



Henry Williams and Reece Switzer, early residents of the Thomas Johnson and Henry Williams Farmstead. Copyprint from Historic American Building Survey Field Records, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

African American Farmers of Nicodemus, Kansas: An Archaeological Examination of the Thomas Johnson and Henry Williams Farmstead

by Margaret C. Wood, Christine D. Garst, Robert J. Hoard, and Virginia A. Wulfkuhle

Eager to escape persecution and the poor living conditions of the Reconstruction South, thousands of African Americans headed west in the latter part of the nineteenth century in search of economic opportunities and political freedom. Kansas became the destination for many emigrants from the South, who were drawn by the availability of homestead lands and the powerful mythical association of the state with freedom, racial tolerance, and justice.¹

In 1877, a small group of African American emigrants established the town of Nicodemus, Kansas, which they purposefully established as a predominantly black community. Among the earliest settlers in Nicodemus were Thomas and Zerina Johnson, who homesteaded a property northeast of town, built a home, broke the sod, and raised a family. Generations of their family occupied the land and made a living as farmers. While all farmers in western Kansas faced challenges presented by nature, geography, and isolation, the Johnsons, their descendants, and other black farmers surrounding the town of Nicodemus bore the added burden of racial prejudice.

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1. Hannah Ballard, "Fashioning a 'Free State': Race, Violence, and Myth-Making in Kansas, 1840–1880," *University of Kansas Journal of Undergraduate Research* (2011), https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/bitstream/handle/1808/13086/Ballard_jur11.pdf;sequence=1.

Historians have long been drawn to the story of black towns in the West, particularly the forerunner of them all, Nicodemus, Kansas.² Yet little is known about the daily lives, aspirations, struggles, and fears of people living in the black farming communities that surrounded black towns such as Nicodemus. Historian Norman L. Crockett points out that residents of both rural and urban black settlements in the West “failed to record their experiences and whites were not interested in preserving and collecting material on black towns.”³

In 2006 and 2007, archaeologists and historians collaborated to piece together the lived experiences of one African American farm family by examining the archaeological remains of the Johnson-Williams farmstead. The land homesteaded by Thomas and Zerina Johnson in the late nineteenth century was owned by their grandson Henry Williams in the early twentieth century. Archaeological remains, oral histories, and documentary evidence help document the everyday experiences and struggles of black farmers around Nicodemus and reveal how race shaped the lives of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century farmers in western Kansas.

Establishment of a Black Community in Western Kansas (1877–1890)

In the summer of 1877, W. R. Hill, a white land speculator, stepped to the podium of a small African American Baptist church near Lexington, Kentucky. Hill was working to attract new settlers to the Solomon River Valley of Kansas. He described the region as blessed with rich soil, plentiful water, stone for building, timber for fuel, a mild climate, and a herd of wild horses waiting to be tamed to the plow.⁴ The new settlement, Hill explained, would be special—an all-black community that would

flourish on the Great Plains. Hill assured the prospective migrants that an initial group of thirty colonists, recruited from the African American community in Topeka, Kansas, had already settled the town and were preparing for the new arrivals. Approximately 150 people from the Lexington area paid the five-dollar fee and signed up for the September migration to Nicodemus, Kansas.⁵

Nicodemus was an early expression of a trend in the development of all-black towns that took place in many western states in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Economic hardship, racial violence, and intolerance prompted a vast migration of blacks from southern states to the “promised land” of the West. Those who established and settled in black towns were seeking economic opportunities, self-determination, autonomy, and safety. By 1881, African American emigrants had founded twelve agricultural colonies in Kansas and dozens of others in Oklahoma, Nebraska, New Mexico, and Colorado.⁶

As in other parts of Kansas, residential segregation was as much a product of white hostility as the desire of black settlers to live near one another. Indeed, land speculators W. R. Hill and W. H. Smith, a black businessman from Topeka, envisioned and implemented settlements in western Kansas based on the premise of residential racial segregation. In 1877, Hill and Smith proposed to develop two townsites in Graham County: one for blacks (Nicodemus) and the other for whites (Hill City). While complete residential segregation was never a reality, these communities reflect an apparent embrace by the numerically and socially dominant white population of what historian Randall B. Woods calls the “doctrine of parallel development.” According to this approach to race relations, blacks should be accorded equal protection under the law and theoretically equal opportunity in the marketplace but not social equality in the form of the racial integration of clubs, societies, churches, entertainment facilities, neighborhoods, or, in this instance, a town.⁷

For Hill, the only white member of Nicodemus’s founding group, the settlement of the black community was motivated by both economic and political interest. Hill profited from the fee he charged to transport migrants to Nicodemus, collecting as much as thirty dollars apiece to settle them on free government land. Hill also had a

2. Norman L. Crockett, *The Black Towns* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1979); Kenneth Marvin Hamilton, *Black Towns and Profit: Promotion and Development in the Trans-Appalachian West, 1877–1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991); Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528–1990* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998); Roy L. Brooks, *Integration or Separation? A Strategy for Racial Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); *Promised Land on the Solomon: Black Settlement at Nicodemus, Kansas* prepared for the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior (Washington, DC, 1986); Kenneth Marvin Hamilton, “The Origins and Early Promotion of Nicodemus: A Pre-Exodus, All-Black Town,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 5 (Winter 1982): 220–42; Charlotte Hinger, *Nicodemus: Post-Reconstruction Politics and Racial Justice in Western Kansas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016).

3. Crockett, *The Black Towns*, xi.

4. James N. Leiker, “Race Relations in the Sunflower State, a Review Essay,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 25 (Autumn 2002): 214.

5. Kenneth Marvin Hamilton, “The Settlement of Nicodemus: Its Origins and Early Promotion,” in *Promised Land on the Solomon*, 5–8.

