

Washington Women's Homesteading, 1862–1949: Developing a Historic Context of Women's Homesteading Experiences

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ABSTRACT

The Homestead Act of 1862 enabled *feme soles* — women who were legally single, widowed, divorced, or deserted— to claim up to 160 acres of land. In Washington State 8.5 million acres (20%) of lands were claimed through the Homestead Act; and although *feme soles* were a minority of these homesteaders, their homesteading experiences illustrate important themes of American settlement and industry. As a place-based heritage, women's homesteading history presents a rare prospect to study and preserve sites of women's history, including the history of women's rights, the history of suffrage, and queer history. One of the objectives of the Washington Women's Homesteading History project is to explore the spatial and temporal patterns of homesteading across Washington State, to understand women's motivations for homesteading and immigration. This poster presents summary data of women's homesteading history in Washington's Channeled Scablands, Okanogan Highlands, Northern Puget Sound, Southern Puget Sound, Southwest Washington, and Washington Coast regions, and explores context themes for future study.

The Washington Women Homesteaders Project

The history of homesteading in Washington (1862–1949) has considerable temporal and thematic overlap with the history of the first wave of feminism in the United States (1848–1920). Although early American settlement is regarded as a significant historical theme in Washington State history, Washington's cultural resource management historic contexts rarely feature women (Mathews and Lynch 2023). The Washington Women Homesteaders project aims to develop a historic context for Washington settlement history that centers women's history, but the limitation of researching women's history under the Homestead Act regrettably still results in the exclusion of women with legal statuses that prevented them from claiming Homestead Act lands during portions of this history, including Indigenous women, Black women, Asian women, and women who were not legally independent of men under coverture law.

Research Questions & Methods

To date this research has focused on establishing summary statistics on women's homesteading history within regions of Washington such as spatial and temporal trends, primarily working to study simple assumptions and stereotypes about women as homesteaders in the West (Mathews 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023). Statistics for this research were collected by browsing Homestead Act (12 Stat. 392) records in the gloreCORDS.blm.gov land patents database (Bureau of Land Management 2023). Records were browsed by county and tallied by gender by year. For this study, homesteaders are classified as woman homesteaders if they were apparently legally *feme sole* not listed with a male patentee or if they were identified by their family surname and their husband was later included on the patent. In many cases additional research into a homesteaders' gender was done through primary sources such as census or marriage records. This work began in 2018 and statistics have been summarized for 28 counties.

Additional summary data is in progress for the 11 remaining counties in Washington. As the research progresses, it has been possible to identify historical themes informed by empirical data on women's roles in the settlement of Washington.

Women Homesteader Popular History

Anecdotal histories and intuitive statistics inform popular history on this topic. Many of these stories are based on outdated dominant narratives, generalizations of women's history across the United States, and stereotypes about women. This study uses these stories as hypotheses for illuminating the true stories of women's homesteading in Washington via empirical study. Common assertions about women homesteaders in the United States include:

1. Women homesteaders were young, single women, who sought economic prosperity.
2. Women had to work alone to patent their claims, limiting their success or deterring women's claims.
3. Women were a minority of the population and therefore a minority of homesteaders.
4. Women were a substantial proportion of homesteaders after 1900 but were rare before 1900.
5. Women homesteaded after 1910, when personal accounts of women homesteaders were frequently published.
6. Women homesteaded after the requirements eased with amendments to the Homestead Act (1873, 1909, 1912, 1916).
7. Women homesteaded after railroads provided access to an area, and/or after railroads advertised settlement in an area.
8. Women homesteaders claimed lands next to their families to expand family holdings.

Washington Women Homesteader Spatial Summaries

Although women's homesteading has been studied in other parts of the United States, no data on women's homesteading in Washington could be found prior to this study. Studies in other states indicate that women's homesteading histories are uniquely local and vary over time, but in general women patented from 1% to 22% of homesteads in parts of the American West. Only 28 county studies have been completed for Washington, but the data indicates that women comprised 1.7% to 10.9% of homesteaders in parts of Washington over the duration of the Homestead Act (Figure 1, Table 1). Two pilot studies using eastern Washington data suggest that as much as 74% of the time women were homesteading with other family members homesteading nearby. No data has been collected yet on how common it was for male homesteaders to homestead with family nearby.

