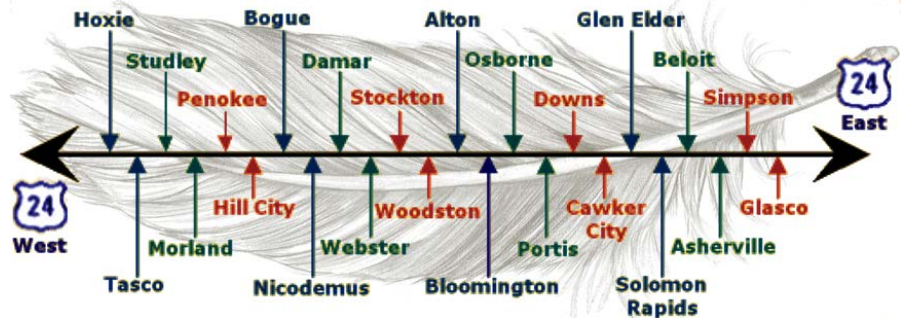
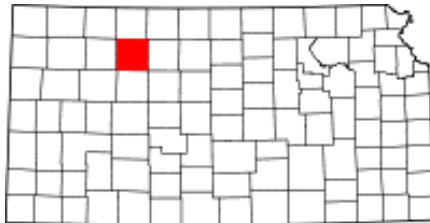




Nicodemus, Kansas

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History of Nicodemus

by Angela Bates

In the fall of 1877 a group of 350 former slaves arrived on the High Plains of Kansas with a dream of experiencing true "freedom," a freedom they were kept from experiencing in their former home in central Kentucky. After the Civil War ended, the war-torn South spent the next ten years rebuilding. This time period became known as Reconstruction. During this time, recently-freed slaves were almost immediately subjected to a new form of slavery through control by Jim Crow laws. These laws prohibited them from experiencing political, social, and economical freedom. They could not even meet in large groups unless a White was present. Life during Reconstruction for the African American meant social re-enslavement.

With the Homestead Act providing the means for land ownership; the stage was set for those who were brave enough to stake out a new life in the wilds of the West. Town speculators W. R. Hill (White) and W. H. Smith (African American) formed a partnership in Graham County that resulted in the establishment of two towns, Nicodemus and Hill City. They formed a partnership and created the Nicodemus Town Company with four ministers, who then returned to their former homes in Kentucky where they recruited potential settlers.

When the initial group of settlers arrived in September 1877 they were disappointed in what they saw. Those who had arrived earlier that spring were living in primitive dugouts. About 60 of these new arrivals had seen enough to know that they did not want to remain, so they turned around and went back to Ellis, and some even all the way back to Kentucky. The ones who saw a vision of what Nicodemus could be and saw themselves making a home on the new land, remained. After winter set in they soon found themselves starving and destitute, having brought only what they could carry. The Osage Indians were returning from their annual hunt when they stumbled upon this group of destitute settlers. Alarmed at the sight of Indians and fearing for their lives, they ran and hid themselves in caves along the banks of the Solomon River. Soon it was clear that they wanted only to share their game. If it were not for these compassionate souls, Nicodemus settlers would have perished on the open plains.

Over the next several years Nicodemus continued to be settled by African Americans, with the last group arriving in 1880 as a part of the official mass "exodus" of African Americans out of the South and into the state of Kansas. A year after settlement a plow was brought to the town site and

settlers started building soddies. The first stone structure built was the St. Francis Hotel and post office. When the Sayers General Store was built across the street it was considered the "most handsome building in Graham County." As stone structures started to line Washington Street, the town began to look like a bustling western town. At its zenith, Nicodemus had several mercantile stores, livery stables, hotels, a bank, doctor's office, two newspapers, and boasted a population of nearly 700. These African Americans began to realize the real meaning of freedom and self-government. In 1885 the hope of the railroad laying track through Nicodemus was blighted when it bypassed the town just south of the Solomon River on its way toward the county seat of Hill City.

The Missouri Pacific encouraged the railroad workers to create a town that they would support and they did, thus the railroad town of Bogue. White merchants who had established businesses in Nicodemus, such as the bank, moved their businesses to Bogue. This caused an economic rift that resulted in the first major decline in Nicodemus. In the years that followed with the Great Depression and dust bowl years of the 1930s Nicodemus continued to decline. Decline continued until today with less than 40 people living on the town site.

On August 1, 1878, Nicodemus hosted its first Emancipation Celebration. It was held until the early 1940s at what was called Scruggs Grove, south of Nicodemus on the 160-acre R. B. Scruggs farm. In the 1950s the celebration date was moved to the last weekend in July. In 2006 Nicodemus celebrated its 128th celebration and the 10th anniversary as a National Park.

Some of the initial groups of settlers from Georgetown, Kentucky, were former slaves of Vice-President Richard M. Johnson under President Martin Van Buren. Most of the settlers were skilled workers and brought with them skills useful in establishing their new homes. Many were blacksmiths, cobblers, seamstresses, cooks, etc. All worked on farms at their former homes in Kentucky and were equipped with skills used immediately to work the land.

Although Nicodemus has never been a big town, it proudly claims many prominent individuals. Nicodemus settlers were the first to fill county offices as commissioners, clerk, coroner, attorney, and census taker. The settlers became some of the most politically-active African Americans in the state. W. L. Sayers became one of the most prominent African American county attorneys. Edward P. McCabe became the Nicodemus Town Company Secretary in 1878 and later became the first clerk of Graham County. He became Kansas State Auditor for two terms and then went on to do the same in Oklahoma. He was the first African American to be elected to a state office. Many settlers were former Civil War Veterans and Buffalo Soldiers. Buffalo Soldier Sam Garland participated in the rescue at the Battle of Beecher Island on the Colorado-Kansas border. Nicodemus proudly claims a long line of professional athletes that include Gale Sayers - LA Rams, Veryl Switzer - Green Bay Packers, Marvin Switzer - Buffalo Bills, and Gerald Wilhite - Denver Broncos. Ernestine VanDuvall, former caterer to Walt Disney, operated Ernestine's Bar-B-Que for years and became known all over the state for her tasty bar-b-que and her famous bar-b-que sauce can still be purchased at various places along Highway 24 and throughout the state. Kim Thomas, current mayor of Stockton, is a Nicodemus descendent and is the first African American female mayor in the state. Angela Bates, founder, past president, and present executive director of the Nicodemus Historical Society, received National recognition in 2005 when she was presented a Lifetime Achievement Award for her work on establishing Nicodemus National Historic Site.

In 1976 Nicodemus was declared a National Historic Landmark District and on November 12, 1996, President William Clinton signed the Nicodemus Bill, designating Nicodemus a National Historic Site, a unit of the National Park Service. It is the only remaining all African American town, settled at the end of Reconstruction, west of the Mississippi. With its unique history, Nicodemus symbolizes the African American experience and settlement in the West. Currently there are no businesses in Nicodemus, but the constant presence of the National Park Service, receiving visitors at the Township Hall - Visitor Center, is a reminder that it is not "dead" or a ghost town. The Historical Society and Museum on the south side of town receives visitors throughout the spring and summer and showcases the "people's story" at Nicodemus. The newest residents in town are the Alexander and Rew families, including their school-age children. Nicodemus hasn't had a population of school-age children since the 1980s, and the Alexander family built the first house in Nicodemus in recent years.

Although just a tiny town on the High Plains of Kansas, Nicodemus is today the most nationally significant community along Highway 24, and people use to say "If you blink you might miss it." Today the large, well lit limestone sign will make you stop and pay attention, as you might want to stop and see what this tiny town that is big on history at the national level has to offer.

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