6. Crockett, *The Black Towns*, xii; Hamilton, *Black Towns and Profit*, 153.

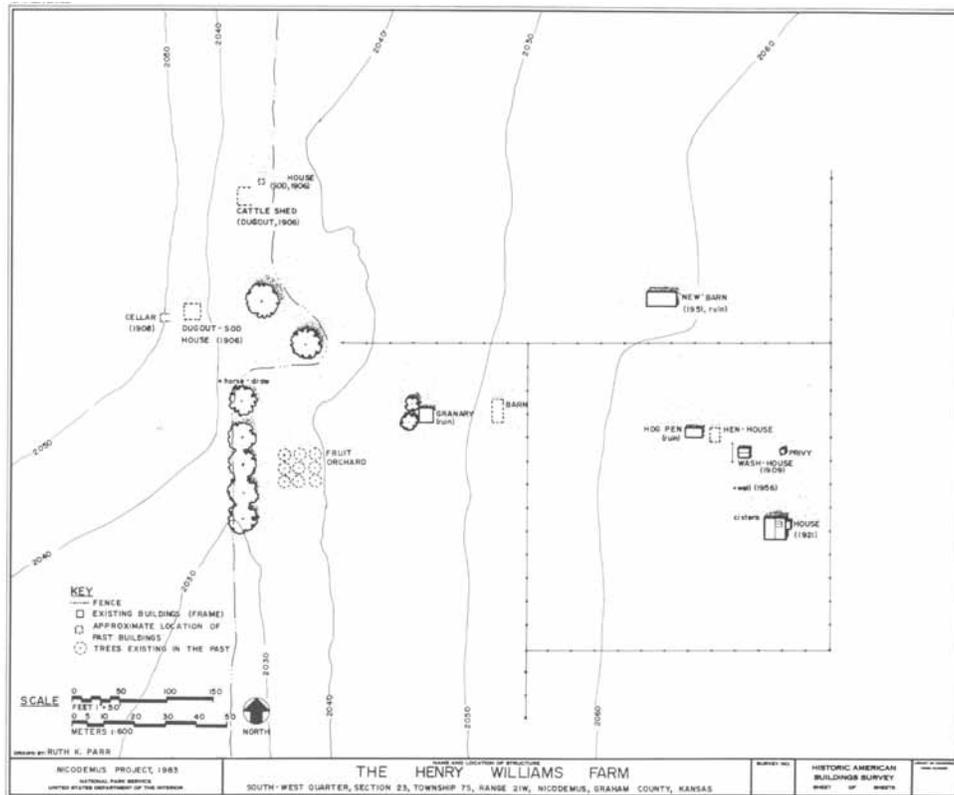
7. Randall B. Woods, “Integration, Exclusion, or Segregation? The ‘Color Line’ in Kansas, 1878–1900,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 14 (April 1983): 181–98; Hamilton, *Black Towns and Profit*, 3.

political motive that dovetailed with his financial interests. He hoped that the black settlers of Nicodemus would vote to make Hill City, his proposed white community, the county seat, enhancing the potential for his future financial gain.⁸

When the Kentucky migrants arrived at the Nicodemus townsite on September 17, 1877, they discovered that Hill's claims of a bountiful and bucolic landscape had been wildly exaggerated. In truth, Graham County remained unorganized and relatively unsettled in 1877, precisely because it was not as conducive to agriculture as Hill had claimed. Many considered the area, with annual rainfall of less than thirty inches, too dry for farming. A few decades earlier, this area of the Plains had been referred to as "The Great American Desert." No timber was available for building or fuel except for a few stands of softwood along the rivers and streams.

Transportation was a problem as well. No railroads or stage lines served the area in 1877, and the nearest towns were more than a day's ride away.⁹ About fifty of the new arrivals turned around the day after they arrived in Nicodemus and headed back east. Those who remained began preparing for the coming winter.

Like contemporaneous white settlers in the area, the new Nicodemus residents began constructing traditional frontier structures: dugouts. Common in the region from the time of early settlement in the 1840s and through the 1880s, dugouts provided shelter in a region that lacked abundant or easily available resources for building. Dugouts were made with hand tools by carving out a rectangular hole in the slope of a hill and then covering it



Site plan of the Henry Williams farm, Graham County, Kansas, drawn by Ruth K. Parr. Courtesy of the Historic American Buildings Survey, 1983. Archaeological excavations reported here focused on the dugout-sod house and cellar (left center). The informant(s) and the source(s) of dates for the structures are unknown.

with a roof of poles, brush, and enough dirt to keep out the rain. They used scrap lumber, stone, or sod to construct the front wall and included a small fireplace for cooking and heating. Settlers who could obtain glass were able to install small windows for light and ventilation.¹⁰ Local limestone, ground and packed into the floor, controlled both insects and dirt. Sometimes the floors and walls were plastered with a clay-like mixture of water and a yellow mineral native to the area, referred to as "magnesia."¹¹

From the outset, the settlers at Nicodemus were in a precarious financial situation. Historian Kenneth Hamilton argues that the fundamental differences between black emigrants to Nicodemus and white settlers in the county

8. Hamilton, "The Settlement of Nicodemus," 7; Hinger, *Nicodemus*, 37-38.

9. Daniel Hickman, "Notes Concerning the Nicodemus Colony," transcribed by G. A. Root, Graham County History File, June 1913, Archives, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka.

10. O. C. Gibbs, "The Negro Exodus: A Visit to the Nicodemus Colony, in Graham County, Kansas," *Chicago Tribune*, April 25, 1879.

11. Clayton Fraser, "Nicodemus: The Architectural Development and Decline of an American Town," in *Promised Land on the Solomon*, 38; Bertha Carter, interview by Margaret C. Wood, Nicodemus, Kansas, May 2006, field notes at Archeology Office, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas.

were money and access to capital. Settlers who spent most of their money transporting themselves and their goods to Nicodemus and financing a claim found that they had few extra resources to support themselves. Poverty, the legacy of slavery, meant that black settlers embarked on the endeavor of settlement on an uneven playing field.¹² As a result, the fledgling colony experienced severe shortages of food and other supplies during the first two years. Lack of jobs in the immediate vicinity eventually forced many men and some women to seek employment in more distant communities.

