

## THE OLDEST EXISTING ALL AFRICAN AMERICAN PIONEER TOWN

NICODEMUS was established in 1877. W.R. Hill, a white man from Indiana and W.H. Smith a black pioneer, established a partnership that resulted in the organization of two towns, Nicodemus and Hill City. In the spring of 1877 Hill and Smith ventured to Topeka, Kansas where with four other black men, they organized the Nicodemus Town Company. Hill and Reverend Roundtree, one of the organizing members, traveled to Lexington and Georgetown, Kentucky to convince blacks to escape the oppression of the South by migrating to the 'Promise Lands' of Kansas in search of true freedom.

In September 1877 a group of about 300 black Kentuckians were led by rail then by foot over land to the townsite of Nicodemus, located just north of the Solomon River. This all black town was promoted as the largest black colony in the United States and was located on the high plains of Kansas in an unpopulated area in the northwest part of the state.

Upon arrival these Kentuckians found a town unlike they had ever seen. The few Topekians that migrated earlier in the spring were living in 'dug outs'. These earth homes were dug 4 - 6 feet deep and were 14 x 15 feet wide. Many, upon seeing this sight returned to Kentucky. Most of them had no choice but to stay and dig in for the winter.

During that first year the settlers all but starved. However, the Osage and Pottowottami Indians who were traversing through the area after their winter hunt, shared their game with the starving settlers of Nicodemus. In the following spring and fall other settlers came to Nicodemus.

As the town began to grow a business district was established with a bank, livery stables, several hotels, general and drug stores, real estate and law offices, and even a doctors office. The population reached around 700. Three schools were established to provide educational instruction to the many children in the

township. Religious training was as important as educational training. The four of the founding fathers of Nicodemus were ministers and several churches were established to accommodate the many weary souls of Nicodemus.

In 1887 when the Union Pacific and Missouri Pacific Railroad companies failed to extend their rails through Nicodemus, businesses and people began to leave. In 1888 the Union Pacific laid track just south of the Solomon River through the open plains. A railroad camp came into existence. This railroad camp became the town of Bogue and many of the businesses in Nicodemus transferred to this new town site.

In subsequent years due to the drought, dust storms, the Great Depression, and general lack of work, Nicodemus continued to lose its population and businesses. Currently there are fewer than 50 residents on the townsite.

In 1976 Nicodemus was elevated to national recognition when it was designated as a National Historic Landmark. Efforts are currently underway to obtain National Historic Site status for Nicodemus. If this national status is obtained, Nicodemus will become a National Park. Not only will the few remaining historical structures be restored and maintained, but the entire history interpreted through programs open to the general public.

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The Nicodemus Historical Society was established as a non-profit corporation in 1989. Its purpose is to preserve the history of Nicodemus, Kansas. For more information contact us at (913) 674-3311.

**Donations and your support are welcome!**