Washington Women Homesteader Temporal Trends

In Washington, the increase in homestead patents in the late 1880s corresponds with a population boom that was encouraged by the completion of the Northern Pacific Railroad line in 1883, promoting trade and travel between eastern and western Washington (Figures 2-3). Homesteads were generally patented

earlier in western Washington than they were in eastern Washington (Figure 4). Women's homesteading trends are similar to the overall pattern of homesteading, with one peak occurring in the 1890s, and another larger peak spanning the 1900s to 1910s (Figures 5-7). The second peak is dominated by women who were homesteading in the Channeled Scablands and Okanogan Highlands (Figure 8). The highest proportion of women homesteaders occurs in the 1910s to 1920s.

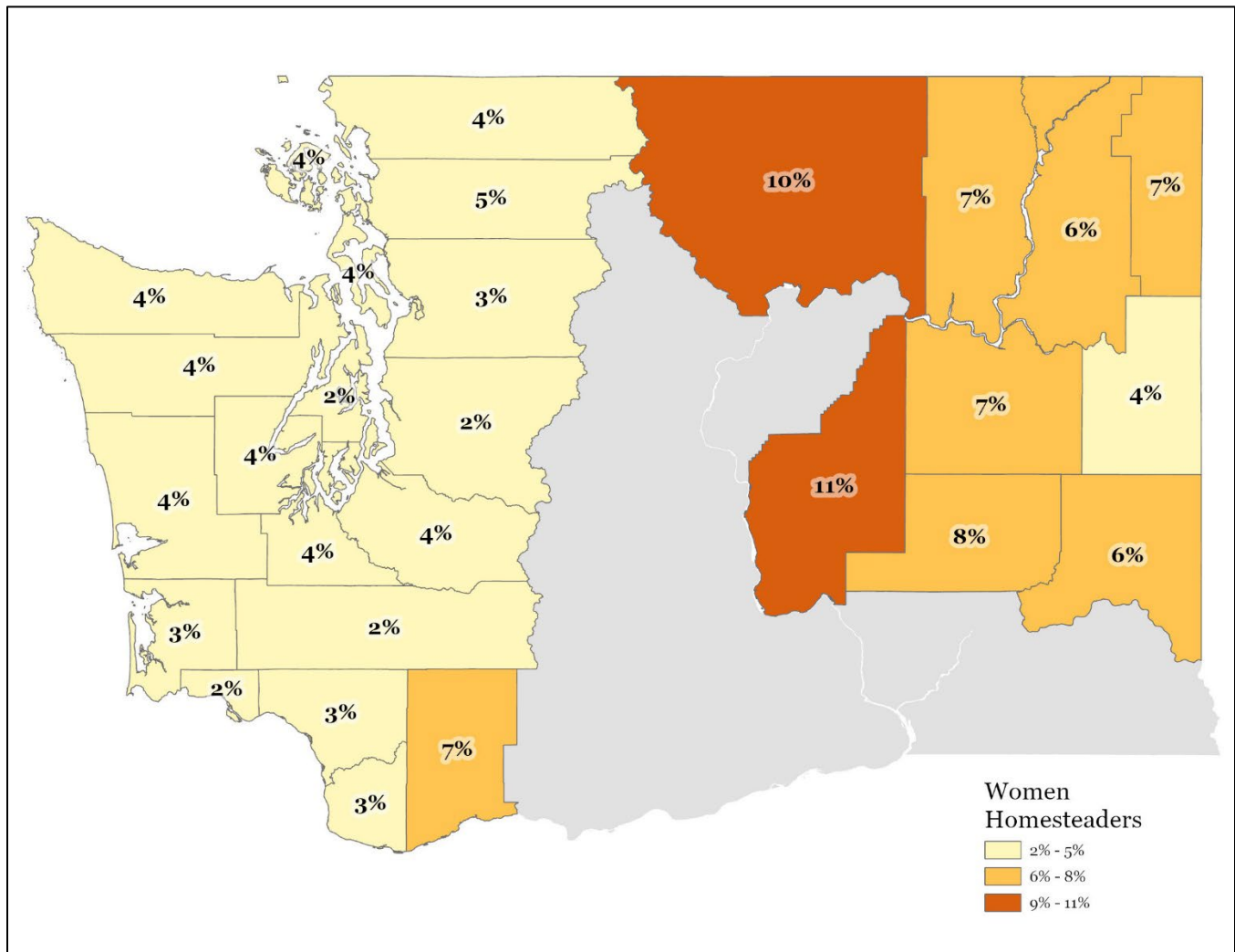


Figure 1. Washington Women Homesteader Percentages by County.

Table 1. Washington Women Homesteader Patents by County.

County	Women Homestead Patents	All Homestead Patents	Women Homesteaders %	Sq Miles
Western Washington	553	16,044	3.4%	25,637
<i>North Puget Sound</i>	<i>160</i>	<i>4,864</i>	<i>3.3%</i>	<i>8,423</i>
Whatcom	34	900	3.8%	2,107
