Nicodemus Walking Tour

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Nicodemus National
Historic Site
Kansas

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 these early pioneers, who established Nicodemus—one of the oldest and most famous Black towns on the western plains.

Nicodemus, 2011

Township Hall—Self Government

After hundreds of years of slavery and subjugation, the freed blacks dreamed of self-determination, self-government, and building a strong, free community. Here at Nicodemus, a few brave souls began to build their dream from the hard prairie soil, in 1877.

1. Township Hall

Built in1939, with support from the depression-era Works Progress Administration program, the Township Hall served more than the needs of local government.

Socials, Friday night dances, and performances of all kinds were regularly held. Multiple events brought the community together and celebrated the freedom and self-determination offered the brave pioneers of Nicodemus and their descendants.

The St. Francis Hotel/Switzer Residence—Business and family life

It was not easy to build a town from the difficult soil of the lonesome prairies. Trees for timber and firewood were scarce. Most families had to collect buffalo chips, sunflower stalks, and twigs to keep warm and cook their food. Paying jobs were few and far between and required residents to be steadfast to make a living in the "middle of nowhere."

2. St. Francis Hotel/Switzer Residence

Resourcefulness was reflected in the multiple uses the St. Francis Hotel/Switzer Residence provided. It was not only a hotel, but also home to original owners Z.T. and Jenny Fletcher, and the Switzer family in the 20th century. Simultaneously, it was used as a stagecoach station, the first town post office, and the first school house. This building was the hub of the community connecting businesses and families of the town by providing necessary services. It also kept Nicodemus residents in touch with far away loved ones through the stagecoach and the U.S. Mail.

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 the ears of the first settlers. Two churches stood out in Nicodemus over the years: the First Baptist Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

3. First Baptist Church

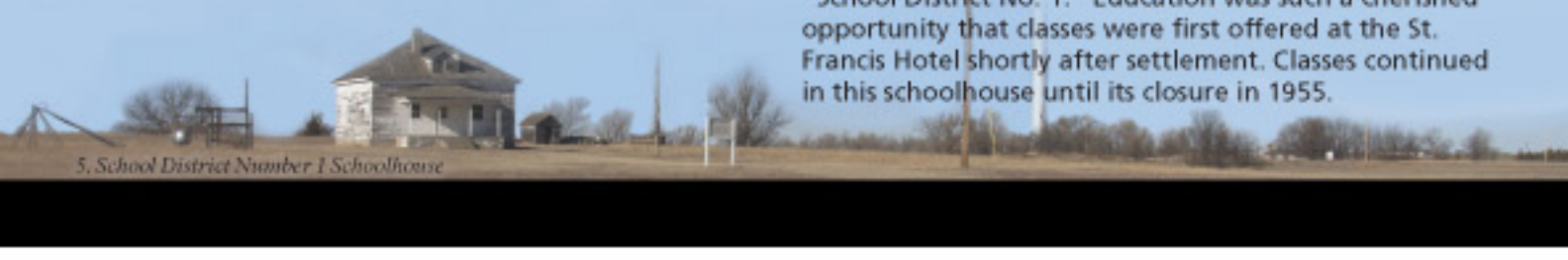
4. American Methodist Episcopal Church

The First Baptist Church has been holding services since 1877. They began in a dugout, which was then replaced with a building with walls of prairie sod. Next came a small limestone structure that the church outgrew. In 1907, this now historic building was completed to serve the growing congregation. Like the town, this church has changed dramatically over time, but it continues as spiritual support for the community. Today, services are held in the brick building to the north.

The African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church, first established in 1878 on another site, acquired this particular building in 1897. While the town flourished, its spiritual needs were met by this and several other active churches. After the boom years, faith was needed more than ever, though the numbers of faithful declined. Services were discontinued in the 1950s as the population of the town diminished.

School District Number 1—Education

Nicodemus pioneers quickly established the first school district in the county and garnered the prestigious title: "School District No. 1." Education was such a cherished opportunity that classes were first offered at the St. Francis Hotel shortly after settlement. Classes continued in this schoolhouse until its closure in 1955.



5. School District Number 1 Schoolhouse

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Beginnings

Rampant racism that free blacks experienced during Reconstruction 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.

