

Name _____ Date _____ Period _____

Exodusters

Directions: Use the article “Exodusters” to answer the following questions in complete sentences.

1. Why did so many African Americans move west after the Civil War?
2. What were the requirements of the Homestead Act? (Don't copy word for word).
3. Why did the Exodusters and other Nebraska settlers build houses out of sod?

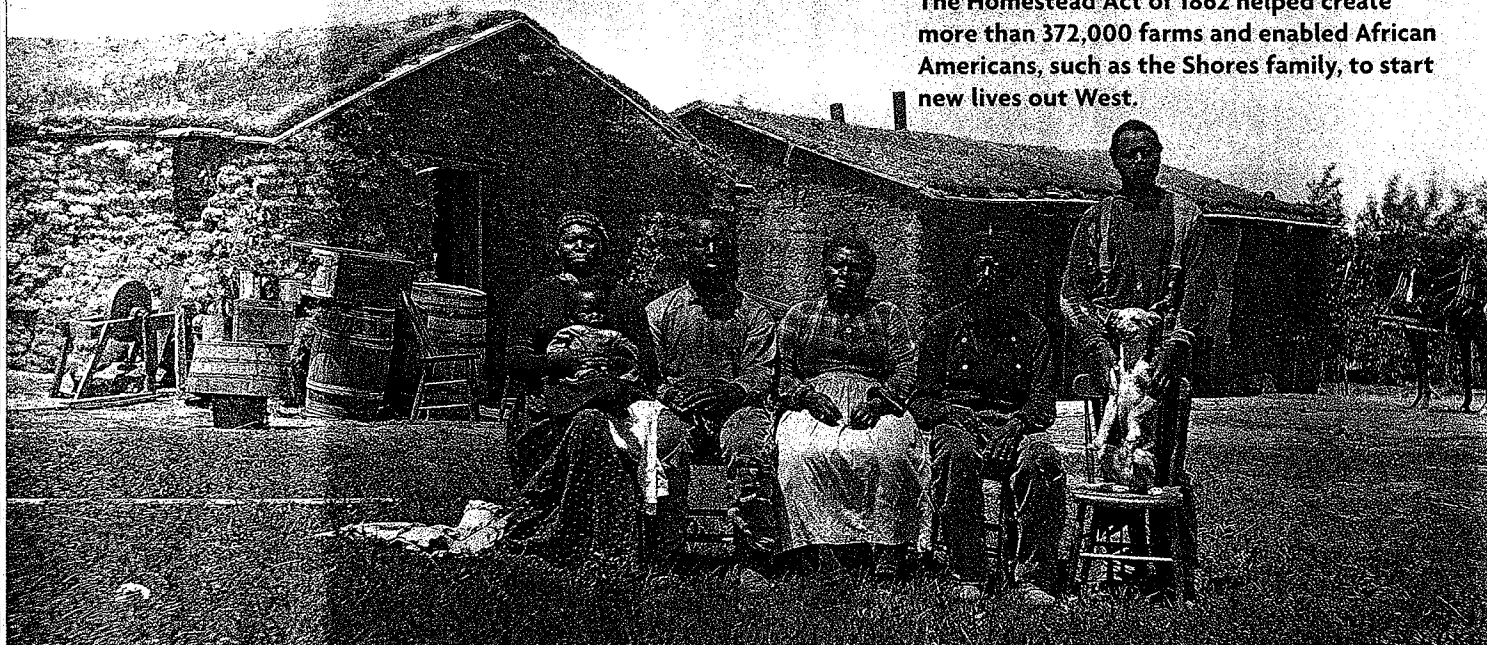
4. What other types of dwellings did western settlers live in?

5. Describe at least three difficulties of living in a sod house.

EXODU

by Marcia Amidon Lusted

The Homestead Act of 1862 helped create more than 372,000 farms and enabled African Americans, such as the Shores family, to start new lives out West.



Dramatic change rarely happens overnight. Even after slavery was abolished in 1865, African Americans in the South faced constant oppression and discrimination. They were denied education and the right to vote, they were cheated out of their crops, and they were subjected to acts of violence. Blacks had hoped for better lives and greater opportunities after the Civil War, but soon many realized that they would not find that life in the South. As it had for so many others in search of a better future, the West beckoned to African Americans.

