

# WESTERN WASHINGTON WOMEN HOMESTEADERS: SUMMARY STATISTICS AND SPATIAL PATTERNS FOR NINETEEN COUNTIES

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## Abstract

Twenty percent (8.5 million acres) of Washington State lands were patented through the Homestead Act between 1866 and 1969, but little is known about the experience of Washington's women homesteaders. Western historians estimate that nearly a quarter of all homesteaders were women and that most of women's homesteading occurred after 1900, however prior to the Washington Women Homesteader project no quantitative studies have been completed in Washington. This poster presents summary data of women's homesteading history in Western Washington and explores the temporal and spatial patterns of women's homesteading history.

## Goals

The Washington Women Homesteaders project aims to develop a historical context for Washington homestead history that includes female homesteaders. Previous studies (Mathews 2019, 2020) have established that the homesteading experience in Washington may have unique local variations from that of the West in general. The goal of the present study was to summarize statistics for women homesteaders in western Washington to determine 1) how common it was for women to homestead, 2) when homesteading peaked, and 3) if spatial or temporal patterns exist in women's homesteading.

## Methods

Summary statistics for this research were collected by browsing Homestead Act (12 Stat. 392) records in the [glorecords.blm.gov](https://glorecords.blm.gov) land patents database. Records were browsed by County and tallied by gender by year. In many cases additional research into homesteader's gender was done through primary sources such as census or marriage records. For this study, homesteaders were classified as women homesteaders if they were apparently legally *feme sole* not listed with a male patentee. Spatial data are explored by county by classifying the data into Jenks natural breaks normalized by all homesteading and square miles.

## Western Washington Homesteaders, 1870-1940

Trends in women's homesteading generally follow those of all homesteaders in western Washington (Figures 1-2). Regionally, homestead patents begin to peak in the late 1880s, reaching a high in 1898 and sharply decline in 1899. This peak is substantially earlier than the national trend of homestead patents peaking in the 1910s. The proportion of women's patents increases from only 1% in the 1870s to 6% in the 1910s. Significant drops in patents in 1885 and 1893 coincide with national economic recessions. The sharp rise in patents in the 1880s and 1890s may have been influenced by the

establishment of transportation systems throughout the region, as well as an increase in native born residents.

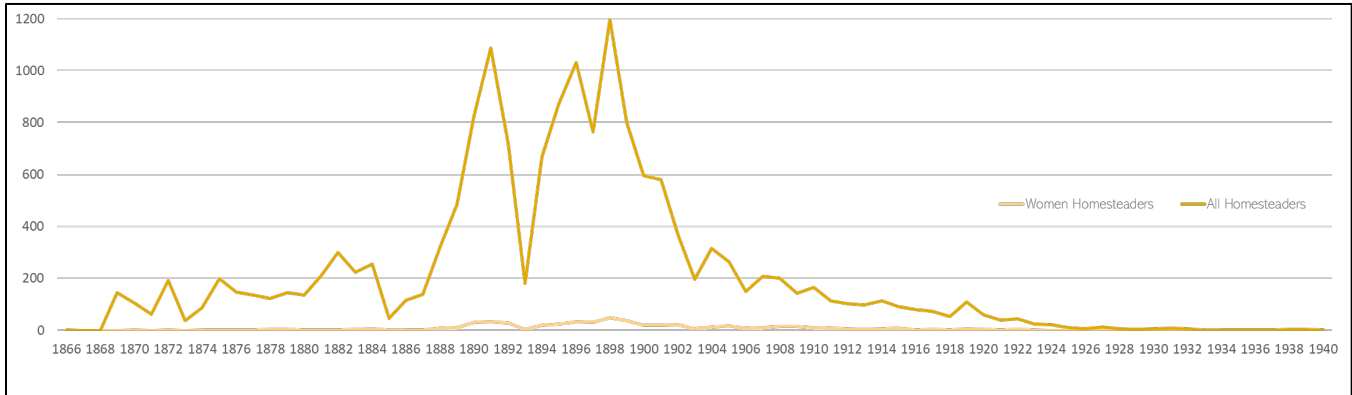


Figure 1. Western Washington Homesteaders, by Year.

