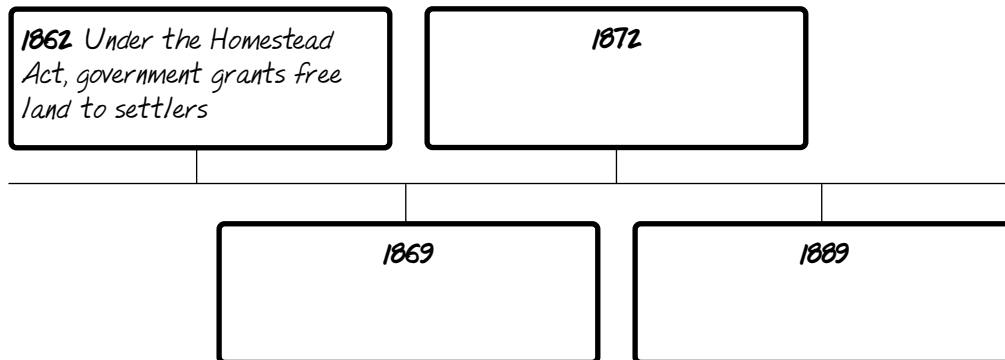


# Settling on the Great Plains

## AS YOU READ

Use this time line to make notes of the important events that shaped the settling of the Great Plains.



## Settlers Move Westward to Farm

*How did the U.S. get people to go west?*

More and more people migrated to the Great Plains with the building of the *transcontinental* railroads. From 1850 to 1871, the federal government gave huge tracts of land to companies ready to lay tracks through the West.

In 1867, the Central Pacific company began laying tracks east from Sacramento, California. Another railroad company, the Union Pacific, began laying tracks west from Omaha, Nebraska. Much of the work was done by Irish and Chinese immigrants. African Americans and Mexican Americans

also did the back-breaking work. In 1869, the two routes met at Promontory, Utah. America's first transcontinental railroad was finished.

The railroad companies sold some of their land at low prices to settlers willing to farm it. Some companies even recruited people from Europe to settle on the land.

In addition, a growing number of people were responding to the **Homestead Act** of 1862. Under this law, the government offered 160 acres of free land to anyone who would farm it for five years. By 1900, the Great Plains was filled with more than 400,000 homesteaders, or settlers on this free land.

Several thousand settlers were **exodusters**—African Americans who moved from the post-Reconstruction South to Kansas.

But the law did not always work as the government had planned. Only about 10 percent of the land was settled by the families for whom it was intended. Cattlemen and miners claimed much of the rest.

The government continued to pass other laws to encourage people to settle the West. In 1889, Oklahoma offered a major land giveaway. This led thousands of settlers to claim 2 million acres in less than 24 hours.

As more and more settlers gobbled up land in the West, the government took action to preserve some wilderness. In 1872, the government set aside land in Wyoming to create Yellowstone National Park. Millions of acres more were set aside later.

**1. How did the government and the railroads encourage settlement of the West?**

Please answer in a paragraph on a separate piece of paper.

## Settlers Meet the Challenges of the Plains

### *What was life like for settlers of the West?*

From 1850 to 1900, the number of people living west of the Mississippi River grew from 1 percent of the nation's population to almost 30 percent. These new settlers had to endure many hardships.

The Great Plains did not have many trees. As a result, people built what became known as **soddys**. These homes were dug into the side of hills or made from sod. A soddy was warm in winter and cool in summer. However, it offered little light or air.

Homesteaders were largely isolated from one another. They had to make nearly everything they needed. Women worked in the fields alongside men. They also took care of the children, ran the house, and did the cooking and laundry.

Farming the Great Plains was difficult work. But several inventions helped make the task easier. The steel plow helped break up the prairie's tough soil. A new reaper cut wheat even faster.

The government also helped in the effort to improve farming techniques. The **Morrill Act** of 1862 and 1890 helped establish agricultural colleges. The government also established experiment stations on the Great Plains. Researchers there developed new types of crops as well as new growing techniques.

To buy much of the new farming machinery, farmers often went into *debt*. When crop prices fell, farmers ended up losing money. As a result, they had trouble repaying their loans. To make more money, they often had to raise more crops. This in turn led to the growth of **bonanza farms**. These were huge single-crop farms.

By 1900, the average farmer had nearly 150 acres under *cultivation*. However, when a drought hit the Plains between 1885 and 1890, many bonanza farms folded. They could not compete with the smaller farmers, who were more flexible in the crops they grew. The high price of shipping their crops also added to farmers' debt.

**2. Name at least one social and economic hardship settlers faced.**

Please answer in a paragraph on a separate piece of paper.



A frontier family stands outside its home on the plains of Nebraska in 1889. Credit: Nebraska State Historical Society, The Solomon D. Butcher Collection

## Skillbuilder

Use the photograph to answer the questions.

**1. What type of home does the family appear to live in?**

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**2. How does this photograph reinforce the geographical description of the Great Plains?**

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