

NICODEMUS: NEGRO HAVEN ON THE SOLOMON

By Glen Schwendemann

STATE OF KANSAS



COMMISSION ON CIVIL RIGHTS

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NOTE

The story of Nicodemus, an all-Negro colony founded in Kansas in 1877, is the subject of the third publication in the series on the "History of Minority Groups in Kansas" published by the Kansas Commission on Civil Rights. The present pamphlet is a reprint of an article by Glen Schwendemann which first appeared in the **Kansas Historical Quarterly** (vol. 34, no. 1, Spring, 1968).

Mr. Schwendemann is a native of Oklahoma where he graduated from the University of Oklahoma, Norman. He is presently teaching in the public schools of Torrance, California. Mr. Schwendemann has also written on "Wyandotte and the First 'Exodusters' of 1879" and "The 'Exodusters' on the Missouri" in the **Kansas Historical Quarterly**. We are indebted both to the author and to the **Quarterly** for their permission to reprint the article and to make a few editorial changes for the present publication.

Nicodemus remains today the only all black community in Kansas. Only ten families live in the unincorporated community in Graham County at present, a considerable decline from the population of more than 400 in 1880. Residents, however, have hopes for the future of the community. Whatever the eventual outcome of the efforts of the townspeople to rejuvenate Nicodemus, "to those who know the truth of history," according to the *Atchison Weekly Champion* of 1883, "the name will always recall the bravest attempt ever made by people of any color to establish homes in the high plains of Western Kansas." From the colony came the first black to hold a major political office in Kansas: Edward P. McCabe, state auditor from 1883 to 1887.

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—*The Editor, Topeka, June, 1971.*

Nicodemus: Negro Haven on the Solomon

GLEN SCHWENDEMANN

The Solomon valley of western Kansas was not a very pleasant place to travel that July day in 1881, and Noble L. Prentis, the famed Kansas journalist, was finding his trip to Nicodemus depressing. As he traveled westward from Stockton, less than 20 miles from his destination, the appearance of the country side began to change remarkably. The wooded areas, which had not been abundant heretofore, suddenly began to diminish entirely. The soil, too, appeared less fertile. In the low bluffs on each side of the Solomon river, it seemed to be a "compromise between a clay bank and a stone quarry"—more suited, thought Prentis, to the growth of cactus and soapweed. But because the journalist had seen several good stands of corn along the way, he had to admit that the soil, like most other things in this world, "was better than it looked." As Prentis rode along under the hot summer sun, he could see in the distance numerous dugouts and an occasional stone residence, but aside from these outposts of civilization, he was quite alone in the vastness of western Kansas.

However depressing the surroundings might appear to Prentis, it was in this area and under these conditions that Nicodemus, the all-Negro colony, was founded in 1877. The settlement, organized by a group of blacks in Topeka, was established in Graham county, one of the new and largely uninhabited parts of the state. The colony was located near the 100th meridian, an area which, in those early days, was often considered to be too arid to support life. In spite of its many natural handicaps, however, Nicodemus had apparently succeeded, and it was to determine the progress of the colony that the journalist had undertaken his long and weary journey to the Kansas frontier.

Prentis was aware, however, that the Nicodemus settlement was not the first of its kind in Kansas. Southern freedmen had been establishing colonies in the state for several years. In fact, Prentis had witnessed the arrival of the first group of Negro colonists ever to arrive in the state. That was in Kansas City, Mo., sometime in 1873. The group, as he recalled, consisted mainly of field hands from Tennessee, and were bound for Cherokee county, in the southeastern part of the state. The leader and organizer of the colony was Benjamin Singleton, an illiterate freedman from Nashville.

Benjamin Singleton was truly an unforgettable character. He was a small man, a mulatto nearly 70 years old, but his age was concealed by an abundance of energy and a never-ending series

of schemes for the betterment of his race. "Old Pap," as his people fondly called him, had been born in slavery about 1809. After several unsuccessful attempts to escape from bondage, he finally made his way to Detroit in 1846. There he reportedly operated a boarding house for fugitive slaves until the end of the Civil War when he returned to Nashville. About 1869, he embarked upon his labors to elevate the race—labors that eventuated in the Negro colonization of Kansas. Singleton advertised the state far and wide, through pamphlets and posters, as the asylum for the freedmen of the South. His publicity was largely responsible for the fact that, by 1881, nearly a dozen Negro settlements had been founded in the Sunflower state. A few of these colonies were established directly by Singleton; the remainder were undoubtedly inspired by Singleton's publicity and his reputation.

Whereas the majority of these Negro colonies were known to Prentis only by name, in the case of Nicodemus he had a more complete knowledge. The colony had received its initial inspiration from a white man, W. R. Hill. A pioneer settler of Graham county, Hill had migrated from Indiana in the summer of 1876. In the fall of that year he laid out Hill City, destined to become the county seat, and began looking for ways to build up the area. It was probably at this time that he first thought of settling a colony of freedmen within the county. The idea was communicated to a group of Negroes then living in Topeka, who undertook the labor of organizing and perfecting the plan.

These blacks capable, intelligent and far-sighted—were former slaves from Kentucky, but had been residents of Kansas for several years. W. H. Smith, who became president of the Nicodemus Town Company, had lived in western Kansas since 1874, and was no stranger to the dangers and pitfalls of frontier life; Simon P. Roundtree, the secretary of the town company, was an ordained minister and a skilled lecturer, who reportedly had been branded as a slave for receiving instruction in reading and writing from his master's son. The corresponding secretary, Z. T. Fletcher, became the town's first postmaster, its first businessman, and remained a familiar figure in Graham county politics for many years.

