexico

By the early 1900s, the discourse of woman’s suffrage had spread throughout the nation. Previous generations of suffragettes were often seen as “radical” by those not in support – many women were outright anti-suffragists. However, following the turn of the century, more and more Americans found themselves supporting the cause. \textit{Holland’s Magazine}, a general women’s magazine published between 1876 and 1953, sponsored an essay contest in May 1913 on the topic. Holland’s had a long tradition of supporting social change and reform causes, and had a sister publication, \textit{Farm and Ranch}, specifically geared towards agriculture.

A “Mrs. R. Bedicheck” responded to the essay contest: “I am a plain country woman, once a school-teacher, just now a wife and mother and homesteader in a pleasant little valley in New Mexico. I never in my life was a member of a woman’s club nor am I well known as a suffragette or in any other way. I am just a plain woman – but I want to vote.”\textsuperscript{125} This Mrs. R. Bedicheck was Lillian Greer Bedichek, wife of Roy Bedichek. Lillian and Roy were second-generation homesteaders. Roy’s parents, James and Lucretia Bedichek, homesteaded in Luna
County, New Mexico, as did Roy and Lillian. In fact, Lucretia was one of the approximately ten percent of women homesteaders – the final patent was in her name. Issued in 1917, Lucretia proved up a year after the death of her husband left her the head of her household.

Latina suffragist Adelina “Nina” Otero-Warren also homesteaded in New Mexico. Otero-Warren spent her life negotiating between Hispano, Anglo, and American Indian worlds. Born to a wealthy Hispano family in New Mexico in 1881, Nina’s father was shot and killed by an Anglo squatter who moved onto her family’s hacienda when she was a young girl. Her family then moved off the hacienda and into Santa Fe, where she met and married Rawson Warren, an officer in the U.S. Cavalry. The marriage didn’t last – the two divorced after only two years, and she began describing herself as a widow.

Nina became active in politics and in the suffrage movement, catching the attention of Alice Paul, who had just founded the National Woman’s Party. Paul and other leading suffragists knew of the importance of Hispanics in winning suffrage in New Mexico – Nina made an ideal leader, and was chosen to lead the New Mexico Congressional Union chapter. She insisted that all suffrage material be published in both English and Spanish. In 1921, she campaigned for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives, becoming the first Latina to run for Congress. She was defeated by Democrat John Morrow, falling short by fewer than 10,000 votes.
In the early 1930s, she and her longtime friend and business partner Mamie Meadors, homesteaded, both establishing a ranch under the Stock Raising Homestead Act of 1916 a few miles outside of Santa Fe. Each claimed just short of 640 acres of land for their homestead, successfully proving up in September of 1935. The ranches, which bordered each other, were affectionately named “Las Dos” (The Two Women).

Wyoming

Even amongst the homesteading states west of the Missouri River, Wyoming stands as a unique example. When the Territorial legislature met in Cheyenne in October 1869, it proposed a raft of progressive laws. Among these were guaranteeing that female teachers would be paid the
same as men, and that married women had property rights separately from their husbands – no small thing in a state with more than 18,000,000 acres of homesteaded land (30% of the state.) The Territory of Wyoming passed a full women’s suffrage bill on December 10th 1869, the first territory or state in the nation to do so. When delegates of the territory gathered in Cheyenne to draft a state constitution in September 1889, the topic of women’s suffrage came up once again. The Laramie Daily Boomerang reported that “It is not at all certain that Congress would approve a state constitution making provision for woman suffrage,” but the convention voted by a margin of more than two to one to include suffrage in the new state constitution. Even the threat of Congress refusing to admit Wyoming as a state left representatives and supporters of the cause undeterred. The legislature sent a telegram to Washington, D.C. declaring “We will remain out of the Union one hundred years rather than come in without the women.” It worked – though the vote was close, Wyoming became the first state in the Union with women’s suffrage, 29 years before the passage of the 19th Amendment.

