

Nicodemus

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Historic Site
Kansas



African American Town 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, five black ministers, and W.R. Hill, a white town 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 the railhead in Ellis to live and some traveled all the way back to Kentucky. 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 and the Dust Bowl years of 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: St. Francis Hotel (1881), African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church (1885), First Baptist Church (1907), Nicodemus School District No. 1 building (1918), and Nicodemus Township Hall (1939). Nicodemus National Historic Site represents the only remaining all black town established at the end of Reconstruction, and is symbolic of the pioneer spirit of the black people who settled there.

Nicodemus residents about 1885.
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'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



The Williams family was among the first group of settlers to Nicodemus.



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



Promoters made wildly optimistic promises to attract settlers.



Despite the arrival of mechanized equipment, farming was always difficult in the region.

Discovering the Spirit of Nicodemus

Planning Your Visit

Things to Do

Nicodemus National Historic Site comprises a small part of the community of Nicodemus. The visitor center in Township Hall is open year-round except January 1, Thanksgiving, and December 25. Stop here first for exhibits, an audiovisual program, and an information desk staffed by park rangers. Service animals are welcome.



Township Hall, built in 1939 (inset), currently serves as the park visitor center.

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A self-guiding tour leads you to the town's historic buildings: Township Hall, District No. 1 School, St. Francis Hotel, Old First Baptist Church, and A.M.E. Church. Most property is privately owned; please respect owners' privacy. For ranger-led walking tours, call 785-839-4233.



District No. 1 School (1918)

NPS / JAMIE ALEXANDER

The original township plat is clearly visible in this 1953 photograph.

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Emancipation Celebration

The National Park Service works together with town residents to preserve and interpret Nicodemus. Most of the 25 or so residents trace their roots to the town's founders. Every summer for over 130 years, hundreds of other descendants return to renew family ties and celebrate their heritage during the town's Emancipation Celebration. The event, held around the last weekend in July, is open to the public. Contact the park for the date.

Getting to the Park

The park is in northwestern Kansas. *From eastbound I-70:* exit at Colby and take U.S. 24 east for 81 miles to Nicodemus. *From westbound I-70:* exit at Hays and take U.S. 183 to Stockton; turn left (west) onto U.S. 24 and go 19 miles. The visitor center is at the east end of town, one block south of U.S. 24.

Firearms

For firearms laws and policies see the park website.

More Information

Nicodemus National Historic Site
304 Washington Avenue
Nicodemus, KS 67625
785-839-4321
www.nps.gov/nico

Nicodemus National Historic Site is one of over 390 parks in the National Park System. For more on national parks and National Park Service programs in America's communities, visit www.nps.gov.

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St. Francis Hotel (1881)

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Old First Baptist Church (1907)

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A.M.E. Church (1885)

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**Nicodemus National
Historic Site**

District No. 1
School

K A N S A S

A.M.E.
Church

St. Francis Hotel

Old First
Baptist Church

Township
Hall

