

WASHINGTON WOMEN HOMESTEADERS

Finding the Underrepresented History of Land Claimants in Early Washington

ABSTRACT

Under the 1862 Homestead Act, single, divorced, deserted, and widowed American women were eligible to claim up to 160 acres of unappropriated public land for the purpose of settlement and cultivation. No comprehensive study of women homesteaders has been completed but regional studies indicate that women comprised between 1–22% of homesteaders in parts of the American West. Homesteader demographics varied across the West due to differences in local environments, culture, and settlement politics. The Washington Women Homesteaders project seeks to record the story of female homesteaders in order to build a historic context of homesteading which includes underrepresented persons and to preserve the sites of their homestead experiences. This poster presents the preliminary findings from 2018 historical research, including a summary of Thurston County homesteaders.

GOALS

Who were Washington's homesteaders and what are their stories? The Washington Women Homesteaders project aims to 1) develop a historic context for Washington homestead history that includes female homesteaders, and 2) establish whether archaeological/historic sites associated with this history may still exist.

METHODS

This project will include a thorough review of Washington homestead files and census data to identify women homesteaders; compilation of homesteader statistics in all regions of Washington; development of a historic context for Washington women homesteaders; mapping and spatial analysis of these underrepresented homestead properties; and identification of archaeological sites via LiDAR and satellite imagery. Statistics were compiled for Thurston County women homesteaders in 2018.

WOMEN & THE HOMESTEAD ACT

Washington settlers began claiming public lands under the 1850 Oregon Donation Land Act, which limited claims to white men. The Homestead Act enabled any head of household to claim land, including a *feme sole* ("a woman alone"). Under coverture laws a married woman, *feme covert* ("a woman covered"), ceased to be a legal entity. Amendments to the Homestead Act between the 1860s and 1910s limited or protected women's rights to their claim based on changes to their marital status.

THURSTON COUNTY WOMEN HOMESTEADERS

On October 2, 1893 twenty-four-year-old teacher Edith Corbett filed homestead claim #1473 with the Olympia General Land Office. Over the next five years she continued to work as a teacher in Yelm while she proved up on her 160-acre homestead on Smith Prairie. On April 23, 1898 she was granted her patent. Edith was one of 24 women to patent a homestead in Thurston County between 1878 and 1909. Only 4% of all Homestead Act patents were granted to women here, which is markedly less than historian's estimates of women homesteaders.

U.S. Homestead Patents

Homestead patents peaked nationally in 1913.

