

Prior to the establishment of USDA, agriculture, though a major interest within the country, did not have a department or bureau within the federal government. However Lincoln, recognized the importance of farming for the strength of the nation and thus created numerous new governmental support systems.

In addition to the USDA, he signed the Morrill Land Grant College Act. This enabled land to be donated to states for colleges that specialized in agriculture and mechanical arts. The University of New Hampshire is one such Land Grant College. When President Lincoln spoke of the importance of educating farmers, he said, “. . . no other human occupation opens so wide a field of profitable and agreeable combination of labor with cultivated thought, as agriculture.”

Another piece of legislation that Lincoln signed in 1862 was the Homestead Act. This law stated that any American or prospective citizen who was the head of a family and at least 21 years old could receive 160 acres of public land. If the settler lived there for five years and made improvements they would receive title to the land. This act enabled a more orderly settlement of the frontier and encouraged the development of smaller farms. Even at that time there was competition from large farms (mostly southern plantations) which was making it hard for smaller farmers to get established and survive. Not all of these claims were successful, as life on the frontier was difficult. However the Homestead Act is responsible for 10% of all U.S. lands being transferred into private hands. Visit the National Archives and their “Teaching with Documents” section to learn more: <http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/homestead-act/>

The establishment of USDA, the Homestead Act, land grant colleges and other agricultural legislation signed by President Lincoln helped to transform American farming. Below are some examples of how things have changed in our country since those early days. Don’t let anyone tell you that history isn’t important; it laid the foundation for where we are today.

Changes in agriculture from Lincoln’s time until today:

	1860*	2010**	% Change
Number of farms	2,044,000	2,201,000	7.68
Total acreage	407,213,000	921,000,000	126.17
Average acreage per farm	199	418	110.05
Total U.S. population	31,443,321*** (10.6/sq. mi)	308,745,538 (87.4/sq. mi)	881.91
Labor force in agriculture	15,141,000***	2,113,000	-86.05
% of population in agriculture	48%	0.68%	N/A

Figures from <http://www.nal.usda.gov/agriculture-then-and-now>