

THE LARGEST COLORED COLONY IN AMERICA!

Is now locating in the Great Solomon Valley, in Graham County, two hundred and forty miles north west of Topeka.

Mr. Smith, the President of the Colony, is a colored man and has lived for the last three years in the Solomon Valley.

All letters of inquiry regarding Soil, Climate, and Locations, should be addressed to W. H. SMITH, or his Secretary, S. P. ROUNDTREE, Topeka, Kansas, until May 15th, 1877; then at Ellis, Ellis Co., Kan. A Postoffice will be located in June at

NICODEMUS,

which is beautifully located on the north side of the south fork of the Solomon River, near the line of Graham and Rooks Counties, 14 miles east of Hill City, and is designed for the Colored Colony. By September 1st the Colony will have houses erected and all branches of mercantile business will be opened out for the benefit of the Colony. A Church edifice and other public buildings will be erected. No Saloons or other houses of ill-fame will be allowed on the town site within five years from the date of this organization.

We invite our colored friends of the Nation to come and join with us in this beautiful Promise Land.

Dated at Topeka, Kansas, April 16, 1877.

TRUSTEES:

WM. EDMONS, JEFF. LENZE, JERRY ALLSAPP.

W. H. SMITH, - - - President.

BERY CARR, - - - Vice President.

SIMON P. ROUNDTREE, - Secretary.

W. R. HILL, Treasurer and Gen'l Manager.

NOTE.—This Colony has made special arrangements for provisions for the Summer season. For Emigrant and Freight Rates, address our Treasurer,

W. R. HILL,
(Box 120.) NORTH TOPEKA, KANSAS.

Nicodemus, the oldest of more than two dozen towns established in the Middle West for a predominantly black population, was founded and promoted by land speculators seeking to make a profit on their investment. Of the seven incorporators of the Nicodemus company, six were black and only two of these were literate. This leaflet called the town to be located in Graham county the "Promised Land."

THE ORIGINS AND EARLY PROMOTION OF NICODEMUS: A PRE-EXODUS, ALL-BLACK TOWN

KENNETH MARVIN HAMILTON

THE DESIRE for profit inspired the founding and early promotion of Nicodemus, Kan., the oldest of more than two dozen towns established in the Middle West for a predominantly black population.¹ Because of the racial identity of most of the Nicodemus citizens during its early years as well as the present day, it has had a unique nature ascribed to its history.² It is important to recognize, however, that when Nicodemus is viewed as an integral part of the urban settlement process of the Trans-Appalachian West, it loses much of its assigned novelty. The founding and early development of Nicodemus occurred in the same social, economic, and legal context as did predominantly white towns in the same region. The founders of this town, moreover, had the same motivation as did the founders of white towns. Making money was the goal of both groups.

The founders of Nicodemus, like the founders of the vast majority of towns in the Midwest, engaged in townsite land speculation. This is the process by which undeveloped land was purchased, platted into town lots, and then sold to newcomers. Speculators played an important role in the settling of the Midwestern frontier. In order to realize a profit on their investment, they advertised their holdings widely in the East and in Europe. This promotion, more than any other factor, informed foreign immigrants and native citizens alike as to where they could locate on the frontier. Moreover, the credit terms the promoters offered gave more people an opportunity to buy relatively cheap and highly productive land than did the terms offered by

the federal government. Land speculators also determined which areas of the West would be rural and which would be urban. These assertions are no less true for the promoters who developed towns which were populated predominantly by blacks than they are for all-white towns.

Both sets of promoters had to work within the context of the federal land law. Since Nicodemus was established during 1877 on federal-government-owned land within Kansas, the 1867 townsite preemption act guided the actions of its founders. This act, originally passed May 23, 1844, and amended March 2, 1867, stated:

That whenever any portion of the surveyed public lands has been or shall be settled upon and occupied as a town site . . . it shall be lawful, in case such town or place shall be incorporated, for the corporate authorities thereof, and, if not incorporated, for the judges of the county court for the county in which such town may be situated, to enter, at the proper land office, and at the minimum price, the land so settled and occupied, in trust, for the . . . occupants thereof, according to their respective interests. . . .³

By its phraseology, the preemption act of 1844 recognized two distinct interest groups in the location and formation of towns. One consisted of persons already settled on the land. Their rights, however, were not given precedence over those of organized groups of prospective settlers. Each alike had the first opportunity to purchase townsite lands at minimum price.⁴ The statute, moreover, encouraged groups of capitalists to form townsite trust associations⁵ and engage in speculation, historically an integral part of town development.

1. Throughout this article the term "predominantly black-populated town" is interchanged with "black town" and "predominantly white-populated town" is interchanged with "white town."

2. Heretofore studies of Nicodemus have been concerned primarily with the role of race in its origins and development and have minimized or ignored other factors which were part of the town's process of development. For example, see Glen Schwendemann, "Nicodemus: Negro Haven on the Solomon," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, Topeka, v. 34, no. 1 (Spring, 1968), pp. 10-31 *passim*; and Norman L. Crockett, *The Black Towns* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1979).

3. *U.S. Statutes at Large, 1844* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1856), v. 5, p. 657.

4. For example, the 1867 amendment only changed the maximum acreage that could be preempted. This act allowed towns with 6,000 or more settlers built on public land to preempt 1,700 acres. The 1844 act only allowed for the preemption of 320 acres.—*Ibid.*, 1844, v. 5, p. 657; *ibid.*, 1867 (1868), v. 14, p. 541.

5. Any group whose members met the qualifications of their respective states could incorporate and become a town company and make a claim to any unclaimed government land for townsite purposes, thus becoming a townsite trust association.

Southern Negroes Once Sought 'Mecca' in Kansas



W. R. Hill was the one white incorporator of Nicodemus and treasurer of the company. An experienced townsite developer, he had taken part in the promotion earlier of Hutchinson and Wichita. The black members of the company had migrated from the South searching for an open society where they could live without fear of hostile whites. Hill is pictured at the upper right of this collage, which appeared in the *Wichita Beacon*, October 1, 1933, and Mrs. Hill is at the upper left.

Townsite trust associations performed several other important functions in the settling of the West. They were development companies which more often than not charged nonassociation settlers a fee for town lots and other services. Prof. Glen Holt has asserted that town developers, using the preemption act, performed not less than three functions: (1) they provided a means for settlers who did not know each other to unite and participate in a "traditional real estate function for which the federal law made no provision whatsoever," i.e., town building; (2) in promoting their sites, the associations induced people to settle in their towns and the surrounding hinterland. This function not only brought people, but also Eastern capital to the West; (3) being real estate dealers, "they provided a form of townsite acquisition familiar to urban settlers." In sum, Holt stated, the association "gave specificity to the government's highly abstract model for town development."⁶

For 33 years, congress, the executives, and the courts made few changes in the preemption law. The federal government recognized speculation as an inherent function of American new town development. In the history of new town development in the American West, few towns came into being without speculation as one of the major inspirations. While allowing speculation, the act insured the land-holding rights of individuals who had built a town for non-speculatory reasons.

ON APRIL 18, 1877, seven Kansans, cognizant of the potential in the townsite preemption law as a tool for developing unclaimed areas in western Kansas, formed the Nicodemus Town Company.⁷ This group was the first trust association that would attempt to develop a town on the middle border for an all-black population. Of the seven incorporators of the Nicodemus company, six were black. The signatures on the articles of incorporation indicate that only two of these could write. One of the literate developers was S. P. Roundtree, a black minister who "wore a

brand on one cheek as punishment for having received educational instruction from his master's son."⁸ Roundtree served as secretary of the company while W. R. Hill was treasurer. W. H. Smith, who with Hill was a prime mover of the Nicodemus project, was chosen president and Ben Carr, vice-president. The remaining incorporators were Jerry Allsop, Jeff Lenze, and William Edmons.⁹ All the incorporators were from Kentucky except Smith who was from Tennessee.

The black members of the company had migrated from the South searching for an open society where they could live without fear of hostile whites. They had come to Kansas in search of free land. Much of their information about Kansas had come from the advertisement "reports" of Benjamin "Pap" Singleton's Tennessee Real Estate and Homestead Association's activities in the state.¹⁰ The six black members of the Nicodemus Town Company would become part of the precursors to the "Exodusters," the name given to those blacks who left the South for Kansas during 1879 and 1880 in such numbers that congress held hearings to determine the causes.¹¹

Singleton, formerly an escaped slave, helped establish and became the president of the Tennessee Real Estate and Homestead Association. The organization recruited between 200 and 300 blacks and located them in Cherokee county, in the southeastern portion of the state. Like most migrants, Southern blacks searched for lands resembling their homes, and in climate and topography, Cherokee county was similar to Tennessee. Few went on to western Kansas. From its inception, the Cherokee county colony prospered, and reports about its activities were widely circulated. This success prompted various Kansas railroads, which needed settlers to generate

8. Federal Writers' Project of the Works Projects Administration, *Kansas: A Guide to the Sunflower State* (New York: Viking Press, 1939), pp. 330-331. Jim McVey, *Pioneering in the West* (Hill City: 1973), p. 22, claimed that the brand looked like the letter "O." He asserted that some of Roundtree's contemporaries thought that he was born in Africa and that the brand had been given to him as a tribal marking.

9. Kansas secretary of state, "Articles of Incorporation," v. 7, p. 434. No biographical information is available on Carr, Allsop, Lenze, and Edmons.

