

Today in History - May 20

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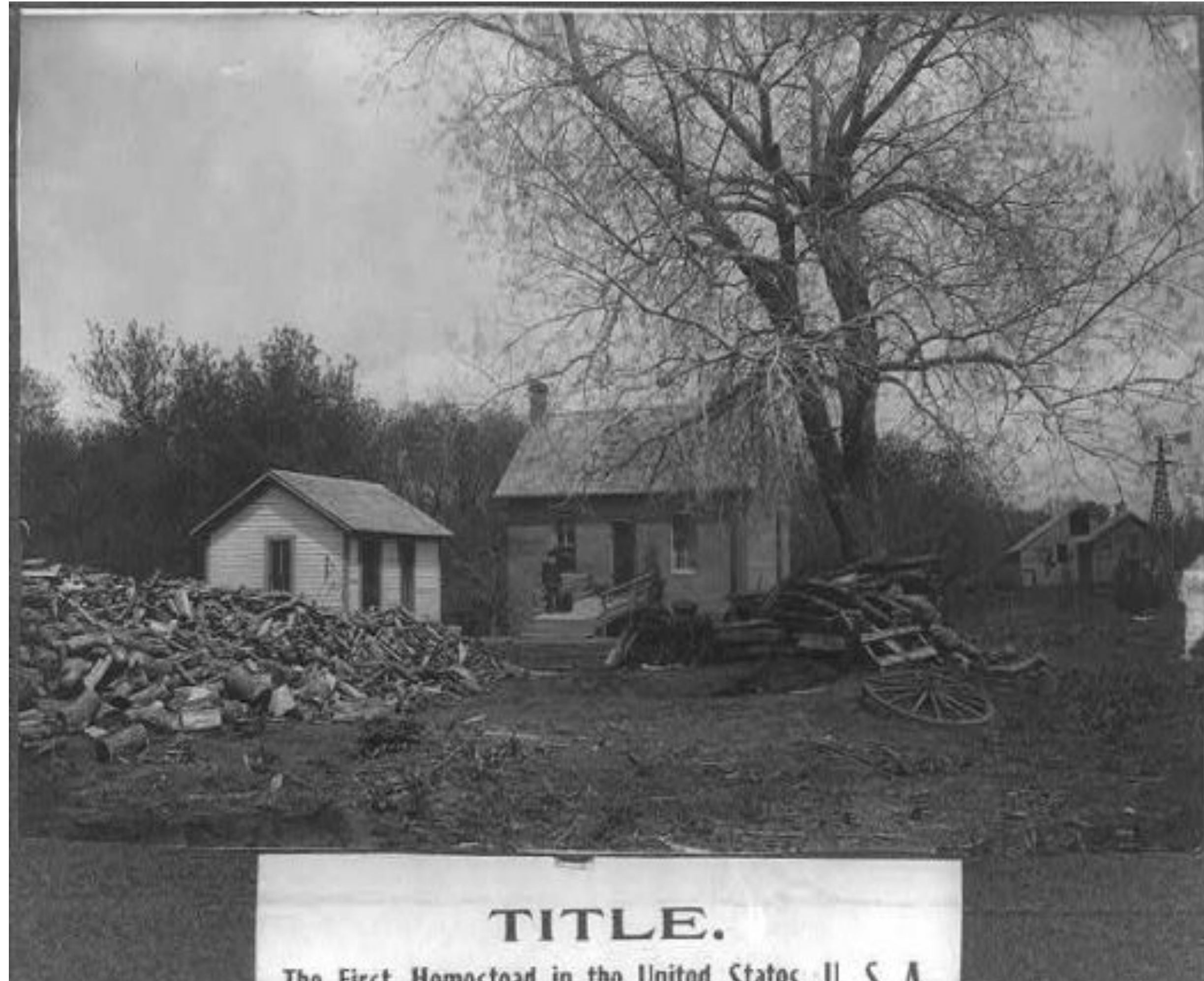
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Today's Stories: [The Homestead Act](#)

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The Homestead Act

President [Abraham Lincoln](#) signed the [Homestead Act](#) on **May 20**, 1862. The act provided settlers with 160 acres of surveyed public land after payment of a filing fee and five years of continuous residence. Designed to spur Western migration, the [Homestead Act](#) culminated a twenty-year battle to distribute public lands to citizens willing to farm. Concerned that free land would lower property values and reduce the cheap labor supply, Northern businessmen opposed the act. Unlikely allies, Southerners feared homesteaders would add their voices to the call for abolition of slavery. With Southerners out of the picture in 1862, the legislation finally passed.