One of Wyoming’s most famous homesteaders, Ellinore Pruitt Stewart, a laundress from a landless Denver family remarked in the early 1900s, “When I read of the hard times among the Denver poor, I feel like urging them every one to get out and file on land.” Stewart believed that “homesteading is the solution of all poverty’s problems,” and she was determined to prove up as independent woman homesteader. She applied for a 147 acre homestead in Wyoming in 1909. She published her experiences as a serial, “Letters of a Woman Homesteader” in the magazine Atlantic Monthly between 1909 and 1914. She filed as a single woman, though she relinquished her claim June 24th, 1912, after marrying Clyde Stewart. In the course of her column, she never admits the relinquishment, which was transferred to her mother-in-law, Ruth
Stewart. Ruth proved up the claim, which was adjacent to Clyde’s, in 1915. Stewart represents a growing class of the feminist “New Woman.” American New Women in the early twentieth century sought to use land laws, education, and politics to their own advantage and betterment. These women embraced the Homestead Act, suffrage, and politics in ever increasing numbers.
Cecilia Hennel Hendricks was another Wyoming “New Woman,” embracing the Homestead Act, suffrage, and politics. A Midwestern native, Cecilia moved from Indiana to Wyoming with her husband John Hendricks, where they homesteaded 80 acres in Park County. Like many homesteading women, whether single, married, or widowed, she was an
active participant in running the homestead as a business venture. The Hendricks Homestead grew sweet clover and managed bee colonies to produce honey. Cecilia managed the finances and bookkeeping of Honeyhill Farm, and her husband valued her as a business partner so much they hired domestic laborers so that Cecilia could assist with running the business.139

While Wyoming passed suffrage decades before, Cecilia demonstrates that women in the state were closely following their sisters’ efforts throughout the nation. She wrote in November, 1914: “We have been celebrating over the fact that two more states – Montana and Nevada, have joined the suffrage ranks.” She also recounted her “first experience getting ready to vote… thought it would be a shame to lose my vote for lack of trying.”140 She wrote that she “…exercised [my] right of suffrage. People talk about objecting to women suffrage because it takes the woman out of their homes, where they belong. Why, voting here is a regular family affair where both men and women vote.”141 She also participated in the reelection campaign of Nellie Tayloe Ross, who was the first woman to become governor in the United States, just four years after the ratification of the 19th Amendment. Nellie became the Governor of Wyoming in 1924, winning a special election after her husband, Governor William B. Ross passed away.142
Conclusion

The ranks of land-owning women homesteaders across the Midwest and Western states swelled between 1862 and 1920, and especially in the early twentieth century. As more and more women joined the ranks of propertied Americans, they increasingly sought the rights that had traditionally been associated with being a landed citizenry – the vote. If homesteaders numbered about 1.6 million, and women homesteaders were a little over ten percent of that number, then more than 160,000 women were joining a historically enfranchised class and using their newfound economic power to push for their equality in the eyes of the law. When accounting the numbers of women who were the wives and daughters of homesteaders, or single women homesteaders who did not successfully prove up and earn their patent, then that number swells even higher.

It is no coincidence that as the Midwest and Western homesteading states were exploding in population, they were also granting women the vote – something few eastern states had done. In fact, the only non-homestead states that granted women voting rights before the 19th Amendment were New York, Rhode Island, Maine, and Tennessee. Of those four states, only New York granted full voting rights. By contrast, 24 of 30 homestead states, and every single Midwest state granted woman suffrage prior to the 19th Amendment. In 1920, 72 years after Seneca Falls, the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified – women were guaranteed the right to vote across the United States. It was homesteaders and the Homestead Act of 1862 that led the way.
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New York was the only state outside of those under the Homestead Act (non-homesteading states) to guarantee full voting rights to women prior to the 19th Amendment. The only other non-homesteading states to provide limited suffrage prior to the 19th Amendment were Maine, Rhode Island, and Tennessee.

New Mexico was the only homesteading state west of the Missouri River which did not provide at least limited suffrage prior to the ratification of the 19th Amendment. Several states under the Southern Homestead Act of 1866 also did not give women the vote before the 19th Amendment: Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida.


The Nebraska Advertiser, September 26, 1867, 3.


The Nebraska State Journal, February 8, 1871, 2.


“Lancaster County.” Nebraska Advertiser: February 9th, 1871, 2.