10. Topeka [Daily] *Commonwealth*, March 25, 1879.

11. U.S. senate, *Executive Document No. 693, Report and Testimony of Select Committee to Investigate the Causes of the Removal of the Negroes From the Southern States*, . . . 46th Cong., 2d Sess., 3 pts. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880).

6. Glen Holt, unpublished critique of Rita Napier, "The Spirit of Speculation: A Study of Town Site Pre-emption and Land Use in Four Frontier Kansas Towns," read before the Missouri Historical Conference, Columbia, Mo., April 24, 1971.

7. Kansas secretary of state, "Articles of Incorporation," v. 7, p. 434, archives department, Kansas State Historical Society.

freight and passenger traffic, to send immigration agents into Tennessee and Kentucky to recruit more blacks, in the process offering reduced fares from Nashville to Topeka.¹²

Nicodemus company President Smith, and a companion, Thomas Harris, came to Kansas during 1877 searching for land as agents for a group of their friends in Clarksville, Tenn. Like the directors from Kentucky, Smith did not have any direct connection with Singleton or the Tennessee Real Estate and Homestead Association. The Nicodemus Town Company consisted of individual Southern blacks who heard of the availability of homestead land in Kansas and used Topeka merely as a jumping-off place enroute to the public lands.¹³

Sometime between September, 1876, and April, 1877, Smith became a business associate of W. R. Hill, who also had come to the Solomon river valley as a homestead locator and townsite promoter. The latter also may have acted as an immigration agent for the Kansas Pacific railroad.¹⁴ Hill was an experienced townsite developer. Born and raised near Covington, Ind., he moved as a young man to Hutchinson and took an active part in that town's early development.¹⁵ He then participated in the promotion of several additions to Wichita.¹⁶

Hill knew how to promote and develop towns. Smith knew that blacks wanted free land in Kansas, and that a large number could be persuaded to settle in the Solomon valley. These two entrepreneurs, one white and one black, joined forces to establish two townsite companies. The first was the Nicodemus Town Company, founded April 18, 1877, with Smith as president and Hill as treasurer; the second was the Hill City Town Company, founded September 28, 1877, with Hill as president and Smith as treasurer. Each of the townsite companies had five additional directors who paid \$100 each for one share of

stock.¹⁷ Smith had formed a black colonization organization¹⁸ with Hill as its agent. For a fee, he would locate the organization's members on government land.¹⁹

There is controversy as to how the two men decided on the name Nicodemus for their black townsite. One claim is that because the leaders of the company were religious, they selected the name of the Pharisee, Nicodemus, who became a secret follower of Jesus and later helped bury him after the crucifixion.²⁰ The more likely explanation, one supported by a circular advertising the formation of the colony, states that the company and later the town were named for an African prince who was brought to the American colonies in 1692 and sold as a slave. The prince declared that the white people would someday regret having enslaved the black people, and he became famous as the first slave to buy his freedom in America.²¹

Although Smith lived in the Solomon river valley about two years before Hill explored the area, Hill selected the site for the proposed town of Nicodemus. Nettie Craig, an early settler of the town, later recalled one popular account of how Hill selected the site for Nicodemus.

He had walked all afternoon trying to find the most favorable spot on which to locate the town. As the sun was dropping below the western horizon, Hill was admiring the beauty of the Western sunset. He lingered until night had settled around him. Then the tired man lay down to rest and think. He was awakened the next morning by the sun shining upon his face. He had found the perfect place.²²

Another account advanced by the *Western Cyclone*, stated that Hill located the town at a spot where he was awakened and frightened by a huge snake.²³

The town's location and Hill's experience as a townsite developer indicate that the promoter took a more rational approach in deciding where to site Nicodemus. Hill seems to

12. Topeka [Daily] *Commonwealth*, March 25, 1879.

13. *Smith County Kansas Pioneer*, Smith Center, March 21, 1874.

14. See, "Ho! for the Great Solomon Valley of Western Kansas!" circular, "Benjamin 'Pap' Singleton Scrapbook," library, Kansas State Historical Society.

15. *Wichita Beacon*, October 1, 1933; Federal Writers' Project, *Kansas: A Guide to the Sunflower State*, p. 329; Orval L. McDaniel mistakenly stated that Hill was a minister from Excelsior Springs, Mo.—Orval L. McDaniel, "A History of Nicodemus, Graham County, Kansas," master's thesis, Fort Hays Kansas State College, Hays, 1950, pp. 42-43.

16. *Wichita Beacon*, October 1, 1933.

17. Kansas secretary of state, "Articles of Incorporation," v. 8, pp. 243-244; *ibid.*, v. 7, p. 434.

18. See, "Largest Colored Colony in America!" and "To the Colored Citizens of the United States," circulars, "Benjamin 'Pap' Singleton Scrapbook."

19. *Wichita Beacon*, October 1, 1933.

20. *Bogue Messenger*, February 25, 1932.

21. "To the Colored Citizens of the United States," "Singleton Scrapbook"; McDaniel, "A History of Nicodemus," p. 50.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

23. *Western Cyclone*, Nicodemus, April 21, 1887.

have recognized the advantages of locating the proposed town along the north bank, the higher of the two sides of the South Solomon river, one-half mile west of Graham county's eastern boundary. The town was located west of the 100th meridian, an area with a severe shortage of timber and water. The few trees that existed generally grew adjacent to the scarce streams. However, Hill's location provided the residents of Nicodemus with fresh water, fuel, building materials, and protection from occasional floods. In addition the river, though unnavigable, gave the townsite potentially easy access, since westward travelers and railways often followed waterways. Hill must have considered these factors before he filed a 160-acre townsite plat with the government land office in Kirwin on June 8, 1877.²⁴

24. *Ibid.*

This registration gave the townsite company the first option to buy the proposed site.

Eight days later, and two days before the Nicodemus Town Company was incorporated with the Kansas secretary of state,²⁵ the company made its first attempt to sell town lots in what was to be an all-black town. Led by Smith and Hill, the Nicodemus company was the first such organization to sell a middle border townsite to blacks only. Their specific strategy was set to accommodate to the several constraints not found in the boosting of biracial or all-white populated towns. In adjusting to these constraints, townsite promotion of such towns went through two distinguishable periods, each reflecting the changing economic and social conditions of Southern Afro-Americans. The first period began in 1877 just

25. See, "Largest Colored Colony in America!" "Singleton Scrapbook."

To sell their town lots Nicodemus promoters formed colony organizations, the first one made up of blacks who had immigrated from the South to Topeka. Most of the 30 colony members escorted by Hill to the townsite in July, 1877, settled on farm homesteads. Those who located in Nicodemus paid the town company \$5.00 for an unoccupied lot.

<p>Frank A. Hill, Printer, Binder, etc., North Topeka, Kas.</p>  <p>OUR PRIDE.</p>	<p>NO.</p> <p>State of Kansas, } 55:</p> <p>Graham County.</p>	 <p>Scenes in the Great Solomon Valley</p>
<p>GENERAL MANAGER.</p> <p>This is to Certify, That</p> <p>of _____ County, State of _____</p> <p>has this day paid the sum of FIVE DOLLARS, being the full amount of Membership Fees in the</p> <p>(((Nicodemus Town Company of Graham Co., Kansas,)))</p> <p>and that said _____ is entitled to any vacant Town Lot on the town site of Nicodemus, Graham County, Kansas, at the time said party arrives at Nicodemus; the said Nicodemus Town Company giving their obligation to make title to said Lot as required by law. And it is further agreed that no Intoxicating Liquors shall be sold on said lot within five years from this date.</p> <p>Dated at _____ this _____ day of _____ 187__</p> <p><small>Not valid until countersigned by W. R. HILL, Gen'l Manager.</small></p> <p><small>This Certificate should be presented to W. H. SMITH, President.</small></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Nicodemus Town Company.</i></p>		



Blacks who had migrated from the South came to Kansas in search of free land. Much of their information about the state had come from the advertisement "reports" of Benjamin "Pap" Singleton's Tennessee Real Estate and Homestead Association. Singleton (1809-1892), formerly an escaped slave, had helped establish the association and served as president.

before the initial large wave of Southern blacks migrated to the Midwest. The second period began in 1890.²⁶

FROM THE end of Reconstruction in 1876 to the enactment of the first black disfranchisement law in 1890, blacks living throughout the South maintained an ambiguous social position. Most Southern Afro-Americans had little freedom and less personal or economic security. Southern whites had not found a uniform means of dealing with their former slaves. No state had instituted a comprehensive code of segregation, nor had any state disfranchised their black citizens. Even so,

many blacks faced racial discrimination, frequent segregation, white-perpetuated violence, and severe poverty. The federal government's failure to allocate land to the new freedmen relegated most black adult males to the loathsome position of being "farmers without land." In addition, black artisans, who held a near monopoly on skilled jobs at the end of the war, began to experience the contraction of their employment opportunities, because of competition from white laborers, racial discrimination, and the establishment of all-white labor unions.²⁷

The South's equivocal handling of the "Negro problem," and the blacks' former con-

26. For a discussion of pre-1890 migration, see Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas After Reconstruction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977). After 1890 Southern states' Jim Crow law initiated the second era of black town development which lasted until the start of World War II.

27. C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), pp. 205-206, 229; Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma* (New York: Harper & Row, 1944), v. 1, pp. 280-281.

dition of slavery, more than racial discrimination, were the special factors that affected the promotion of Midwest townsites intended for blacks during the first era. Bondage predetermined that the vast majority of Afro-Americans would start their lives as Southern freedmen with little or no money and with the lowest possible social prestige. Twelve years after their emancipation, at the beginning of the first era of all-black townsite promotion, the situation for most blacks remained unchanged.

