

Morrill Act - Land Grant College

Lead: In 1862 higher education in the United States received a boost from the gentleman from Vermont, Justin Morrill.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: Before Justin Smith Morrill was elected to Congress on an anti-slavery ticket in 1854 he had been a store clerk, merchant and a farmer. As a congressman he shifted to the new Republican Party and gradually moved up in the leadership, serving as Speaker of the House beginning in

1865. Moving over to the Senate he represented Vermont in that body for 31 years before his death in 1898. In the Senate he was Chairman of the Finance Committee and there insured the completion of the Washington Monument and a major expansion of the Library of Congress.

However, it is for a cause he championed first as a Representative that was his best national contribution. In 1857 he introduced a measure to establish a network of colleges founded through the assistance of federal land-grants and primary intended to boost the teaching of agriculture, mechanical and industrial arts and military science. Land was set aside in the amount of 30,000 acres for each

Senator and Congressman from a state. Land would be sold and proceeds used for higher education, sometimes with states devoting it entirely to a single college, sometimes to a string of colleges, usually public institutions but occasionally to private schools such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Some schools used their grants wisely, Cornell for instance, sold its million acres for over \$5.50 per acre a princely sum in that era. Others were not so fortunate and it became obvious that further help would be needed if the schools created under the original law were to survive. Morrill responded in 1890 with a second act which provided them regular cash grants to

the so-called land-grant colleges. For those states which continued segregation, the second act required that a equitable amount be devoted to starting Black colleges before the money would flow.

Morrill's legislation continued a practice of government support for higher education that extended back to the early 1600s when the English Crown designated 10,000 acres for an educational institution in Virginia. His vision of an enlightened society secured the future for higher education in America.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

Johnson, Eldon L. "Misconceptions about the Early Land-Grant Colleges," *Journal of Higher Education* 52 (4, 1981), 333-351.

Preer, Jean. "Just and Equitable Division: Jim Crow and the 1890 Land-Grant College Act," *Prologue* 22 (4, 1990), 323-337.

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