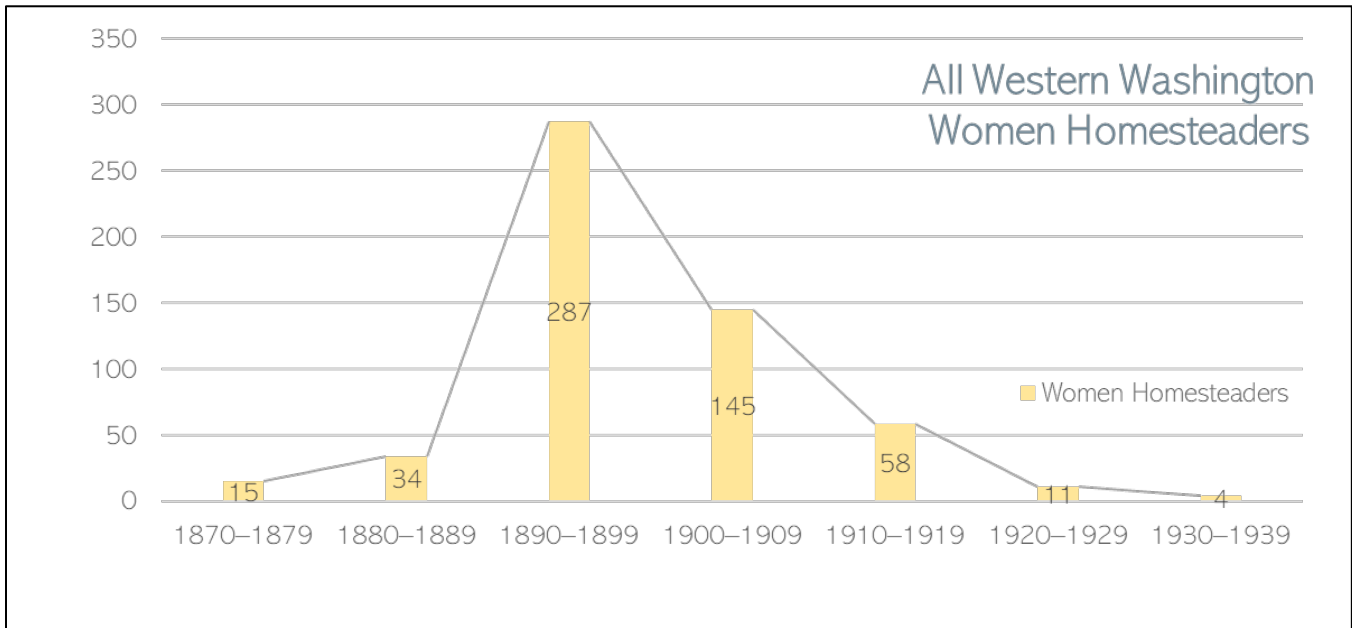


Figure 2. All Western Washington Women Homesteaders, by decade.

In 1870, Mary Marvin and Margaret Hanison were the first women to patent homesteads in western Washington. Only 15 women patented homesteads by 1879, comprising 1% of all homesteads in western Washington at the time. This rate is substantially lower than the female population in Washington, which increased slightly as the population grew from 37% (8,965) in 1870 to 39% (29,143) in 1880. In each of the four regions of western Washington analyzed here, women’s patents increase slightly in the 1880s, spike in the 1890s, and then gradually decrease into the 1930s (Figures 2-6). The spike in women’s patents in the 1890s is especially dramatic in the Puget Sound area.

