

# Nicodemus

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



National Historic Site  
Kansas



The Emancipation Celebration held each July honors the people of Nicodemus, past and present.

## African American Home on the Frontier

This northwestern Kansas town—barely a few dozen buildings—tells us first-hand stories of the African American experience on the Great Plains. Founded in 1877, it was the first western town built by and for black settlers. For black farmers in the region, it was the economic and cultural hub for many decades.

After the Civil War, blacks in the South found that the political and economic gains of Reconstruction were being violently stripped away. Some looked westward, but, because racial tensions extended to the frontier, the idea of an all-black settlement took hold. The Nicodemus Town Company was formed by W.H. Smith and five other African American men, and W.R. Hill, a white land developer.

In September 1877, some 300 settlers recruited from Kentucky arrived at the newly platted town of Nicodemus. Like their white counterparts elsewhere on the frontier, they lived in primitive conditions. Newcomers were shaken by the spectacle of homes dug into the ground. Sixty people returned to Kentucky immediately. By the mid-1880s, hard-working, strong-willed settlers transformed Nicodemus into a prosperous town. Lasting prosperity on the Great Plains, though, depended on the presence of a railroad line. Despite the tireless efforts of town boosters, the nearest railroad ran several miles south. The town began a gradual decline. Nicodemus suffered along with the rest of the nation during the Great Depression in the 1930s.

In 1976 the original 161-acre town was listed as a National Historic Landmark District. In 1996 Congress established Nicodemus National Historic Site. The National Park Service and the residents of Nicodemus work together to preserve five remaining historic structures—the St. Francis Hotel (1878), African Methodist Episcopal Church (1897), First Baptist Church (1907), Nicodemus School District No. 1 building (1918), and Nicodemus Township Hall (1939). Nicodemus National Historic Site preserves a living community that includes descendants of the original emigrants who answered the call of free land and a limitless future.

*‘That is Nicodemus.’ The families lived in dugouts . . . The scenery was not at all inviting, and I began to cry.*

Willianna Hickman recalling her arrival at Nicodemus, Spring 1878



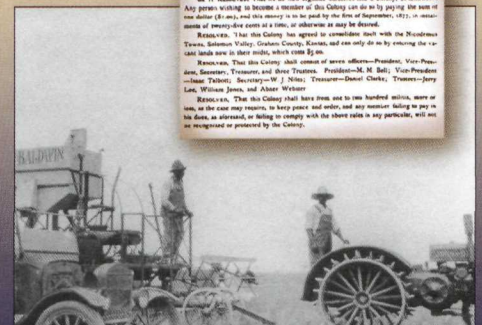
As at Nicodemus, many 19th-century Great Plains settlers lived in homes dug out of the ground.

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Town residents gather at a gas station near Nicodemus, 1920s.

COURTESY NICODEMUS HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTION, KANSAS UNIVERSITY



Despite the arrival of mechanized equipment, farming was always difficult in the region. *Top:* Promoters made wildly optimistic promises to attract settlers.

COURTESY NICODEMUS HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTION, KANSAS UNIVERSITY

**All Colored People  
GREAT WANT TO  
GO TO KANSAS,  
On September 5th, 1877,  
Can do so for \$5.00**

**IMMIGRATION**

WHEREAS: We, the colored people of Lexington, Ky., knowing that there is an abundance of cheap land now belonging to the Government, have assembled ourselves together for the purpose of locating on said lands. Therefore,

We do hereby call on all colored people who are desirous of going to the West to join our party, and to be paid by the first of September, 1877, in amounts of twenty-five cents at a time, or otherwise as may be desired.

RESOLVED: That this Colony be organized in accordance with the Nicodemus Town, Sherman Valley, Graham County, Kansas, and one only do so by crossing the said lands now in their hands, which 1898 E. J. ...

RESOLVED: That this Colony shall consist of seven officers—President, Vice-President, Secretary, Treasurer, and three Trustees. President—M. B. Bell; Vice-President—George Taylor; Secretary—W. J. Sims; Treasurer—Daniel Clarke; Trustees—Jerry Lee, William Jones, and Abner Walker.

RESOLVED: That this Colony shall have from one to two hundred miles, more or less, and the same may require, to keep goods and supplies, and any number, being to pay in his dues, as aforesaid, or failing to comply with the above rules in any particular, will not be recognized or protected by the Colony.

