

# The Influence of Free and Cheap Land on Migration

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From the beginning of European settlement in North America, free and inexpensive land has been a tool for enticing settlers to migrate to new areas. The English and Spanish granted large tracts to individuals in return for bringing new people into areas with sparse European populations. Bounty land was granted to soldiers in America's early wars. The end of the American Revolution led to a number of Federal plans to sell or grant vast acreages of public domain land. Homesteading opportunities attracted Americans and immigrants to the west after the Civil War. The availability of affordable land was a catalyst for the migration of many of our ancestors.

## English Land Grants

### ***Joint Stock Companies***

The cost of planting permanent settlements in the New World was large and the risk of failure was large, as well. Neither the English Crown nor individual investors were willing to take the risks on themselves, so joint stock companies were chartered by the monarch and given grants of North American land to populate with settlements. Stock was sold to individual investors, which raised the necessary capital and spread the risk around. Each company was given specific areas to settle. Following the establishment of colonies, the royal governor was often delegated the right to grant land.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Headrights***

Headrights were "per head" grants of land to settlers and those who paid the transportation expenses for settlers. For example, the Virginia Company established grants of 50 acres for each immigrant brought into the colony. Headrights could be sold, and several years may have elapsed between arrival in the colony and claiming the land.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Grants for Settlement***

In order to populate the frontier, the English and Colonial authorities made large land grants to individuals provided they bring families to settle on the land. For example, Virginia made a grant of 10,000 acres in the Shenandoah Valley to Jacob Stover, a Swiss immigrant, on 17 June 1730. Stover was given two years to bring in German and Swiss families to settle there.<sup>3</sup> The grant was conditioned on

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<sup>1</sup> W. Stitt Robinson, Jr, *Mother Earth: Land Grants in Virginia, 1607–1699* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1996 [reprint; original published in 1957]); *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/library/books/records/item/635381-mother-earth-land-grants-in-virginia-1607-1699>).

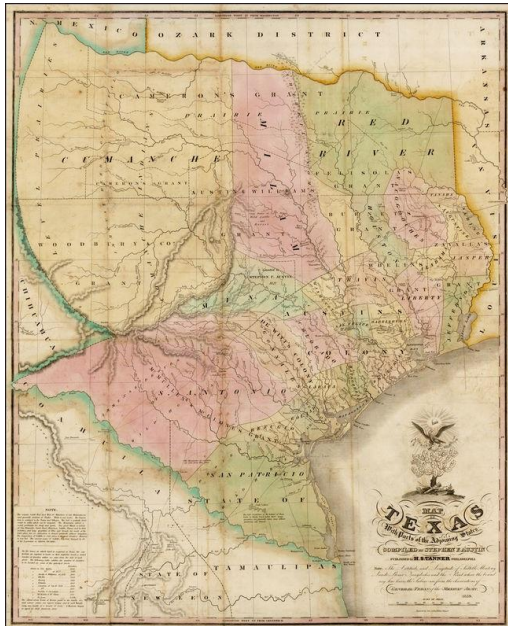
<sup>2</sup> "Virginia Land Patents and Grants," *Library of Virginia* (<https://lva-virginia.libguides.com/land-grants>).

<sup>3</sup> Marilou West Ficklin, "Colonial Virginia Frontier," *Westerly Journeys* (<https://www.westerly-journeys.com/colonial/colovirg.html>).

Stover's bringing one family per thousand acres. Similar grants were made to Jost Hite and to Alexander Ross and his partner Morgan Bryan.<sup>4</sup>

## Spanish and Mexican Land Grants

Spain made extensive land grants in Florida, California, and Texas, and Mexico later made further grants in California and Texas, in order to attract settlers. This is a large and complex topic and there are several items in the resources section that can help you learn more. We'll look briefly here at one example, Texas.<sup>5</sup>



1839 Texas Map <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/land-grants>

The earliest land grant made in Texas was by Spain in 1716 for a mission in eastern Texas. Throughout the 18th century, land was granted, surveyed, and allocated to individual settlers in Texas colonies and towns. In 1820 Spain opened Texas to settlement by foreigners, and in January 1821 Moses Austin was granted land to bring 300 Catholic families from Louisiana for settlement.