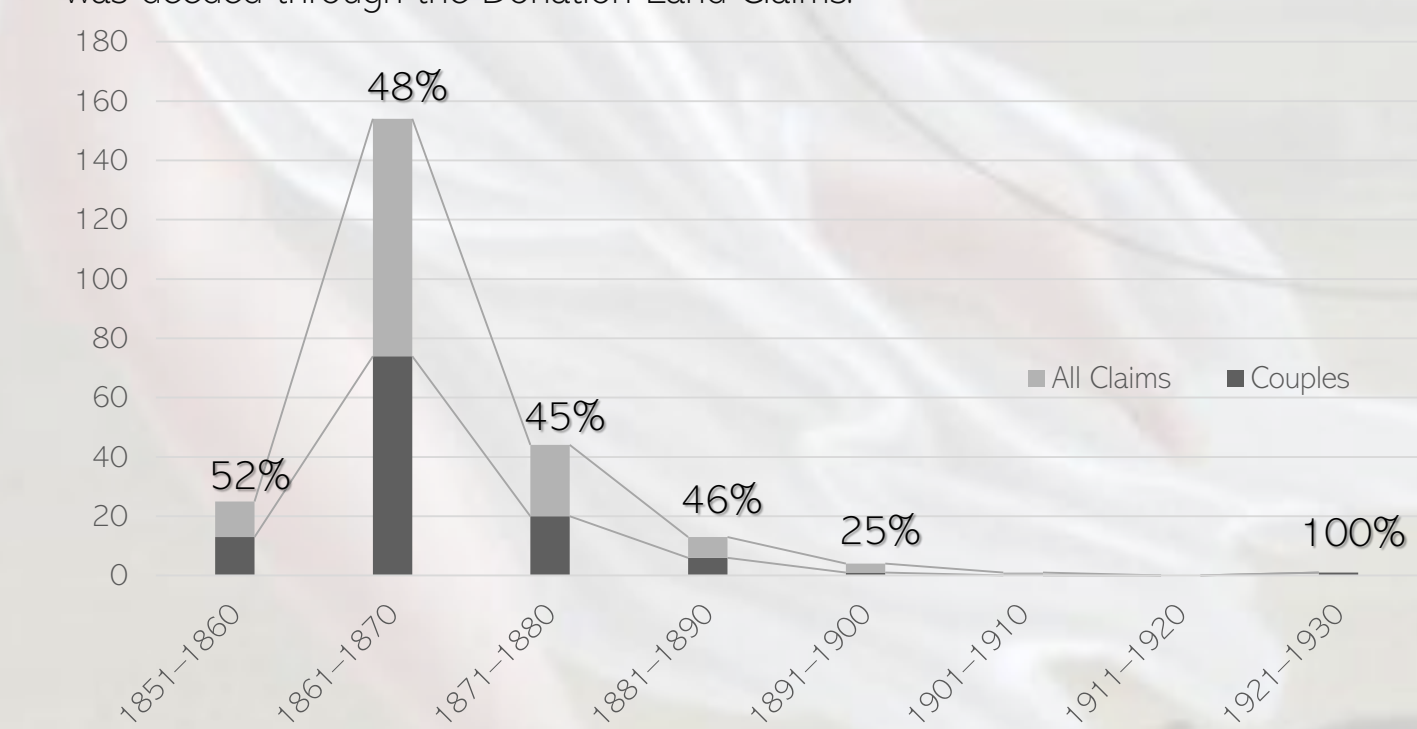


WESTERN WOMEN HOMESTEADERS

Historians have estimated that one in five homestead claimants were female, and that most women's claims were made after 1900 when homesteading was at its peak. Some studies confirm these observations, but many also indicate that women were a smaller proportion of the homestead population in some areas or times. Most empirical studies find that men's and women's patent success rates were about 40%, although there were cases of discrimination by land agents.

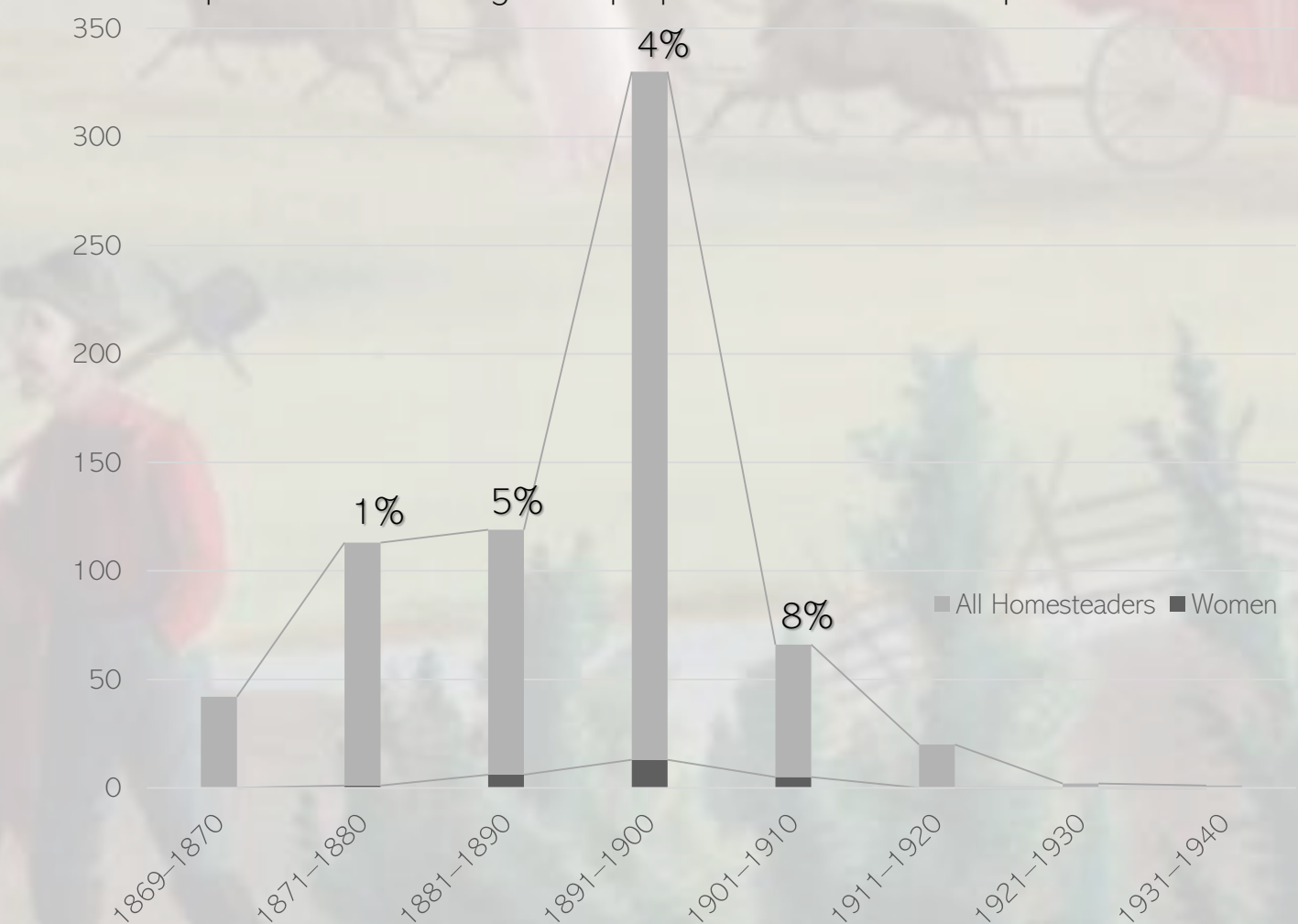
Thurston County Donation Land Claim Patents

