

The Homestead Act of 1862 gave heads of families or individuals aged twenty-one or older the right to own 160 acres of public land in the western United States after five years of residence and improvement.

This law was intended to provide land for small farmers and to prevent land from being bought for resale at a profit or being owned by large landholders.

An early amendment to the act even prevented husbands and wives from filing separate claims.

The West, land reformers had assumed, would soon contain many 160-acre family farms.

They were doomed to disappointment.

Most landless Americans were too poor to become farmers even when they could obtain land without cost.

The expense of moving a family to the ever-receding frontier exceeded the means of many, and the cost of tools, draft animals, a wagon, a well, fencing, and of building the simplest house, might come to \$1,000---a formidable barrier.

As for the industrial workers for whom the free land was supposed to provide a "safety valve," they had neither the skills nor the inclination to become farmers.

Homesteaders usually came from districts not far removed from frontier conditions.

And despite the intent of the law, speculators often managed to obtain large tracts.

They hired people to stake out claims, falsely swear that they had fulfilled the conditions laid down in the law for obtaining legal title, and then deed the land over to their employers.

Furthermore, 160 acres were not enough for raising livestock or for the kind of commercial agriculture that was developing west of the Mississippi.

The national government made a feeble attempt to make larger holdings available to homesteaders by passing the Timber Culture Act of 1873, which permitted individuals to claim an additional 160 acres if they would agree to plant a quarter of it in trees within ten years.

This law proved helpful to some farmers in the largely treeless states of Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas.

Nevertheless, fewer than 25 percent of the 245,000 who took up land under the Act obtained final title to the property.