

THE CHANGING PUBLIC LAND LAWS 1785-1916

A variety of motives were at work in the evolution of a national land policy. But the trend is very clear: easier and easier access. The price and purchase conditions imposed on public land settlers gradually became a minor barrier to land acquisition.

Year	Price (per acre)	Size (acres)	Conditions
1785	\$1 minimum	640 or more	Cash sale; amended in 1787 to provide for payment of one third in cash, the remainder in three months
1796	\$2 minimum	640 or more	One half of purchase price paid within 30 days, the remainder within one year
1800	\$2 minimum	320 or more	One fourth of purchase price paid within 30 days, then annual installments of one fourth for three years, at 6 percent interest
1804	\$2 minimum (\$1.64 for cash)	160 or more	Credit as in act of 1800; discount to \$1.64 per acre for cash payment
1820	\$1.25 minimum	80 or more	End of credit system; cash payment only
1830	\$1.25 minimum	160 maximum	Squatters on public domain land allowed to purchase their tracts at the minimum price (preemption) temporary act, had to be renewed biennially
1832	\$1.25 minimum	40 or more; 160 limit on preemption	Cash purchase only; right of preemption reaffirmed
1841	\$1.25 minimum	40 or more; 160 limit on preemption	Cash purchase only; established right of preemption, doing away with necessity of renewing legislation
1854 (Graduation Act)	12.5 cents minimum	40 or more	Reduction of the sale price of land in proportion to the length of time it had been on the market; price ranged from \$1 for land unsold for ten years to 12.5 cents for land unsold for thirty years

Source: Lance Davis, Richard Easterlin, William Parker (eds.), *American Economic Growth* (Harper & Row, 1972), pp. 104-5.

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Year	Price (per acre)	Size (acres)	Conditions
1862 (Homestead Act)	Free	160 or less	Payment of an entry fee and five years continuous residence; land could be preempted after six months' residence for \$1.25 per acre cash
1873 (Timber Culture Act)	Free	160	Cultivation of trees on one quarter of a 160-acre plot gave the settler title to the whole 160 acres; amended in 1878 to require the cultivation of trees on only one sixteenth of the plot
1878 (Timber and Stone Act)	\$2.50	160 or less	Sale of lands chiefly valuable for timber or stone resources to bona fide settlers and mining interests
1877 (Desert Land Act)	\$1.25	640; reduced to 320 maximum in 1890	Sale of a section of land to a settler on condition that it be irrigated within three years; amended in 1891 to increase the amount of improvements required, with one eighth of the land to be under cultivation; payment to be 25 cents at time of entry, \$1 at the time of making proof of compliance with the law
1909 (Enlarged Homestead Act)	Free	320 acres	Five years' residence with continuous cultivation; designed for semiarid lands that were nonirrigable and had no minerals or merchantable timber
1916 (Stock-Raising Homestead Act)	Free	640 acres	Designed for land useful only for grazing; conditions similar to previous Homestead laws

Sources: Benjamin H. Hibbard, *A History of the Public Land Policies* (University of Wisconsin, 1965) *passim*; and Roy M. Robbins, *Our Landed Heritage: The Public Domain, 1776-1936* (University of Nebraska, 1962), *passim*.