In 1825, the Mexican government allowed Americans to settle in Texas, paying a small fee for their land grants.

An *empresario* selected colonists, allocated land, and oversaw the enforcement of Mexican law. In compensation he was entitled to five leagues and five labores [about 23,000 acres] for each 100 families they settled. Between 1821 and 1835, forty-one empresario grants were made, the majority going to emigrants from the United States.

In the 1830s and 1840s the Republic of Texas passed headright laws to attract settlers and granted over 36 million acres in

headrights. In addition, colonization contracts distributed 4.5 million acres. Texas also granted 32 million acres to railroads.

## French and Indian War Bounty Land and the Proclamation Line

Bounty lands were an incentive and a reward for military service. The location of these land was on the frontiers of settlement because governments desired that people move to the frontiers and because governments believed that the frontiers were best settled by men with military experience.<sup>6</sup>

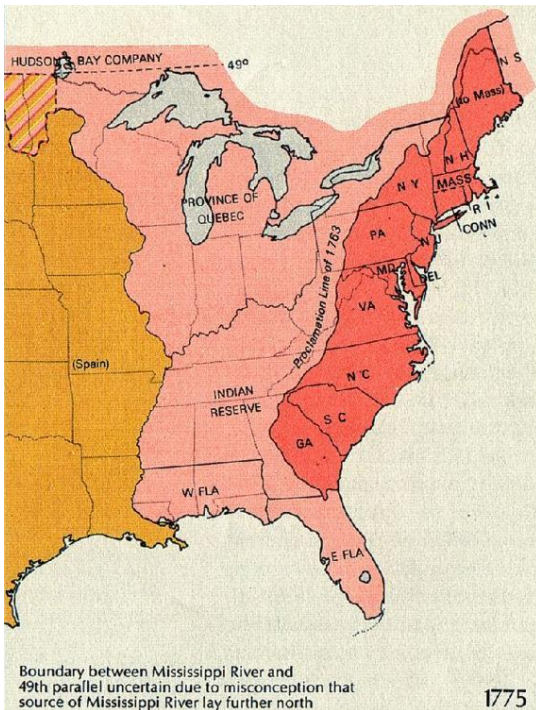
<sup>4</sup> "The Jost Hite Story," *The Brinker Family History* (<https://midsouthrescue.tripod.com/thebrinkerfamilyhistory/id103.html>). Also, Joint Committee of Hopewell Friends, *Hopewell Friends History 1734–1934* ([facsimile reprint] Westminster, Maryland: Heritage Books, 2007 [original published in 1936]).

<sup>5</sup> Aldon S. Lang and Christopher Long, "Land Grants," *Texas State Historical Association* (<https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/land-grants>).

<sup>6</sup> Lloyd deWitt Bockstruck, *Bounty and Donation Land Grants in British Colonial America* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2007).

Bounty land awarded to soldiers of the French and Indian War, including George Washington, but there were problems.

In 1754, Lieutenant Governor Dinwiddie issued a proclamation designed to encourage enlistment in the local militia for the war against the French. In addition to their pay, those who enlisted in Lieutenant Colonel George Washington's fledgling Virginia Regiment were offered a share in two hundred thousand acres west of the Ohio River. Unfortunately for the men who fought under Washington in the Braddock and Forbes expeditions against the enemy at Fort Duquesne, they were not to see these bounty lands until more than twenty years had passed, during which time Washington led the struggle to secure their title.<sup>7</sup>



1 National Atlas of the United States via en.wikipedia, Public Domain,  
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=179283>

