

Connecting with Our Pioneer Past:

Letters from the Homestead

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When elementary students collaborate in active learning projects that integrate the social studies they greatly advance their literacy skills and civic awareness. They can improve their analysis and ability to solve social problems by using reading and writing to construct knowledge about historical events. In the lessons described below, 26 fourth graders learned American history, geography, economics and civics through building and designing homestead dioramas. These 26 homesteads became our pioneer community and the student designers became its citizens. As in real life, this simulated community contained a variety of productive resources necessary for satisfying basic economic needs. However, the resources were distributed unevenly throughout the township. This inequity challenged students to consider issues of social justice related to the meaning of the common good as we deliberated matters of economic policy for living together in a democracy.

Instructional Considerations

To most fourth graders, learning about the history of land ordinances, homestead laws, and political arguments over the direction of government policy is as dry as the Great American Desert. They would much rather learn about the adventures of pioneers and what daily life was like for pioneer homesteaders. However, as our social studies standards

state, students should understand how political institutions and economic processes have developed and changed over time.¹ Developing curriculum and instruction capable of making social institutions and economic processes meaningful for young learners can be a challenge for teachers.

Researchers attribute elementary students' prior knowledge and strong interest in social history—changes in ordinary people's material conditions and social relations over time—to their early and direct experiences with the kinds of history learned outside of school from family members and elements of popular culture. Compared to social history, “political history”—changes in social institutions, laws, treaties, and forms of government—is more difficult for children to learn due to a lack of life experience and formal history education.² Beginning instruction with social history rather than political history is more meaningful for young learners because they are better able to use information about changes in people's social relations and material conditions over time to understand events that took place in the past.

Incentives for Moving West in the 1800s

Americans headed west during the 1800s for a variety of reasons. Some individuals went in search of adventure or believed that they could strike it rich

prospecting for gold in the streams and mountains of California, Colorado, and Nevada. Families moved west to improve their economic situation by acquiring land, the chief form of wealth at the time. Good farmland in the East was expensive and increasingly hard to find. West of the Appalachians, land could be bought for a fraction of the cost of land in the East.

The Land Ordinance of 1785 had established a rectangular system of survey that divided land into townships measuring six miles square and containing 36 sections of land; each section of land contained 640 acres and measured one mile square. In subsequent years politicians argued over the proper direction of government land policy. Some believed that public lands should be sold to the highest bidder as a way of generating revenue for the government; other politicians viewed laws that offered inexpensive or free land in the West to ordinary people as a convenient way for the government to ease overcrowding in the East. Many southerners feared that populating the West with free farmers who opposed the spread of slavery would weaken the power of southern states.

It was not until the South seceded from the Union, therefore, that Congress was able to pass the Homestead Act on May 10, 1862. The law stated that anyone who was the head of a family, at least 21 years of age, a veteran

of the U.S. armed forces, a citizen—or someone who intended on becoming a citizen—could acquire 160 acres (¼ section) of land in the public domain for an initial filing fee of only \$10. To acquire permanent title and ownership of the land, a homesteader had to live on and “improve” the land for five years, at which time he or she would be called upon to “prove up” by showing a government official exactly how the land had been improved.³

Creating and Interpreting the Township Map

For our simulation, the two collaborating teachers and I created an outline map of an imaginary township in the West, gave a copy to each student, and displayed a transparency of the map on an overhead projector (Figure 1). Modeling on the transparency, we added a compass rose with the four cardinal directions along with a map grid using letters down the left-hand side and numbers across the top corresponding to each section of land in the township. The map legend included symbols to represent major landforms, roads, rivers, and railroad tracks, as well as to designate regions containing timber, prairie, mountains and a river. Finally, we drew a map scale of one inch = one mile on the township transparency. We then asked students to describe how a homestead family might make use of the natural resources symbolized on their township maps:

- **prairie**—gave homesteaders access to flat, fertile land that was ideal for farming, cultivating crops, ranching and raising livestock;
- **wooded areas**—provided timber that could be used for fuel and to build cabins, barns, corrals and fences;
- **mountains**—contained gold or silver, along with game that could be hunted for food and to make clothing from hides;

- **river**—for fishing, to irrigate dry lands for farming, provided water for crops, people, and animals.