The problem for the Nicodemus promoters, therefore, was to locate and identify those few blacks in the South financially able to buy town lots and willing to move to the Midwest. Smith's and Hill's promotional appeal in the initial period was to emphasize the money-making opportunities of Nicodemus. Profit, not escape from Southern white oppression, was their first theme.

The promoters' lack of funds prohibited them from employing boosting agents, placing advertisements in Southern newspapers and periodicals, or distributing boosting brochures. Instead, they distributed circulars, the cheapest means to advertise their town lots. Even in this tactic, they were selective, however. Their cheaply printed sheets were mailed directly to likely prospects in the Southern states. Smith and Hill were not seeking mass numbers eager to escape the South. They were aiming at those who had some financial means.

While they did not concentrate on appealing to blacks' sense of nationalism, they did explicitly direct advertising literature only to Afro-Americans. The earliest circular, dated April 16, 1877, told its readers that Nicodemus would become the "Largest Colored Colony in America." In addition, the flier pointed out that Smith, the colony's president, was black. Another circular dated July 2, 1877, that announced the location and other characteristics of Nicodemus, was addressed "To the Colored Citizens of the United States."²⁸ Even fliers primarily concerned with the boosting of Hill City, Smith and Hill's all-white town, informed readers that only Afro-Americans would live in Nicodemus. The Hill City handbill invited "Men of Business, Capital

and Energy" on a round-trip excursion from Topeka to the Solomon valley, the location of Hill City and Nicodemus, to take place on June 28, 1877, at a cost of \$10 per ticket. The fliers stated that "colored citizens have the same rates to go and see their NICODEMUS."²⁹

The promotional material also emphasized the high moral tone of the new place. At the bottom of the July 2, 1877, handbill, the promoters printed a song glorifying Nicodemus, the man and the town.

NICODEMUS

Nicodemus was a slave of African birth,
And was bought for a bag full of gold;
He was reckoned a part of the salt of the earth,
But he died years ago, very old.

Nicodemus was a prophet, at least he was as wise,
For he told of the battles to come:
How we trembled with fear, when he rolled up his eyes,
And we heeded the shake of his thumb.

Chorus:

Good time coming, good time coming,
Long, long time on the way:
Run and tell Elija to hurry up Pomp,
To meet us under the cottonwood tree,
In the Great Solomon Valley
At the first break of day.³⁰

The April 16, 1877, leaflet, calling Nicodemus the "Promise Land," stated that by September 1, 1877, houses, business buildings, public buildings, and a church edifice would be erected. However, no "saloons or other houses of ill-fame" would be allowed during the town's first five years.³¹ In the July 2 leaflet it was boastfully reported that within 90 days the colony's officers had organized nearly 300 members.³² It further stated that a few of the colony's members, with plenty of provisions, had already located on their claims.

More than any other aspect, however, the circulars emphasized the natural advantages of the South Solomon valley and, implicitly, the economic opportunity to be found there. The fliers proclaimed the townsite's location as being beautiful and "designed for the Colored Colony."³³ In recognition of the symbiotic relationship between a town and its hinterland,

29. "Ho! for the Great Solomon Valley of Western Kansas!" *ibid.*

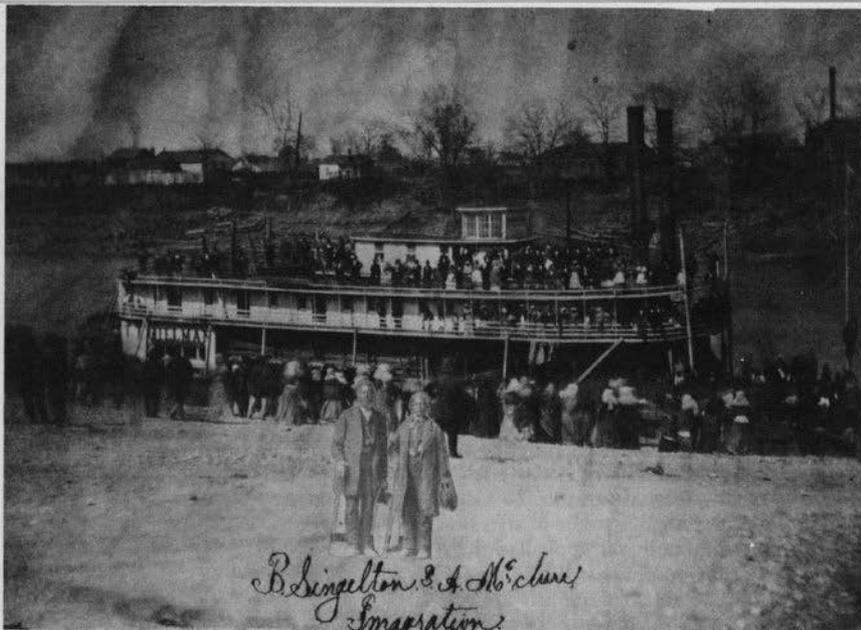
30. "To the Colored Citizens of the United States," *ibid.*

31. "Largest Colored Colony in America!" *ibid.*

32. "To the Colored Citizens of the United States," *ibid.*

33. "Largest Colored Colony in America!" *ibid.*

28. "Largest Colored Colony in America!"; "To the Colored Citizens of the United States," "Singleton Scrapbook."



This picture of a group of blacks leaving Nashville, Tenn., has had a photograph of Singleton and S.A. McClure superimposed on it. The 1870's colonization movement involving blacks from the South was inspired and assisted by Singleton, and this movement brought about the establishment of communities in Cherokee, Hodgeman, and Morris counties as well as Nicodemus in Graham county.

the circular dated July 2 asserted that the soil around Nicodemus was "of a rich, black, sandy loam" and the area's rolling plains look "most pleasing to the human eye." In an attempt to allay fear that the area might be short on water, the circular asserted that "the south fork of the Solomon river . . . has an abundance of excellent water . . . while there are numerous springs of living water . . . throughout the Valley."³⁴

The leaflet misrepresented the truth when it led readers to believe that the area possessed more than enough timber for heating and cooking and that coal would be found in the area.

TO SELL their town lots, the Nicodemus promoters relied heavily upon the formation of colony organizations. Since most blacks could not read, the townsites boosters went in person to describe the advantages of the Solomon valley and persuaded at least four groups to form immigration associations and move to the Nicodemus area.³⁵ Smith, Roundtree, and Fletcher organized the first colony in Topeka during the spring of 1877.³⁶ Hundreds of

blacks had immigrated to Topeka from the upper South as a result of the publicity given to Pap Singleton's efforts at inducing blacks to relocate in Kansas and the reduced fares offered by Kansas railroad agents. Most of the Afro-Americans lived in three separate areas of the city called "Redville," "Tennessee Town," and "The Bottom."³⁷ Whites of Topeka donated land and used timber so that blacks could build shelter for themselves. Smith, who had temporarily resided in Topeka, knew that many of the blacks had no intention of making the capital city their permanent home. They regarded the town only as a departure point from which they would move south and west to new locations. Smith, Roundtree, and Fletcher capitalized on this desire and directed attention toward Nicodemus.³⁸ On July 30, 1877, Hill escorted 30 members of the colony from the Topeka bottom to the townsite.³⁹ Most of these settlers, and those that later followed, settled on farm homesteads. They gave Hill from \$2.00 to \$30 each for locating them on suitable plots of land and helping with the filing procedures.⁴⁰

34. "To the Colored Citizens of the United States," *ibid.*

35. *Smith County Kansas Pioneer*, March 21, 1879; *Ellis County Farmer*, Hays, May 28, 1959.

36. *Atchison Weekly Champion*, July 23, 1881.

37. *Ellis County Farmer*, May 28, 1959.

38. *Atchison Weekly Champion*, July 23, 1881.

39. McDaniel, "A History of Nicodemus," p. 42; *Hill City Times*, June 27, 1968.

40. *Wichita Beacon*, October 1, 1933.

Those who located in Nicodemus paid the town company \$5.00 for an unoccupied lot.⁴¹

The success of the Topeka colony organization may have inspired the Nicodemus promoters to apply the technique in the South, for after the formation of the Topeka colony, the boosters formed at least three colonization groups in Kentucky and guided them to the South Solomon valley. In the fall of 1877, they formed a group in Lexington, Ky., and in the spring of 1878, the promoters formed two groups in Georgetown, Ky. The members of the Georgetown colony organized after listening to Hill in a small Baptist church. The white townsite agent told his audience that blacks lived as equals with whites in western Kansas. He informed the group that 160 acres were available for those who wanted to homestead, and that a herd of wild horses in the area could be caught and tamed for farm work. He claimed that wild game in the valley would satisfy all their needs for meat.⁴² As a result of Hill's sales pitch, over 300 people in two groups moved to Nicodemus from the Georgetown area.

WHEN THE black immigrants were in Nicodemus, their fundamental differences from white settlers became all too apparent. The Nicodemus promoters expected that the Afro-Americans would establish a town social order not unlike that of white-

populated new towns. What they had not counted on, however, was the poverty and illiteracy that were the legacies from their long years in slavery. Even though the *Ellis Standard* asserted that the settlers of the second of five Nicodemus colony groups "look as though . . . they had not lacked for a plenty of good wholesome food, and their . . . clothing was . . . up to the average of western immigrants,"⁴³ neither they nor any of the other groups of Nicodemus settlers had as much money as their white counterparts.⁴⁴ The few blacks that did possess enough money to relocate in northwest Kansas did not have access to large amounts of Eastern investment capital, a necessity in the rapid growth of all successful Midwestern towns. Moreover, the Afro-Americans' high illiteracy hindered their attempts to acquire wealth and to transact their town's business. These two factors combined to produce the major differences that existed between Nicodemus and its white counterparts.