About half of Donation Land Claim patents were claimed by couples, who were eligible for 640 acre claims. Single men could claim 320 acres. 25% of Thurston County land was deeded through the Donation Land Claims.



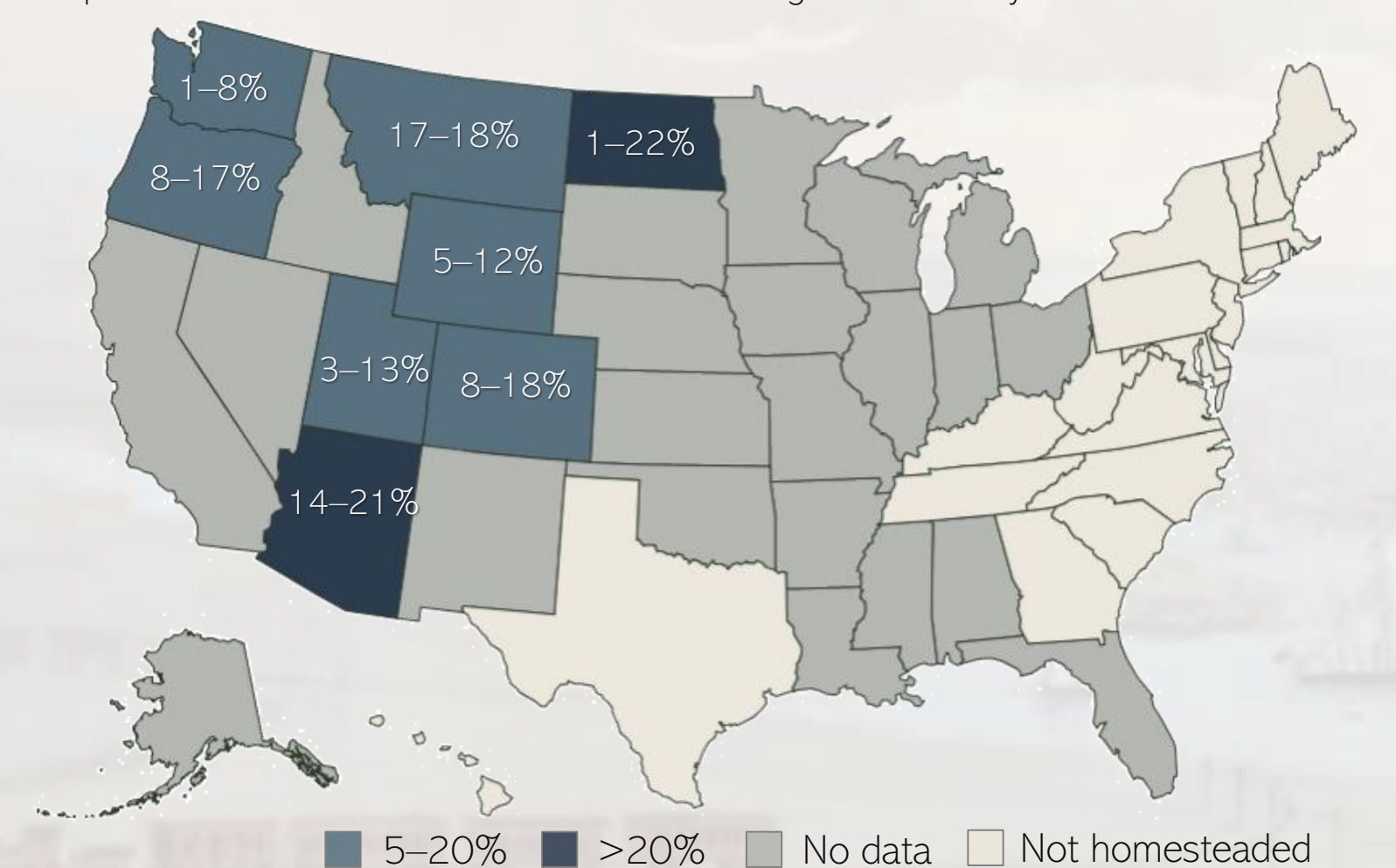
Thurston County Homestead Patents

Homestead patents peaked in 1898. Women's patents also peaked in 1898, but women's