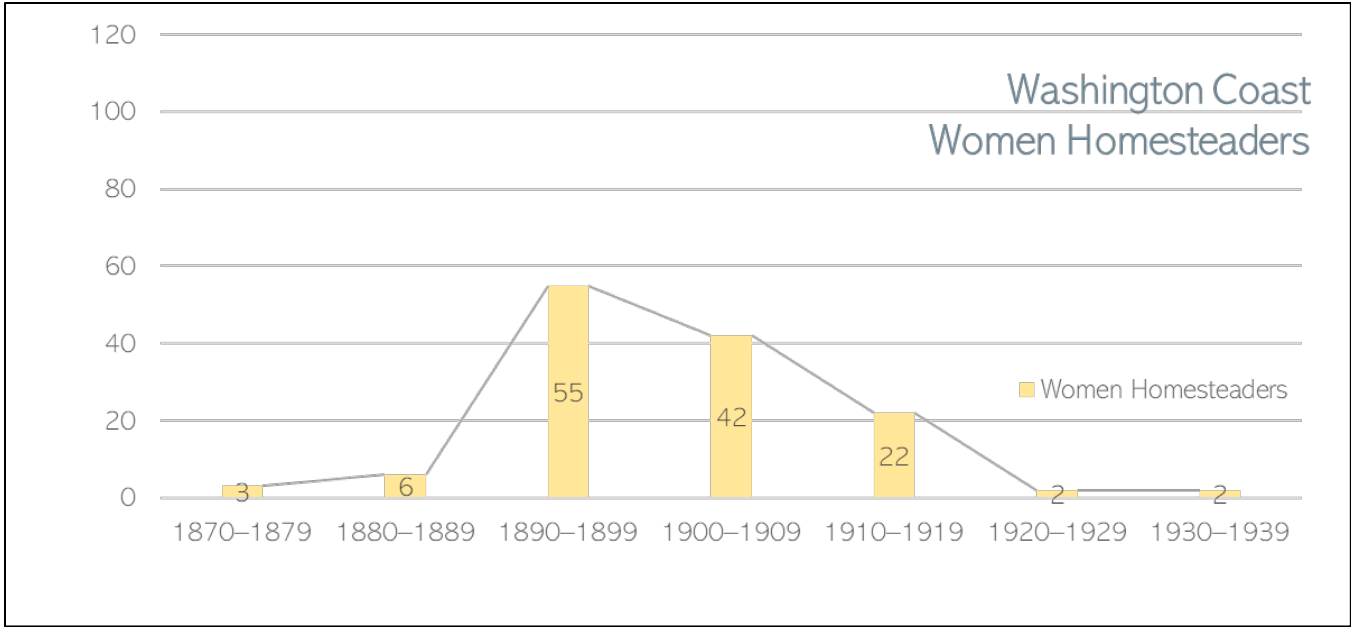


Figure 3. Washington Coast Women Homesteaders, by decade.

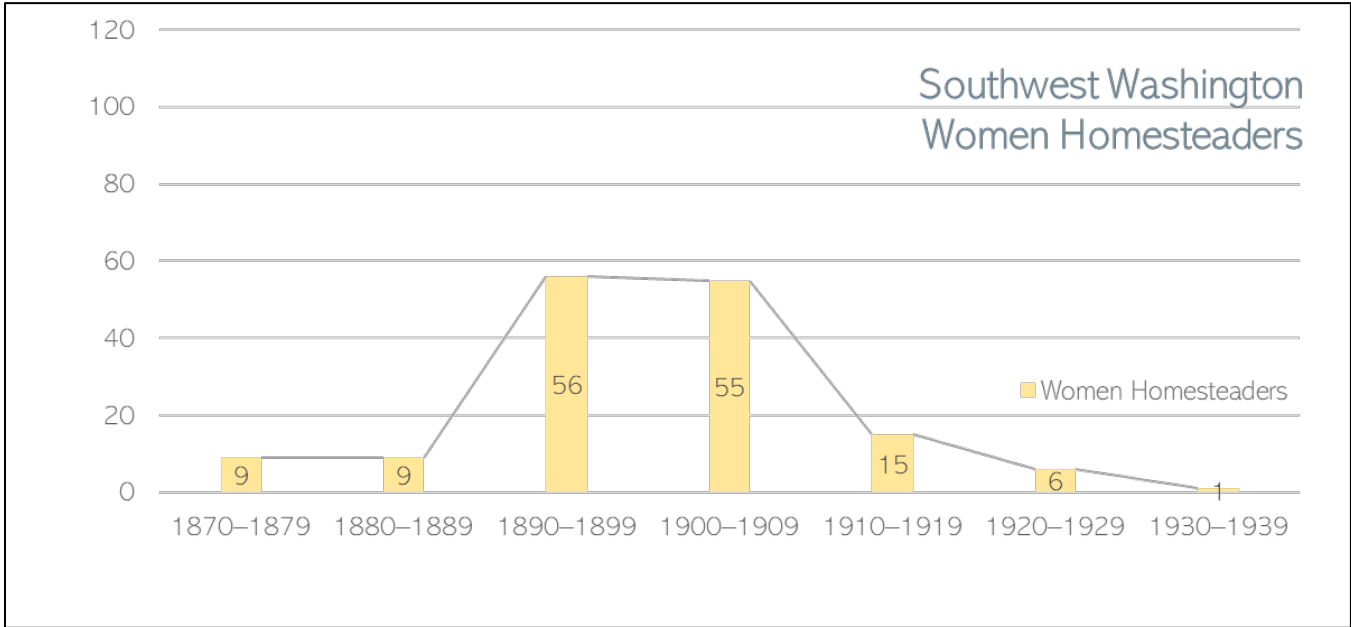


Figure 4. Southwest Washington Women Homesteaders, by decade.

