

Federal Government Land Policy 1850-1900

Type of Legislation	Date	Notes
Railroad land grants	1850-1871	Over 180 million acres are granted to railroads, encouraging construction and development, particularly in western states
Homestead Act	1862	Over 80 million acres go to settlers agreeing to improve 160 acre parcels for at least five years. By 1890, 375,000 farms were claimed. In fact, most of California, Texas, and the Southwest were closed to homesteading and much of the prime land had already been granted to the railroads.
Morrill Land Grant Act	1862	17 million acres of federal land are deeded to the states which are to sell the land and use the proceeds to endow at least one college that would offer courses in agriculture, engineering, and home economics. Over 70 land grant colleges are established, mostly in the middle and far west.
Dawes Act	1887	Some reservation land is granted to individual Indians who renounce tribal loyalty. Remaining reservation lands are sold to white settlers. By 1906, 75 million acres that had once been reservation land had been purchased by whites. Total land held by Indians declined by 50%.
Federal land sales	1850-1900	Direct sales of 100 million acres of the West by the Land Office. Cattle companies needing huge tracts of land and land speculators benefited most directly from these sales.

Result of land policies: more acres are occupied and farmed between 1870 and 1900 than in the previous 250 years of American history. In one night in 1889 in Oklahoma, two million acres of former reservation land was claimed by land-hungry farmers, known as “Boomers.”

*Based on *The American Journey: A History of the United States* by Goldfield, et al.