W. R. Hill, who took no active part in the government of the colony, was primarily concerned with enlisting settlers, conducting them to Kansas and locating them upon their government claims. He was also responsible for selecting the site of the proposed town of Nicodemus, and in an area as sparsely settled as Graham county in 1877, the location of the town was not difficult.

The Graham county of the late 1870's was politically unorganized,



Nicodemus, Kansas, as it appears today. Although the population has declined from more than 400 in 1880 to only ten families today, the residents have high hopes for future growth.

but its boundaries were definite. It was located a full 240 miles west of Topeka, about 120 miles from the Colorado border and nearly 50 miles from the Nebraska state line. The major geographical landmark was the South fork of the Solomon river, which crossed the center of the county from west to east. Until 1876 not more than 75 people resided in the area. In the fall of that year, however, Hill City was platted just north of the Solomon river and within three miles of the center of the county. It was followed in 1877 by the establishment of Nicodemus, while Millbrook, Gettysburg, and Roscoe were founded in 1878. Of these five, only Hill City and Nicodemus have survived.

Nicodemus was located about one-half mile from the eastern border of the county at the junction of Spring creek and the Solomon river. Hill selected the townsite in early June, 1877, and within a few days he had platted the town. The first settler was the Rev. Simon P. Roundtree, who was on the townsite by June 18. In a circular dated July 2, 1877, Roundtree extended a general invitation to the "colored people of the United States" to come and settle in the "Great Solomon Valley of Western Kansas." About 300 persons, announced Roundtree, had cast their lot with the settlement, and a few had already taken up residence on their claims.

Perhaps the most interesting part of this circular was a poem, which explained the colony's name. It was not, as popularly believed, derived from the Biblical Nicodemus, but from a legendary slave who was said to have arrived in America aboard the second slave ship and later purchased his freedom. His alleged ability as a prophet was celebrated in the poem, reportedly sung by the plantation Negroes:

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.

To make the song fit the Nicodemus colony, this awkward but characteristic chorus was added:

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.

By July 30 the initial body of settlers, numbering around 30, had taken up residence in the area. These consisted mainly of the town officers. In addition to Smith, Roundtree, and Fletcher, there were Jerry Alsup, Jeff Lindsey, and William Edmons, all trustees of the town company. Z. T. Fletcher's wife was the first woman in the colony, and the only representative of her sex until the middle of September when a large group of colonists arrived from Kentucky under the leadership of W. R. Hill.

Hill had apparently spent most of the month of August in Kentucky enlisting recruits for the new settlement. In close cooperation with several Negro ministers, he had traveled through Scott and Fayette counties speaking to the congregations of the various Negro churches. By early September, Hill and a black minister, the Rev. M. M. Bell, had enrolled nearly 300 freedmen from the vicinity of Lexington. The group arrived in the colony on September 17, 1877, a day long celebrated as the founding of Nicodemus colony. When the lands were surveyed and Hill had located these new settlers on their claims, they occupied approximately 70 farms.

The second large body of settlers originated near Georgetown, Ky., and arrived in the colony in the spring of 1878. It was memorable for bringing to Nicodemus two outstanding Negro preachers. In the party was the Rev. Silas M. Lee, who founded the Nicodemus First Baptist Church and remained its pastor until the late 1880's. A more versatile man was the Rev. Daniel Hickman, who not only established and pastored the Mt. Olivet Baptist Church near Hill City, but was also one of the leading black politicians of the county during the 1880's.

Hickman's wife, Williana, accompanied her husband to Kansas. In 1937, at the age of 90, she described the trip to Kansas for a reporter of the *Topeka Daily Capital*. She recalled leaving Kentucky early in March, 1878, with a group led by W. R. Hill and her husband. Their ranks were much reduced in number when they finally arrived by rail at Ellis, about 35 miles south of Nicodemus. Many of the travelers had lost heart, or had found greater opportunity elsewhere, and departed from the company at various points en route. Some of the children had caught measles, and the entire party was forced to remain in Ellis for two weeks living in tents.

When the colonists, now reduced to about 200, set out on the difficult journey to Nicodemus, a compass was employed to direct the way. At night bonfires were built, and the men occasionally discharged their firearms to scare away the wild animals. "When we got in sight of Nicodemus," recalled Mrs. Hickman,

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 dugouts. We landed and once again struck tents. The scenery to me was not at all inviting, and I began to cry.

The Hickman homestead was located 14 miles west of the town of Nicodemus and about three miles north of Hill City. And the intervening farms must have been well settled, judging from the numbers that continued to arrive. About 125 blacks reportedly took homes in the area in May, 1878. In 1879, probably in the spring of the year, a "Rev. Mr. Goodwin" of Norton county, conducted 50 Mississippi Negroes to the colony. These were probably some of the "Exodusters" from Louisiana and Mississippi who were migrating to the state at this time. The last sizable group to arrive in Nicodemus colony was about 25 in number. They were probably from Mississippi also, and were brought by Simon P. Roundtree.

With the exception of additional arrivals attracted to the town of Nicodemus, which flourished in the mid-1880's, the colony had reached its maximum size. The Negro population of the county, by 1880, was somewhere between 500 and 700. Such an indefinite estimate is explained by the existence of two conflicting census reports. An official census, conducted in February, 1880, preparatory to county organization, indicated a Negro population of about 700, roughly 20 percent of the entire population of the county. Four months later, in June, 1880, the federal census reported only 484 Negroes, about 11 percent of the county population. Two hundred and sixty of these were living in Nicodemus township, and 224 in Hill City and Wild Horse townships. Although a proper discussion of the problem cannot be pursued in this limited space, this writer must seriously question the validity of the county census, since it does not take into account the attrition that occurred among the Negroes during the early and difficult years of settlement.