[The first homestead in the United States, U.S.A.](#) 1904. Prints & Photographs Division

By 1900, homesteaders had filed 600,000 claims for 80 million acres. Most pioneers settled in the Western Plains states. Experienced farm workers from other states or Europe, they abandoned family and community ties for the isolation of pioneer life gambling that conditions would favor prosperity. Louise Lane Trace was sixteen when her family arrived in Nebraska. After navigating a series of disasters, they reached their homestead in the spring of 1866. Over seventy years later, WPA interviewer George Wartman recorded [Mrs. Trace's memories](#) of that difficult time:

Mr. Lane had arrived at his homestead with 30 head of cattle and several horses. He put out sod corn which gave all indication of being a wonderful crop, but the grasshoppers took the entire crop. There was an abundance of wild grass, but no way to harvest it. After winter set in with no feed for the stock they commenced to suffer. The horses became so weak from starvation [that?] they were not fit for traveling so Mr. Lane would walk 15 miles to what they called the "Dutch Settlement" and now known as Swanton, pay \$2.00 per bushel for corn and carry a sack full on his shoulder making a thirty mile-round-trip for one sack of corn.

[Mrs. Wm. Trace](#). George Hartman, interviewer; Lincoln, Nebraska, November 29, 1938. [American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1940](#). Manuscript Division

Charity Couch and her husband filed their homestead claim near the South Platte River in western Nebraska nearly twenty years later. Yet, the prairie remained an isolated place. Her [WPA interviewer noted](#):

Mrs. Couch says she scarcely dared step outside the yard because there were so many long horned cattle and there were no neighbors between their place and Ogallala except the old Searle Ranch. There was no school for a year or so as their were no children in the district, and no social gatherings at that time such as church, Sunday school, literary, or dances, as people lived too far apart. There were a few buffalo, deer, antelope and gray wolves, and also large numbers of wild fowl such as prairie chickens, grouse, geese, and ducks.

[Charity B. Couch](#). Bessie Jollensten, interviewer; Ogallala, Nebraska, November 16, 1938. [American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1940](#). Manuscript Division



[Rural life in Neb.](#) Solomon D. Butcher, photographer, 1886. Prints & Photographs Division

Prosperous ranchers, the Couch family added to their original homestead, eventually accumulating 1,800 acres. Like farming, successful ranching required hard work and more than a little luck. Nevertheless with ready access to railroads and a rising demand for beef, ranches proliferated across the Plains states. Between 1860 and 1880, [cattle](#) in Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, and Dakota increased from 130,000 to 4.5 million head.



[Daniel Freeman Standing, Holding Gun, with Hatchet Tucked in Belt.](#) 1904. Prints & Photographs Division

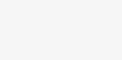
Learn More

- See the entry for the [Homestead Act](#) in the Library's [Primary Documents in American History](#) Web guide series.
- Locate additional recollections of life on the homestead by searching [American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1940](#) and [Pioneering the Upper Midwest: Books from Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, ca. 1820 to 1910](#) on the terms *pioneer* or *settler*.
- Learn about ranching life yesterday and today. [Buckaroos in Paradise](#) documents a Nevada cattle-ranching community, with a focus on the family-run Ninety-Six Ranch.
- Search the collection [Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives](#) on the keyword *grasshopper* to find pictures of the crop damage done by this pest.
- Locate additional images by searching on the term *homesteading* in the Library's digital collections of [prints and photographs](#).
- Search the collection [A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation](#) in the 37th Congress using the word *homestead* to find Congressional documents related to the Homestead Act.

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