Claiming Land to Homestead

We picked popsicle sticks labeled with students’ names out of a jar to ensure that sections of land from the township map would be selected randomly. When a name was called out, the selected student announced to the class the map coordinates of the section of land he or she wanted to homestead. The rest of the class then recorded the student’s name in the proper section of land on their own township maps (Figure 2).

After students recorded the names of all class members in their selected locations, we asked a series of questions to give them practice identifying one another’s location using the cardinal directions. For example, “Where is Joseph’s homestead located?” A correct response indicated that Joseph’s homestead was located south of Betty’s homestead, east of Gary’s property, west of Billy and north of Alice. Intermediate directions may also be used to locate homesteads.

Negotiating a “Common Good” in Planning the Community

Living together in a democratic community required that we as citizens decide how to distribute essential resources fairly to all homesteaders. Students were invited to think about, discuss, and agree upon a shared vision of the common good that answered the question: “How can we provide for everyone living in our township so that each one of us is able to have all, or most of, the resources he or she needs and wants?” Many more questions arose that provided opportunities for students to deliberate on controversial economic and social problems associated with planning our pioneer community. Working together in small groups, students proposed economic and social policies to solve problems identified by the class.

We used the following activity to simulate the exchange of resources

among homesteaders and to cultivate a sense of community. We provided the students, seated in a circle, with colored plastic chips corresponding to the resources located on their homesteads (water = white chips, food = green chips, gold = yellow chips, and timber = red chips). These chips represented the *surplus* water, food, gold, and timber that could be used in trade with other pioneers. Individuals raised hands to propose a trade with someone who had a resource chip they needed; if agreed upon, the two pioneers stood up and met in the center of the circle, introduced themselves, and told each other where they lived. They exchanged chips, shook hands, and returned to the circle. A pioneer who lived in the mountains used her yellow chip (gold) to buy food (green chip) from a pioneer who lived on the prairie; a pioneer who had surplus water (white chip) exchanged chips with a pioneer who had surplus timber (red chip). Resource chips could also be used at the General Store in Coffeerville to trade for or purchase manufactured and imported goods that could not be grown, raised, or found on anyone’s homestead.

Conducting Research to Build and Design Homestead Dioramas

In preparation for making homestead dioramas we began reading *A Pioneer Sampler: The Daily Life of a Pioneer Family in 1840*.⁴ This book contains many good examples of material conditions and relations of production among the members of the fictional Robertson family. Relations of production on the Robertson homestead were organized according to family members’ gender, age, experience, and abilities. Each family member was responsible for certain chores in order for the homestead to function properly. Given an awareness of these relationships, students were better able to contextualize life in the past by developing a sense of empathy as perspective recognition.⁵

Each student in the class received a copy of the *Pioneer Sampler* and three large index or “research cards” as we

called them. On their three research cards students wrote notes from the book pertaining to three different homestead improvements they planned to make on their dioramas during the first year of settlement using the following prompts on side one (card 1 of 3 for first year of settlement):

1. The first improvement I will make to my homestead is...
2. This improvement is needed because...
3. I found information about this improvement on pages ___ to ___ in my *Pioneer Sampler* book.

On side two of each research card students sketched a small drawing of what the improvement would look like on their homestead dioramas. Students learned how to use the book's table of contents, glossary, and index to locate pertinent information about specific homestead improvements. Different



Figure 3.

A student's homestead diorama, created using salt dough, clay, cardboard, natural materials and miscellaneous objects.

colored index cards helped students keep track of the sequence of homestead improvements made over the three years: three yellow index cards were used to record information for the first year's three improvements, three blue index cards for the second year's improvements, and three orange cards for the third year's improvements.