There is no doubt that large numbers of the settlers left the colony between 1877 and 1880. Their defeat, however, was not as dishonorable as it might first appear. They could scarcely have succumbed to a more unyielding, nor a more demanding, antagonist than the Kansas frontier. For example, immediately upon arrival in the colony, the Negroes were absorbed in the laborious task of providing adequate shelter. The absence of traditional building materials forced them to construct dugouts, or "burrows," as they

All Colored People
THAT 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 choice lands now belonging to the Government, have assembled ourselves together for the purpose of locating on said lands. Therefore,

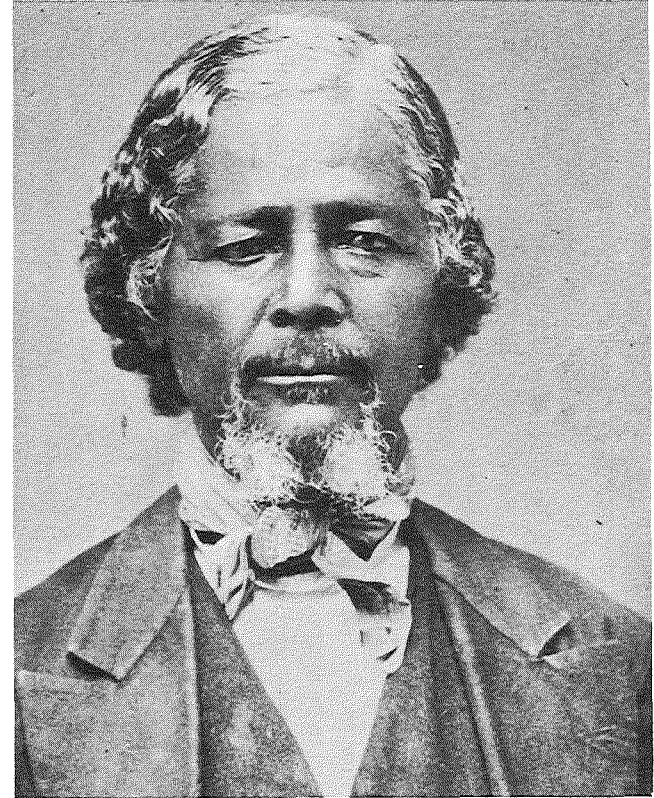
BE IT RESOLVED, That we do now organize ourselves into a Colony, as follows:— Any person wishing to become a member of this Colony can do so by paying the sum of one dollar (\$1.00), and this money is to be paid by the first of September, 1877, in installments of twenty-five cents at a time, or otherwise as may be desired.

RESOLVED, That this Colony has agreed to consolidate itself with the Nicodemus Towns, Solomon Valley, Graham County, Kansas, and can only do so by entering the vacant lands now in their midst, which costs \$5.00.

RESOLVED, That this Colony shall consist of seven officers—President, Vice-President, Secretary, Treasurer, and three Trustees. President—M. M. Bell; Vice-President—Isaac Talbott; Secretary—W. J. Niles; Treasurer—Daniel Clarke; Trustees—Jerry Lee, William Jones, and Abner Webster.

RESOLVED, That this Colony shall have from one to two hundred militia, more or less, as the case may require, to keep peace and order, and any member failing 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.

An immigration poster of 1877 which announced the organization of a colony in Lexington, Ky., for the purpose of settling at Nicodemus. This group of nearly 300 arrived at the town-site on September 17, 1877.



Benjamin "Pap" Singleton, of Nashville, Tenn., born in slavery, was prominent in promoting the Negro "Exodus" to Kansas. He advertised the state far and wide as an asylum for the freedmen of the South.

were often called. These were carved out of the side of a bank or small hill with spades or grubbing hoes, covered with poles or brush and topped with a layer of earth.

For the first few months, at least, the dugout remained the standard habitation, but it slowly gave way to the "sod dugout," which was built three or more feet into the earth and finished above with blocks of sod taken from the prairie. While the roof retained the same form as that used for the dugout, lumber slowly began to make its appearance in the door and the single window. A visitor to the colony in those early years judged the Nicodemus "soddy" to be as good as the average.

The interior of the house reflected the familiar frontier home, with a dirt floor and a fireplace at one end of the single room. The bareness of the walls was striking, broken only by "cheap pictures" of "Janes" and "Elizas" no longer in vogue elsewhere. Near the door was a pile of corn stalks, which, with sunflowers, willows, cottonwood, and cow dung, provided the fuel for the Nicodemus settlers. Around the outside of the house were chicken coops made of corn stalks, and in front, seemingly out of place in their surroundings, were marigolds, bachelor's-buttons, and four o'clocks.

The colonists soon found, however, that the problem of providing shelter was far easier of solution than that of finding an adequate food supply. In Nicodemus colony, as in most frontier settlements, money was almost nonexistent. The majority of the blacks had spent their meager savings on railroad fares to Kansas. In addition, W. R. Hill collected from each colonist a five dollar fee, two dollars of which was paid to the government for filing charges, a similar sum was kept by Hill for locating the settler on his land, and the remainder went into the treasury of the Nicodemus Town Company. As a result of these and other necessary expenses, most of the colonists found themselves on the frontier without food or the means to obtain it.

