

There's a hill behind the barn where the crocuses grow. Where we can see a wide chunk of prairie. There are bluffs during the day and farm lights scattered at night. There's about one farm per two square miles, fewer now than we'd have seen as kids in the 1960s. It's still possible, though, from this vantage point, to see how the settlement of the prairie was designed 150 years ago. Originally, the plan was to have as many as 4 farms per square mile. Each to be 160 acres in size, with lots of kids, horses, barns and chickens. You might also be asking, how did this particular design come to be? Well, we'll need to look south for that.

In the early 1800s, the American south was dominated by rich plantation owners and slaves. The north was industrial, with poor workers and farmers. The workers and farmers began agitating for better opportunities. One idea that caught on was "Free Soil". The workers knew there was land west of the Mississippi. They lobbied the government to survey right to the Rockies and give a small square chunk to every family who promised to clear, cultivate and build on the land.

Plantation owners were against giving out free-hold land. They feared small farm states would tip the scales away from slave ownership. So it took a while, but eventually Abraham Lincoln and the Republicans passed the 1862 Homestead Act, imposing a one-mile square grid onto the land. Those squares were further divided into four 160 acre pieces. The Free-Soil movement had calculated that a quarter section should be large enough for a hard-working family.

There were downsides of course. The Homestead Act flagrantly violated treaties signed with First Nations across the West, inspiring waves of resistance and outright war as Indigenous Peoples sought to protect what they still had of their lives and land.

Back in Canada, the government, headed by John A. McDonald, saw settlers flooding into the American west. They worried Canada could lose its hold of what they considered to be *their* west. So, in 1872, Canada passed the Dominion Lands Act, which similarly offered quarter sections to stalwart, eastern Canadians and select European immigrants. First Nations and the Metis Nation were pushed aside as Canada's western conquest kicked into high gear with farm recruits, railroads, reserves and the North-West Mounted Police.

Look with me across the prairie. I notice that rarely were homesteads built along grid roads or at the

corners of quarter sections. Thinking socially, the clustering of farmsteads would have benefited the mental health of families. But apparently, it was more efficient for horses to be pastured and housed near to the centre of the farm, as horses were the energy source for most farm work.

There was great urgency to settle the land, 160 acres at a time. The urgency created winners and losers, as decisions were imposed. Still today, we live with the consequences of those decisions. Fortunately we have a few generations of hindsight to help us see the past, and to help us ponder a fairer, more thoughtful future.

160 Acres at a Time is based on a story in *Vantage Points 1*. Learn about Turtle Mountain Souris Plains Heritage Association at vantagepoints.ca. Other stories in this series can be found there.

See ya later.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Homestead-Act>
<https://web.archive.org/web/20021107160515/http://www.fff.org/freedom/0501e.asp>
<https://www.canadashistory.ca/explore/settlement-immigration/selling-the-prairie-good-life>
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1909 Canada West Magazine cover, Glenbow Archives



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