After the French and Indian War ended in 1763, King George III issued a proclamation prohibiting settlement west of the Appalachians and reserving that land for Native Americans. The land that had been promised to Washington and his soldiers was beyond the Proclamation Line so they could not legally claim it. The Proclamation Line discouraged, but did not stop, migration beyond the mountains by European Americans.<sup>8</sup>

## U.S. Federal and State Bounty Land

United States bounty land was given for military service from the Revolutionary War through 1855 for three reasons: to encourage enlistment, to encourage remaining in the service, and to reward military service. The wars covered by the period of bounty land distribution are the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, various Indian wars of the period, and the Mexican War. In some cases, bounty land was also awarded by states, in addition to the federal government.

Distribution of federal bounty land was governed by various acts of Congress. States also passed legislation

awarding bounty land for service from that state.

Former soldiers showed they were eligible for bounty land by producing a warrant, a piece of paper issued by the government showing they had earned the land. The greatest number of bounty land warrants went to soldiers of the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812.

<sup>7</sup> "Washington as Land Speculator," *George Washington Papers, Library of Congress* (<https://www.loc.gov/collections/george-washington-papers/articles-and-essays/george-washington-survey-and-mapmaker/washington-as-land-speculator/>).

<sup>8</sup> "Proclamation Line of 1763," *George Washington's Mount Vernon* (<https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/proclamation-line-of-1763>).



Being awarded bounty land did not mean the former soldier actually took up that land. Many veterans had no interest in moving far away from home and family. Depending on what the law allowed at different times, warrants would often be sold, gifted, or bequeathed to others. Much of the bounty land was in states of the Northwest Territory.<sup>9</sup>



## Distribution of U.S. Public Lands

Over the course of time from the Revolution to the mid-19th century, all the land acquisitions shown in the map above expanded available territory in the United States exponentially. The government ended up being land rich and cash poor. Between 1796 and 1862, public lands were sold in fairly large tracts to provide operational funds for the federal government. By 1860, the U.S. government was still in

<sup>9</sup> Christine Rose, *Military Bounty Land 1776–1855* (San Jose, California: self-published, 2011).

possession of 685 million acres of public land. It became clear that settlers were needed to populate the new western frontier.<sup>10</sup>

### The Homestead Act of 1862

The Homestead Act of 1862 allowed grants of public land to individuals who had to meet requirements for living on and improving their 160-acre tracts. Daniel Freeman was the first to claim land under the act. More than 270 million acres were granted during the period of the law.<sup>11</sup>

The act allowed people who had never taken up arms against the United States to apply if they were 21 or over or the head of a household. Women and Freedmen were eligible. Immigrants were eligible if they had filed a declaration of intention to become a citizen. Homesteading was ended by the Federal government in 1976, except for Alaska, where homesteading was allowed till 1986.

While the Homestead Act of 1862 is the best-known of the Federal land acts, it is not the only one. At least fourteen other land acts or orders between 1785 and 1935 affected the availability of public land for settlement.<sup>12</sup>



“Railroad Land Grants,” *Library of Congress*  
<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/timeline/riseind/railroad/grants.html>

### Railroad Grants

The shaded areas on this map show the grants of public land made to railroads in the 19th century. In order to expand the rail transportation network and to encourage settlement, the Federal government granted lands to railroads between 1850 and 1872. Railroads sold farmland and town lots to individuals wishing to settle along their routes. Many railroads set up land offices and advertised extensively for settlers both in the U.S. and overseas.<sup>13</sup>

### Some Online Collections

This is by no means an exhaustive list of collections relating to migrating for land. It is offered as a sampling of what’s available.

<sup>10</sup> Gary M. Anderson and Dolores T. Martin, “The Public Domain and Nineteenth Century Transfer Policy,” *Cato Journal*, vol. 6, no. 3 (Winter 1987); accessed at *Cato.org* (<https://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/serials/files/cato-journal/1987/1/cj6n3-11.pdf>).