Designing and Building Homestead Dioramas

After reading a few chapters of the book and completing the first set of three research cards, students began building and designing their dioramas.⁶ Homestead dioramas were made of salt dough to form the base and modeling clay for sculpting people, wild animals,

Figure 1: Township Available for Homesteading in 1845

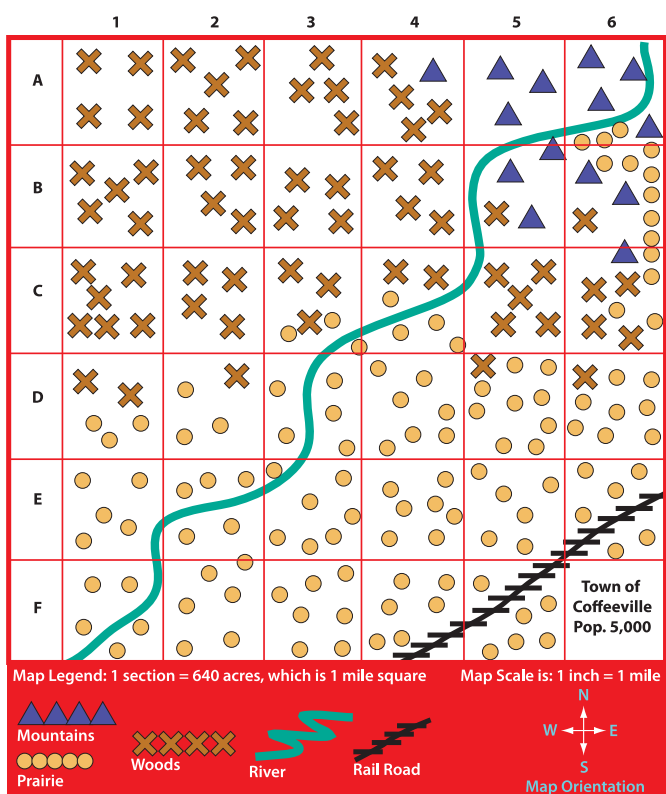
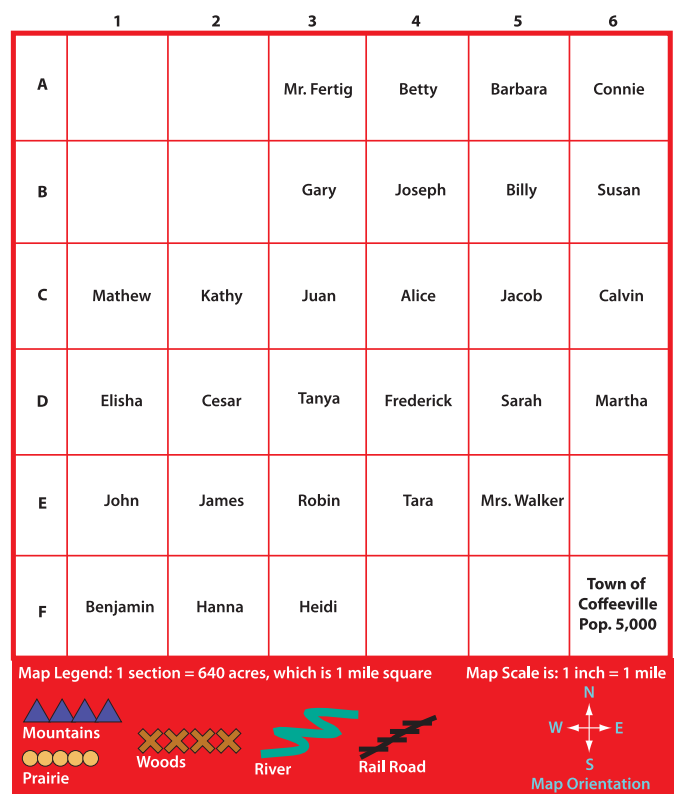


Figure 2: Township Available for Homesteading in 1845



and domestic livestock; cardboard was used for shelters, cotton for the smoke rising from campfires and coming out of chimneys, toothpicks or twigs for fences, trees made of plastic, rocks from the playground, and plastic wrap colored blue to simulate water (Figure 3).