Not all of Nicodemus's early developmental problems can be attributed to the settlers' slave legacy, however. True, their heritage predetermined that they would be poor and ignorant of frontier living, but the townsite promoters' feeble planning contributed significantly to the hardships of the town inhabitants. Smith and Hill simply failed to consider the limited funds of the colonists when they relocated settlers to Nicodemus and its sur-

41. See, Nicodemus Town Company, Membership Certificate, "Singleton Scrapbook."

42. *Rooks County Record*, Stockton, March 29, 1934.

43. *The Standard*, Ellis, September 22, 1877.

44. *Salina Journal*, January 12, 1950.

In 1879 and 1880 additional blacks came to Kansas in great numbers, most of them with few financial resources. In contrast with this exodus, the blacks sought by Nicodemus promoters earlier were those who were financially able to buy town lots and willing to move to the Midwest. This sketch by Henry Worrall of exodusters housed at the fairgrounds in Topeka appeared in *Harper's Weekly*, July 5, 1879.



To the Colored Citizens of the United States.

NICODEMUS, GRAHAM CO., KAN., July 2d, 1877.

We, the Nicodemus Town Company of Graham County, Kan., are now in possession of our lands and the Town Site of Nicodemus, which is beautifully located on the N. W. quarter of Section 1, Town 8, Range 21, in Graham Co., Kansas, in the great Solomon Valley, 240 miles west of Topeka, and we are proud to say it is the finest country we ever saw. The soil is of a rich, black, sandy loam. The country is rather rolling, and looks most pleasing to the human eye. The south fork of the Solomon river flows through Graham County, nearly directly east and west and has an abundance of excellent water, while there are numerous springs of living water abounding throughout the Valley. There is an abundance of fine Magnesian stone for building purposes, which is much easier handled than the rough sand or hard stone. There is also some timber; plenty for fire use, while we have no fear but what we will find plenty of coal.

Now is your time to secure your home on Government Land in the Great Solomon Valley of Western Kansas.

Remember, we have secured the service of W. R. Hill, a man of energy and ability, to locate our Colony.

Not quite 90 days ago we secured our charter for locating the town site of Nicodemus. We then became an organized body, with only three dollars in the treasury and twelve members, but under the careful management of our officers, we have now nearly 300 good and reliable members, with several members permanently located on their claims—with plenty of provisions for the colony—while we are daily receiving letters from all parts of the country from parties desiring to locate in the great Solomon Valley of Western Kansas.

For Maps, Circulars, and Passenger rates, address our General Manager, W. R. HILL, North Topeka, Kansas, until August 1st, 1877, then at Hill City, Graham Co., via Trego.

The name of our post-office will be Nicodemus, and Mr. Z. T. Fletcher will be our "Nasby."

REV. S. P. ROUNDTREE, Sec'y.

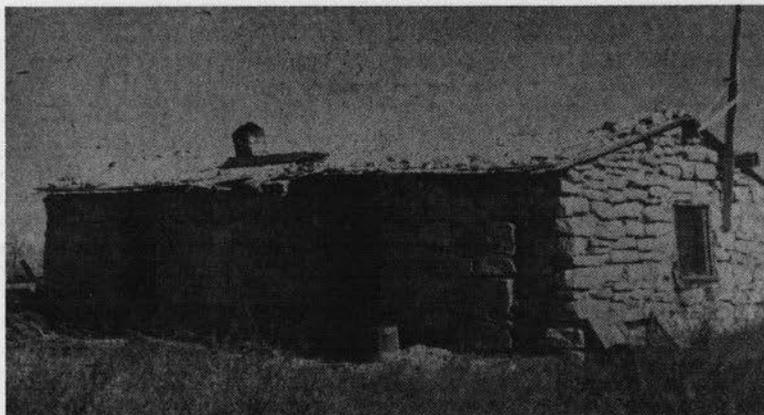
NICODEMUS.

Nicodemus was a slave of African birth,
And was bought for a bag full of gold;
He was reckoned a part of the salt of the earth,
But he died years ago, very old.

Nicodemus was a prophet, at least he was as wise,
For he told of the battles to come;
How we trembled with fear, when he rolled up his eyes,
And we heeded the shake of his thumb.

CHORUS : Good time coming, good time coming,
 Long, long time on the way;
 Run and tell Eliza to hurry up Pomp,
 To meet us under the cottonwood tree,
 In the Great Solomon Valley
 At the first break of day.

This circular announcing the location and other characteristics of Nicodemus was signed by one of the town incorporators, S. P. Roundtree, a black minister who served as secretary of the company. The poem at the bottom of the page suggests that the town was named for an African prince who was sold into slavery.



During the first year Nicodemus blacks found that making a living in northwestern Kansas was hard. The scarce timber supply forced them to live in sod dugout houses, the most common form of shelter for new settlers on the high plains. This sod house, one of the first permanent homes in the town, had almost completely deteriorated when this photograph, appearing in the *Topeka Daily Capital*, May 11, 1958, was taken.

rounding area. Of the four colonies they located, this was especially true for the July, 1877, group from Topeka and the September, 1877, group from Lexington. The promoters settled these immigrants, some of whom owned teams, wagons, and plows, too late in the growing season for them to raise crops. In addition, the colonists who spent most of their money transporting themselves and their goods to Nicodemus⁴⁵ found that the distance between their town and the populated areas of the state was an obstacle in obtaining jobs to tide them through the winter. Their situation proved the *Standard* was wrong when it stated the "dusky sons and daughters of the south . . . have enough of everything to make a decent start. . . ."⁴⁶

During their first year, Nicodemus blacks found that in comparison to the South, making a living in northwest Kansas was very hard. The scarce timber supply forced them to live

in sod dug-out houses,⁴⁷ the most common form of shelter for new settlers on the high plains, and to use sunflowers, willows, and buffalo chips as fuel.⁴⁸ They obtained their water from the South Solomon river until they could sink wells.⁴⁹ The colonists, unfortunately, found that most of the wild game that Hill so eloquently described during his recruiting addresses had migrated elsewhere.⁵⁰ Thus, the settlers could not supplement their meager provisions through hunting. The few immigrants who possessed money usually had to walk 30 miles to purchase supplies at the nearest railroad. All but three of both groups of colonists' horses died soon after they arrived at the townsite, and none of the blacks were able to capture and tame any of the wild horses that pastured south of Nicodemus.⁵¹

45. *Atchison Weekly Champion*, July 23, 1881; *Hill City Times*, September 8, 1849; Schwendemann, "Nicodemus: Negro Haven on the Solomon," p. 16; *Topeka Daily Capital*, May 11, 1958.

46. *The Standard*, September 22, 1877; *Bogue Messenger*, February 25, 1932; *Kansas City (Mo.) Times*, May 28, 1959; McDaniel, "A History of Nicodemus," pp. 44-45. An early settler of Nicodemus stated that her mother claimed that the black immigrants "looked like a band of tattered refugees [sic] from Uncle Tom's Cabin! With all their worldly possessions tied in bundles balanced on top of the women's bandana covered heads and in gunny sacks thrown over the shoulders of the men. . . ."—*Ellis County Farmer*, May 28, 1959.

47. McDaniel, "A History of Nicodemus," p. 47; *Bogue Messenger*, February 25, 1932. Members of the second colony attempted to build lean-tos, but the strong Kansas winds blew away the sheets covering the framework. They quickly learned how to build dugouts. "A man would stake off ground about 14 x 15 feet and make a rectangular excavation to a depth of six feet. Steps were dug for descent. Walls were of sod bricks; over a ridgepole, willow sapplings, straw weeds and dirt formed the roof."—*Hill City Times*, September 4, 1940; *Ellis County Farmer*, May 28, 1959. The first Lexington colony built their initial sod houses as a group project so that Henry Williams's mother would have shelter when she gave birth to him, the first child to be born in Nicodemus.—*Hays Daily News*, July 31, 1955; William J. Belleau, "The Nicodemus Colony of Graham County, Kansas," master's thesis, Fort Hays Kansas State College, Hays, 1943, p. 14.

48. *Kansas City (Mo.) Star*, January 26, 1905.

49. McDaniel, "A History of Nicodemus," p. 47.

50. *Rooks County Record*, March 29, 1933.

51. *Hill City Times*, September 5, 1940; *Atchison Weekly Champion*, July 23, 1881; *Kansas City Times*, May 28, 1959.



Edward P. McCabe (1855-1920), a free-born northern black, was elected secretary of the Nicodemus colony in 1878 and later was appointed clerk of Graham county by Governor Anthony. In 1882 he was elected state auditor, the first black to be elected to state office in a northern state.