In response to the hardships, the townsfolk reached out to other communities, private charities, and Native Americans in the region. Support from these sources helped to sustain the community for the first year of settlement and intermittently over the next several years.¹³

One of the most urgent tasks in the initial years of the colony was breaking sod to create fields for corn and wheat as well as gardens. The first group of settlers in 1877 lacked horses and equipment, so whole families—men, women, and children—participated in the arduous task of breaking the prairie by hand. The arrival of several teams and implements in the spring and summer of 1878 greatly accelerated the plowing process. Newcomers who owned teams of horses or oxen helped those who did not. Despite their efforts, the first crops failed. Determined to succeed, rural families continued to turn and cultivate the land. In spring 1879, the average farm had seven acres or more in cultivation.¹⁴

By 1880, Nicodemus was emerging as a thriving community, and 264 blacks (84 percent) and fifty-two whites (16 percent) resided in the town and surrounding township.¹⁵ Nicodemus reached its zenith in 1886. At that time, three churches served the residents' spiritual needs. There were three hotels, two grocers, a bank, two newspapers, a lumberyard, a furniture store, a blacksmith shop, a millinery shop, an implement dealer, a meat market, several land agents, a drug store, a lawyer, a doctor, and many smaller businesses. Although Nicodemus was

founded as an all-black town, white people owned and operated businesses and worked with black leaders to promote the community. Most of the town's social and athletic organizations, including the baseball team and band, were integrated.¹⁶ In 1886, boosters who hoped to attract more settlers and a railroad line to Nicodemus shifted gears and began to promote the community as a harmonious integrated town rather than a black town. Even so, the black population remained constant, while the white population became smaller. By 1895, the population of the township consisted of 282 blacks (92 percent) and twenty-five whites (8 percent).¹⁷

Nicodemus's fortunes began to decline in the late 1880s. By 1888, three railroads had bypassed the town despite its purchase of \$16,000 in bonds to attract a rail line. The impact was devastating for commercial enterprises. One by one, businesses relocated to other, more prosperous towns. Many dismantled or moved their newly erected buildings, accelerating the town's physical decline. The population of the town plummeted as people moved away or settled on farms in the surrounding township. By comparison, Hill City continued to thrive throughout the 1890s. Nicodemus did not develop into the economic hub that it had aspired to become, but it continued to be the social heart of a close-knit rural farming community.¹⁸

A Farming Community (1890-1910)

Although the population of the town of Nicodemus dwindled to a few dozen souls, many African American families stayed, relocating on their previously homesteaded farms in the surrounding township. Living on their fledgling farms, these families faced harsh conditions as they struggled with the unpredictable environment of western Kansas. An 1885 blizzard destroyed 40 percent of the wheat crop. A prairie fire swept through in 1887, destroying many crops, houses, and barns. The fire was followed by a drought that resulted in complete crop failures in 1889 and 1890. Serious drought conditions continued through the mid-1890s.¹⁹ Prices for corn, wheat,

12. Hamilton, "The Settlement of Nicodemus," 7.

13. *Ibid.*, 8.

14. Gibbs, "The Negro Exodus."

15. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Tenth Census of the United States* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1880); Margaret C. Wood, *Explorations of the Struggles and Promise of African American Settlement on the Great Plains: Archaeological Survey and Testing of Sites Related to the Settlement Period and Early History of Nicodemus, Kansas* (Topeka, KS: Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Washburn University, 2007), 32.

16. Claire O'Brien, "'With One Mighty Pull': Interracial Town Boosting in Nicodemus, Kansas," *Great Plains Quarterly* 16 (Spring 1996): 117–29; Hamilton, *Black Towns and Profit*, 24; Fraser, "Architectural Development," 47–50.

17. Kansas State Census, *1885 Kansas State Census*, Microfilm reel K53, Archives, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka; Hamilton, "The Settlement of Nicodemus," 19.

18. Fraser, "Architectural Development," 52, 57.

19. Quintard Taylor, "Black Towns," *Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History*, edited by Colin A. Palmer, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New



*North and west sides of the Henry Williams house at the Johnson and Williams farmstead. Views of this structure are also shown on page 63 of Clayton Fraser's chapter in *Promised Land on the Solomon* and at <https://loc.gov/pictures/item/ks0137/>.*

and farm products fell during this period, so even when crops were successful, profits were lean.²⁰ For people who had been on the land for only ten to twelve years, these events were overwhelming. In the late 1880s and early 1890s, many homesteaders gave up and sold out. Land companies and eastern banks acquired large blocks of ground from desperate farmers. Between 1885 and 1900, ownership rates in Nicodemus Township dropped from 96 percent to 54 percent, and the number of farms fell from seventy to forty-eight. Others attempted to hold on to their properties by borrowing money, but this tactic

was rarely successful. Many farmers, unable to meet their loan payments, defaulted, and banks foreclosed.²¹

An examination of land and personal property values in selected Graham County townships between 1886 and 1900 reveals that the troubles encountered by all farmers in the county during this period were compounded for the black farmers of Nicodemus Township. The boundaries, sizes, and populations of the townships varied over time, so one-to-one comparison is not valid. Nevertheless, it is possible to get a general impression of relative wealth in these townships. Over time, assessors consistently appraised Nicodemus Township properties as the lowest-valued land in Graham County. The disparity was striking. For example, in 1900, the assessed value of

York: Macmillan Reference, 2006), 280–86; Lula Craig, "A History of Nicodemus Kansas," 1915, Manuscript RH MS D250, Kansas Collection, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas Libraries, Lawrence; *Nicodemus National Historic Site, Cultural Landscape Report*, prepared by the Midwest Regional Office, National Park Service (Omaha, NE, 2003), 66.

20. National Park Service, *Nicodemus National Historic Site*, 61.

21. Wood, *Explorations of the Struggles and Promise*, 34; Fraser, "Architectural Development," 53, 57.

Nicodemus Township land and city lots totaled \$43,813, compared to \$75,036 in Hill City Township and \$154,070 in Moreland Township. The average land value for all thirteen townships in Graham County was \$86,900.²² While differences may have existed in the quality of land, access to transportation lines, and political status among Graham County townships, it is also likely that structural racism impacted the land valuation in Nicodemus Township.

The value of personal property tells a more disquieting tale. In 1886, the average value of personal property in Nicodemus Township was \$9.02 per person, contrasted with \$26.68 in Gettysburg and \$46.64 in Hill City townships. By 1888, the value of personal property per person in Nicodemus Township (\$24.43) was the third highest in the county, behind only Hill City (\$53.05) and Wild Horse (\$28.86) Townships.²³ These figures suggest that in the early years of settlement before the railroad lines bypassed Nicodemus, residents were able to accumulate some wealth. Seven years later (1896), the situation had changed dramatically, and the average resident of Nicodemus Township had \$1.35 worth of personal property, compared to averages of \$18.86 per person in Hill City Township and \$13.89 in Gettysburg Township.²⁴

These data reflect the unique challenges faced by the black farmers of Nicodemus Township. Structural racism is a complicated issue, but it is difficult to imagine any other reason that Nicodemus land would have had so much less value than the surrounding areas. The ability of Nicodemus's early settlers to overcome the barriers that they faced as blacks in a predominantly white county is attested to by the fact that they were able to accrue a fair amount of personal property in the decade following settlement, comparing positively with other Graham County residents. After the environmental and economic disruptions between the mid-1880s and mid-1890s, Nicodemus residents had a more difficult time

22. Kansas State Board of Agriculture, *Fifth Biennial Report, 1885–1886* (Topeka, KS: State Printer, 1887); Kansas State Board of Agriculture, *Sixth Biennial Report, 1887–1888* (Topeka, KS: State Printer, 1889); Kansas State Board of Agriculture, *Seventh Biennial Report, 1889–1890* (Topeka, KS: State Printer, 1891); Kansas State Board of Agriculture, *Twelfth Biennial Report, 1899–1900* (Topeka: Kansas State Board of Agriculture, 1901), 730.