Skagit	36	766	4.7%	1,731
San Juan	20	498	4.0%	174
Island	4	107	3.7%	209
Snohomish	39	1,252	3.1%	2,087
King	27	1,341	2.0%	2,115
<i>South Puget Sound</i>	<i>110</i>	<i>2,940</i>	<i>3.7%</i>	<i>3,746</i>
Pierce	48	1,153	4.2%	1,670
Thurston	26	668	3.9%	722
Mason	24	557	4.3%	959
Kitsap	12	562	2.1%	395
<i>Washington Coast</i>	<i>131</i>	<i>3,303</i>	<i>4.0%</i>	<i>6,377</i>
Clallam	56	1,262	4.4%	1,738
Jefferson	22	553	4.0%	1,804
Grays Harbor	38	915	4.2%	1,902
Pacific	15	573	2.6%	933
<i>Southwest Washington</i>	<i>152</i>	<i>4,937</i>	<i>3.1%</i>	<i>7,091</i>
Wahkiakum	5	301	1.7%	264
Lewis	45	1,851	2.4%	2,403
Cowlitz	33	1,101	3.0%	1,139
Clark	33	1,198	2.8%	1,629
Skamania	36	486	7.4%	1,656
Eastern Washington (Not Complete)	1,644	22,271	7.4%	22,189
<i>Okanogan Highlands</i>	<i>761</i>	<i>9,426</i>	<i>8.1%</i>	<i>11,350</i>
Okanogan	413	4,056	10.2%	5,268
Ferry	76	1,087	7.0%	2,204
Stevens	200	3,290	6.1%	2,478
Pend Oreille	72	993	7.3%	1,400
<i>Channeled Scablands</i>	<i>883</i>	<i>12,845</i>	<i>6.9%</i>	<i>10,839</i>
Grant	269	2,471	10.9%	2,680
Lincoln	181	2,782	6.5%	2,311
Spokane	119	2,675	4.4%	1,764
Whitman	158	2,871	5.5%	2,159
Adams	156	2,046	7.6%	1,925
Total (Not Complete)	2,197	38,316	5.7%	47,826

