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Homestead National Monument Celebrates Heritage Center Opening on the 145th Anniversary of the Signing of the Homestead Act into Law

May 20, 2007 (Beatrice, NE). The new Homestead Heritage Center at Homestead National Monument of America was dedicated today. The new 10,600-SF facility, designed by GWWO, Inc./Architects (GWWO) of Baltimore, Maryland, commemorates the Homestead Act of 1862, one of the most significant and enduring events in the westward expansion of the United States. Today's opening was celebrated on the 145th anniversary of the signing of the Act into law.

Approved as part of the Park's General Management Plan in December 1999, the center includes 21 exhibit areas displaying many of the more than 52,000 artifacts in the Monument's collection, most of which have never been available for public viewing due to limited space in existing facilities. The center also houses a theater, information services, bookstore, curatorial and office spaces and an area for viewing the homesteading land records that the Monument hopes to soon bring online and make available for public research.

The dramatic design is based on the homesteading experience and is a distinguished form on the landscape. "The building is intended to grow from the land and to symbolize the struggles and triumphs of the original homesteaders," says GWWO President and Design Principal Alan Reed.

"The new facility will have a significant impact on our ability to not only tell the homesteading story, but to protect and preserve its artifacts and history," says Mark Engler, Superintendent of Homestead National Monument of America.

Homestead National Monument of America, located in southeast Nebraska, commemorates the Homestead Act of 1862 and the far-reaching effects it had upon the landscape and people of the plains. By granting 160 acres of free land to claimants, the Act allowed nearly any man or woman a chance to live the American dream. Located on the site of the one of the first homesteads claimed, the National Monument is a tribute to the courage and tenacity of the early settlers.

GWWO, Inc./Architects is a full service architectural firm that specializes in the planning and design of cultural and educational facilities, with emphasis on quality design that is both inspirational and evocative. Other firm projects include the new Ford Orientation Center and new Donald W. Reynolds Museum and Education Center at George Washington's Mount Vernon, a new Education Center for the Russell W. Peterson Urban Wildlife Refuge in Wilmington, Delaware and the expansion and renovation of the Museum of the Rockies in Bozeman, Montana.

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Homestead Heritage Center Design Embodies the Homesteading Experience

Building Grows from the Land to Symbolize Struggles & Triumphs of Homesteaders

Every aspect of the new Heritage Center is intended to offer visitors a total educational experience. The parking lot encompasses exactly an acre (1/160 of an original homestead), in answer to the "how big is an acre?" question that is routinely asked by visitors; the approach to the Center includes exhibits along the path; and the building itself symbolizes the struggles and triumphs of homesteaders.

"The story of the homesteaders is a powerful one, grounded in their simple existence," says Alan Reed, GWWO president and design principal. "The essence of the American pioneering story is that survival depended on the ability to work the land. This experience forged symbiotic relationships involving the interdependency of man, his tools and the land. This is what we were thinking about as we approached the design of this project."

Visitor Experience. The visitor's experience of Homestead National Monument of America begins when they enter the park. Planning for this project considered this experience from this starting point, through the building, and onto the prairie.

Transition. Upon approach from east to west, the Heritage Center is visible at a distance. Distinct from the surrounding farm buildings, it is clearly a destination. However, as visitors enter the site, the view of the Heritage Center is lost as the site becomes more prominent. Visitors become enveloped within the planted fields and the entry sequence provides a transition zone where the developments of the modern world are left behind – a metaphorical journey backwards from modern agrarian society to the virgin prairie many homesteaders encountered.

Approach. As visitors enter the parking area, the Heritage Center re-emerges in the distance. Cars and buses are left behind as the final leg of the journey is completed on foot, symbolic of the struggle the homesteaders faced as they neared their destination. A 160-foot-long “living wall” runs from the parking lot to the center and includes exhibits about all 30 of the homesteading states. Following the wall, visitors get their first look at the new center, a two-story building with roof upturned.

Entry. As visitors enter the Center, the view explodes upward and outward. Initially, only the sky with a windmill silhouetted in the foreground is visible. However, as visitors move through the lobby, the view opens up to the prairie – the same view that greeted homesteaders over 140 years ago. Careful siting enables the architecture to frame a view of the restored prairie of the Freeman homestead (the first claimed), emphasizing the untouched vastness that was the West. As visitors circulate through the building and explore the exhibits, views to the landscape are maintained.

Exit. After visiting the Heritage Center, visitors exit into an outdoor “activities plaza.” The plaza provides access to the Freeman homestead, the Palmer-Epard cabin and the Park's trail system. From the vantage point of the plaza, the restored prairie is poignantly juxtaposed with the surrounding countryside.

Architecture. Designed to create a distinguishable form on the landscape, the new building features an upturned roof that is symbolic of sod being turned by a plow. The building's futuristic design is reflective of the hopes and dreams of early settlers and their quests for the American Dream. The form responds to the park's needs by creating a recognizable destination that is immediately identified by visitors entering the Park from the east, while screening the building from adjacent neighborhoods to the north. Intended to “grow from the land,” the building nestles into the landscape and a portion is constructed below grade in order to provide shelter from tornados when necessary.

Offering an experience of surprise and discovery, the center embraces the resource it interprets and views out punctuate the stories told within. The ability to view the tallgrass prairie that surrounds the center also gives visitors the opportunity to see rangers interact and manage the prairie. The Monument maintains the oldest restored tallgrass prairie in the entire National Park System.

The main glass wall and clerestory windows bring an abundance of natural light into the lobby. Visitor services (toilets, information, gift shop, audio/visual and park offices) are located off of the lobby. Wayfinding is enhanced by the open design and unobstructed view to exhibits on the lower level. Visitors circulate via a grand stairway, which is located with direct access to the exterior plaza and restored prairie.

Exhibits. The 21 exhibits in the new Heritage Center are intended to give a national look at the Homestead Act and to examine its widespread impacts. Exhibit titles include:

- Legislating Westward Expansion
- Unleashing an Agricultural Revolution
- Opportunity and Displacement
- Confronting Reality
- Reading Photographs
- The First and Last Homesteaders
- Homestead Life and Community
- Success and Failure
- The Enduring Legacy

Exhibits feature interactive components, including videos and games designed to utilize different technologies. "We want to make sure we can engage all age groups," says Mark Engler, Superintendent of the Homestead National Monument of America.

Brookes & Company of Frederick, Maryland served as the Exhibit Design firm for the project.