23. The value of personal property per person is calculated by dividing the total value of personal property by the population count for each township listed in Graham County in the *Biennial Reports*. *Fifth Biennial Report, 1885–1886*, 626; *Seventh Biennial Report, 1889–1890*, 177.

24. Kansas State Board of Agriculture, *Tenth Biennial Report, 1895–1896* (Topeka: Kansas State Board of Agriculture, 1896), 626.

recovering than did their predominantly white neighbors in the surrounding townships.

Crop yields began to improve for farmers in western Kansas in the early 1900s. Modern methods were adopted by many local farmers, and educational programs, sponsored by the Kansas State Agricultural College and the Western Kansas Industrial Training School, offered new opportunities. In addition, the industrial training school began to rent and lend equipment to farmers who did not own their own machinery.²⁵ As they began to take advantage of the new techniques, improved technologies, and generally positive conditions, crop production increased. After 1916, farmers started to break more ground, and crop yields were high throughout the 1920s. By the 1930s, rural communities in the Midwest struggled to survive, battling declining crops and population and the devastating effects of the Dust Bowl. By the 1950s, the loss of younger residents due to the lack of educational and employment opportunities left communities such as Nicodemus with older farm owners, aging infrastructure, and few sustaining assets.²⁶

History of the Johnson and Williams Families and Land Ownership of the Farmstead

The 2006 and 2007 archaeological investigations were conducted on land that originally was settled by the Johnson-Williams family. This large, complex, and interdependent extended family from Kentucky is representative of the homesteading farmers associated with the unincorporated town of Nicodemus. The primary residents of the property were Thomas and Zerina Johnson and their dependents in the first generation, followed by Henry and Cora (Johnson) Williams and their children in the next generation. Other family members joined and left these households periodically.

Although oral histories indicate that the family was on this property as early as 1878, Thomas Johnson did not file the final receipts for his claim until 1885 and received the patent on June 14, 1887, as did his son Henry Johnson and son-in-law Charles Williams.²⁷ The seven-year delay in filing these claims may have been due to the difficulty

25. National Park Service, *Nicodemus National Historic Site*, 67.

26. Margaret C. Wood, "'Wake Nicodemus': African American Settlement on the Plains of Kansas," U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Archaeology Program, accessed September 27, 2017, <https://www.nps.gov/archeology/sites/npsites/nicodemus.htm>.

27. U.S. Department of Interior, Bureau of Land Management, General Land Office Records, Federal Land Patents, <https://glorerecords.blm.gov/default.aspx>.



Participants in the 2007 Kansas Archeology Training Program field school excavating the dugout/sod-up residence.

that Nicodemus residents had finding professionals to complete surveys for them. Daniel Hickman, who related his account of Nicodemus's founding to George Root, archivist and historian at the Kansas Historical Society, pointed out that racism played a role in preventing blacks who settled at Nicodemus from documenting their claims. Hickman said that "some opposition developed in this [county] and adjoining counties at the settlement of the Negroes in the vicinity, and no surveyor in Graham County could be induced to take the job of making the survey." Nicodemus settlers eventually were able to hire a surveyor from Norton, Kansas. Shortly after completing the job, he died under mysterious circumstances. According to Hickman, he was killed in Norton County by some unknown person who shot him in ambush.²⁸

Henry Johnson's acreage formed an L-shaped tract in Section 23, bounded by the properties of his children. The Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) township map shows a dugout and a sod house on the parcel owned by the Johnson and Williams families.²⁹

While the extended Johnson-Williams family of thirteen individuals likely migrated as a group, they are listed as five distinct households in the 1880 census records.³⁰ As was the case with many homesteading families, members of the Johnson and Williams families filed claims and worked cooperatively with their kin to assure that they all had the labor and resources to meet their needs. Two of the five Johnson and Williams households in 1880 were headed by women. Ella (Ellen) Johnson, age twenty-one, was listed as a farmer living alone. She received the patent for her property on September 28, 1889.³¹ Mary Johnson was a farmer and head of household, living with her adult son Joseph and his two daughters. In the agricultural census, her son Joseph shows up as working 160 acres.

In 1885, Thomas Johnson, Henry Johnson, Joseph Johnson, and Charles Williams each worked 160 acres. Joseph Johnson and Thomas Johnson appear to have built houses and barns on their lands. Joseph's and Thomas's properties were each estimated to be worth \$1,000, while

28. George A. Root, "Biographical Sketch of Daniel Hickman," George A. Root Collection, 6, Archives, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka.

29. Orval McDaniel, *A History of Nicodemus, Graham County, Kansas* (master's thesis, Fort Hays State College, Hays, KS, July 1950), 126-8; Historic American Buildings Survey, *Nicodemus, Kansas—a National*

Historic Landmark Black Settlement, HABS number KS-49, prepared for the National Park Service (Washington, DC, 1983).

30. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Tenth Census of the United States* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1880).

31. Bureau of Land Management, General Land Office Records, Federal Land Patents.

Charles Williams's and Henry Johnson's holdings were valued at \$500 and \$200, respectively. According to Kansas census records, the family owned \$85 worth of machinery, four milk cows, nine head of cattle, two pigs, and one horse. Like other area farmers, the Johnson and Williams families grew mostly corn and wheat as well as some sorghum and hay for feed. Each farm had at least half an acre planted in potatoes. Collectively, they produced six hundred pounds of butter.³²

A. G. Tallman, publisher of Nicodemus's *Western Cyclone*, visited the Thomas Johnson farm in 1886. In his newspaper article, Tallman suggested that the extended family operated as a common unit, sharing equipment, pooling labor, and diversifying crops among the various farms.