Some of the early settlers, accustomed to the woodlands of Kentucky and Tennessee, reacted negatively to the challenge of living in Nicodemus. When members of the first colony arrived at the townsite, they became so disappointed and angry with Hill that they sought to hang him. The promoter attempted to take refuge in a dugout of one of his friends, but the highly indignant blacks followed him. His friend's wife, a very large woman, used a shawl to hide Hill, a small man, behind her and helped him escape through their back door to the home of Reuben Lawlis. The Lawlis family mistook the noise from the nearby waterfall as the sound of approaching blacks and drove Hill, who hid under hay in a wagon, to Stockton, where he stayed until he thought it safe to return to the colonists.⁵² Members of the Lexington colony reacted differently. Sixty families of that group displayed

their unhappiness by returning eastward the day after they arrived at the townsite.⁵³

Those immigrants who remained displayed ingenuity and industry in surviving in the South Solomon valley. Unlike their white counterparts, who generally had the luxury of being able to spend most of their time around their new homes, the destitute condition of the colonists inspired many of the males and some of the females to seek jobs miles away from their families. Most found work in towns and on railroads east of Nicodemus. Others acquired employment in eastern Colorado. The blacks would repeatedly work a few days and then return to Nicodemus to take care of their families.⁵⁴

In spite of such efforts, blacks had to rely on charity for subsistence. The colonists began receiving assistance as early as the winter of 1877-1878, when Osage Indians, on their way to eastern Kansas, gave the black settlers some of the food they had obtained from their annual Rocky Mountain hunt and from the quarterly commodity subsidy they had just received at Fort Ogallala.⁵⁵ Although some of the whites in the area, especially the ranchers and cowboys, resented the colonists, neighboring whites also contributed some aid to the blacks.⁵⁶ By March, 1878, the month Hill settled the first of three new colony groups, the settlers began a systematic program for receiving and distributing goods obtained

54. *Republican Daily Journal*, Lawrence, April 30, 1879; Nobel L. Prentiss, *A History of Kansas* (Winfield: E. P. Greer, 1899), p. 153; *Atchison Weekly Champion*, July 23, 1881; *Wichita Evening Eagle*, December 3, 1953.

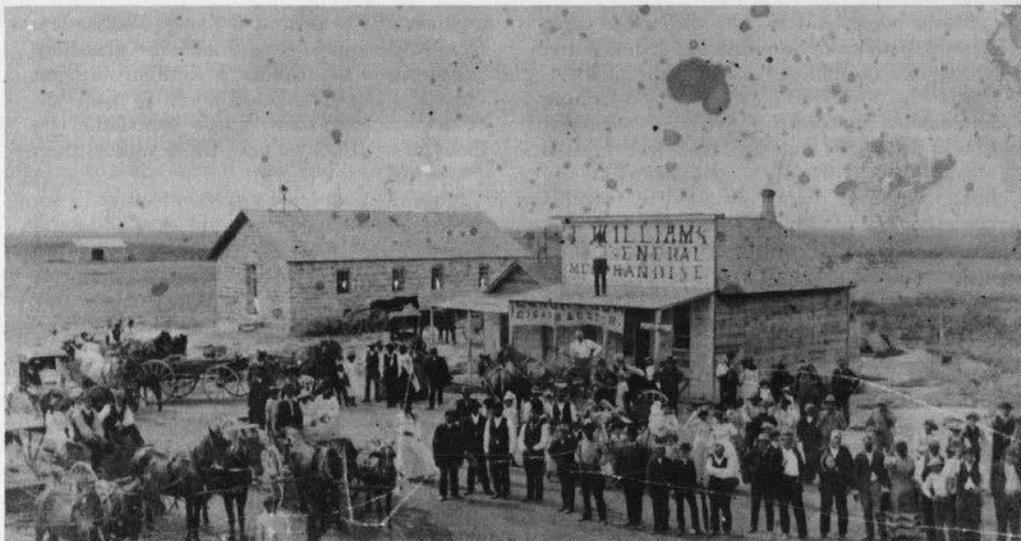
55. McDaniel, "A History of Nicodemus," p. 56.

56. Since the farmers were eliminating needed grasslands with their plows, the cowboys harassed both white and black settlers. The cowboys would drive their cattle on the settlers' newly-plowed ground and fields of young wheat. They crippled one white family's team of horses and at one point during a two-week time span in 1878, the cowboys made six raids on the settlers in attempts to drive the farmers away.—Maria L. Stanley to Gov. George T. Anthony, April 7, 1878, Records of the Governor's Office, George T. Anthony correspondence received, subject file, cities and towns, box 2, folder 15, archives department, Kansas State Historical Society. Once the cowboys, in a dispute over watering their cattle along the Solomon river, ran off some of the cows belonging to the blacks of Nicodemus. The settlers "retaliated by capturing one of the cowboys and holding him as a hostage until the cattle were returned."—Floyd Benjamin Streeter, *The Kaw, The Heart of the Nation* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1941), p. 199.

There was also some deep resentment toward the blacks from nonranching whites. As a result of the antiblack feelings among northwest Kansas whites, the settlers of Nicodemus could not find a surveyor in Graham county to survey their homestead plots. They finally acquired the services of John Landers, a white man from Norton. After he completed the job, someone shot and killed him from ambush in Norton county.—George A. Root, "Biographical Sketch of Rev. Daniel Hickman," p. 3, "History—Graham County Collection," manuscript department, Kansas State Historical Society; *Wichita Beacon*, October 1, 1933.

52. *Hill City Times*, August 22, 1940.

53. McDaniel, "A History of Nicodemus," pp. 45-46.



This photograph was probably taken in the early 1880's when business was beginning to flourish. The Baptist church is at the left. For a short time in 1878 the community had between 600 and 700 residents, but as with many small towns in rural areas, the population dwindled, and only a few blacks live there today.

through charity. Under the leadership of the Topeka colony's officer, the blacks sent solicitors throughout the eastern portion of the state. They stored the subsistence aid that they received in a sod-house commissary. The building was later replaced with a stone-front dug-out.⁵⁷

During the spring of 1878, the suffering Afro-Americans began to receive some relief from new groups of black colonists. The first new group, colony number three, had about 150 members. It arrived at the townsite, with Hill as its guide, from Kentucky. The fourth colony, consisting of about 25 immigrants, also originated in Kentucky during May, 1878, with Roundtree as its leader. The last large group of settlers, led by Reverend Goodwin, had about 50 people and arrived from Mississippi during February, 1879.⁵⁸ These groups and several unrecorded individuals and smaller groups, in

comparison to the Topeka and Lexington colonies, had substantial amounts of cash, supplies, horses, and wagons, and they shared much of their wealth with the poorer settlers.⁵⁹

In addition, westward-bound white migrants helped some of the blacks cultivate their claims. Nicodemus's relatively large population made the townsite and its surrounding area an ideal place for white travelers to rest and refresh themselves. For a short time during 1878, Nicodemus had between 600 and 700 residents, making it the most populous town north of the Kansas Pacific railroad tracks and west of Beloit.⁶⁰ Eventually all but a few businessmen and others who could make a living in a frontier town resettled on homestead lands. However, those blacks who already had staked out their claims exchanged food and shelter for the use of the whites' plow teams to break up the land.⁶¹

57. *Kansas City Times*, May 28, 1959; Belleau, "The Nicodemus Colony," pp. 56-57; *Atchison Weekly Champion*, July 23, 1881.

58. *Topeka State Journal*, January 7, 1922; Lee Ella Blake, "The Great Exodus of 1879 and 1880 to Kansas," master's thesis, Kansas State College of Agriculture and Applied Science, Manhattan, 1942, p. 56; *Smith County Kansas Pioneer*, March 21, 1879. Many of the new settlers fell into the habit of calling Nicodemus, "Nigger Demus."—Arna Bontemps and Jack Conroy, *They Seek a City* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1945), p. 44.

59. Many of the later colonists left the South with a substantial amount of wealth in comparison to most blacks of that era. For example, Jordan Dotsan had over \$1,000 worth of goods shipped to Nicodemus.—Jordan Dotsan to Gov. George T. Anthony, April 29, 1878, Anthony correspondence received, subject file, cities and towns.

60. *Western Cyclone*, April 21, 1887.

61. Van B. Shaw, "Nicodemus, Kansas: A Study in Isolation," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Missouri, Columbia, 1951, p. 100.

Those homesteaders who did not receive white assistance in farming their claims either improvised or obtained aid from the new colonists who possessed plow teams and farming implements. Before the arrival of wealthier blacks in 1878, many of the immigrants planted crops with only spades, mattocks, and hoes.⁶² Some of them continued to use this crude method of farming. One man, who may have had a need to distinguish his land from that belonging to others at a glance, spaded a four-foot-wide hedge row around his 160 acres of land. Other Afro-Americans hitched milk cows to plows. A black man and his wife broke 12 acres of tough prairie land and cultivated eight acres of corn with a cow.⁶³

A large segment of the early colonists still needed charity for survival, however. This need occurred even though the blacks found that they could earn additional money by selling buffalo bones which they gathered on the prairie for \$6.00 per ton.⁶⁴ The migrants attempted to obtain further aid through the state's governor. During March and April, 1878, Kansas Gov. George T. Anthony received several letters from Nicodemus's leaders and sympathetic whites asking for his help in acquiring governmental aid for the town.⁶⁵ The correspondence from John H. Edwards, a white real estate dealer from Ellis, seems to have had the most influence with the governor. Edwards's first letter to Anthony concerning relief for the blacks of Nicodemus was an introduction for Roundtree. The real estate dealer expressed disapproval for the black minister's plan to solicit the governor's assistance in requesting congress for aid to needy Kansas blacks.⁶⁶ Edwards, who later claimed that the colonists would for some time "be a weight upon the state," proposed relief through private rather than governmental sources, a suggestion the governor quickly

endorsed.⁶⁷ The people of Kansas had made a nationwide appeal for aid after the grasshopper invasion of 1874, and Anthony did not think that the state could afford to make another request so soon. A new solicitation, he thought, would deter new white settlers from relocating in the state.⁶⁸

Since the poor blacks of Nicodemus did not receive any assistance from the state or federal government,⁶⁹ they continued until the spring of 1879 to canvas the older settled areas for aid. In at least one recorded instance, they sent an agent out of state. Roundtree made a successful plea for assistance at the Michigan state fair. Citizens of Michigan gave the colonists money and several train car loads of commodities.⁷⁰ During April, 1879, the migrants decided at a mass meeting to cease soliciting aid and disband the colony organization established for that purpose. This occurred as a result of five factors: (1) their successful charity drives; (2) predictions of a good crop harvest; (3) the demoralizing effect of begging; (4) the realization that some of the colonists would rather beg than work; and (5) fear that many of the destitute exodusters would be sent to the Nicodemus area.⁷¹

THE BLACKS made the decision to stop requesting aid under new leadership. The colonists had chosen W. H. Smith and S. P. Roundtree to head their self-governing organization until the summer of 1878 when they elected John W. Niles, a member of the Lexington colony, as president and Edward P.

