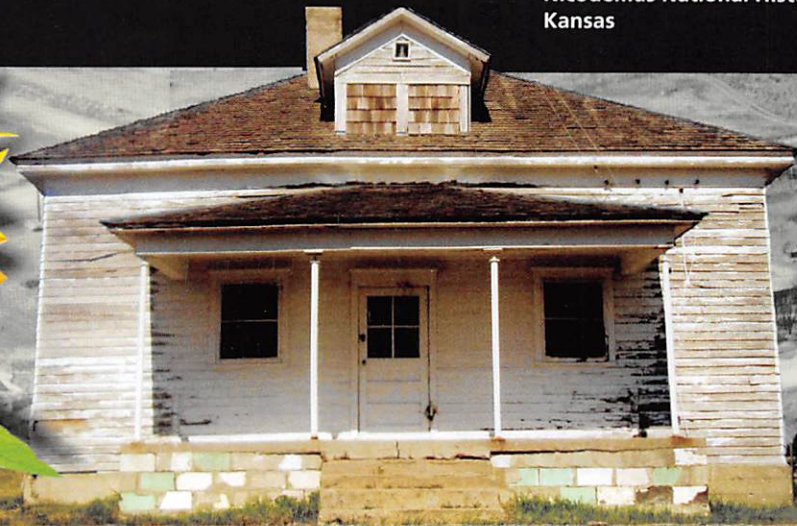


Nicodemus Walking Tour

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Nicodemus National Historic Site
Kansas



*“When we got in sight of Nicodemus
the men shouted, “There is Nicodemus!”*

- Williana Hickman, 1878

Township Hall - Self-Government



After hundreds of years of slavery and subjugation, freed blacks dreamed of self-determination, self-government and building a strong community.

Built in 1939, with support from the depression-era Works Progress Administration program, the Township Hall served more than the needs of local government. Socials, dances, and performances were regularly held. Multiple events brought the community together.

St. Francis Hotel/Switzer Residence - Business and Family



It was not easy to build a town from the difficult soil of the lonesome prairies. Trees for timber and firewood were scarce. Families collected buffalo chips, sunflower stalks, and twigs to keep warm and cook food. Paying jobs were few and required residents to be steadfast to make a living in the “middle of nowhere.”

Resourcefulness was reflected in the St. Francis Hotel/Switzer Residence. Not only a hotel, it was also a home to Z. T. and Jenny Fletcher, and later, the Switzer family in the 20th Century. The structure also served as a stagecoach station, and the town’s first post office and schoolhouse.

The five historic buildings of Nicodemus are physical expressions of the five pillars that continue to anchor African American communities today: church, self-government, education, home, and business. They illustrate the individual and collective strength of character and desire for freedom of the early pioneers who established Nicodemus in 1877.

The First Baptist Church and A.M.E. Church

Central to the African American community was the church. It represented the freedom to worship and served as a cornerstone of faith and community. In fact, it was in the churches of Georgetown, Kentucky, where word of Nicodemus reached those that would become the first settlers. Two churches stood out in Nicodemus: the First Baptist Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Church.



The First Baptist Church was established in 1878, first meeting in their members’ dugouts. After a series of structure, a new church was built in 1907. Legend has it that the new building was constructed around the existing church, so that services could continue during construction.

Once the new church was finished, the now interior old walls were removed. The First Baptist Church was the first building in Nicodemus to receive electricity in early 1950. A newer extension to the north was completed in the 1970s.



The African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church is one of the oldest surviving buildings in Nicodemus. Built around 1885 and first used as the Mount Pleasant Church (1897), the building served the A.M.E. congregation from c. 1910-12 through c. 1947 when declining membership forced it to shut its doors.

School District Number 1- Education

After generations of being denied an education, the settlers of Nicodemus wasted little time in establishing a school for their children. In 1879 the town established the first organized school in the county with the title of “School District No 1.”

This building, built in 1918, served Nicodemus School District No. 1 until the 1960s, when enrollment numbers proved too low to keep it open.



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

Early Beginnings

Rampant racism experienced by free blacks after the Civil War left little faith that the promise of freedom could ever be realized. It is no surprise that many took land promoters up on their proposal to settle an all-black town in the free lands of Kansas.

In the spring of 1877, three hundred determined people made the trek westward from Georgetown, Kentucky. Two other groups followed shortly afterward. Although the land appeared to offer little to these first settlers - some returned immediately - it was the vision and tenacious spirit of those who remained that made Nicodemus a home where real freedom could be experienced.

Above: Handbill promoting Black emmigration to Kansas. Right: The Bates Family homesteaded near Nicodemus. Below: Early Nicodemus settlers, ca. 1885.

The Boom Years

Despite hardships and fueled by shared dreams, Nicodemus thrived. Although the early years were rough, with residents living in dugouts, sod homes, and few stone structures, Nicodemus continued to draw more settlers.

By the mid-1880s, the town boasted a commercial district that included general stores, a bank, millinery shop, newspapers, a blacksmith, law and land offices, a literary society, and many social and fraternal organizations. This gained the attention of the railroads, which were scouting for new routes.

Returning Home

Despite the best efforts of the town, the railroad chose an alternate route south of the Solomon River. In a three month period in 1888, the town experienced a mass exodus by those in search of greater prosperity connected to the railroad.

Many businesses relocated to the new town of Bogue, five-miles southwest of Nicodemus. With the loss of the railroad, the population declined. The Great Depression, and the drought of the dust bowl years, prolonged the downward spiral of out-migration.

Today, the population at Nicodemus remains around twenty. However, descendants that live across the nation number in the thousands.

The annual Emancipation/Homecoming Celebration that began in 1878 (held the last weekend in July) continues to draw back descendants. This celebration honors a long tradition where families reunite for a parade, dance, talent, and fashion show, speakers, vendors, and food. They re-connect with their families and with their shared history.

The annual Homecoming Celebration brings many descendants back home to Nicodemus.

Safety and Information

Please stay on public roads as most property is privately owned. Use care when exploring the town. The visitor center is accessible and service animals are welcome.

Nicodemus National Historic Site
304 Washington Avenue
Nicodemus, KS 67625
Info: 785-839-4321
Park Manager: 785-354-4273
www.nps.gov/nico



District #1 School