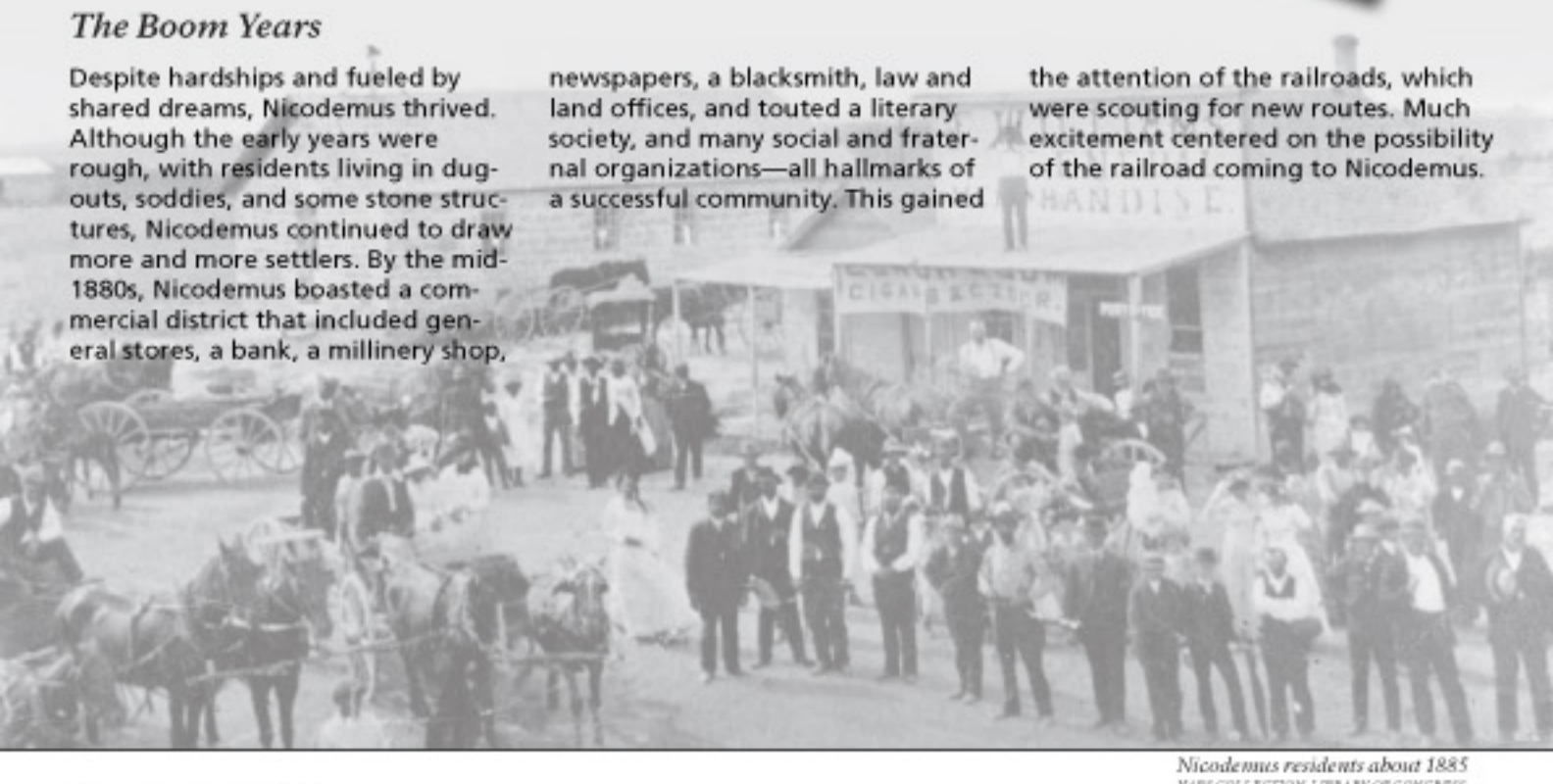
I looked with all the eyes I had. 'Where is Nicodemus? I don't see it.' My husband pointed out various smokes coming out of the ground and said, 'That is Nicodemus.' The families lived in dugouts. . .The scenery was not at all inviting, and I began to cry.
—WILLIANNA HICKMAN, SPRING 1878.

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

Handbill promoting black emigration to Nicodemus from the South.
KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY, MINORITIES COLLECTION, MANHATTAN, KS.

The Boom Years

Despite hardships and fueled by shared dreams, Nicodemus thrived. Although the early years were rough, with residents living in dugouts, soddies, and some stone structures, Nicodemus continued to draw more and more settlers. By the mid-1880s, Nicodemus boasted a commercial district that included general stores, a bank, a millinery shop, newspapers, a blacksmith, law and land offices, and touted a literary society, and many social and fraternal organizations—all hallmarks of a successful community. This gained the attention of the railroads, which were scouting for new routes. Much excitement centered on the possibility of the railroad coming to Nicodemus.



Nicodemus residents about 1885
HABS COLLECTION, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Returning Home

Despite the best efforts of the town, the railroad chose an alternate route south of the Solomon River. Within three short months in 1888, the town of Nicodemus experienced a mass exodus from which it never recovered. In search of greater prosperity, many businesses relocated to the new railroad town of Bogue, 5 miles southwest of Nicodemus.

With the loss of the railroad, the population began to decline. The Great Depression and drought of the dust bowl years prolonged this downward spiral of outmigration. Today, the population at Nicodemus hovers around thirty. However, descendents 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 descendents. This celebration honors a long tradition where families reunite for a parade, dance, talent/fashion show, speakers, vendors, and great food. They reconnect with their families, with their shared history, and with the town that is home in their hearts.

The Bates family, homesteaders, near Nicodemus, date uncertain. COURTESY NICODEMUS HISTORICAL SOCIETY, SPENCER RESEARCH LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS

Members of the Priscilla Arts Club, ca. 1940. COURTESY NICODEMUS HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTION, SPENCER RESEARCH LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS

Watching the 2009 Homecoming Celebration Parade. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, NICODEMUS NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE.

Safety and Park 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.

For more information contact:

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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