67. John H. Edwards to Anthony, March 15, 1878.—Anthony correspondence received, subject file, cities and towns.

68. Painter, *Exodusters*, p. 151.

69. Although there is no evidence that blacks of Nicodemus and its hinterland received aid from private relief organizations operating outside of Graham county, one national association and several statewide associations were established to assist freedmen immigrating to Kansas. The blacks of Topeka formed the Kansas Colored State Emigration Bureau, May 3, 1879, while biracial groups organized the Kansas Freedmen's Relief Association in April, 1879. The latter group had the governor of Kansas as its chairman. In addition, Kansans and non-Kansans organized the National Emigration Society, April 10, 1879.—Blake, "The Great Exodus of 1879 and 1880 to Kansas," pp. 34, 43; Clara H. Hazelrigg, *A New History of Kansas* (Topeka: Crane & Co., 1895), p. 189; *Ellis County Farmer*, May 28, 1879; *North Topeka Times*, April 25, 1879. The blacks of Graham county may have had to obtain assistance from the Graham County Central Aid Association, which was organized on May 8, 1880. This group appealed "To The People Of Central And Eastern Kansas" to assist the many needy families in the county. The lack of rain during 1880 in northwest Kansas placed many of the area's people in a destitute condition.—*Western Star*, Hill City, May 20, 1880.

70. Federal Writers' Project, *Kansas: A Guide to the Sunflower State*, p. 331.

71. *Republican Daily Journal*, April 30, 1879; Blake, "The Great Exodus of 1879 and 1880 to Kansas," p. 54.

62. Prentis, *A History of Kansas*, p. 153.

63. *Seneca Weekly Courier*, September 17, 1880; *Hill City Times*, September 5, 1940.

64. *Kansas City Star*, January 26, 1905; *Hill City Times*, November 24, 1955.

65. John H. Edwards to Governor Anthony, March 11, 15, 1878; W. B. Townsend to Anthony, April 2, 1878; S. P. Roundtree to Anthony, April 2, 1878; W. R. Hill to Anthony, March 23, 1878; John W. Niles to Anthony, March 14, 1878; W. P. Tomlinson to Anthony, March 18, 1878.—Anthony correspondence received, subject file, cities and towns.

66. John H. Edwards to Anthony, March 11, 1878, *ibid.*; Painter, *Exodusters*, p. 151.

McCabe, as secretary.⁷² Niles did not possess the literacy of some of the other migrants, but he displayed an aggressive, energetic, dominating personality. A very forceful speaker, Niles would profess the greatness of blacks to any and all audiences. He once gave a lecture at the state capitol building where he addressed all the people of Kansas on the need for reimbursement of the colored people for loss and damage sustained while in slavery.⁷³ Although he made his living until he left Kansas under a cloud of suspicion as a deputy county clerk, a wood merchant, and banker, he was renowned for his uncanny ability to swindle. One of his exploits, the cheating of a bank, compelled W. L. Chambers, an early white settler of northwest Kansas, to write an exposé pamphlet describing Niles and his deeds.⁷⁴

Born a slave during 1842 in Mississippi to a European father and a black mother,⁷⁵ Niles came to Nicodemus by way of Tennessee and Kentucky. Although Niles had served time in a Tennessee penitentiary for killing a man during 1869 he later obtained a pardon.⁷⁶ After his release, Niles eventually migrated to Lexington and became involved with Smith's and Hill's Nicodemus colony organization. He arrived at the townsite with the colony during September, 1877. Soon thereafter, he became known for his colorful personality and eloquent speaking style that enabled him to become a masterful solicitor.⁷⁷ He personally brought in so many of Nicodemus's relief supplies that he claimed to be the colony's underwriter. A reporter from the *Atchison Weekly Champion* was so impressed with Niles that he asserted that "You can hardly be said to have seen Nicodemus if you have not seen Niles. . . ." ⁷⁸

During 1881, this big brown man "with a

large head, two rows of very white teeth, and an everlasting flow of conversation" ⁷⁹ became Nicodemus's most notorious confidence artist. Soon after the colonists ceased their efforts at gaining aid, Niles became deputy clerk to Edward P. McCabe, who had just received the county clerk appointment from Governor Anthony. With the money he earned from his new job coupled with what he made as a private banker and commodities trader for the blacks of Graham county, Niles began to display an elegant taste for clothes, carriages, and although he had a wife somewhere in the South, for women. To maintain his life-style, he occasionally mortgaged his property to a white bank at Stockton. The last time he borrowed money from the bank he was accused of fraud. Niles approached the owner of the bank, Jay J. Smyth, who lived in Iowa and infrequently visited the bank that his brother-in-law, C. C. Woods, operated, with a request to make a loan with nonexistent corn as collateral. Niles told Smyth, whose brother-in-law was out of town, that he had bought more than 1,500 bushels of corn from the area's blacks, for over 20 cents a bushel. He asserted to the banker that he wanted to hold the corn until he could receive at least 30 cents a bushel, but he needed a loan until the demand for the corn increased. Being from Iowa where corn was almost legal tender, Smyth immediately loaned Niles the money.

When the banker's brother-in-law, who knew that the blacks had only raised a few bushels of corn, returned, he informed the Iowan that Niles had deceived the bank. Woods had a warrant issued for Niles's arrest. The town constable found Niles in Hill City, 18 miles from the bank's location, where he was in the company of a "buxom dusky maiden." Niles asked and received the constable's permission to take the lady home before accompanying the peace officer to jail. The black man never returned to Hill City. Instead he attempted to make his escape by traveling through Nebraska partially on foot. Smyth gave the policeman a letter of credit and told him to "'Go and find that nigger . . . dead or alive.'" Two weeks later, the constable captured Niles.

Several weeks after his return to Stockton,

72. *Western Cyclone*, April 21, 1887.

73. Reprinted in the *Graham County Lever*, Gettysburg, November 26, 1880, from the Topeka [*Daily*] *Commonwealth*, November 19, 1880; W. L. Chambers, *Niles of Nicodemus: Exploiter of Kansas Exodusters, Negro Indemnity and Equality of Blacks With Whites His Obsession, Beats Bankers, Bench and Barristers; Counter League to Post-War K.K.K. Riots and Finally Prison* (Los Angeles: Washington High School, 1925), p. 5; *Roscoe Tribune*, July 30, 1880.

74. Chambers, *Niles of Nicodemus*, Foreword.

75. United States Census Office, *Tenth Census, 1880*, for Kansas, Graham county, Nicodemus township, p. 1.

76. Chambers, *Niles of Nicodemus*, p. 19.

77. A. T. Hall and E. P. McCabe met Niles at Leavenworth while the black man from Nicodemus was soliciting for relief for his town.—Belleau, "The Nicodemus Colony," p. 51.

78. *Atchison Weekly Champion*, July 23, 1881.

79. *Ibid.*

Ho! for the Great Solomon Valley of
Western Kansas!

EXCURSION!

Over the Old Reliable Kansas Pacific,

Thursday, June 28, 1877,

From Topeka, Kansas, through the
Wheatfield of America to Trego
and return.

ROUND TRIP TICKETS, \$10, GOOD FOR 30 DAYS

*We invite Men of Business, Capital and Energy to go
and see the new El Dorado of the Solomon Valley, HILL
CITY. One thousand Town Lots given to actual settlers.*

*To farmers wanting homes there are 30,000 acres of
fine, choice Government Land in the Great Solomon Valley
subject to entry. Come and go to the Solomon Valley with
us and plow deep, while the sluggards sleep.*

*The colored citizens have the same rates to go and see
their NICODEMUS.*

TICKETS ON SALE AT THE K. P. DEPOT.

W. R. HILL,

Excursion Agent.

"Times" Print, North Topeka, Kan.

This flier, primarily concerned with the boosting of Hill City, the all-white town developed by W. R. Hill and W. H. Smith in Graham county, also stated that blacks could have the same excursion rates "to go and see their Nicodemus." Smith, a black entrepreneur, was president of the Nicodemus town company and treasurer of the Hill City company.