The town company, in two circulars dated April 16 and July 2, 1877, had promised "plenty of provisions" for the settlers, but whatever was furnished, if anything, failed to satisfy the demand of the ever-increasing body of people. It soon became necessary, therefore, to appeal for assistance to the white people in the more populous sections of Kansas. Agents from Nicodemus were found in the eastern part of the state as early as March, 1878. In the fall of that year, Simon P. Roundtree reportedly made a successful plea for help at the Michigan State Fair. Early in 1879 the *Smith County Kansas Pioneer*, published at Smith Center, about 55 miles northeast

of Nicodemus, reported the Rev. Silas M. Lee in the area soliciting aid for the colony. All of these supplies, transported free of charge by the Kansas Pacific railroad, were placed in a commissary building and issued by the town officers as the need arose.

By April, 1879, the demoralizing effects of this aid were clearly evident. Certain settlers were becoming dependent upon relief and were more inclined to "beg" than to work. Also, it was felt that if the dole were continued, the colony might attract some of the exodusters from the South, who were not only destitute but were largely indifferent to work as well. For these and other reasons, in April, 1879, the Nicodemus Town Company was abolished and each man was left to "hoe his own row."

It must be noted, however, that the majority of the Nicodemus colonists did not surrender to the bread of charity. They were largely self-sufficient from the beginning. Travelers in western Kansas encountered these black pioneers looking for work far and wide. They left their families on the claims, labored until they had accumulated a little money and returned to make the necessary improvements. Over and over this process was repeated, expanding the cultivatable acres until the farm either supported the family or was lost through weariness, misfortune, or mismanagement.

One of the best examples of the successful Negro colonists was R. B. Scruggs, "an ole green boy, never 'way from home," as he described himself. Early in 1878, shortly after arriving in Nicodemus, Scruggs found work driving a freight wagon from Nicodemus to Stockton, a distance of 20 miles. He also worked for a time in the railroad towns of Bunker Hill, Ellsworth, and Salina, the last-mentioned 130 miles east of Graham county. But these hard years paid rich dividends, and Scruggs lived to be the owner of 720 acres of land. He later admitted that the Nicodemus Negroes were not unique in their sufferings and hardships, as these were shared in common with white farmers of the area. He did feel, however, that the Negroes who succeeded usually possessed less equipment and a smaller cash reserve than did most of their white neighbors.

Scruggs' description of his fellow colonists was altogether accurate, and on the frontier where success depended so entirely upon cultivating the soil, the Negroes' lack of farming equipment was especially remarkable. Available information indicates that only three horses were brought into the colony in the fall of 1877, but they were dead by the following spring. The Georgetown colonists, who arrived in March, 1878, certainly possessed an unknown number of horses. However, in the following month three teams and wagons were hired in the northern part of the county to transport relief

supplies from Ellis to Nicodemus. This lack of farming equipment greatly retarded the progress of the colony. Normally, a farmer could not expect to raise much of a crop from prairie sod until the second year of cultivation. In many cases the Nicodemus colonists were still trying to farm with spades and grubbing hoes after a year in residence.

This picture was altered somewhat in the fall of 1878 when two men appeared in the area with equipment adequate to turn the prairie sod. In spite of the two dollar per acre charge, their services were in much demand. When they departed, an average of nearly five acres per homestead had been put in cultivation. By the spring of 1879 the average had been raised to seven acres. In that year the number of teams in the entire colony was estimated at about 24. By 1881 the blacks were planting approximately 10 to 15 acres per homestead and were beginning to accumulate some livestock.

A closer look at the progress of the black farmers was provided by statistics for Nicodemus Township in 1881. This section of the county contained 83 white people and 275 blacks, the latter representing about 57 percent of the Negroes in the county. The township had 31 horses and 10 mules, approximately one team for every four or five farms, and reported an average of 12 acres per homestead in cultivation. These families had accumulated 43 head of cattle and 75 hogs. They were growing 997 acres of corn, 98 acres of millet, 50 acres of sorghum, and 50 acres of rice corn, an experimental grain that had been imported from Egypt.

Therefore, by 1881, the Negro settlers, through a combination of great courage and much hard work, could produce many cases of solid achievement. S. B. Weton, who had suitable equipment, had broken 50 acres of land as early as May, 1879, and half of this was being planted in wheat. But success was not entirely dependent upon capital and equipment. Grant Harris had arrived in the colony "penniless" and by 1881, had 40 acres in cultivation and possessed 60 head of livestock. Anderson Boles, who also owned a hotel in the town of Nicodemus, was likewise without means when he came to Graham county, but was planting 75 acres of grain and had one cow and calf and 19 hogs. Thomas Johnson, one of the original colonists, was cultivating nearly 40 acres and owned eight head of stock. Perhaps the most successful of the Nicodemus colonists was John Lored, who had been living in Kansas since 1861. He had missed an earlier chance to own a farm near Topeka, but he was retrieving his loss in Graham county. By 1881 Lored was farming 50 acres of land and had 16 head of livestock, three teams of horses,

and nine hogs. By the middle of the 1880's, Lored was still one of the leading farmers in the area.

Considering the conditions under which the Negroes were laboring, their progress was impressive. They were doing as well in their new environment as their white neighbors, and, more important, they were quickly winning the respect and general good will of the people of Graham and the surrounding counties. The *Smith County Kansas Pioneer* of March 21, 1879, noted that the Nicodemians "know how to work, and are not afraid to do it." On July 11, 1879, the *Millbrook Times* referred to its Nicodemus neighbors as "an intelligent, sensible and law-abiding class of citizens." In the same year, the leadership of the colony was described by the *Lawrence Daily Journal* as "good, practical, common-sense men," and it was generally conceded that Nicodemus was probably the only one of the Negro colonies in the state that was not torn by internal dissension.