15 *The Nebraska Blue Book, 1922.* (Lincoln: Nebraska Legislative Reference Bureau, 1922), 420.

16 Dawson County, Nebraska, is noteworthy for being the only county to vote in favor in all three campaigns (several counties weren’t in existence in 1871 and voted in favor twice.)


19 History Nebraska MS 572, Box 1, Folder 5, Erasmus Correll, “Nebraska Legislation for Women.”


21 Kristin Mapel Bloomberg, “‘Striving for Equal Rights for All’: Woman Suffrage in Nebraska, 1855-1882,” *Nebraska History* 90, 89.

22 November 2, 1877. Clara Bewick Colby papers, MSS M92-172. Wisconsin Historical Society; Bloomberg, 89.

23 Bloomberg, 91.


25 While the territories of Wyoming and Utah had granted suffrage to women, they would not be admitted states until 1890 and 1896, respectively. Nebraska had multiple serious opportunities to be the first state to guarantee women’s suffrage, in 1871 and 1882.


28 “Nebraska.” *The Omaha Daily Bee*, November 8, 1882, 1.


30 History Nebraska, MS1073 Series 1, Box 1, Folder 1. Nebraska Woman Suffrage Association.

31 History Nebraska, MS1073 Series 1, Box 1, Folder 1. Nebraska Woman Suffrage Association. Mrs. Draper Smith to Viola Harrison, December 1913.

32 History Nebraska, MS1073 Series 1, Box 1, Folder 1. Nebraska Woman Suffrage Association. Viola Harrison to Mrs. Mary Ware Dennett, December 17, 1913.


35 History Nebraska, Series 1, Box 1, Folder 1. Nebraska Woman Suffrage Association. Mrs. Draper Smith, November 17, 1914.

36 *The Suffrage Messenger* was published between 1915 and 1917, following the failure of the amendment to pass on November 3, 1914 – it was clear that a change in strategy was required.

37 *The Suffrage Messenger*, February 1915, 2.


39 Heider, 118.

40 *Beatrice Daily Sun*. October 16, 1904, 3. The Beatrice Daily Sun and other local newspapers reported that this farm sold for the $125 an acre, and was regarded as “well improved.”

41 Heider, 120. Women were also encouraged to create a “corn wagon,” decorated with suffrage banners, and ask farmers for donations of corn, grain, or small livestock for the cause.


44 The Nebraska Blue Book, 1922. (Lincoln: Nebraska Legislative Reference Bureau, 1922), 420.

45 “General Land Office Records.” – Dawson County, Homestead Entry Original, 1870-1900. https://glorecords.blm.gov/results/default.aspx?searchCriteria=type=patent|st=NE|cty=047|dt1_m=1|dt1_yr=1870|dt2_m=12|dt2_yr=1900|aut=251101|sp=true|sw=true|sadv=false#resultsTabIndex=0&page=1&sortField=6&sortDir=0

46 This estimate is conservative – that household size takes in to account both urban and rural areas. Rural households are on average significantly larger than urban ones. For more on this subject, see Patterns of Urban and Rural Population Growth. Population Studies, New York: United Nations Publications, 1980.

47 Deborah Fink and Alicia Carriquiry. “Having Babies or Not: Household Composition and Fertility in Rural Iowa and Nebraska, 1900, 1910.” Great Plains Quarterly 12, (Summer 1992): 157-168, 163.

48 Ibid.

49 Only two counties voted “Yes” on women’s suffrage in 1871 – Dawson, which as previously mentioned voted “Yes” in all three elections, and Fillmore, which never again voted yes.

50 The Nebraska Blue Book, 1922. (Lincoln: Nebraska Legislative Reference Bureau, 1922), 420.

51 Of note – several counties that are listed in blue were created prior to, but did not actually organize until after, the 1882 vote.

52 Homesteading the Plains, 96. “The Nebraska Pattern”

53 Ibid, 102.


58 For more on this topic, see Sara Egge’s How Midwestern Suffragists Won the Vote By Attacking Immigrants: https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/how-midwestern-suffragists-won-vote-by-attacking-immigrants-180970298/#Rwqfd7Hi7760goXk.99

59 “Keeping Patriotism Alive in Schools” The Omaha Daily Bee, March 30, 1917.