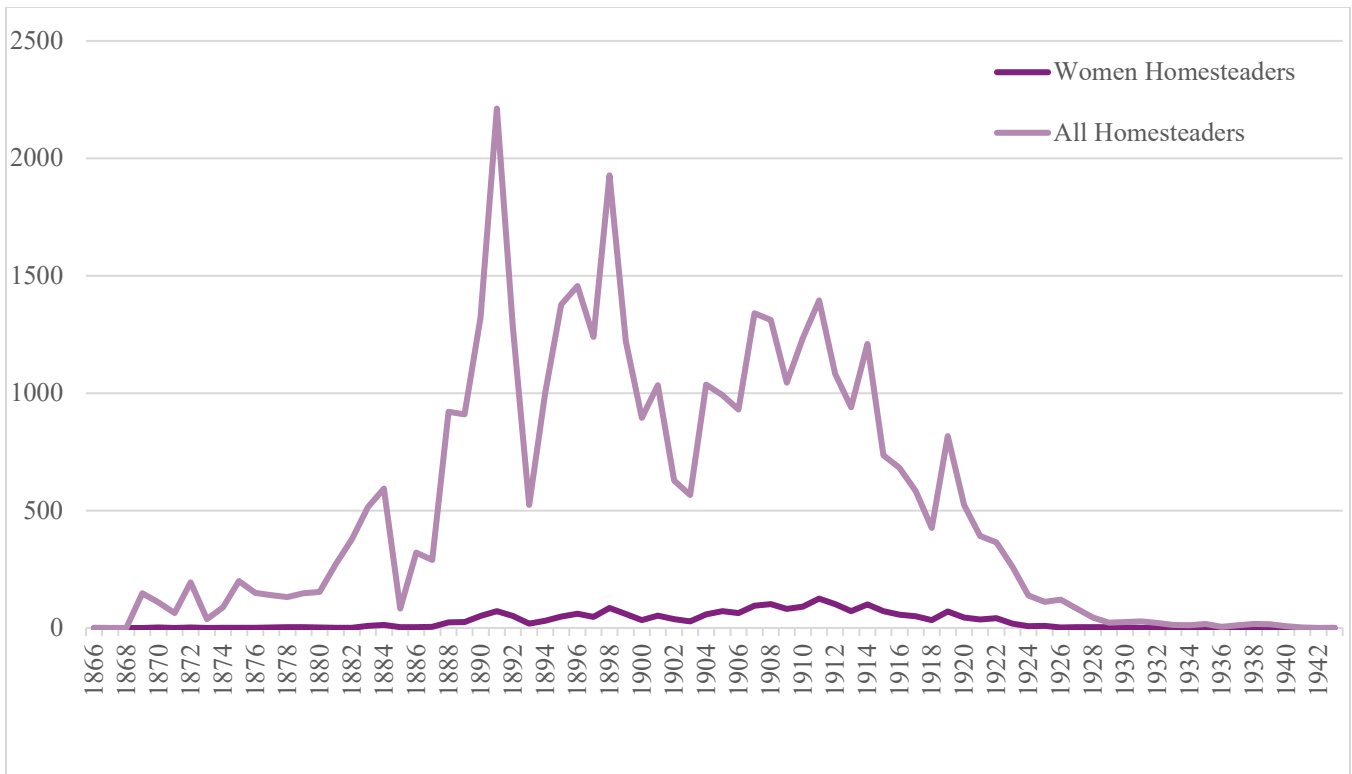


Figure 3. Washington Homesteaders per Year.