Niles appeared in court to defend himself against the charges of obtaining money under false pretenses. Although some of the town's best lawyers aided the prosecuting attorney in preparing his case, Niles represented himself. The black man went to court with the local newspapers sympathetic with his plight, thus increasing his chances of being tried by a sympathetic jury. Realizing the prevailing feeling toward him, Niles did not call one witness to testify in his defense, but relied solely on the mood of the jury, his oratorical skills, and his ability to convey to whites that they and blacks shared many of the same problems of living in northwest Kansas. He presented a three-hour plea for his freedom that was reported as being "eloquent and soulful." His presentation centered on blacks' former condition of bondage, the wealth that many whites made from slavery, the lack of rain in Graham county, and the exploitative behavior of banks in the area. After his address, the jury debated his guilt or innocence at length. They finally agreed to exonerate Niles. The judge, who criticized the "jurymen for ignoring the evidence and their instructions," the county attorney, the assisting lawyers, and the bankers were all astonished at the verdict.

Niles soon left Nicodemus. He traveled to Washington, D.C., where he gave lectures pressing the federal government to give former slaves indemnity for their loss of liberty and wages during bondage. Although most of the Eastern newspapers ridiculed his ideas, a group of congressmen introduced a freedman compensatory bill which was quickly defeated. Having had only limited success in Washington, Niles returned to Arkansas where he was convicted on nine counts of fraud because he had fleeced many blacks out of their money under the pretense of selling them railroad lands. He was fined \$800 plus court costs or the opportunity of working the fine off at 25 cents per day. Thereafter, Niles faded into oblivion.⁸⁰

WHILE many whites perceived Niles as unscrupulous, they had no such image of McCabe, a free-born Northern black. The man lived an extraordinary life. Born in Troy, N.Y.,

on October 10, 1850, he lived for a while in Fall River, Mass., attended public school in Newport, R.I., and continued his education in Bangor, Me., until his father died. Later he went to New York city where he worked as a clerk and porter on Wall street. Traveling to Chicago, he took a job as a clerk at the Palmer House Hotel, and later became a clerk in the Cook county treasurer's office. After 18 months there, he joined Abraham T. Hall, Jr., city editor of the Chicago *Conservator*, and migrated west to Kansas.⁸¹ At Leavenworth, McCabe and Hall signed on with John W. Niles, then a town agent for Nicodemus, and relocated in that predominantly black populated town.⁸²

According to an early settler of Nicodemus, McCabe had little money when he ventured to western Kansas, and he had to borrow from a Chicago seamstress whom he later married. He eventually secured a job surveying for the government, while he engaged in real estate and transacted legal business for blacks in the Nicodemus area.⁸³ During 1880, McCabe obtained Gov. John St. John's appointment as temporary county clerk. He did so after informing the governor that he did not want to be supported for office by the Millbrook slating petition. Without his permission or agreement, the white settlers of Millbrook placed his name on a petition with their candidates. Since most blacks in the county identified Millbrook with the Democratic party, this was an attempt at gaining black signatures. McCabe told St. John that he desired to be considered for the clerk's office only on the Hill City petition, for the Millbrook movement favored "too much of the 'Old School' democracy" for him or his people "to touch, or handle the unclean thing."⁸⁴

During the period McCabe sought the county clerk's office, Hall petitioned and received the governor's appointment as the county census taker, and Nicodemus lost its

81. William J. Simmons, *Men of Mark: Eminent, Progressive and Rising* (Cleveland: Geo. M. Rewell & Co., 1887), pp. 1055-1056.

82. Schwendemann, "Nicodemus: Negro Haven on the Solomon," p. 22.

83. Blake, "The Great Exodus of 1879 and 1880 to Kansas," p. 82; Schwendemann, "Nicodemus: Negro Haven on the Solomon," p. 22.

84. E. P. McCabe to Gov. John St. John, March 7, 1880.—Records of the Governor's Office, John St. John correspondence, subject file, county affairs, Graham county, March, 1880, box 8, folder 1, archives department, Kansas State Historical Society.

80. Chambers, *Niles of Nicodemus*, pp. 1, 7, 9-14, 16-19.



The photograph, *upper left*, of W. R. Hill and son, Will, appeared in a special section on Graham county settlers in the *Hill City Times*, November 24, 1955. Above is Hill's residence in Hill City and *below*, an early view of the town. Hill had brought the first group of settlers to Hill City in February, 1878, and for a year or so promoted that town concurrently with Nicodemus. But the size of Hill City's potential market later caused him to concentrate his boosting efforts on his namesake town.



bid for temporary county seat. The black town competed with Gettysburg and Millbrook, two all-white towns for the county government operation. Each town attempted to demonstrate that it had the widest popular support by submitting to the governor petitions with the greatest number of signatures. The settlers of Nicodemus claimed that citizens of Gettysburg used fraud in collecting their names. Abraham Hall and McCabe asserted to the governor that his slowness in selecting one of the towns as the county seat encouraged Gettysburg and other towns to employ deceptive measures in their attempts at gaining the appointment. To substantiate their allegation, the pair sent St. John several affidavits describing the tricks used by Gettysburg residents in getting blacks to sign their petition.⁸⁵ Neither these testimonies, the town's petition, nor later correspondence from the citizens of Nicodemus⁸⁶ induced St. John to make a favorable decision for the black town. He appointed Millbrook as the first county seat of Graham county,⁸⁷ which was organized on April 1, 1880.

Two months later, McCabe and other county officials supervised a special county-wide election to determine the location of the permanent county seat. Since many of the voters thought Millbrook obtained the temporary seat by deceit, the selection of Nicodemus as the polling place was probably the officials' attempt to reduce the number of fraud charges. The scandal-free election produced Millbrook as the winner, and in July, 1881, W. R. Hill challenged and again failed to strip the county's headquarters from their town.⁸⁸ This

factor contributed considerably to the near abandonment of Hill City.⁸⁹

THE COUNTY experienced a major transformation in its population makeup during the three years between the arrival of the first black immigrants and the county's official establishment. The area changed from predominantly black to a governmental unit with a large white majority. This factor relieved the fears of whites who thought the county would be organized with a poor black majority, and Hill would sell school bonds before they could afford to pay the additional tax costs. Mrs. Maria L. Stanley, and other Graham county whites, wanted the governor to delay the organization of the county until the citizens could operate it without going into debt.⁹⁰

The change in the county's racial composition preceded the coming of three white businessmen to Nicodemus. Their enterprises initiated Nicodemus's primary function of profitably collecting and distributing goods. The poverty of the hinterland population delayed the town from providing the area's residents with a market place. Earlier, three different black immigrants had attempted to operate retail stores. During the winter of 1877-1878, Z. T. Fletcher opened the first business in Nicodemus. He purchased a small amount of goods from a white man who owned

89. At one time during the fall of 1883, Hill City had no residents. Tirzilla Garnett, who lived on a homestead, ran the post office during the day and returned home at night. An Atchison *Champion* newspaper reporter stated when he was in "Hill City there was only one store building standing, solitary and alone." The original population of the town either moved to farms, to other towns, or out of the area. After the extraordinary good crop year of 1884, Hill, with the assistance of James F. Pomeroy, a millionaire from Boston, by way of Atchison, revitalized the town.

James, the son of R. M. Pomeroy, president of the Atchison and Pike's Peak Railway Company, made large investments in the Hill City and Nicodemus area. He was born in Cincinnati and raised in Boston where he held the position of land commissioner and general manager with his father's railroad, two jobs that gave him considerable experience in land development. Pomeroy moved to Atchison during 1878, where he owned and operated a company that supplied coal to the Pike's Peak railroad. After the railway became the Union Pacific, Central Branch, Pomeroy sold his coal company and became involved with Hill in western Kansas land development. The town promoter sold Pomeroy on the money-making opportunities in Graham county. Because of better profit potential, Pomeroy invested a substantially greater amount of money in Hill City than in Nicodemus. During 1887 he gave Graham county a \$20,000 courthouse for removing the county seat from Millbrook to Hill City. In addition, he built two hotels, a general store, 40 residences, and several office buildings. By contrast he bought only two undeveloped lots and contributed to the building of a church in Nicodemus. All of his investments in Graham county, which also included a large model farm, were managed or made with the assistance of Hill, his land agent.—Moore, "Story of Hill City, Kansas," p. 4; *Atchison Globe*, June 20, 1907; *Hill City Times*, July 6, 1961; *Western Cyclone*, July 8, 1887.

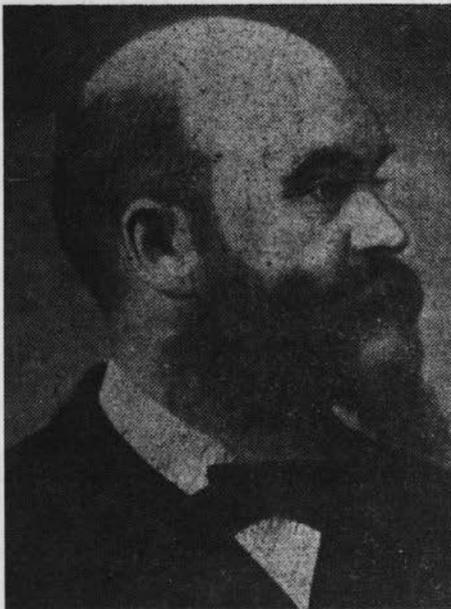
90. Maria L. Stanley to Anthony, April 7, 1878.—Anthony correspondence received, subject file, cities and towns.