In the spring of 1879, a mass migration of some 6,000 black people from the South began heading for Kansas, Nebraska, and other parts of the West. Eventually, an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 blacks were persuaded to move west, mostly on foot but sometimes by boat up the Mississippi River. They became known as the Exodusters.

A former slave, Jerry Shores, and his family followed this movement west. They traveled with three wagons in one of the first emigrant trains to Nebraska. Shores drove one wagon, his son drove another, and his 16-year-old daughter drove the third one, which included taking care of her own team and greasing the wagon's wheels.

The Shores family settled on a homestead claim in Nebraska. In 1862, in an effort to encourage people to settle the West, President Abraham

STERS

Lincoln had signed the Homestead Act. For many former slaves, the act offered their best opportunity to own land and their own homes.

The requirements of the Homestead Act were relatively simple. Any person 21 years of age or older and head of a household was entitled to 160 acres of uninhabited federal land. Within six months of living on a chosen parcel of land, or "claim," the homesteader had to start building a permanent house and making improvements to the claim. After living on the claim for five years, the land would belong to the homesteader.

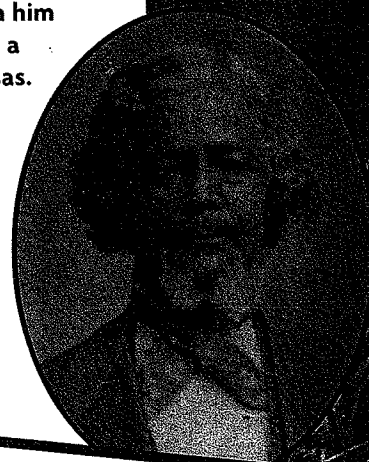
Since Nebraska was mostly treeless prairie land, it was nearly impossible for the Shoreses to build any kind of wooden structure. But good, cheap material was available: The earth and grass under their feet, which some settlers referred to as "prairie marble," could be used to build a sod house, or "soddy." Like many other pioneer families on the prairie, the Shoreses immediately went to work on their soddy to keep the family safe and protected from the weather.

The first step was to find a level plot of land. They cleared it of grass, smoothed it out with a spade, and packed it down to make a hard earth floor. A one-room sod house was usually 16 by 20 feet, and once the site was ready, the builder could begin laying sod bricks around the perimeter of the house.

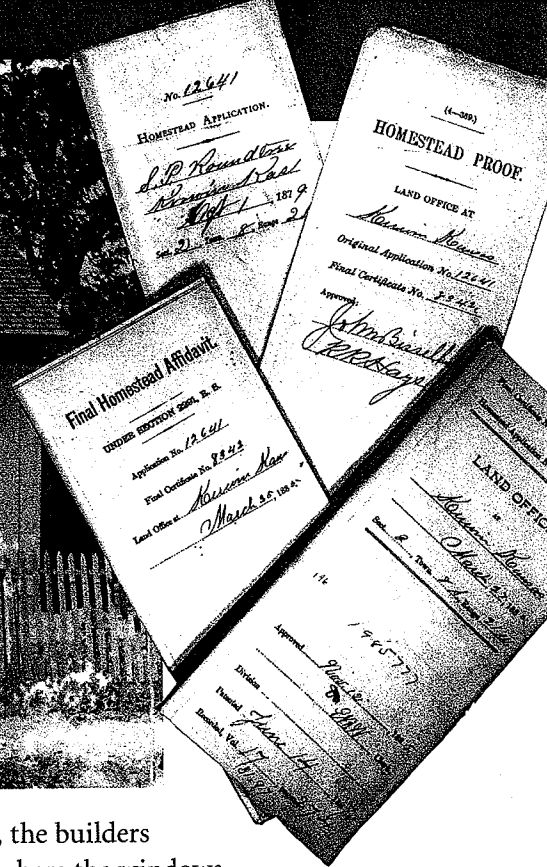
To build a sod house, it was important to have the right kind of grass — one with dense roots that would hold the soil together. Buffalo grass, wheat grass, and several other varieties made the best sod for building. Then the sod would either be cut into bricks or, thanks to the invention of the steel breaking plow, plowed into strips 12 inches wide and four inches thick. The strips were then cut into bricks about three feet long. These bricks might weigh as much as 50 pounds apiece. The average sod house weighed almost 90 tons!