A visit to the farm of Thos. Johnson is enough to encourage the homesick farmer of any state. He and his children, all with families, own a tract of land of a thousand acres about one fourth of which is under cultivation. He has about 60 fine hogs and the whole family owns a large herd of cattle and several fine horses. They have recently bought a twine binder and are in the midst of harvest. When you make a visit to Mr. J's farm do not forget to look at Mrs. Johnson's chickens and ducks.³³

There is a notable difference between Tallman's account of the Johnson farm and the Kansas census information that had been gathered a year earlier.³⁴ Census takers recorded far fewer head of livestock and far less ground under cultivation than Tallman stated. In an attempt to promote the community to outsiders, Tallman may have overestimated the extent of Johnson's herds and crops. Alternatively, the family may have underestimated the extent of their agricultural endeavors to census takers to avoid taxes or other penalties. Whichever was the case, the Johnson and Williams families clearly were doing well by the mid-1880s. This prosperity is consistent with trends identified earlier, suggesting that from the time of settlement until 1888, Nicodemus families increased their personal wealth and the production of their farmlands.

In 1885, Henry Johnson planted more than thirty-seven acres of corn and wheat, while each of his relatives had fewer than sixteen acres planted in these crops. He also owned the only two horses, four of the nine head of cattle, and two of the four milk cows that are listed in the Kansas census records. At this time, Henry's wife, Mary, was a young mother with a six-year-old child, and she produced one hundred pounds of butter. Her mother-in-law, Zerina, produced around three hundred pounds, and her sister-in-law Emma Williams produced two hundred pounds of butter.³⁵ While Henry Johnson appears to have had the most land under cultivation, Joseph Johnson owned a barn, and Henry Williams had invested in expensive farm machinery. These diversified investments in various aspects of agricultural production exemplify the cooperative approach to homesteading practiced by the Johnson and Williams families.

Henry and Mary Johnson lived in their own household in 1885. In the same year, Joseph Johnson and his two young children moved into the house of their Uncle Thomas and Aunt Zerina Johnson. Joseph's mother (also Mary) had been in poor health, and she may have passed away sometime between 1880 and 1885. Perhaps Zerina took over the responsibility of watching Joseph's daughters, Lizzie and Clarinda. In 1885, Thomas and Zerina's younger daughter, Ella Johnson, was no longer listed in the census; however, her name did appear as the owner of three tracts in Section 23, which she claimed in 1886.³⁶ Ella may have married and changed her name around this time, making her difficult to track.

Oral history suggests that Thomas Johnson and his family lived in a dugout on their acreage near an unnamed tributary of Spring Creek. The flowing stream provided freshwater for animals and for various household needs and food. Nicodemus descendant Harold Switzer remembers catching catfish and perch from the creek. Drinking water came from a natural spring that was situated on the bank of the creek.³⁷

From 1878 through 1885, the Johnson and Williams families were able to build a productive farm through the use of cooperative work and support strategies rooted in the ties of extended kinship. Difficult environmental

32. Kansas State Census, 1885 *Kansas State Census*, microfilm reel K-51, Archives, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka.

33. A. G. Tallman, "Visit to the Thomas Johnson Farm," *Western Cyclone* (Nicodemus, KS), July 1, 1886.

34. Kansas State Census, 1885.

35. Ibid.

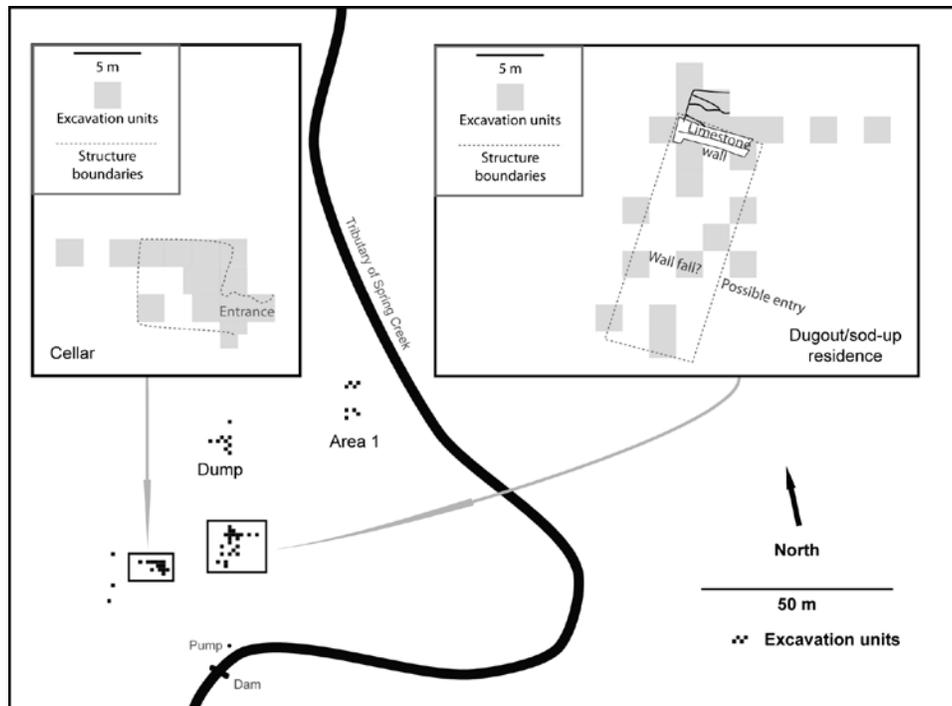
36. McDaniel, *A History of Nicodemus*, 126.

37. Harold Switzer (Nicodemus descendant), interviewed by Margaret Wood, Nicodemus, Kansas, May 2006, field notes at Archeology Office, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka; Kansas State Census, 1885.

and economic times from 1885 through 1895 took a heavy toll on them. Joseph Johnson lost his barn, feed, and many of his animals to an 1887 grass fire. Massive drought and crop failures in 1889 caused many farmers in Nicodemus Township to lose their land, including Thomas and Zerina Johnson.³⁸ In 1889, Thomas and Zerina sold their farm to Horace F. Schwartz of Logan (Phillips County), Kansas. The acreage changed hands several times over the next fifteen years in a complicated series of transfers and eventually fell into the hands of the Midway Land Company.