Much of the colony's success, of course, was dependent upon the caliber of its leadership. For a time in the 1880's, the colony possessed leaders who had no equals among the Negro population of Kansas. Three of these, John W. Niles, A. T. Hall, and E. P. McCabe, deserve closer attention. Niles was a free-born Negro from Lexington, Ky., who migrated to Graham county early in 1878. His leadership qualities were quickly recognized, and he was elected president of the Nicodemus Town Company to replace W. H. Smith. A winning smile and buoyant personality made him a favorite among the people, and, in spite of his later brushes with the law, he continued to stand high in their affections.

Perhaps Niles was best known by W. L. Chambers of Stockton, an early day editor of the *Rooks County Record*. Chambers recalled seeing Niles many times in Stockton, and he followed the Negro's life with much interest. Near the town of Stockton, as Chambers wrote in later years, was a bluff that ran along Dibble creek, and in the face of this bluff were a great many caves. These were used temporarily, and sometimes all winter, by the Nicodemus people in their journeys to and from their homes in search of work. One evening in the winter of 1879-1880, as Chambers was walking through this area, he met Niles and received a life-long impression. "His was a flamboyant figure," as the editor recalled,

well fed and groomed, rotund, flashily clothed in garments of fine texture, wearing heavy rings on hands uncalloused by manual toil. His features of copper hue, showed intelligence and a degree of culture that marked him superior to his fellows in many ways . . . At this time his leadership was undisputed, and as he strode down the path he was greeted with deference and

doffing of hat and tiles. His smile was gracious through condescending, and his greetings effusive.

Noble L. Prentis, who visited the colony in 1881 as a reporter for the Atchison *Champion*, was taken on a tour of the area by Niles. Prentis had to confess that one had not seen Nicodemus until he had met Niles. The journalist was entertained by an "everlasting flow of conversation" as the big, jovial Negro pointed out the many improvements being made in the settlement. By the time the tour had ended, however, Prentis was convinced that, in spite of Niles' many good qualities, he was not "loaded to the water's edge with scrupulosity." But Prentis gave Niles credit for being faithful to his race. He had held the Negro settlers on their claims when many were ready to quit in despair. He had also been instrumental in finding relief supplies for the colony in its early days of want. For a time in the early 1880's, Niles was prominent in Graham county politics, but his personality was too erratic for sustained effort. The trait that Prentis had so clearly distinguished soon became most prominent and ultimately proved to be his downfall.

A. T. Hall and E. P. McCabe were close friends who had arrived in Nicodemus colony in April, 1878. They were both from the North, and were described as "young men of refinement and culture." Hall was born and reared in Chicago, and had spent a year in medical school before he became a sailor on the Great Lakes. After three years, however, he gave up this life and entered the world of journalism. He worked as a reporter on several papers in Minnesota and Indiana before he became city editor on the Chicago *Conservator*, a Negro paper. In this position he encountered frequent references to a new Negro colony which was to be established in Hodgeman county, Kansas, by a group of Kentucky freedmen. After considerable thought he determined to cast his lot with these new settlers, and prevailed upon his friend E. P. McCabe to join in the new venture also.

McCabe was a New Yorker by birth and had worked as a messenger in the federal treasury depository there before migrating westward. He finally settled in Chicago, and, because of his unusual intelligence and skill as a penman, was soon employed in the Cook county courthouse. McCabe's decision to accompany Hall to Kansas was one of the wisest moves of his life. He had probably risen as high as his color would permit in Chicago. On the Kansas frontier, where society was more fluid and opportunity excellent for a man of intelligence and leadership, he was destined to rise to heights seldom attained by Negroes in his generation.

Hall preceded his friend to Kansas by several days. One morning



W. R. Hill, a pioneer settler of Graham county and founder of Hill City, visited the South and encouraged the settlement of Negroes in his county. He selected the townsite of Nicodemus in early June, 1877.



Edward P. McCabe, who joined the Nicodemus colony in 1878, served as state auditor in 1883-1887, the first Negro to hold a major political office in Kansas. McCabe was also auditor of Oklahoma territory, 1897-1907.

in early April, as he was taking breakfast in a Leavenworth boarding house, he overheard a conversation at a nearby table that completely altered the future for himself and McCabe. Three women were discussing a mass meeting to be held that very evening at the African Methodist church, across the street from the boarding house. A large load of relief supplies, so the story evolved, had been collected in the city for the black settlers of Graham county. The goods had been held up through the intervention of some local Negro politicians, and the meeting had been arranged to decide the disposition of the material. Hall immediately looked up the Nicodemus agent, John W. Niles, and together they were able to free the needed supplies for the benefit of the colonists. Niles, of course, was highly pleased with such capable and unexpected assistance, and he invited Hall to settle in Nicodemus. The Chicagoan promptly accepted the offer for himself and for McCabe, who had not yet arrived.

The two young blacks soon found their talents in great demand. Graham county in 1878 was on the threshold of a period of feverish activity. Settlers were beginning to arrive in the area in considerable numbers. Advertising themselves as "Attorneys and Land Agents," they began running surveys and locating settlers on their claims. McCabe was also elected secretary of the Nicodemus Town Company in the reorganization that elevated Niles to the presidency, and served in that capacity until the town company was disbanded in April, 1879.