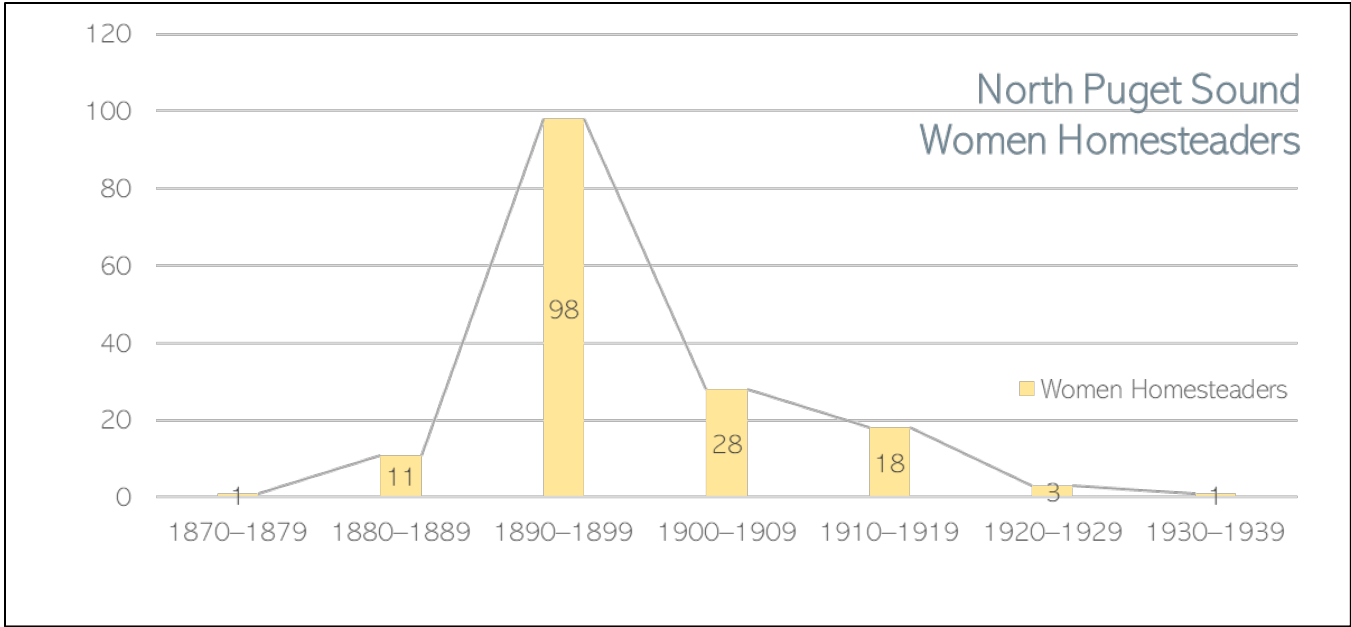


Figure 5. North Puget Sound Women Homesteaders, by decade.