By 1895, Charles Williams, his wife, Emma (Johnson) Williams, and their four children were the only members of the extended family remaining in Nicodemus Township. Henry Williams continued to work his 160 acres, although the value of both his acreage and his machinery was greatly reduced. Planting fifty acres of corn, Henry now had seven horses, four milk cows, three head of cattle, and two hogs. Emma produced about three hundred pounds of butter.³⁹

Although times were hard, Charles Williams managed to purchase a large tract in the neighboring section in 1899.⁴⁰ Not long after the land transfer, Charles died, leaving his wife, Emma (age forty-seven), sons, Henry (age twenty-two), Charlie (age eighteen), and Neil (age thirteen), and daughter, Maggie (age two). His properties were divided among Emma (320 acres), Henry (160 acres), and Charlie (160 acres).⁴¹ Henry married soon after his



Areas excavated in 2006 and 2007 at the early occupation locations of the Johnson and Williams farmstead. Insets show the cellar and dugout/sod-up residence.

father's death and by 1905 lived separately with his wife, Cora, and daughter, Vernis.

In 1906, Henry Williams purchased the property that had been homesteaded by his grandparents Thomas and Zerina Johnson, bringing the land back into family ownership. It is not clear whether Henry, Cora, and Vernis moved back onto the original Johnson homestead immediately, but in the early 1920s, they built a frame house on the property.

In summary, the Thomas Johnson claim likely was occupied by the family from 1878 until 1889, when Johnson sold the tract. It was held by absentee owners between 1889 and 1906. During that time, the land may have been leased to other farmers, or it may have gone fallow. In 1906, Henry Williams, grandson of Thomas Johnson, purchased the land that his grandparents had homesteaded. Henry and his family moved back onto the land and may have lived in the old dugout built by his grandparents until he could construct a frame farmhouse that he completed in 1921.

The story of the Johnson-Williams family exemplifies the struggles of all farmers who worked to obtain a living from the harsh western Kansas landscape in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Working as an extended family cooperative network, they were able to

38. Historic American Buildings Survey, *Nicodemus, Kansas; Promised Land on the Solomon*; Don Burden, Heather Lee Miller, Paul Sadin, and Dawn Vogel, *Historic Resources Study: Nicodemus National Historic Site*, prepared for Midwest Regional Office, National Park Service (Omaha, NE, 2011); Craig, "A History of Nicodemus Kansas," 1-7.

39. Kansas State Census, *1895 Kansas State Census*, microfilm reel K-53, Archives, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka.

40. McDaniel, *A History of Nicodemus*, 126; T7S R21W, SE ¼ of Section 22.

41. Kansas State Census, *1905 Kansas State Census*, microfilm reel K-58, Archives, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka.

build some wealth and resources when times were good. Environmental and economic challenges buffeted them, and elements of structural racism made it more difficult for them to overcome these obstacles. Lower land values, less personal property, and compromised family networks made the struggle to survive even harder for the black farm families of Nicodemus Township.

Archaeological Investigation of the Johnson-Williams Farmstead

In 2003, Sherda Williams, then superintendent of the Nicodemus National Historic Site, and Angela Bates, director of the Nicodemus Historical Society, began compiling information to locate and evaluate sites related to the town of Nicodemus with potential for having archaeological material related to the early settlement period. An important source of information was the 1983 HABS report on places associated with the Nicodemus settlement. This survey included oral history interviews with residents and the preparation of maps of several properties, including the Thomas Johnson and Henry Williams farmstead.⁴²

In April 2006, Williams and Bates were joined by Margaret Wood of Washburn University and Steve DeVore of the Midwest Archeological Center of the National Park Service to assess ten sites with favorable archaeological prospects. The methods included a pedestrian survey augmented by an informal metal detector survey. The Thomas Johnson and Henry Williams farmstead was recognized as having substantial research potential.⁴³

A systematic geophysical survey, conducted by DeVore and Jay Sturdevant, also of the Midwest Archeological Center, revealed anomalies for subsurface testing.⁴⁴ It confirmed the presence of a high density of artifacts near the depressions that tentatively were identified as dugouts by the HABS survey and interviews with local informants. Thus, multiple lines of evidence converged, providing sufficient evidence that the site had good potential for intact and informative archaeological deposits.

Excavations took place at the Johnson-Williams farmstead in the summers of 2006 and 2007. In 2006,

Wood led a Washburn University field school. This work focused on two depressions that were identified as a dugout residence and a dugout cellar in the 1983 HABS documentation of the site.

In June 2007, the Kansas Historical Society in partnership with the Kansas Anthropological Association, Washburn University, and Howard University conducted excavations as part of the Kansas Archeology Training Program Field School, the Washburn University Archaeological Field School, and the Howard University Nicodemus Archaeological Field School. Flordeliz T. Bugarin of Howard University was hired to direct the work.⁴⁵

Excavation of the Cellar

In a 1942 interview, Henry Williams stated that there were three dugouts on the Johnson-Williams property and that these had been constructed before the frame house was built.⁴⁶ Archaeological investigations were conducted in part to test this assertion. In 2006, the Washburn University crew partially excavated the cellar. Distinct soil colors differentiated the edges of the walls and the subsequent soil deposits that had partially filled in the structure. Excavations disclosed that the cellar was cut into a steep slope with an entrance and front elevation facing east-southeast. It measured eleven feet square, providing an area of 121 square feet. Vertical posts and a hinge at the southeast corner indicated the entrance. Two other vertical posts likely served as wall or roof supports. Boards lying horizontally above the original excavated surface of the cellar were floorboards.

Canning jars, ceramic tableware sherds, and food remains, such as animal bones, were recovered from the cellar interior. Six peach pits were found in the occupation levels, leading Wood to question whether the peaches were grown locally or imported from a neighboring state.⁴⁷ Also recovered were wooden planks that may have been used as shelves. Several holes extending horizontally into the north wall may have served as shelf supports.

A small depression just outside the west wall might have been the remains of a vent or smokestack. This suggestion is consistent with the possibility that the cel-

42. Historic American Buildings Survey, *Nicodemus, Kansas*; Sherda Williams, "Excavation of an Early Dugout Homestead at Nicodemus, Kansas." *CRM: The Journal of Heritage Stewardship* 5 (Winter 2008): 84–87.

43. Wood, *Explorations of the Struggles and Promise*, 59, 62; the Thomas Johnson and Henry Williams farmstead is designated by the Kansas archaeological site number 14GH102.

44. Steven L. DeVore, *Geophysical Investigations of Two Dugout Locations Associated with Nicodemus National Historic Site, Graham County,*

Kansas, Archeological Center, National Park Service (Lincoln, NE, 2007).

45. Flordeliz T. Bugarin, "KATP Searches for the Nicodemus Past," *Kansas Preservation* 29 (July / August 2007), 7–13.

46. William J. Belleau, *The Nicodemus Colony of Graham County, Kansas* (master's thesis, Fort Hays State College, Hays, KS, 1943), 15.