When Hall and McCabe located in Graham county, or more properly, the area later to become Graham county, there was no governmental organization of any kind. All official business was taken to Stockton, the county seat of Rooks county, to which Graham county was attached for purposes of administration and justice. This arrangement had many advantages for a new community of farmers, chief of which was the absence of taxation. It also had a serious drawback. In those early days before county organization, great herds of cattle roamed at will over the region, restrained only by the presence of an occasional cowboy. The cattle, of course, looked upon the small patches of grain the farmers were laboring to grow merely as more favorable grazing grounds, and the farmers were powerless to stop this destruction. As a consequence of this and other less tangible reasons, there arose considerable agitation for some type of county organization.

During the summer of 1879 a petition bearing the signatures of 25 voters from Nicodemus was presented to the commissioners of Rooks county, praying for township status. According to the law

this was sufficient grounds for the area to be declared a township and for the sheriff of Rooks county to call an election of officers. The Nicodemus petition came as a surprise to the residents of the area, and, needless to say, it threw the political life of the county into high gear. The Hill City *Western Star*, which had been established only weeks before, was soon joined by the Millbrook *Times*, the Roscoe *Tribune* and the Gettysburg *Graham County Lever*, each of which began "booming" its town for the coming political honors. Great interest was aroused in the township election, but with county organization approaching, the question as to which community would become the seat of government was all important. The only serious contenders for the honor were Hill City, Millbrook, and Gettysburg, all of which were within four miles of the center of the county. But each needed the support of the farmers and villagers in the outlying areas, and the Nicodemus colonists, with around 150 electors, about 12 percent of the county's voting strength, found themselves in a position of considerable power.

The township election was held on December 2, 1879, at Nicodemus, which had been designated the temporary township seat. Three tickets were presented to the voters for consideration. There was an "Equal Rights Ticket," nominated at Nicodemus, which carried the names of five white men and three blacks. A "People's Township Organization Ticket" from Gettysburg contained only white men for candidates. Lastly, a ticket was put up by the people of Roscoe, which included the names of three men from that town and the remainder of the Equal Rights ticket.

The election results were decisive and quite gratifying to Nicodemus. The Equal Rights ticket carried the day and brought into office three Negroes. Granville L. Lewis became one of the two justices of the peace; H. Winn was elected township clerk, and Lewis Welton, road overseer. The Negroes were recipients of further honors when steps were taken to organize the county. A. T. Hall was appointed by Gov. John P. St. John to conduct the county census, and on April 1, 1880, when the governor issued his proclamation of organization, E. P. McCabe was appointed temporary county clerk and served in that capacity until an election was held for county officers on June 1, 1880.

The first county canvass showed that the Negroes were still a power in the area. John DePrad of Nicodemus was elected county clerk, an office later held by many of the Negroes and Thomas Allison of Hill City, the first Negro settler in the Solomon valley, ran a close second for commissioner of his district. And the promising beginning made by the Nicodemus colonists was maintained in

the years that followed. It was a rare election that did not list a black or two on the ballot. From the time of Daniel Hickman, who served as chairman of the commissioners during the heated county-seat fight in the late 1880's, to W. L. Sayers, one-time county attorney and a prominent lawyer in Hill City until his death in the late 1940's, the Nicodemus Negroes were honored with many political offices. Never, as far as can be determined, were the Negro people of Graham county subjected to the indignities or loss of political rights suffered by their brethren in the South. In November, 1879, shortly before the first election held in the county, the *Millbrook Times* reminded its readers that "every fair minded voter will concede that Nicodemus and the colored people are entitled to a portion of the officers." This advice has apparently been followed by the residents of the county ever since.

While the Nicodemus Negroes were making such rapid progress in politics and others areas of life in which they were engaged, they were not neglecting the little town at the junction of the Solomon and Spring creek. It was not as prosperous and "booming" as its competitors throughout the county, but its growth was constant and was probably more nearly a reflection of the condition of the black farmers. By 1881 it had acquired about 35 structures, residential and commercial. The houses, mostly of sod, were scattered about the townsite in an irregular pattern, but the business district was beginning to assume a uniform appearance.

Z. T. Fletcher was still operating the general store which he had founded in the fall of 1877. This was the oldest business in the county and in 1878, when he became postmaster, he combined the post office and store under one roof. W. H. Smith and Louis Welton had set up stores in the town, the former probably in 1878 and the latter in 1879, but neither succeeded. By 1881, however, the business of the place was largely in the hands of three white men—William Green, S. G. Wilson, and C. H. Newth. Green and Wilson, who established general stores in 1879, erected two-storied stone buildings in 1880 to house their businesses. Wilson moved from the town for a time but returned in 1884, bought out Green's stock and established himself as one of the leading merchants. C. H. Newth, an English immigrant, set up a store in 1879, and also carried a line of drugs. In 1880 he added a meat shop, which, by April of that year, was reported "on the way with a fair prospect of having meat soon."

Until the end of 1880 A. T. Hall and E. P. McCabe were operating their business in a little sod building that became famous as the polling place for the first election held in the county. This building

also served as the site of the first "hotel" in Nicodemus prior to 1878, but it quickly failed. A more enduring hotel was the Douglass House, later called the Boles House, operated by Anderson Boles and his wife. Here a meal of good Kentucky cooking and a bed for the night could be had for 50 cents. A similar sum was sufficient to be the guest of J. M. Myers of the Myers House or of Hiram Burley at the Union House. Of the three, however, the Boles House, which enjoyed the reputation of being the best in town, was the only one located in a stone building in 1880, and that had been purchased from John W. Niles in July of that year.