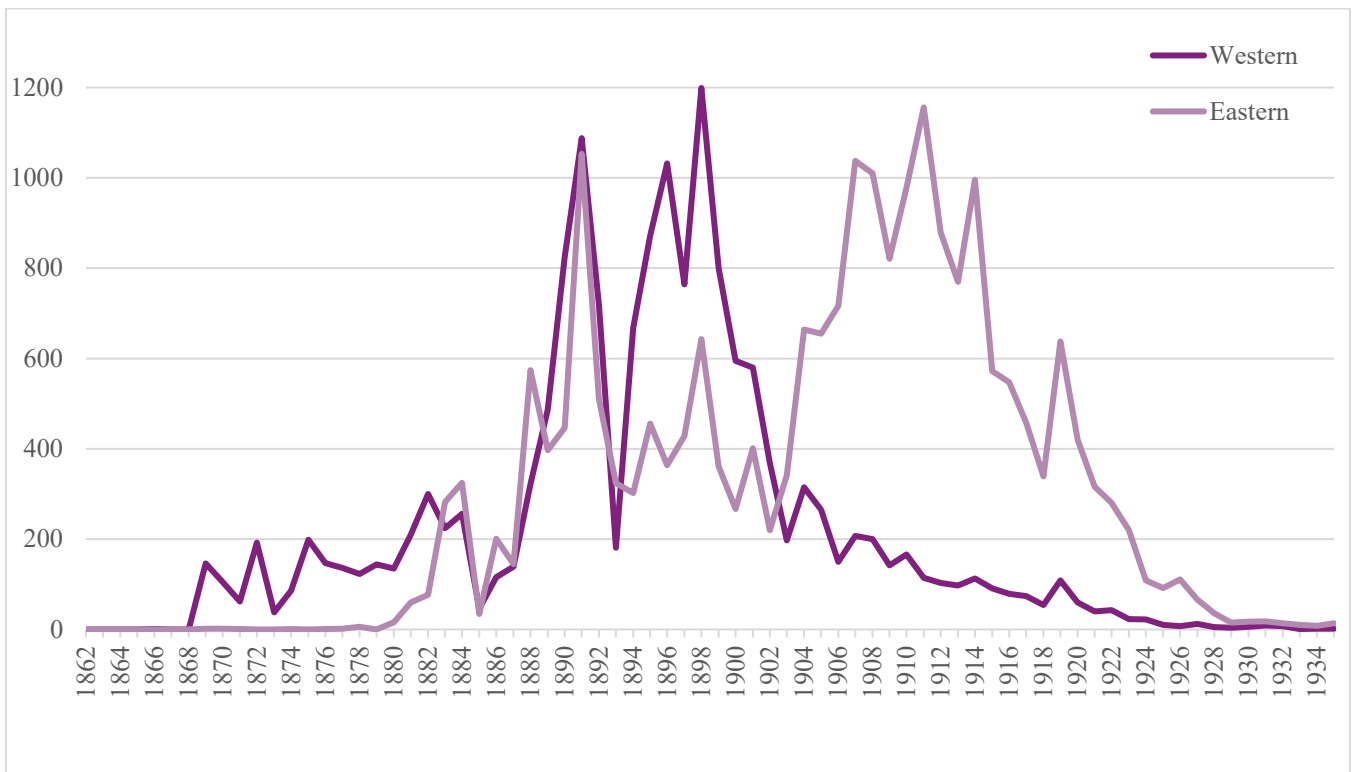


Figure 4. Washington Homesteaders per Year, Eastern and Western Washington.