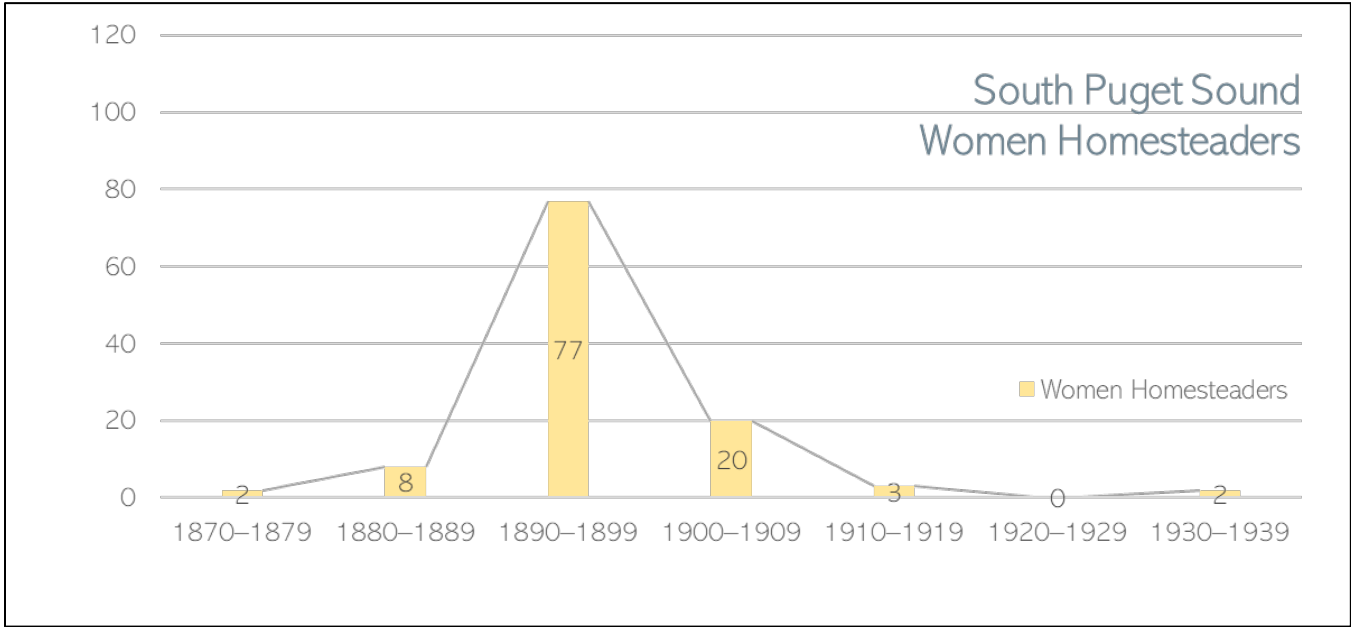


Figure 6. South Puget Sound Homesteaders, by decade.

## Women Homesteaders by County

Women were issued 3.5% of the Homestead Act patents in western Washington (Table 1). By county, the rate of women homesteaders ranges from 1.7% to 7.4%. On average, western Washington counties had 29 women homesteaders, ranging from 4 to 56 women.

*Table 1. Washington Women Homesteader Patents by County.*

County	Women Homestead Patents	All Homestead Patents	Women Homesteaders %
North Puget Sound	160	4863	3.3%
Whatcom	34	900	3.8%
Skagit	36	765	4.7%
San Juan	20	498	4.0%
Island	4	107	3.7%
Snohomish	39	1252	3.1%
King	27	1341	2.0%
South Puget Sound	110	2939	3.7%
Pierce	48	1152	4.2%
Thurston	26	668	3.9%
Mason	24	557	4.3%
Kitsap	12	562	2.1%
Washington Coast	131	3303	4.0%
Clallam	56	1262	4.4%
Jefferson	22	553	4.0%
Grays Harbor	38	915	4.3%
Pacific	15	573	2.6%
Southwest Washington	151	4937	3.1%
Wahkiakum	5	301	1.7%
Lewis	44	1851	2.4%
Cowlitz	33	1101	3.0%
Clark	33	1198	2.8%
Skamania	36	487	7.4%
Western Washington	554	16043	3.5%

Few local differences in rates of female homesteaders are observed by mapping homesteaders by county (Figures 7 and 8), however rates of female homesteaders do cluster in the Puget Sound area in the 1890s (Figure 9). The most remarkable local spike in patents occurred in 1898 in Grays Harbor County when 9 women were issued patents, comprising 8% of patents in the county that year and 24% of all women's patents in that county.

