Westward Choices

Land, transportation, and the limits of opportunity

SS24.US1.14a "Evaluate the contributions of the Homestead Act and the transcontinental railroad to increased migration to and settlement of the West."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline two details showing how the Homestead Act encouraged settlement, and circle two details showing how the railroad encouraged migration or settlement. Put a 1 beside a detail that limits the benefits of either one.

What Drew Settlers West?

1. In 1862, Congress passed the Homestead Act to encourage settlement on western land. An eligible applicant could claim 160 acres and gain ownership after living on and improving the land for five years. For families who wanted farms but could not afford to buy large tracts, that offer was a powerful reason to move. Yet a claim was not a ready-made farm. Settlers needed money for tools, seed, and shelter, and some faced drought or poor soil. The federal government also made land available to settlers by taking control of land long used and occupied by Indigenous peoples.

2. The first transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869, joining eastern rail lines to a route across the West. Compared with wagon travel, trains carried people and supplies across long distances much faster. Rail companies also sold land along their routes, giving some migrants another way to acquire property. Once settlers arrived, rail connections helped them ship crops or livestock to distant buyers and receive goods they could not make locally. Building those routes depended on difficult, dangerous labor, including work by many Chinese immigrants. A rail line could open possibilities, but its fares and shipping charges still cost money.

3. The land law and the railroad worked in different ways. The Homestead Act offered a reason to settle: the chance to own a farm. The railroad made the journey and the work of farming more practical by moving people, supplies, and products. Together, they could make a claim far from an eastern city seem possible. Their benefits were uneven, however. A family without money for equipment might struggle even after reaching its claim. Indigenous nations lost land as settlement expanded, while railroad companies gained land to sell. Increased migration brought opportunity for some people and serious losses for others.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did the Homestead Act encourage settlement, and what detail shows why a claim might still be difficult to keep?

2. Which two railroad services made western settlement more practical? Explain how each helped settlers.

3. Why might the Homestead Act have attracted a family to the West, while the railroad affected whether that family could succeed there?

4. Evaluate one benefit and one harm of increased western settlement described in the passage. Who experienced each?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Imagine it is 1874. A farming family with little savings is deciding whether to move west. In four or five sentences, judge whether the Homestead Act or the railroad would matter more to its decision. Use details from the passage to explain how both could help and identify one obstacle the family might face.

ANSWER KEY

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GRADE 10 · SS24.US1.14a

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two details showing how the Homestead Act encouraged settlement, and circle two details showing how the railroad encouraged migration or settlement. Put a 1 beside a detail that limits the benefits of either one. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did the Homestead Act encourage settlement, and what detail shows why a claim might still be difficult to keep?	**It offered eligible applicants ownership of 160 acres after five years of residence and improvements, but settlers still needed money for tools, seed, and shelter or faced difficult growing conditions.**
2	Which two railroad services made western settlement more practical? Explain how each helped settlers.	**Trains carried people and supplies west faster than wagons, and rail connections let settlers ship farm products to distant buyers or receive goods.**
3	Why might the Homestead Act have attracted a family to the West, while the railroad affected whether that family could succeed there?	**The chance to own a farm gave the family a reason to move; the railroad could bring needed supplies and carry its crops or livestock to buyers.**
4	Evaluate one benefit and one harm of increased western settlement described in the passage. Who experienced each?	**Some settlers gained the chance to own farmland, while Indigenous nations lost land as settlement expanded.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

The Homestead Act would matter more to this family because it offers a chance to own 160 acres without buying a large tract. The railroad could help them travel west faster than a wagon and later ship crops to buyers. Both would make starting a farm seem possible. Still, the family might struggle to pay for seed, tools, and shelter, so the land offer alone would not ensure success.

Accept either policy as more important in Part 3 if the student supports the judgment with passage details, explains how both could help, and names a relevant obstacle. For the marking job, accept any accurate details that match the three categories.