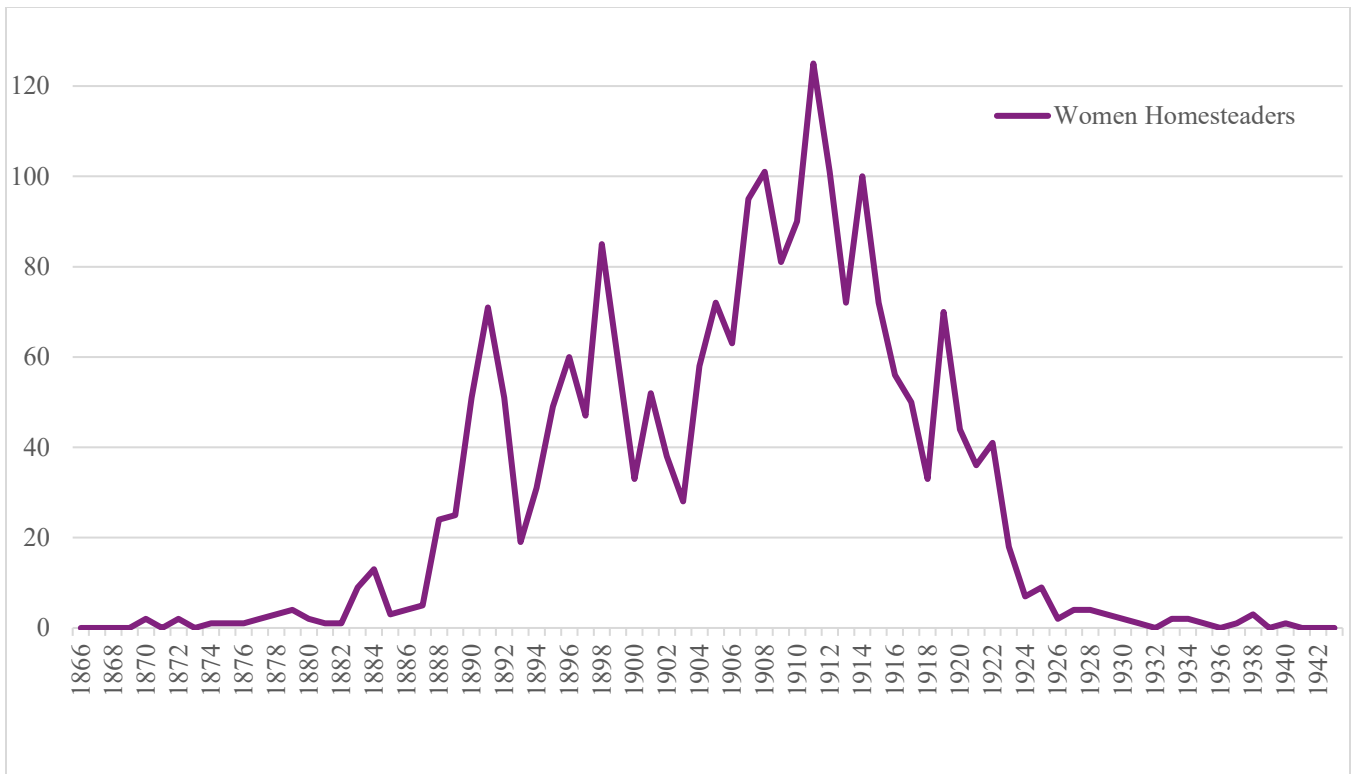


Figure 5. Washington Women Homesteaders per Year.