Nicodemus also supported two livery stables, in addition to such accommodations provided by the hotels. John W. Niles opened up a livery stable in the fall of 1880, and Z. T. Fletcher found it convenient to add such a business to his other commercial ventures. Late in 1879 John Lee's Blacksmith Shop was being "over run of work," and a white man, B. S. White, was handling what little building materials the colonists needed in his lumber yard. This establishment was perhaps the best indication of the progress being made by the Nicodemus settlers. The sod house was beginning to vanish from the scene.

The first organized church in Graham was located in the northern part of the county in 1876, but in the Solomon valley the blacks were the spiritual leaders. The Rev. Simon P. Roundtree delivered the first sermon in the colony in 1877, but no church was organized until the arrival of the Reverends Hickman and Lee in the spring of 1878. Hickman reportedly built the first church edifice—a sod building—in 1879. By March, 1879, Lee's church had 40 members and the Free Methodist church, established late in 1878 by the Rev. Jerry Myers, numbered 25 in its congregation. In May, 1880, the Baptists moved from their sod structure into a new stone building. In February, 1881, the Methodists purchased S. G. Wilson's stone residence and converted it into a church and mission school.

The Nicodemus settlers had also been leaders in education since 1877. In the winter of 1877-1878, a school was conducted by the wife of Z. T. Fletcher in her dugout and had an attendance of 45 students. The report that six schools were operating throughout the colony in 1878 was probably an exaggeration, however. In June, 1879, School District No. 1 was established at Nicodemus, and by the spring of 1880 the town was vying with Hill City for the honor of having the largest school in the county. The facilities in Nicodemus were rather makeshift until 1887 when a four-room structure was erected. The term of school in the early 1880's usually lasted from

November to March, three to four months. In 1887-1888, two teachers were being employed for a school term of nine months.

The progress made in the education of the Nicodemus young people was representative of advances being made in other areas of life as well. The period between 1881 and 1887 was one of continued and substantial growth in Nicodemus and the surrounding countryside. Evidence during these years is scanty, however, for the pens of Hall and McCabe, which advertised the colony so well during its early days, were now widely separated. After moving their business to Tempe, a small settlement a few miles northwest of Nicodemus, Hall sold his holdings to McCabe in October, 1880, and became city editor of the St. Louis *National Tribune*, a Negro paper. After a short time in that position he returned to the Chicago *Conservator*, but soon removed to Pittsburgh, Pa., where he ended his life as counter clerk in the city treasurer's office.

In the meantime McCabe was elected county clerk in November, 1881. In 1882 he was elected state auditor of Kansas, possibly the first Negro to hold a high elective office in a Northern state. He was returned to the position in 1884 and even hoped for a third term but was denied the nomination. In 1897 McCabe was appointed auditor of Oklahoma territory by Gov. George W. Steel, and served with distinction in that position until the coming of statehood in 1907. He spent the remainder of his life in Chicago, dying there, so it was reported, in poverty. His remains were returned to Topeka, the scene of his greatest triumph, and were laid to rest without fanfare by his wife, a minister, and a cemetery caretaker.

McCabe was still resident in Nicodemus colony, however, when his friend John W. Niles set forth on a venture that was to end in prison. Niles had long cherished a scheme for indemnifying the former slaves for their years spent in bondage, and while still in Graham county he advertised his plan through newspapers and in speeches. But no one seemed to share his enthusiasm for the idea, and after narrowly escaping conviction for fraud in Stockton, he transferred his activities to Arkansas, the place of his downfall. He reportedly passed himself off as an immigration agent, and went among the freedmen "selling" nonexistent railroad lands, pocketing the first payment. He soon had nearly a thousand Negroes enrolled in a secret organization and was in the process of establishing a well-disciplined "army" for his indemnification scheme when the authorities stepped in and halted his activities. He was convicted on nine counts, but was allowed to work off his \$800 fine at 25 cents a day, a task that undoubtedly kept him in Arkansas for some time. In fact, the Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, in 1887, reported him as

“soaring in Arkansas.” This is the last mention that has been found of Niles. He faded from view as quickly as he entered, and remained as puzzling a personality on his departure as when he trod the dusty streets of Nicodemus in 1878.

Perhaps the streets of the town would have been the only part of the settlement familiar to Niles had he returned in 1887. The community had grown considerably since his residence there and now numbered over 150 inhabitants. Of the many new buildings that had been added to the town, probably the most prominent structure was the St. Francis Hotel, operated by Z. T. Fletcher and his brother Thomas. The earlier “houses” had closed their doors, leaving Fletcher the sole hotel operator by 1885. He was without a competitor until 1886, when Eliza Smith, a black woman from Denver, Colo., opened the Gibson House. Fletcher was still in the livery business and had added a line of farming implements. His wife, in the meantime, had set up as a milliner and was having some success.

S. G. Wilson, who was elected county treasurer in 1886, closed out his general store late in that year. He and C. H. Newth, who was still listed as druggist and the town’s sole doctor, were the only white businessmen until A. G. Tallman established the Nicodemus *Western Cyclone* on May 13, 1886. Tallman had a monopoly of the newspaper business until H. K. Lightfoot established the Nicodemus *Enterprise* on August 17, 1887. In the columns of these lively four-page papers one can see the various activities of the Nicodemians. S. M. Lee was preaching to a membership of 100 at the Baptist church; the Free Methodists were holding services for 40 faithful, and the African Methodist Episcopal Church, established perhaps as early as 1881, was about to begin the construction of a new frame building. This structure, and the new schoolhouse, completed at about the same time, were considered the finest buildings in the town.

