**Our Documents - Dawes Act (1887)**

Native American policy during the period from 1870 to 1900 marked a departure from earlier policies that were dominated by removal, treaties, reservations, and war. The new policy focused on breaking up reservations by granting land portions to individual Native Americans. People thought that if a native person adopted white clothing and ways, and was responsible for his own farm, he would gradually drop his *Indian-ness* and be **assimilated** into the population.

On February 8, 1887, Congress passed the Dawes Act. The law allowed for the President to break up reservation land, which was held in common by the members of a tribe, into small portions to be divided out to individual Native Americans. Thus, Native Americans living on tribal land were granted portions of reservation land.

In 1893 President Grover Cleveland appointed the Dawes Commission to negotiate with the Cherokees, Creeks, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Seminoles, who were known as the Five Civilized Tribes. As a result of these negotiations, several acts were passed that gave land to members of the Five Civilized Tribes in exchange for getting rid of their tribal governments and recognizing the US state and Federal governments.

The purpose of the Dawes Act and the acts that followed was to protect Native American property rights, particularly during the land rushes of the 1890s, but in many cases the results were very different. The land given to individual Native Americans included desert or near-desert lands unsuitable for farming. In places where the land was good for farming, the techniques of farming were much different from their tribal way of life. Many Indians did not want to take up agriculture, and those who did want to farm could not afford the tools, animals, seed, and other supplies necessary to get started. These Native Americans were forced to sell their land to white settlers.