61 Ibid.


63 History Nebraska MS1073 Series Five, Box Three and Four. Barkley V. Pool, Lancaster County District Court.


65 History Nebraska, MS1073 Series 1, Box 1, Folder 1. Nebraska Woman Suffrage Association. June 1918 – WOMAN SUFFRAGE REFERENDUM CASE.

66 History Nebraska, MS1073, Barkley v. Pool, testimony, 5551, Nebraska Suffrage Papers.


68 History Nebraska, MS1073, Barkley v. Pool, testimony, Barkley v. Pool.

69 History Nebraska, MS1073, Barkley v. Pool, testimony, Barkley v. Pool.

70 History Nebraska, MS1073, Barkley v. Pool, testimony, Barkley v. Pool.


Ibid, 130.


The wave of homesteaders proving up in 1890 reflects the creation of the county in 1885. Many claimants had two claims of approximately 160 acres each, as the Enlarged Homestead Act allowed up to 320 total acres to be claimed – those who only had 160 could make another claim to reach the full amount allowed under the new law, passed in 1909. While there are a total of around 900 claims then, there are fewer homesteaders than that – though they still represent a massive percentage of the county.

History Nebraska, MS1073 Series 3, Box 1, Folder 3 – Nebraska Woman Suffrage Association - Vote By Years On Constitutional Amendment for Extension of Suffrage, Lists.


In a sign of the times, the petition had one other grievance: calling for “federal censorship of motion picture films, to prevent the use of immoral pictures.” Petition to Congress from the Citizens of Lawrence County, South Dakota; 1916; Petitions and Memorials, Resolutions of State Legislatures, and Related Documents which were Presented, Read, or Tabled during the 65th Congress; (SEN6A-K9); Petitions and Related Documents That Were Presented, Read, or Tabled, 1789 - 1966; Records of the U.S. Senate, Record Group 46; National Archives Building, Washington, DC. [Online Version, https://www.docsteach.org/documents/document/lawrence-south-dakota, June 21, 2019]


84 *Bachelor Bess*, Letter from Elizabeth Corey to Margaret Corey, November 10, 1912, 205.

85 *Bachelor Bess*, Letter from Elizabeth Corey to Margaret Corey, January 28, 1912, 174.


87 Like many homesteaders, Elam Preston took advantage of multiple different opportunities to claim land – he had both a successful homestead claim (proved up in 1888), and a successful timber culture claim (proved up in 1893).


88 “Amounts to the Same.” *Jamestown Weekly Alert*. March 8, 1900, 5.


90 Ibid.

91 For more on the subject of agrarian economic and protest movements and political organization amongst American farmers in the late 1800s, see


99 The Atchison Free Press. September 7th, 1867, 2.

100 Ibid.


103 Ibid, 179.


105 The Longton Gleaner, June 4, 1886, 3 and “For Sale.” The Longton Gleaner, 3 September, 1886.

106 The Longton Gleaner, June 29, 1883, 3.

107 The Citizen, February 27, 1889, 3.


110 Fugate, “Biggers, Kate H. Himrod.”


113 “Mrs. Kate Stafford of Oklahoma And Forty Others Arrested For Picketing at White House.” The Daily Ardmoreite. 11 November, 1917.

114 “War or No War, We Want Ballot.” Mabel Vernon. The Daily Oklahoman. November 19, 1917.


120 Not only was Jeannette Rankin one of the six members of Congress to vote against宣erring war on the German Empire in 1917, she was the only member of Congress to vote against declaring war against Japan following the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 – thus the only member of congress to vote against U.S. involvement in both World Wars. Though she understood the political ramifications, she stated, “As a woman, I can’t go to war and I refuse to send anyone else.” Rankin, Jeannette https://history.house.gov/People/Listing/R/RANKIN,-Jeannette-(R000055); as in Nancy Unger, “RANKIN, Jeannette Pickering,” American National Biography (ANB) 18 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 142.

121 Murphy, 16.

Murphy, 20.


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139 Skipper, 186.


142 Though Nellie Tayloe Ross won a special election in 1924, the reelection campaign in which Cecilia Hennel Hendricks participated was unsuccessful.