47. Wood, *Explorations of the Struggles and Promise*, 115.

lar served as a smokehouse. Unfortunately, there was insufficient time to excavate in this locale to better understand the depression. Apparently, the cellar was used as a dump after it had served its primary purpose. The complete base of a treadle sewing machine was recovered from its center. The base was manufactured by the Singer Manufacturing Company of New York with a patent date of April 15, 1879.

Excavation of the Dugout/Sod-up Residence

The domestic structure, a dugout/sod-up house, was located to the east of and downhill from the cellar. Its surface expression was a depression of approximately nineteen by thirty feet. Initial excavations along the north end exposed a plaster-faced limestone wall.

Subsequent excavations focused on defining the walls and excavating to the floor of the interior. A distinct line of plaster on the interior of both the north and west walls was evident in the profile. Excavation along the south and east walls revealed lines of light tan sediment, running both horizontally and vertically. The nature and spacing of this sediment strongly suggested that blocks of sod had been laid up to face the front and sides. Evidence of sod blocks tended to be near the front and sides of the dugout, not near the rear wall, which was cut into the side of the slope. Thus, the structure was sodded up on three sides, with the base of the wall on the north end being constructed of stone blocks and then completed with sod blocks. In the center of the east side was a slight depression, possibly marking the threshold of an east-facing entrance.

Excavations into the floor produced a thin, ashy layer containing structural debris—window glass, mortar, plaster, tarpaper—and domestic artifacts that included table ceramics, decorative glass, buttons, sewing implements, and kitchen utensils. The plaster and mortar often underlay the sod-block remnants, indicating that



A treadle sewing machine base was exposed at about three feet below ground surface in the center of the cellar. Embossed lettering on this base notes that the machine was patented in April 1878 by the Singer Manufacturing Company of New York

the sod walls had been plastered. Tarpaper often was associated with the floor. Rock at the ends of an east-west line, approximately bisecting the structure with substantial amounts of stone, mortar, plaster, and sod in the middle, suggested either a dividing wall or an addition to the original house. Thus, this residence may have had two rooms. The residence is not accurately described merely as a dugout. Instead of having walls that primarily were excavated, the walls were predominantly either of laid stone or sod. It was a hybrid and had similarities to the limestone-and-sod Tuss-Lacey house in Nicodemus proper.⁴⁸

Excavation of units immediately outside the structure identified what initially appeared to be steps exterior to the substantial stone north wall and then along the north, west, and south walls, although the latter were not as

48. Hamilton, "The Settlement of Nicodemus," 8, Figure I-7.



Stone and plaster-coated north wall of the dugout/sod-up residence.

clearly defined. It is unlikely that steps were built toward the backs of dugout walls; it is more probable that these were builder's trenches.

Excavation determined that the residence was rectangular, measuring 25.2 by 10.9 feet, and that it had an interior area of about 275 square feet. This size is small by today's expectations, but the 1862 Homestead Act, which stipulated the minimum requirements for the homesteading benefit, mandated a building of 12 by 14 feet, or 168 square feet. The Homestead Act area requirement established what was considered a minimum living area at the time, and this dugout/sod-up was more than adequate by the standards of the day. The north side was about the size of a structure recommended by

the Homestead Act. It may have been built first to comply with that law, with the southern section added as time and resources became available.

The construction dates of the cellar and residence are not certain. The 1983 HABS site plan shows them as "past buildings" as of 1906.⁴⁹ The residence may be the original structure built on the site by Thomas Johnson around 1880. Thomas's grandson Henry Williams acquired the farmstead in 1906 and may have lived in the dugout/sod-up dwelling until the frame house was completed in 1921. Four coins in the ashy artifact-rich level with dates of 1890, 1900, and 1904 imply an abandonment date sometime after 1904.

Clear evidence of both stone and sod walls and a floor dug into the substratum confirmed the oral histories that a structure had stood here. Still, it may not have been the first on the property. The HABS documentation indicated a sod house and a dugout cattle shed about 131 feet north and 49 feet east of the residential structure that may represent elements of the original farmstead. However, the surface survey and geophysical survey did not detect these. Perhaps both were outside the boundaries of those investigations.

Ideally, the distribution of different classes of artifacts across the site would signal where specific activities occurred. However, the uses of some parts of the site changed through time. Evidence suggests that the cellar eventually fell into disuse and, as was commonly done, was filled with household trash, including a treadle sewing machine pedestal.

It is important to note that the entire site was not excavated. Because archaeological investigation is expensive and time consuming, excavation focused on those areas that were expected to answer fundamental questions about the site, based on the site's written and oral history and the geophysical survey and on places most likely to produce artifacts that help to tell the story of the inhabitants. Therefore, excavations concentrated on the two suspected dugouts, a dump, and a spot where a barn might once have stood, although the latter produced no such evidence. Many activities, such as black-

49. The HABS documentation is not clear about what information was used to create the plan view of the settlement and how or why the 1906 date was assigned. It is reasonable to assume that it is based on the recollections of one or more informants.

smithing and the butchering of animals, almost certainly occurred some distance from the residence, and other activities, such as the repair of equipment and sharpening of tools, also may have happened closer to the appropriate work locale. These are locations that can be identified and explored in the future.

Interpretations from the Archaeological Excavations

The recovered artifacts give insights into the organization of the farmstead as well as the family's everyday life. Proportions of construction materials assisted in interpreting building function. Window glass was recovered from the residence, as anticipated, and also from the cellar, although only one-tenth of the amount found in the residential structure. The plaster, mortar, and tarpaper, primarily from the residence, indicate that care was taken to finish its interior. These details also suggest that, unlike many dugouts, this one was intended to be used for more than a temporary period.

Clear evidence of the larger structure's use as a dwelling lies in the recovered artifacts. These include stove parts, flatware, table setting dishes, personal items such as jewelry, coins, buttons, the soles of shoes for adults and children, combs and hairpins, smoking paraphernalia, eyeglasses, sewing-related equipment, marbles, china doll fragments, and a small stamped brass cherub.⁵⁰

Some personal and domestic artifacts were also found in the cellar. These may have been inadvertently left there when it was being used but also are likely to have been discarded when the cellar was no longer in use. For example, a sadiron came from this location.

