

## Welchester Tree Grant Park Historical Background

In America's colonial times, people who dreamed of owning family farms went from the coastal plain to the foothills, across the Appalachians to the Ohio Valley. The earliest colonies were founded on the two coasts, but, by the 1850s, the Louisiana Purchase and other huge government land acquisitions had filled out the continental United States. The public was convinced that all this land rightfully belonged to the people.

The distribution of government lands had been a contentious issue since the Revolutionary War, and overlapping land claims and border disputes were common. The Land Ordinance of 1785 finally implemented a standardized system of federal land surveys that eased boundary conflicts. The sale of public lands generated revenue to run the federal government. Initially, an individual wanting to buy government land was required to purchase a full section of 640 acres. By 1800, the minimum lot was halved to 320 acres, and settlers were allowed to pay in 4 installments, but prices were fixed at \$1.25 an acre until 1854. The large investment and massive amount of physical labor required to clear the land for agriculture often posed insurmountable obstacles for individuals dreaming of owning their own farm.

Over time, three federal acts were passed by Congress to allow for private ownership of government lands. First, the Pre-emption Law of 1841 stated that public land could be purchased from the government for \$1.25 an acre or purchased from a previous owner at an agreed-upon price.

The Homestead Act of 1862, signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln, opened up much of the West for settlement. The Act allowed individuals to file for a quarter-section of free land – just 160 acres (1/2 mile squares). The land was theirs at the end of five years if they had built a house on it, dug a well, broken (plowed) 10 acres, fenced a specified amount, and actually lived there. For an \$18 filing fee, the homesteader could have his or her piece of America.

Finally, The Timber Cultural Act of 1873 gave homesteaders the right to claim 160 acres of additional land by planting and successfully cultivating 40 acres of trees and attending them for 10 years. Later this requirement was reduced to 10 acres and 8 years of care. For most settlers in the arid plains, succeeding even at the reduced levels was a practical impossibility, due to the lack of water and sparse vegetation.

Physical conditions on the frontier presented great challenges for the homesteaders and their families. Wind, blizzards, and plagues of insects threatened crops. Open plains meant few trees for building, forcing many to build homes out of sod. Limited fuel and water supplies turned simple cooking and heating chores into difficult trials. Ironically, even the smaller size of sections posed a problem. While 160 acres may have been sufficient for an eastern farmer, it was simply not enough to sustain agriculture on the dry plains, and scarce natural vegetation made raising livestock on the prairie difficult. As a result, in many areas, the original homesteader did not stay on the land long enough to fulfill their claim.

After several decades, President Theodore Roosevelt expanded the Homestead Act, permitting land grants of 640 acres to farmers and ranchers. The Homestead Act's lenient terms proved the undoing of many settlers, who were not required to own equipment or to know anything about farming.

Homesteaders who persevered were rewarded with opportunities as rapid changes in transportation eased some of the hardships. Six months after the Homestead Act was passed, the Railroad Act was signed, and by May 1869, a transcontinental railroad stretched across the frontier. The new railroads provided easy transportation for homesteaders, and new immigrants were lured westward by railroad companies eager to sell off excess land at inflated prices. The new rail lines provided ready access to manufactured goods and catalog houses like Montgomery Ward offered farm tools, barbed wire, linens, weapons, and even houses delivered via the rails.

Before the Homestead Act was repealed in 1934, over 1.6 million homestead applications were processed and more than 270 million acres—10 percent of all U.S. lands—passed into the hands of individuals.

Though never the paradise lauded in popular myth, the plains finally became home to that breed of settler willing to cope with adversity. One such settler, Charles Clark Welch, claimed what is today known as Welchester Tree Grant Park. C. C. Welch played an important part in Colorado's early development. He arrived in Colorado in 1860 and was prominent in local hard rock mining, railroad building, the development of coal fields, and the promotion of irrigation projects. This included building the Welch Ditch, which was begun in 1880, and remains in operation 124 years later. The Welch Ditch had a tremendous impact on the arid plains that it crosses. Like other entrepreneurs of the age, Welch managed to profit from his ditch building efforts in multiple ways. Shortly after completing the Welch Ditch in 1885, Welch applied for a tree grant. He planted 27,000 ash seedlings on about 74 acres, and nurtured them with water from his new ditch. After eight years, 18 acres (25%) remained in a healthy and growing condition. As a result of proving his claim, Welch was granted a large acreage in the area.

Welch called his land "Welchester," combining his family name with the old English word "chester," meaning "camp." The Welch family holdings encompassed a large area around Welchester Tree Grant Park, including their family home at 1115 Zinnia Street.

The Timber Culture Act was repealed in 1891, due to speculation and fraud, but not before 585,243 acres of public land had been granted in Colorado alone. Welchester Tree Grant Park stands in testament to thousands of hard-working settlers who faced adversity daily, but rarely met with success. Unlike most tree grant claims, the Welchester Tree Grant prospered, and today it provides a welcome refuge to people and a wide variety of birds and wildlife.