

3.2 The Growing West

Who benefited from the second wave of westward expansion in the United States?

Explore

Homesteaders

How did the U.S. government support the development of farming in the West?

Supported by laws such as The Homestead Act in 1862, huge numbers of farmers moved west after the Civil War. This act provided would-be farmers with 160 acres of land for five years at no cost. After five years, if a person or family lived on the land and made improvements, such as building a house and a fence, then the land was theirs permanently. Because so many farmers moved west to take advantage of this act, they came to be called homesteaders.

The government enacted other laws to support the settlement of the West, including the Morrill Act of 1862. This act granted each state 30,000 acres of federal land for each representative or senator the state had in the U.S. Congress. The states were required to sell the land and use the money to form and maintain colleges that taught mechanical arts and agriculture. Many of the country's major public universities—including the University of California at Berkeley, Texas A&M, Purdue, and Penn State—were founded as land-grant colleges and universities.

In addition, the government devised a plan to open Native American [reservations](#) in the Oklahoma Territory for settlement. The [Dawes Severalty Act of 1887](#) took land that once had belonged to Native American nations and made it available to settlers. On April 22, 1889, thousands of people lined up on the border of the territory. When the starting gun was fired at noon, they rushed to stake a claim. The first land run had begun. In one day, cities such as Oklahoma City, Norman, and Stillwater were founded. According to one report, the city of Guthrie went from nonexistent to a population of 10,000 that afternoon.

Because of the mass movement of farmers and other settlers to the West, the population of the United States west of the Mississippi River soared from almost 7 million in 1870 to almost 17 million in 1890.