The Nicodemians were great celebrators in the 1880’s and were never slack in observing the Fourth of July. September 17, the day on which the colony was founded, had been recalled with considerable spirit since 1881. The most enduring holiday, however, was Emancipation Day, August 1, which was the date of the liberation of the Negro in the West Indies. It was probably first observed in 1881, and has continued until recent years with undiminished fervor. Although the white people of Graham county were never backward in attending public gatherings in Nicodemus, Emancipation day seemed to attract the lighter-hued residents in far greater numbers. In its later years, the celebration served as a reunion

for the Negro people of the surrounding states. Usually, the time was filled with speeches, dancing, a carnival, and, of course, a great variety of food served under the trees of R. B. Scruggs' grove.

In the mid-1880's Nicodemus also had a baseball team, a literary society, and a benefit society dedicated to relieving the distress and sorrow of its members. Lodges were common; there was a band and a music teacher, and for a short time, an ice cream parlor. But all these luxuries of civilization were indicative of something stronger and more important in the community. This was the business center that had grown up in the town. By the spring of 1887 Nicodemus could boast four general stores, a grocery, two druggists, three land companies, a lawyer, two hotels, two livery stables, a blacksmith shop, and a harness and boot repair store.

Early in 1887 A. L. McPherson, a white man, established the Bank of Nicodemus, and with this addition the community took its place as a commercial center of some importance. It seemed as though Nicodemus had finally been caught up in the "boom" that was sweeping western Kansas, skyrocketing land prices and bringing an unprecedented prosperity to this heretofore "desert." But in reality the prosperous condition of the town was only a reflection of the greater production on the farms in the vicinity. Graham county had received regular moisture since 1881, and the crops had been of good quality and quantity. The editor of the *Cyclone* no doubt correctly assessed the business activity in May, 1887. "Real estate in this city," noted the journalist, "is changing hands to a considerable extent and is appreciating in value every day. There is no unhealthy boom on, no wild craze for property, no fictitious values but a strong, firm and steady tendency which shows the healthy growth of the city."

The editor warned, however, that a "yipity, yipity boom panic" could be expected and an inflation of prices would undoubtedly follow. The streets of the town were daily filled with strange faces, 222 in one week, and it was becoming increasingly difficult to find a residential building. The stage from Stockton was crowded with people who were filling the hotels of the town to capacity.

Some of the business activity, however, was in anticipation of the extension of the railroad from the east. For some time there had been talk of a railroad being built through the county, and Nicodemus was usually included in the plans. The Missouri Pacific was expected to be extended to Stockton and thence to Graham county via Nicodemus. The town could also look for the arrival of the Union Pacific, but its chances were slimmer in that direction, as the road would have to cross the Solomon river to reach Nicodemus.

In spite of this obstacle, on May 2, 1887, Union Pacific surveyors ran a line through the town. But they had also been busy plotting another route elsewhere. By late 1887 great speculation prevailed as to which route would be chosen. The question was laid to rest, however, when the track layers began working south of the river, crossing to the north bank only to accommodate Hill City, the county seat. The editor of the *Cyclone* noted in early September, 1888, that "the smoke of the engine" might be seen hanging in the southern sky. Then, the railroaders' camp, which later developed into the town of Bogue, became the subject of an ominous article in the very last issue of the *Cyclone*:

We are sorry to see several of our business men making preparations to move to the proposed new town. We consider this a very unwise move and one they will regret. With a thickly settled surrounding, already established in business and as reliably informed the extension of the Stockton road in the near future, Nicodemus and her business men have nothing to cause them alarm. For every one that goes now we will get ten wide awake men next spring. Don't get frightened, hold on to your property and be ready to enjoy the real boom that will surely come.

The Missouri Pacific was never extended beyond Stockton, and Nicodemus never had her "yipity, yipity boom panic" as the editor had predicted. While the town undoubtedly lost many of its most enterprising businessmen, there was no wholesale exodus of Negroes from the county, nor apparently from the town. On the contrary, the Negro inhabitants of the county increased. In 1880 the federal census reported 484 Negroes in the county. This number continued to grow steadily until in 1910 the black population reached its peak of 595. In 1920 the figure dropped to 413; in 1930 it was 429. By 1940, however, the number of Negroes in the county had fallen to 365, and continued to decline until in 1960, only 195 Negroes were reported.

Reliable figures for the population of Nicodemus have not been found. It is presumed, however, that they followed the rise and fall of the black population in the county as a whole. Following World War II the decline of the town's population came more rapidly. In 1950 Nicodemus had been reduced to 16 inhabitants, and these were forced to purchase the necessities of life in Bogue, six miles distant.

Thus, by 1953, when the post office was finally closed, Nicodemus had completed a cycle of existence in 76 years. With a slight variation of the picture, it might be said to have departed this life much as it had been born. In 1878 the hopes of the infant settlement were in the hands of Z. T. Fletcher, a postmaster-merchant. In

1953, these same hopes, now quite without purpose, were laid to rest by the Rev. J. D. Wilson, a postmaster-minister.

And yet between these two dates a noble experiment had taken place, and a final defeat had in nowise diminished the glory of the blacks who had labored there. If one were to assess correctly the worth of the colony, he must turn to the *Atchison Weekly Champion*, which as early as 1883 predicted the future of the settlement and paid the finest tribute the Negroes have ever received. The writer noted that someday Nicodemus might become no more than a name, "the waning and fading designation of a spot where men once lived; but to those who know the truth of history," concluded the writer, "the name will always recall the bravest attempt ever made by people of any color to establish homes in the high plains of Western Kansas."

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