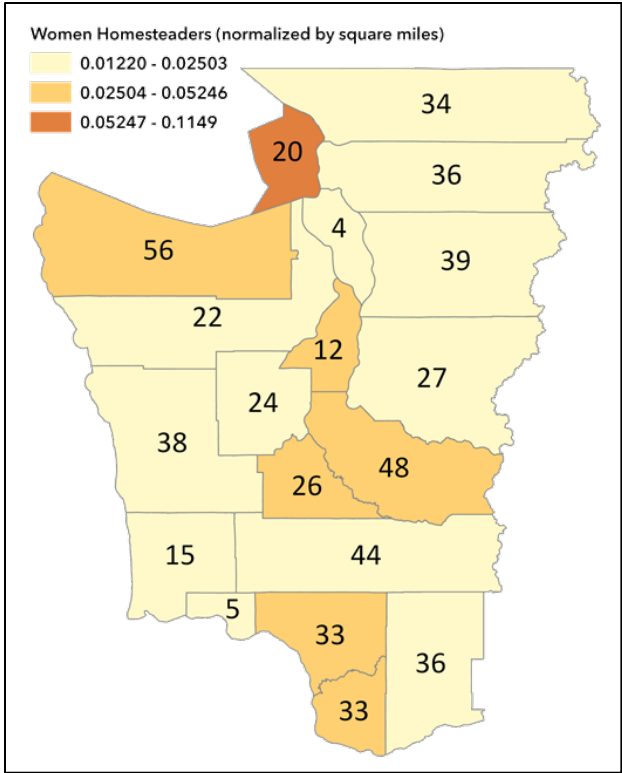


Figure 7. Women Homesteaders, Normalized by Square Miles in the County.

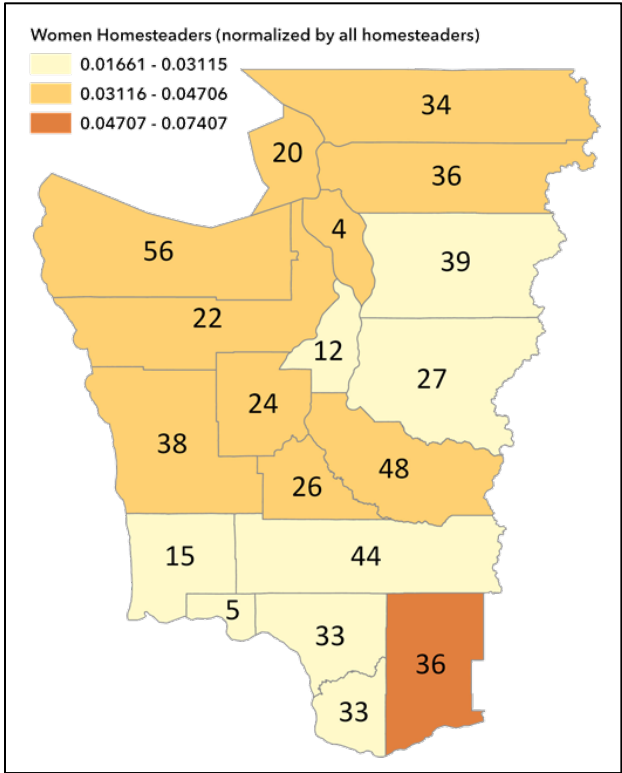


Figure 8. Women Homesteaders, Normalized by All Homesteaders in the County.

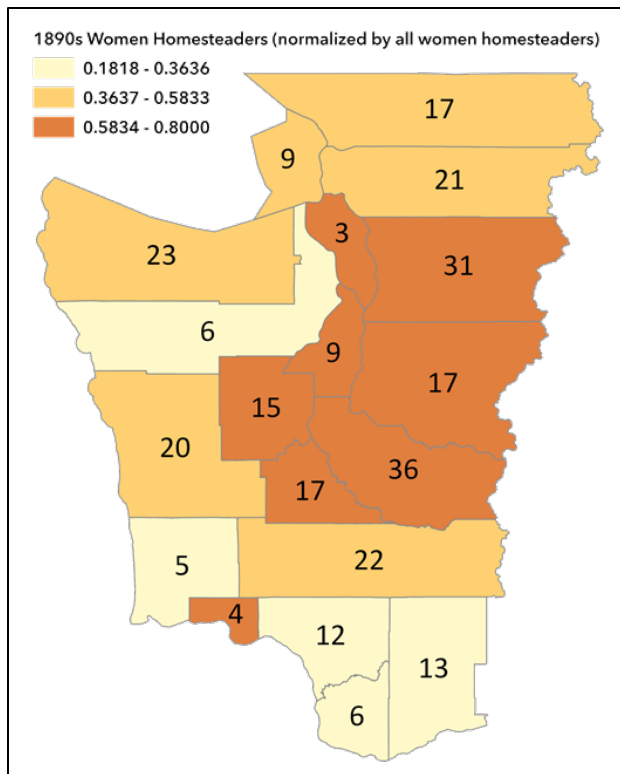


Figure 9. 1890s Women Homesteaders, Normalized by All Women Homesteaders in the County.

## References

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