Writing Letters from the Perspective of a Homesteader

After the first year of settlement, students wrote the first in a series of three letters home in which they described their lives as pioneer homesteaders to friends and family living back East (Figure 4). In the

letters, they explained why their particular homestead improvements were needed, where they were made, how they worked, and what they looked like. Students also wrote about daily life on the homestead and the responsibilities of different family members, about matters of health, what they did for relaxation and entertainment, the experience of participating in a barn raising, and how school was going for them in a one-room schoolhouse.⁷

Students invested a great deal of ownership in the diorama project because it gave them a reason for conducting

research, a way to engage in the process, and tangible means for applying their research findings. Reading and writing became the tools that students used to construct historical knowledge rather than reproduce information. Building and designing their own homestead dioramas motivated students to learn such reading and research skills as adjusting one's reading for a particular purpose by skimming a text and recognizing when more intensive reading was required. Students also learned how graphs, charts, tables, and maps could be used to organize and display data gathered during the research process.

Figure 4: A Student's Letter

Dear Aunt Hattie, Uncle Jack, and All,

May 22, 1844

I have found an excellent piece of land in Colorado to homestead. One way I improved my land was to clear it. I bought some potato, wheat, and oat seeds at the general store. Then I broadcasted them all over a clear spot where I had chopped down some trees. After that I tied a large branch to the oxen's yoke so they would drag it and then spread earth all over my seeds. Then I prayed for sun and rain so it would help the seeds grow.

Also, I now know my location and how many acres I own. I'm east of Juan, west of Jacob, south of Joseph, north of Frederick, northeast of Tanya, southeast of Gary, southwest of Billy, northwest of Sarah and northwest of the town of Coffeerville. I have 640 acres, which is an entire section of land.

After I got those chores off my back I had some of my neighbors help me clear more of my land. They also helped by giving me food and water and I gave them some wood. I had Betty, Robin, and Susan's sons come help clear trees and rocks while Betty gave me water and Robin and Susan gave me food. I adored the idea that everyone helped and I would like to help them just like they helped me.

I am also planning on harvesting some food from the fields and selling some crops if I have a surplus this year. I would sell them so that I can earn money to buy some animals as soon as I can get the barn up. Maybe I'll buy some cows, chickens, sheep, geese, pigs, and maybe even a shotland sheep dog for herding the sheep and cows.

Sincerely, the animals and your niece,

Alice

"Proving Up" to Claim Permanent Ownership of the Land

Considered historically, the three cycles of reading the *Pioneer Sampler*, recording notes on index cards to plan homestead improvements, making the physical improvements to dioramas, and writing letters home represented three years of living on a homestead. Showing a government official how a homestead property had been improved over the years in order to qualify for permanent ownership of the land was called "proving up." Homestead proof documents were reproduced and distributed to students who read and heard the nineteenth-century language and used it to model the process of documenting their own homestead claims in ways that were more true to the period being studied (Figure 5).

After the homestead proof documents were completed, students placed all of their homestead dioramas on the floor of the classroom and recreated the entire township. Using this model, we reviewed concepts and relationships related to the history, geography, economics, and civics of our pioneer community. We also talked about some of the ways in which the diorama project was similar but not identical to the actual Homestead Act of 1862. In reality, a settler had to live on and improve the land for five years, not the three years of our class simulation.

Figure 5: Homestead Proof Document

HOMESTEAD PROOF— TESTIMONY OF CLAIMANT

I _____ being called as a witness in his or her own behalf in support of homestead entry at the location of _____ testify as follows:

Question 1. What is your name (written in full and correctly spelled), your age, and address?

Question 2. Are you a native of the United States, or have you been naturalized?

Question 3. When was your house built on the land and when did you establish actual residence therein? (Describe said house and other improvements you have placed on the land.)

Question 4. Of whom does your family consist? Have you and your family resided continuously on the land since first establishing residence thereon?