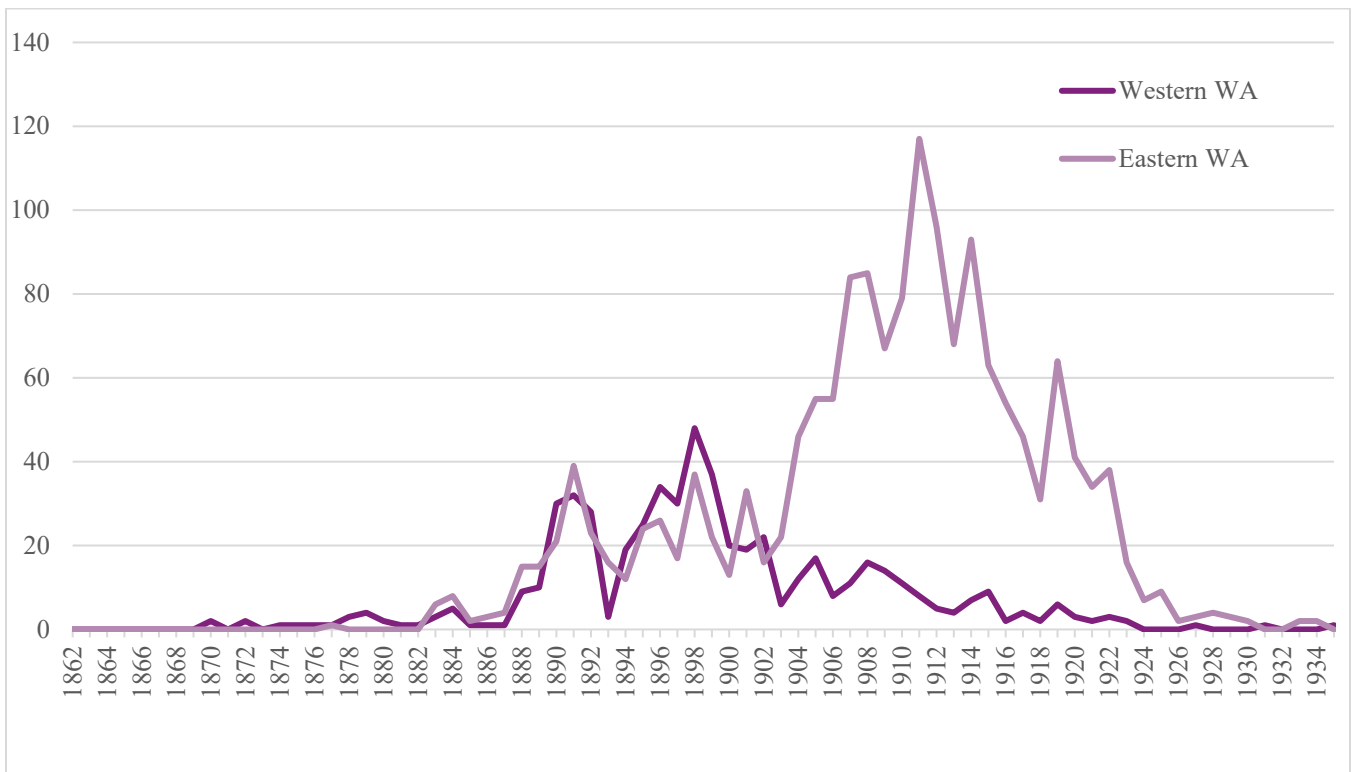


Figure 6. Washington Women Homesteaders per Year, Eastern and Western Washington.

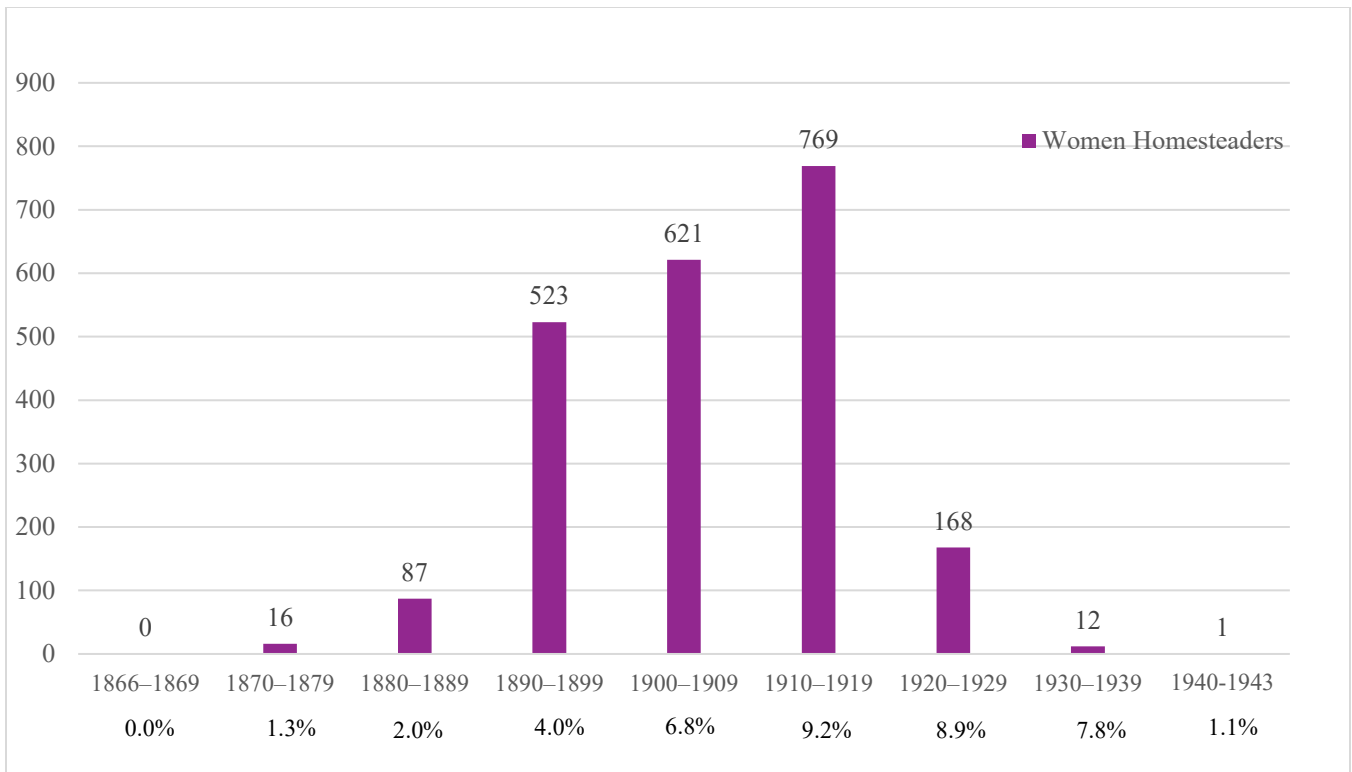


Figure 7. Washington Women Homesteaders per Decade.