<sup>11</sup> “The Homestead Act of 1862,” *Educator Resources, National Archives and Records Administration* (<https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/homestead-act#:~:text=President%20Abraham%20Lincoln%20signed%20the,play%20a%20small%20registration%20fee.>).

<sup>12</sup> Stephen A. Flanders, *Atlas of American Migration* (New York: Facts on File, 1998), 79.

<sup>13</sup> Public Lands Foundation, *America’s Public Lands: Origin, History, Future* ([https://publicland.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/150359\\_Public\\_Lands\\_Document\\_web.pdf](https://publicland.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/150359_Public_Lands_Document_web.pdf)).

*Bureau of Land Management.* General Land Office, Patent search.

<https://glorerecords.blm.gov/search/default.aspx?searchTabIndex=0&searchByTypeIndex=0>

### **Federal Bounty Land**

*Ancestry.* “U.S. War Bounty Land Warrants, 1789–1858.”

<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/bountylandwarrants/>

*FamilySearch.* “United States Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty Land Warrant Applications, 1800–1900.” <https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1417475>

*FamilySearch.* “War of 1812, Military Bounty Land Warrants, 1815–1858.”

<https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/290307>

*Fold3.* “Bounty-Land Warrant Applications Index.”

[https://www.fold3.com/title/918/bountyland\\_warrant\\_applications\\_index](https://www.fold3.com/title/918/bountyland_warrant_applications_index). This index of approved and disapproved bounty-land applications for soldiers who served after the Revolutionary War (1790–1855) is free to use without a Fold3 subscription. Copies of applications can be ordered from the National Archives online at <https://eservices.archives.gov/orderonline/start.swe>

*Fold3.* “Revolutionary War Pensions and Bounty-Land-Warrant Applications.”

<https://www.fold3.com/page/881-revolutionary-war-pensions-and-bounty-land-warrants>

*Fold3.* “War of 1812 Pension and Bounty Land Warrant Application Files.”

<https://go.fold3.com/1812pensions>

### **Homesteading**

*Ancestry.* “U.S., Homestead Records, 1863–1908.” <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/60593/>

### **Some State Records**

*Ancestry.* “North Carolina and Tennessee, Early Land Records, 1753–1931.”

<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2882/>

*Ancestry.* “North Carolina and Tennessee, Revolutionary War Land Warrants, 1783–1843.”

<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2885/>

*Library of Virginia.* “Virginia Land Office Patents and Grants/Northern Neck Grant and Surveys.”

<https://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/guides/opac/lonnabout.htm>

*Texas General Land Office.* “Archives Surname Index.”

<https://www.glo.texas.gov/history/archives/surname-index/>

## **Resources**

“About the Revolutionary War Bounty Warrants.” *Library of Virginia.*

<https://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/guides/opac/bountyabout.htm>

“America’s Great Migrations Project.” *University of Washington*.

<https://depts.washington.edu/moving1/>

“An Act granting Bounty Land to certain Officers and Soldiers who have been engaged in the Military Service of the United States.” Thirty-First Congress, Sess. I, Ch. 85, 1850. *Library of Congress*.

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---- *Revolutionary War Bounty Land Grants Awarded by State Governments*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2006.

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[https://publications.newberry.org/makebigplans/plan\\_images/gardiner-map-bounty-lands-illinois-1818](https://publications.newberry.org/makebigplans/plan_images/gardiner-map-bounty-lands-illinois-1818)



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National Archives and Records Administration. "Bounty-Land Warrants for Military Service, 1775–1855." <https://www.archives.gov/files/research/military/bounty-land-1775-1855.pdf>

---- *Index to War of 1812 Pension Application Files*. Descriptive Pamphlet M313. <https://www.fold3.com/pdf/M313.pdf>

---- *Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty-Land Warrant Application Files*. Descriptive Pamphlet M804. <https://www.archives.gov/files/research/microfilm/m804.pdf>

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