

Homestead Act on Display in Beatrice

The historic document that launched the land rush that helped settle the American West is now on display at the Homestead National Monument of America near Beatrice. It's the Homestead Act of 1862, the actual four-page document, signed by President Lincoln. Monument superintendent Mark Engler says it's a thrill to see the document up close. (play audio :16 "...123 years.")

The act wasn't formally repealed until the Reagan administration in 1985. The document was borrowed from the National Archives in Washington D-C and it's under 24-hour guard. Jim Zeender (ZEN-der), with the National Archives, says the details of how the document was transported and its security are not being made public, because of its value and historical significance. (play audio :20 "...been displayed.")

The document is housed in a climate-controlled area of the Heritage Center at the monument. Greg Bradsher with the National Archives Records Administration says there are 60,000 boxes of land entry files, about half of them homestead files. People regularly seek copies of those documents, interested in family history or land development. (play audio :10 "...and the West.")

The Homestead Act was a landmark, granting most Americans the ability to claim 160-acres of undeveloped federal land west of the Mississippi River. Claimants had to be at least 21 years old, they had to live on the land for five years and show evidence of making improvements. The document will be on display at the monument through May 28th. Also, during the next month, May 20th will mark the 150th anniversary of the signing of the bill into law.

Nebraska Radio Network