

NICODEMUS NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

The Spirit of African-American Self Determination and Perseverance in the American West

Arrival... It seemed to young Willina Hickman that a terrible scene of desolation mocked her once hopeful anticipation of arriving in the "Promised Land" of northwestern Kansas. As an old woman many years later, she recollected her feelings upon first spotting Nicodemus in spring 1878...

"When we got in sight of Nicodemus the men shouted, "There is Nicodemus!" Being very sick, I hailed this news with gladness. I looked with all the eyes I had. I said, "Where is Nicodemus? I don't see it." My husband pointed out various smokes coming out of the ground and said, "That is Nicodemus." The families lived in dug-outs.... The scenery was not at all inviting, and I began to cry." As Willina cried, she gazed upon the unfolding of an important story of our Nation's relentless march westward, the first western town planned by and for African-Americans.



Founded in September 1877, Nicodemus already consisted of about 300 Black settlers in the area when Willina arrived with her husband, Daniel, the following spring. As did their white counterparts, these African-American settlers lived in very primitive conditions. This wasn't the little town of nice homes, public buildings and lush vegetation they were assured awaited their arrival. Instead, they found people living in dugouts "like prairie dogs" among the grasses of the plains, with the only relief a thin meandering oasis of the tree-lined Solomon River. Having come from the forested hills and cultivated lands of northeastern Kentucky, certainly others in Willina's group were equally shaken by this unfamiliar and apparently desolate scene. Many, about 100, returned to Kentucky or went on. Willina, Daniel and others chose to stay.

The "Lure of the West"... By the 1870s, the American Frontier had moved west of the Mississippi. Those wanting free or inexpensive government land had to seek opportunities further westward.

This was an era of reckless land promotion. Railroads, needing to populate the West to create markets for their services, exaggerated the qualities of the soils and climate in this "Western Eden".

Town and land promoters scoured the Nation to recruit settlers. These promoters also presented wildly optimistic visions of the future for settlers of western lands. It was two such men who formed the Nicodemus Town Company. Reverend W. H. Smith, a Black minister, was president and W. R. Hill, a white man and professional land developer, served as treasurer. As church activities were almost the only large gatherings allowed Southern Blacks, Hill visited African-American congregations in Kentucky to pitch Nicodemus. It was he who enticed the Hickmans and others to form colony organizations to settle Nicodemus.



Escaping Oppression... The story of Nicodemus actually began in the aftermath of the Civil War. For the South, the post-Civil War era was marred by racial oppression. Long before the last Federal troops left the South at the end of Reconstruction in 1877, the few political and economic gains Blacks had made during the previous decade were being violently stripped away.

Associating Kansas with the Underground Railroad and the fiery abolitionist John Brown, African-Americans were particularly responsive to opportunities to settle there. They recollected that, after much cross-border bloodshed between abolitionist Kansas and pro-slavery Missouri, Kansas entered the Union as a free state. Handbills and flyers distributed by the Nicodemus Town Company portrayed Nicodemus as a place for African-Americans to establish Black self-government.

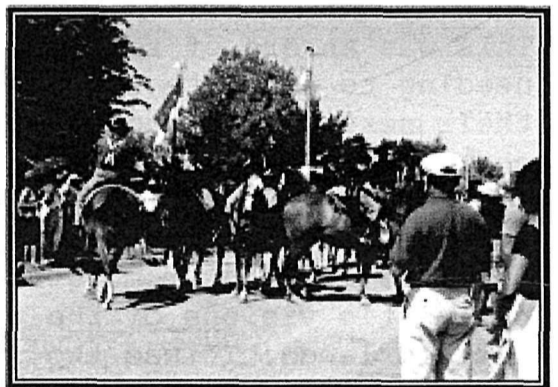
Growth and Decline... By the mid-1880s, the Hickmans and other strong-willed settlers transformed Nicodemus into a prosperous town. They boasted of two newspapers, three general stores, at least three churches, a number of small hotels, one school, literary society, ice cream parlor, a bank, a livery, numerous homes and more.



The people of Nicodemus needed only one more ingredient to ensure its continued growth and survival - a railroad. They had seen other towns bypassed by railroads wither and die. Despite tireless efforts of town boosters, the closest a railroad ever came was just

south of the Solomon River; Nicodemus lay to the north. When businesses fled to the other side of the river to a Union Pacific Railroad camp that later became the town of Bogue, Nicodemus began a long gradual decline.

The Spirit of Nicodemus... Despite the decline of Nicodemus and scattering of its people through the years, it lives on in spirit and place as a reminder of the many African-Americans who ventured far throughout the west and farmers, cowboys, soldiers, miners, politicians, stagecoach drivers, entrepreneurs and many more. Descendants treasure their spiritual bonds to this place. They come from throughout our Nation to return to Nicodemus every year during the last weekend in July to celebrate "Homecoming". It is a time for renewing family ties and friendships lasting generations. Originating from Nicodemus' earliest times as "Emancipation Day" to observe freeing of slaves in the West Indies, Homecoming has evolved and endured over 100 years. Homecoming is celebrated by a parade, fashion show, food, drink and much more. People of all races from nearby communities, and around our Nation, join the celebration.



Recognition... The U.S. Congress, recognizing the importance of Nicodemus' contribution to our Nation's history, enacted legislation establishing Nicodemus National Historic Site as unit of the National Park System in November 1996. The legislation directs the National Park Service to cooperate with the people of Nicodemus to preserve its five remaining historic structures - First Baptist Church, African Methodist Episcopal Church, St. Francis Hotel, School and Nicodemus Township Hall - and keep alive the memory of the many roles African Americans played throughout the American West.

All Colored People
PLEASE URGE TO
GO TO KANSAS.
On September 5th, 1877,
Can do so for \$5.00

IMMIGRATION.
 Attention, All Colored People: Kansas is a free State, and offers every advantage for the colored people who wish to settle there. The State is rich in soil, and has a fine climate. It is a free State, and offers every advantage for the colored people who wish to settle there. The State is rich in soil, and has a fine climate. It is a free State, and offers every advantage for the colored people who wish to settle there.