A Claim to Land

How a land law shaped opportunity after the Civil War

8.C.13.5.A "Describe how the Homestead Act of 1862 enabled more individuals to obtain land and partake in economic opportunities following the war."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline the steps from claiming land to owning it, circle two ways a farm could support a living, and number two details showing barriers or losses.

The Promise and Cost of a Homestead

1 In 1866, a family looking west could find an unusual offer: a claim to federal public land without paying the full purchase price of a farm. The Homestead Act, passed in 1862, allowed an eligible adult citizen, or an immigrant who had declared an intention to become a citizen, to claim up to 160 acres. A person filing a claim had to pay small fees, live on the land, and improve it for five years to gain ownership. The law opened a route to ownership for people who could not afford to buy farmland outright.

2 After the Civil War ended in 1865, veterans, immigrants, and other settlers used this route to seek farms. A homesteader could grow wheat to sell, raise livestock, or grow food for the household, reducing what the family had to buy. Ownership could give a family a lasting asset instead of leaving it dependent only on wages or a landlord. Nearby merchants and railroad businesses also gained customers and goods to transport as more farms appeared. Yet a claim was not the same as a profitable farm.

3 Starting a farm required money for tools, seed, shelter, and travel. Dry weather, poor soil, and distance from markets could make earning a living difficult, even for someone who met the law's rules. Black Americans faced discrimination and often lacked the money or access to transportation needed to make a claim. The land was not empty: federal policies forced many Native peoples from their homelands as settlers moved in. The act expanded chances to gain land and earn income for some people, but its benefits came with serious costs and were not shared equally.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did the Homestead Act make land ownership possible for someone who could not afford to buy a farm outright?

2. How could a homestead help a family earn money or spend less after the war? Give two ways.

3. Why might owning a homestead offer a veteran or immigrant a different economic future from relying only on wages?

4. What made the act's opportunities unequal? Explain one barrier to starting a farm and one cost to Native peoples.

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Imagine you are a carpenter earning wages in a city in 1868 and are deciding whether to seek a homestead. Write a five-sentence letter to a relative that weighs a route to ownership, two ways your livelihood might change, one barrier you would face, and an effect on Native peoples.

ANSWER KEY

A Claim to Land

GRADE 8 · 8.C.13.5.A

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline the steps from claiming land to owning it, circle two ways a farm could support a living, and number two details showing barriers or losses. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did the Homestead Act make land ownership possible for someone who could not afford to buy a farm outright?	**An eligible person could claim up to 160 acres without paying the full purchase price. Paying small fees, living on the land, and improving it for five years could lead to ownership.**
2	How could a homestead help a family earn money or spend less after the war? Give two ways.	**A family could sell crops or livestock for income and grow food that it would otherwise need to buy.**
3	Why might owning a homestead offer a veteran or immigrant a different economic future from relying only on wages?	**Ownership could give the person a lasting asset and a way to produce food or goods to sell, rather than depending only on wages.**
4	What made the act's opportunities unequal? Explain one barrier to starting a farm and one cost to Native peoples.	**A settler needed money for supplies or travel, and some faced discrimination or difficult farming conditions. Federal policies forced many Native peoples from their homelands as settlers moved in.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Dear Aunt, I would leave my city carpentry wages to seek a homestead in 1868. I could claim up to 160 acres and, after paying fees and living on and improving the land for five years, gain ownership. I would grow food to spend less at stores and sell wheat for income. Still, buying seed and tools before a harvest could drain my savings. I worry that federal policies forcing Native peoples from their homelands make my opportunity come at their expense.

Accept other passage-supported ways a farm could provide income or reduce expenses. The letter should connect the law to the carpenter's decision without treating the land as empty or the opportunity as equally available to everyone.