85. Two illiterates, Samuel Foster and George Johnson, claimed that Simon Knowlton and an unknown white man tricked them into making their marks on the Gettysburg petition. The men told Johnson that the petition was for a site north of the Solomon river, the side on which he lived. He subsequently learned that Knowlton was an owner of the townsite of Gettysburg and the petition supported the town. Johnson did not want his name on the white settlement's petition because "the people of that town have tried to ignore my race of people always." These two men deceived Foster by telling him that their petition was for Nicodemus and not Gettysburg.—Affidavit of George Johnson, October 30, 1879, and affidavit of Samuel Foster, October 30, 1879, in *ibid.*, St. John correspondence, subject file, county affairs, Graham county, May 1877-February 1880, box 8, folder 1.

86. Five Nicodemus citizens to St. John, February 21, 1880.—*Ibid.*

87. Margaret S. Moore, "Story of Hill City, Kansas," unpublished manuscript in Graham County Public Library, Hill City, p. 1.

88. *Ibid.*



James P. Pomeroy, a millionaire of Boston and Atchison, assisted W. R. Hill in the revitalization of Hill City after 1884. In 1887 he gave Graham county a \$20,000 courthouse for locating the county seat at Hill City.

a store near the town and for a short time unsuccessfully ran a retail store from a dug-out.⁹¹ His venture, as well as that of Henry Smith and Lewis Welton,⁹² two other blacks who attempted to operate retail stores, failed because the area's black homesteaders did not obtain enough money from work or cash crops to make the fledgling business ventures profitable. After the spring of 1879, the colonists acquired money from outside jobs and were able to raise crops and livestock enough to enable three whites to successfully operate businesses at Nicodemus.⁹³ S. G. Wilson, a

91. *Atchison Weekly Champion*, July 23, 1881; McDaniel, "A History of Nicodemus," p. 57; *Kansas City Star*, January 26, 1905.

92. *Western Cyclone*, April 21, 1887.

93. Wages for farm labor in Graham county during 1879 to 1880 ranged from \$13 to \$16 per month with board. Carpenters were paid \$2.00 to \$3.00 per day, wagon makers \$2.00 to \$2.50 per day, harness makers \$2.00 to \$2.75 per day, washerwomen from 75¢ to \$1.00 per day, and domestic servants \$1.50 to \$2.50 per week.—Kansas State Board of Agriculture, *Second Biennial Report, 1879-1880* (Topeka: Kansas Publishing House, 1881), pp. 286-287. The *Lawrence Daily Journal* asserted that the blacks of Nicodemus, during the winter of 1879, "average from three acres to fifty acres of winter wheat each. . . . The yield would have provided the farmers with enough wheat to sell on the open market.—*Lawrence Daily Journal*, December 11, 1879.

New Yorker, and William Green, a Rhode Islander, owned general stores, while C. W. Newth, a European, operated a drugstore.⁹⁴

The presence of white businessmen did not hinder the blacks from dominating the politics of the township.⁹⁵ The Afro-Americans controlled the township's elective offices and exerted a major influence in county-wide political affairs. During the election of 1881, they were able to have McCabe elected to a full term as county clerk and Daniel Hickman, a minister and leader of one of the Kentucky colonies, who lived in Hill City township, county coroner.⁹⁶ During 1880, blacks outnumbered whites in Nicodemus township almost five to one. Out of 316 people in the governmental unit, only 58 were white, but in the county as a whole, blacks were outnumbered 3,774 to 484 for a meager 12 percent of the total county population.⁹⁷ The county-wide election of Afro-Americans indicates the lack of intensive white racial hostility present in the county and the higher degree of political sophistication possessed by area blacks. They appear to have united behind their candidates and made political deals with selected groups of whites.

There is some evidence that an unofficial understanding existed between blacks and whites in governing the township's school board. The school system usually consisted of two Afro-Americans and one white who was a Republican.⁹⁸ The former slaves demonstrated the importance they attached to education by establishing, during 1879, the first school in Graham county. Compared with whites in the area, blacks had a low literacy rate, but it was remarkably high for a group of people who had been in slavery only a few years earlier.

94. *Western Cyclone*, May 5, 1887.

95. Kansas statutes did not allow towns with less than 200 residents to incorporate. Nicodemus and other small towns were governed by their townships, subdivisions of county governments. Each township had a trustee, clerk, treasurer, road overseer, and at least two constables and justices of the peace. Townships with extraordinarily large populations had more than two constables and justices. Each officer, with the exception of the justices, came up for reelection every year. The justices were elected every two years. Once a year, the trustee, who headed the administration, made a complete report to the county commissioners about his township's affairs.

96. George A. Root, "Fragmentary Notes Concerning the Nicodemus Colony as given by Rev. Daniel Hickman, One of the Promoters of the Colony," p. 1, "History—Graham County Collection."

97. U. S. Census Office, *Tenth Census, 1880*, for Kansas, Graham county.

98. Root, "Fragmentary Notes Concerning the Nicodemus Colony," p. 2, "History—Graham County Collection."

Thirty-nine percent of the total black population could read, and 25 percent could write. The percentages increased substantially for the population between the ages of 15 and 45. Fifty-six percent of the males in this group could read, while 48 percent could write.⁹⁹

BOOKS APPEARED to have been important to the colonists. William Kirtley, an exslave from Scott county, Kentucky, who arrived in Nicodemus during 1878, relocated to northwestern Kansas with about a dozen books. These included a *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*, an elementary speller, and two Bibles.¹⁰⁰ The first attempt of the blacks to teach their children to read these and other books took place in a sod hotel belonging to Z. T. Fletcher, a school board member.¹⁰¹ His wife, the town's first teacher, taught 15 children. The students "sat on seats that were made of big blocks with hewn logs laid over them."¹⁰² Mrs. Fletcher and later teachers instructed the children in basic literature, arithmetic, moral values, and hygiene. During the period of extreme economic hardship for the settlers, a teacher told one "little boy, to comb his hair before coming to school. Next day his hair was cut right down the middle." When the teacher asked him why he cut his hair, the student replied that his family could not afford a comb.¹⁰³ He and his classmates began school late in the winter after they had assisted with the harvest. The length of these children's school terms varied from three to six months.¹⁰⁴

The founding of the school coincided with the town company ending its promotional activities of Nicodemus. Two major factors induced the town company to stop advertising the town. First, the company could locate only a very few Southern blacks with money enough to relocate in northwest Kansas, buy a town business lot, and establish an enterprise. Of the several hundred people the promoters

managed to relocate to Nicodemus,¹⁰⁵ only a few dozen had any desire to permanently live there. During 1878, 600 people resided in Nicodemus township,¹⁰⁶ most of them in the town. Two years later, only 316 persons occupied the township,¹⁰⁷ and the vast majority of that number lived on farms. The decrease in urban population was mostly due to the blacks utilizing the town as a way station to homesteads or other farm lands. The town company may have sold a substantial number of five-dollar resident lots, but few 75-dollar commercial lots and the land units that would have provided the company a sizeable return on their initial investment. These small successes induced the company to continue its promotional activities, however.

Second, Hill's great interest in the promotion of Hill City diverted his attention from Nicodemus and deprived the company of a major inspirational force as well as his expertise. This speculator brought the first group of settlers to Hill City on February 1, 1878,¹⁰⁸ five months after the initial settlement of Nicodemus. For a year or so, Hill and Smith promoted both towns concurrently.¹⁰⁴ The size of the town's potential target market then inspired the townsite speculator to concentrate his boosting efforts on his namesake town.

Hill and the town company's lack of interest in promoting Nicodemus did not kill the town; the residents of Nicodemus would later actively boost their town almost as eagerly as did the original owners. Whereas the residents would be interested in long-term growth of the town, the townsite company had only desired relatively quick profits. The company's leaders decided that it could not continue to make a rapid large return on its investment by charging noncompany members a fee to locate in Nicodemus.

The Nicodemus company made money in a

99. U.S. Census Office, *Tenth Census, 1880*, for Kansas, Graham county.

100. Hill City *Times*, September 5, 1940.

101. *Western Cyclone*, April 21, 1887.

102. Hill City *Times*, September 5, 1940.

103. Hays *Daily News*, July 31, 1955.

104. Belleau, "The Nicodemus Colony," pp. 22-25.

105. Many of the blacks who left the South for Nicodemus never arrived in the northwest Kansas town. For example, a group of colonists led by Rev. Daniel Hickman and Hill, left Scott county, Kentucky, with 300 members, but arrived in Nicodemus with less than 200 settlers. The people that did not complete the journey settled in St. Louis, Kansas City, or some other place along the route.—Root, "Biographical Sketch of Rev. Daniel Hickman," p. 3, "History—Graham County Collection."

106. Belleau, "The Nicodemus Colony," p. 20.

107. The Tenth Census claimed that Nicodemus township had 452 people, but the census schedule for the township has only 316 names.—U.S. Census Office, *Tenth Census, 1880*, for Kansas, Graham county, Nicodemus township.

manner that was very common on the Midwest public domain. Companies would buy the land from the government at preemption prices, then sell town lots at a higher market price. If the companies collected more than the government sale price, the remainder would be divided among the share holders. It was this profit that inspired the formation of most Midwest town companies which, in turn, helped populate the frontier.

The Nicodemus Town Company was similar to its white counterparts in that it went into business mainly to make a profit. Being primarily black seems to be the major difference

between the Nicodemus Town Company and white town companies that operated on the public domain. Motivation for engaging in townsite formation was not the only similarity between town companies that promoted towns for the Afro-American and those that established towns for other groups. Both whites and blacks selected a location, platted the site, filed the plat, attracted settlers, and bought the land from the government at preemption prices. Future studies may also show that Nicodemus's later development paralleled many contemporary biracial and all-white Midwest towns.