patents reached a greater proportion of homestead patents in the 1900s.



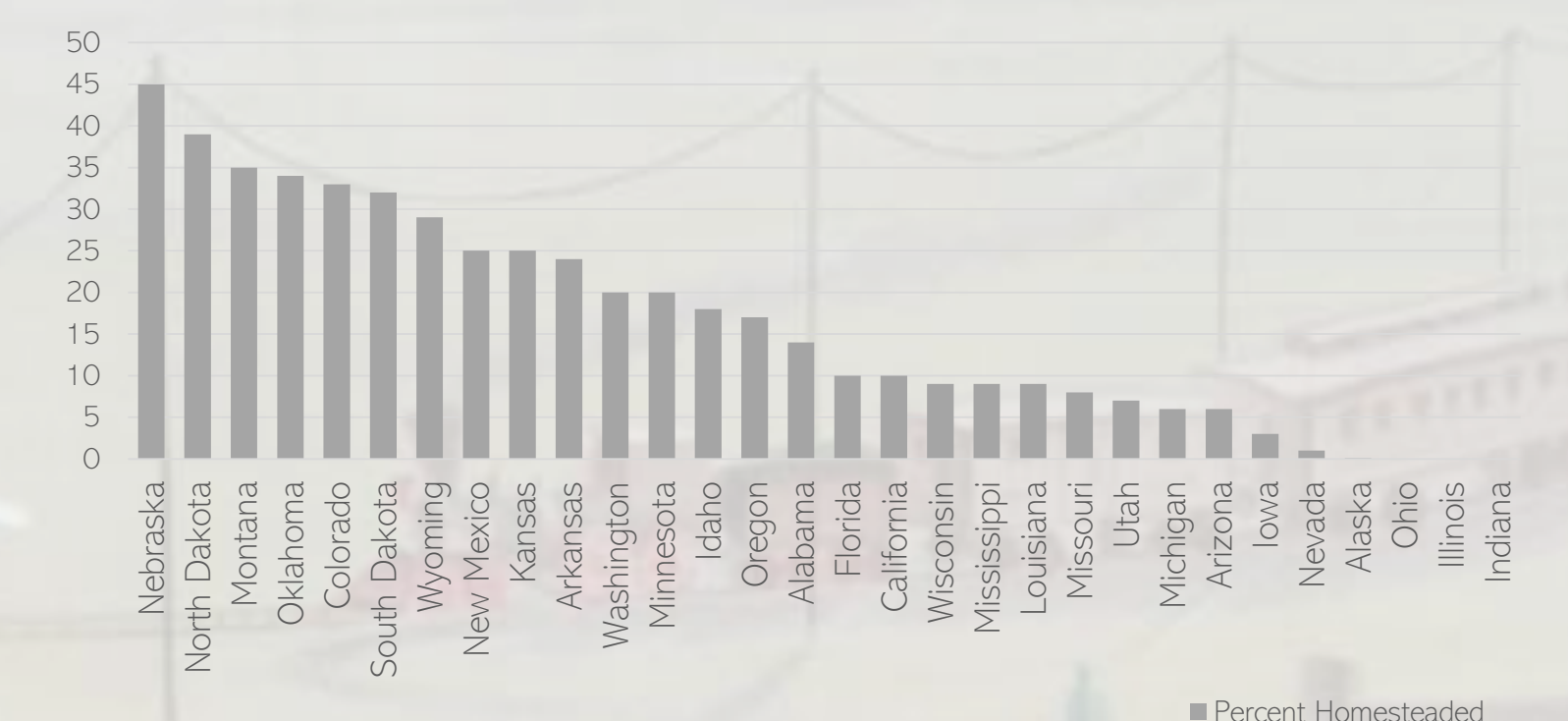
Women Homesteaders by State

Up to 22% of homesteaders were women, although this varies by location and decade.



Percent of State Homesteaded

20% of Washington lands were claimed through homesteading.



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