50. A detailed analysis of the specific artifacts and their context within the site is contained in the technical report: Christine D. Garst, Robert J. Hoard, Daniel Hougland, Dan Morrow, Margaret C. Wood, and Virginia A. Wulfkuhle, "Archaeological Investigations at the Thomas Johnson/Henry Williams Homestead (14GH102), 2006-2007," *Kansas Anthropologist: Journal of the Kansas Anthropological Association*, forthcoming. Additional artifact images can be viewed on the Kansas Memory site, <http://www.kansasmemory.org/locate.php?query=14gh102>.



The Tuss-Lacey home in the town of Nicodemus, no longer standing, was an above-ground sod house with one elevation made of limestone.

Ammunition shows that both a twelve-gauge shotgun and a .22-caliber rifle or pistol were used at the site. Excavation also produced more than three thousand bones or bone fragments. Most could not be identified beyond general classes, such as large, medium, or small mammals, including deer and pig. No cattle or horse bones were recognized, although the Kansas State Censuses for 1885 and 1895 indicate both meat and milk cows as well as pigs and horses. Ten artifacts are related to the use of horses, including a horseshoe, a bit fragment, and harness hardware. Bones of chickens, ducks, turkeys, and prairie chickens were recovered, as were eggshells. Finally, rabbit bones are well represented, and historical accounts confirm that rabbit hunting and fishing in the nearby spring-fed creek were common. The animal remains at the site corroborate oral histories that discuss the management of livestock as well as the hunting of wild resources.

Wood charcoal and coal cinders reflect the use not only of wood, which was not plentiful in the region, but also of coal, which could have been used for heating and cooking in the residence and also for blacksmithing. Coal and cinders were much more plentiful than wood charcoal, especially in an ash dump just northeast of the residence, showing the relative importance of this commodity in the home. In contrast, wood charcoal was more common in the dump, possibly as a result of burning trash. Little coal or charcoal was found in the cellar, which lessens but does not eliminate the possibility that it was used as a smokehouse. Lamp chimney glass, air-vent fragments,



This H.J. Heinz Company condiment bottle, dating 1888-1910, was found in the dugout/sod-up residence in 2007.

burner fragments, and a lantern shade with a bail came from both the residence and the cellar.

Conclusions

The townsite of Nicodemus has received significant attention, and appropriately so, given that it has been occupied continuously since it was established. The Emancipation Day festival was first held in 1878 and continues to the present day, when descendants of the settlers from around the country come back to visit.⁵¹ The Johnson-Williams farmstead has the potential to deepen our understanding of the daily lives of black farm families who sought social and economic opportunities in western Kansas.

Archaeological investigations at the Johnson-Williams farmstead shed light on the less well-known component of Nicodemus—the agricultural homesteaders. Like

many of the initial structures in town, such as schools, churches, and shops, the first structures built by the region's agrarian settlers were dugouts. The Johnson-Williams residence was a dugout, for the most part, but also was an amalgam of available resources that took advantage of the local topography. Its west wall was dug into a substantial slope, and the north wall also was dug in but fortified with stone and finished with plaster. The west wall was augmented with sod, and the south and east walls were made of sod. To refer to the structure simply as a dugout or a soddie diminishes the wise use of resources apparent in the building's design.

While dugouts and sod houses are considered temporary structures, evidence indicates that those built at the Johnson-Williams farmstead were used for a more substantial period. With initial settlement in 1878 and the frame house not built until 1921, one or more of the three reported dugouts on the property might have served as residences for more than forty years.

The emphasis on storage at the Johnson-Williams farmstead is clear in the construction of a substantial dugout cellar, used initially for food storage and possibly meat curing, although evidence for the latter was weak. The cellar itself was evidence enough, but its identification as a storage cellar was bolstered by the presence of several canning jars. A significant investment in flooring, 121 square feet of floor space, and evidence of shelving indicated a substantial pantry.

The residential structure encompassed almost 275 square feet. It was not a large dwelling, but it was larger than residential dugouts excavated by archaeologists in other parts of Kansas and in South Dakota.⁵² It also was substantial, with a robust stone wall, two or possibly three courses deep, supporting the north wall. More coursed rock in the center of the house suggested a separate building stage or a wall separating two rooms.

While interviews, newspaper articles, and census records provide evidence of cattle, horses, pigs, chickens, and ducks, little archaeological evidence of such livestock was recovered. Dry-land farming of corn and wheat was important. Use of wild plants included poke salad and dock for greens and horehound and snakeroot for

51. Kansas Historical Society, "Seeking the Promised Land: The People of Nicodemus," *Reflections* 11 (Spring 2017), 4-5.

52. Gina Powell, *Phase III Archeological Testing of 14GY305 and 14GY307, Two Dugouts in Gray County, Kansas, Associated with Highway 50 Improvements* (Topeka: Archeology Office, Kansas Historical Society, 2013), 7-8, 17; Gina Powell, "Living Underground in Kansas," *Kansas Preservation* 36 (2014), 13-20.

medicine, the latter also harvested and dried for sale, but these do not appear in the archaeological record. Additional surveys and more extensive excavation of the refuse pile have the potential to provide more information on animal butchering and domestic use.⁵³

The archaeological excavation of the Thomas Johnson and Henry Williams farmstead confirmed the oral history of dugouts there being used for housing and storage. Structural evidence and the artifacts recovered from the cellar and the residence are consistent with those uses. Furthermore, structural elements of the residence in particular—the sturdy northern stone wall and the evidence of plaster on both sod and stone walls—show a level of care and a creation of living space beyond what would be invested in a transitory shelter. Instead, the residence was built to accommodate the rearing of a family until a frame house could be built, which occurred in 1921.

Finally, some of the personal artifacts recovered—a stamped metal cherub, fragments of china dolls, smoking paraphernalia, and jewelry—bring the people who lived at this place 140 years ago a little closer to the Kansans of today. Revealed is a population of emancipated slaves with few resources and little capital building an environment for themselves that, while not equal to that



This sad iron was recovered from the cellar in 2007. Also called flat irons or smoothing irons, some type of padding would have been wrapped around the handle during use. Sad irons needed to be kept clean and rust-free while in use, no longer the case for this example.

of their white neighbors, is comparable despite hard times brought on by both the environmental and social conditions in the region. It is a story of their ultimate but hard-won success—improving the property, making it productive, regaining it after losing it, and maintaining a place of their own in a free state far from where they and their ancestors had been enslaved. [KH]

53. La Barbara W. Fly, “Into the Twentieth Century,” in *Promised Land on the Solomon*, 74.