Question 5. For what period or periods have you been absent from the homestead since making settlement, and for what purposes; If temporarily absent, did your family reside upon and cultivate the land during such absence?

Question 6. How much of the land have you cultivated and for how many seasons have you raised crops thereon?

Question 7. Are there any indications of coal or minerals of any kind on the land? (If so, describe what they are, and state whether the land is more valuable for agricultural or mineral purposes.)

Question 8. Have you ever made any other homestead entry? If so, please describe.

I hereby certify that the foregoing testimony is true on this _____ day of _____, 18_____.

Signature of Homesteader: _____

Signature of Government Representative: _____

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Homesteaders received 160 acres, a quarter of a section of land, and not an entire section of land, 640 acres. Another anachronism was that the *Pioneer Sampler* provided us with information about pioneer life in the 1840s, which was 20 years before the Homestead Act was actually passed into law.

Conclusion

In order to promote higher-order thinking and decision making, the homestead experience was presented to students as a problem to figure out rather than a bundle of disparate facts to be memorized. Solving this historical problem required students to engage in the research necessary for creating authentic homestead dioramas and writing letters from the perspective of pioneers. Building dioramas also enabled students to make meaningful connections among the social studies by understanding how geography and natural resources can affect the economic dynamics of a community and, in so doing, shape the character of its citizens' social relations.

Children's overriding concern for negotiating the fairest ways of distributing resources throughout the township raised questions and issues that lead to meaningful discussions of democratic citizenship. Coming to grips with basic economic realities, students recognized the existence of both mutual and opposing interests. Resolving differences among the citizens of our simulated community required making deals

and negotiating compromises with *real* people—classroom peers. The integrated nature of these lessons provided many opportunities for students to learn challenging social studies content while developing skills in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. 📖

Notes

1. National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, D.C.: NCSS, 1994). The following NCSS thematic strands were addressed: II. Time, Continuity, and Change; III. People, Places, and Environments; IV. Individual Development and Identity; V. Individuals, Groups, and Institutions; VI. Power, Authority, and Governance; VII. Production, Distribution, and Consumption; VIII. Science, Technology, and Society; X. Civic Ideals and Practices.
2. Keith C. Barton and Linda S. Levstik, "Back When God was Around and Everything: Elementary Children's Understanding of Historical Time," *American Educational Research Journal* 33, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 419-454.
3. By virtue of the Homestead Act of 1862, unmarried, widowed, and divorced women were able to claim land as the heads of households, and many became quite successful. See the story of Adeline Hornbeck in "Teaching with Historic Places," 1999, Jackdaw Publications, Field Trip HP-67.
4. Barbara Greenwood and Heather Collins, *A Pioneer Sampler: The Daily Life of a Pioneer Family in 1840* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994).
5. Keith C. Barton and Linda S. Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004).
6. Craig Hinshaw, "It's a Flat World," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 11, no. 1 (September/October, 1998).
7. Recommended trade books addressing pioneer life and the homesteading experience include: Eye Bunting, *Dandelions* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1995); Laurie Carlson, *Westward Ho! An Activity Guide to the Wild West* (Chicago Review Press, 1996); Pam Conrad, *Prairie Visions: The Life and Times of Solomon Butcher* (New York: Harper Trophy, 1994); Paul Erickson, *Daily Life in a Covered Wagon* (New York: Puffin Books, 1994); Russell Freedman, *Children of the Wild West* (New York: Clarion Books, 1983); A. S. Gintzler, *Rough and Ready Homesteaders* (Santa Fe, N.Mex.: John Muir Publications, 1994); Ellen Levine and Elroy Freeman, *If You Traveled West in a Covered Wagon* (New York: Scholastic, 1986); Jacqueline Morley and David Antram, *How Would You Survive in the American West?* (New York: Salariya Book Company, 1997); R. Conrad Stein, *Cornerstones of Freedom: The Oregon Trail* (Chicago: Children's Press, 1994).

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