Once the Shoreses had their sod bricks, they placed them side by side lengthwise and grass side down to make a wall two feet thick. Every few layers, they laid them in the opposite direction to make the walls stronger. Sometimes they used loose dirt and mud to fill cracks between the bricks.

Benjamin "Pap" Singleton (BELOW) became a spokesperson for the Exodusters and recruited African American settlers to join him in establishing a colony in Kansas.



Ho for Kansas!
 Brethren, Friends, & Fellow Citizens:
 I feel thankful to inform you that the
REAL ESTATE
AND
Homestead Association,
 Will Leave Here the
15th of April, 1878,
 In pursuit of Homes in the Southwestern
 Lands of America, at Transportation
 Rates, cheaper than ever
 was known before.
 For full information inquire of
Benj. Singleton, better known as old Pap,
NO. 5 NORTH FRONT STREET.
 Beware of Speculators and Adventurers, as it is a dangerous thing
 to fall in their hands.
 Nashville, Tenn., March 18, 1878.



Many homesteaders eventually upgraded their houses from sod to something more permanent.

As the walls grew higher, the builders positioned wooden frames where the windows and door would go. Then they laid sod all around the frame, leaving a gap at the top (filled with rags or grass) to allow room for the sod to settle without crushing the glass in the window. Wooden pegs held the frames in place in the sod walls.

Once the walls were the correct height, the builders placed a wooden ridgepole from one end of the sod house to the other to support a roof. A sod house roof was sometimes made out of lumber covered with shingles or tarpaper, but often it was simply covered with more sod bricks, cut thinner than the ones used for the walls.

There's No Place Like Home


Not every family who settled in the West lived in a soddy. The luckiest families lived in simple but sturdy one-room log cabins, which had been introduced by Swedish immigrants. But even in locations with plenty of trees, a log cabin took time to build. A family might first spend several years in a dugout, which was a shelter made by digging into the side of a hill and hollowing out a room. Some settlers dug partial rooms into hillsides and then finished the front of the house with a wall of sod bricks. Still other settlers lived in tents or Indian-style tipis. — M.A.L.

Sod houses lasted only about six or seven years. A sturdier, yet still very simple, dwelling was the one-room log cabin, but it required land with plenty of trees.

Sod houses were sturdy, fireproof, warm in the winter, cool in the summer, and above all, cheap to construct. But what was it like to live in one? The roof often leaked, especially since Nebraska sod contained sand, which made it easier for water to filter through. Sod roofs held on to water, and even after a rainstorm was over, the soggy material would drip for days. If the ridgepole decayed, the entire roof might collapse in a mess of mud and lumber.

Snow often made its way into the house through the smallest crack or crevice, and many builders would let the sod walls settle for as long as six weeks before smoothing them and coating the inside walls with plaster. The floors in most sod houses were simply packed dirt, which sometimes got covered with carpets if the family had any. If they had more money, they might build a floor of split logs or even wide wooden planks from a sawmill.

Some pioneer women complained that nothing was ever clean in a sod house. Fleas, rats, mice, and snakes were a constant problem because they liked to live in the cracks between the bricks. Women learned to cook with lids on their pots to keep mud — or worse — from falling into the food. Beds had to go in the center of the room beneath the ridgepole, where they were most likely to stay dry. After a long, soaking rain, the family would have to take almost everything in the house outside to dry in the sunshine.

For all its hardships, life in a soddy on the Nebraska prairie was the first taste of freedom for black families like the Shoreses, who had suffered under slavery in the South. Even with the mud and the bugs, the sod house was their first real home, built with their own hands — a symbol of their new life in the West. 

Marcia Amidon Lusted is the author of nine nonfiction books for children.