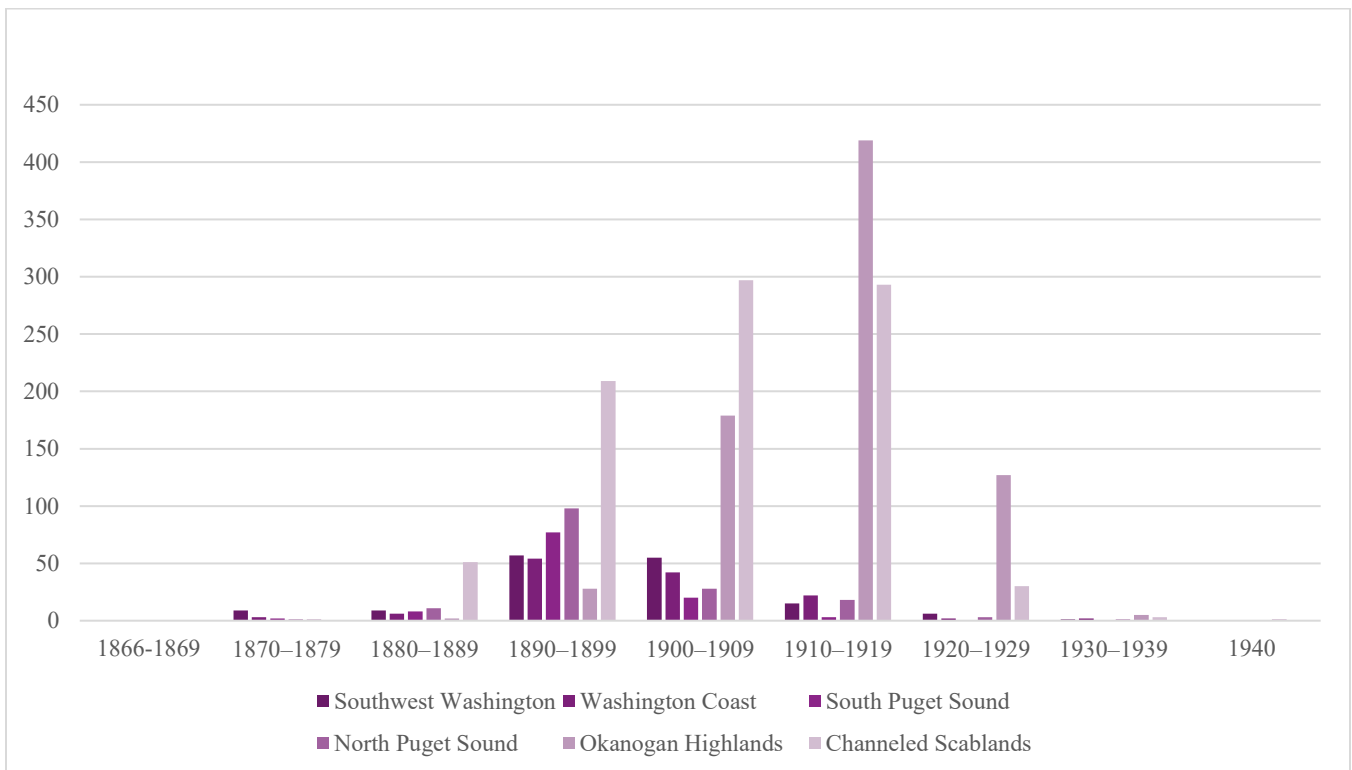


Figure 8. Washington Women Homesteaders per Decade by Region.

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