

# The Clerk's Black History Series

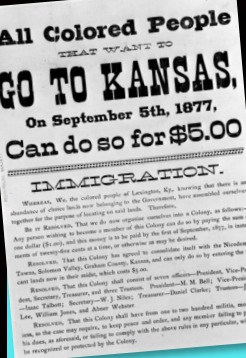
## Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County Nicodemus, Kansas (1877 - )



“Oldest Western Community Founded by African Americans after the Civil War”

**Nicodemus, Kansas** sits in the northwest corner of the state, along the Solomon River in Kansas. Instead of following the historically popular freedom route north, some newly freed black people went west. Nicodemus symbolizes the pioneering spirit of ex-slaves who fled the war-torn South in search of “real” freedom.

The passage of the 13th Amendment and abolition of slavery in 1865, failed to bring about true freedom, equality, and prosperity to blacks in the South. Instead, they remained racially oppressed, poverty-stricken, and struggling for survival. When Union soldiers finally withdrew from the south, blacks were left unprotected from Southerners who had violently opposed emancipation. Land prices were inflated to limit property ownership by blacks and Jim Crow made life unbearable. In 1876, word spread through the south about a developing all-black community in the Midwest, north



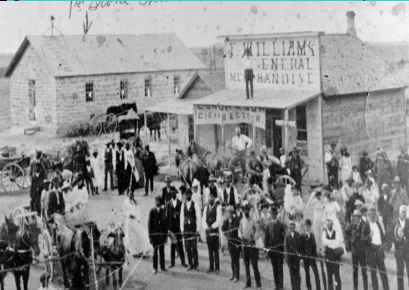
of Topeka, KS. A haven called Nicodemus. And while the new colony was ostensibly named for the biblical figure Nicodemus, the new black settlers claimed their own story of the eponymous black folk legend who came to America as a slave and later purchased his own freedom - Nicodemus.

W.R. Hill, a white land speculator and his partner, black Tennessean homesteader W.H. Smith, traveled to black churches in the backwoods of Kentucky and Tennessee to share the news of Nicodemus. They told of a sparsely settled territory with abundant wild game, wild horses that could be tamed and the opportunity to own land through the homesteading process. The earliest promotional handbill proclaimed it would be “The Largest Colored Colony in America,” portraying it as an oasis for blacks to establish a community of self-government. The ad drew the attention of hundreds of hopeful families looking for a new start.

In late August, 1877, 350 black men, women and children, nicknamed “Exodusters,” along with their livestock and supplies, left Lexington, Kentucky on a train, headed to Nicodemus, Kansas. The group arrived in Ellis, Kansas and it was there, they learned they would have to travel the remaining 35 miles to Nicodemus, by foot.

The Exodusters finally arrived in Nicodemus on September 17, 1877. The vast, barren, flat landscape shocked the new arrivals. Due to the lack of building materials and tools, many families already there, lived in “dugouts” or sod homes (simple dwellings dug into a dirt bank and with a sod roof). The dugout homes were generally small and functional during dry hot weather, but often flooded during rainy periods. For some settlers, however, the rugged living conditions proved to be unlivable and several dozen families immediately returned to the green rolling hills of Kentucky. Those who stayed vowed they would not return to the Jim Crow South and oppressive remnants of slavery. They worked hard to develop the land and build with primitive hand tools. They cooked and heated their dugouts with dried cow and buffalo chips, corn cobs or wood salvaged from the nearby Solomon River. They built a town out of sheer determination.

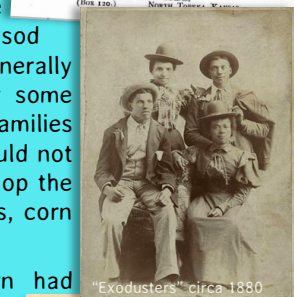
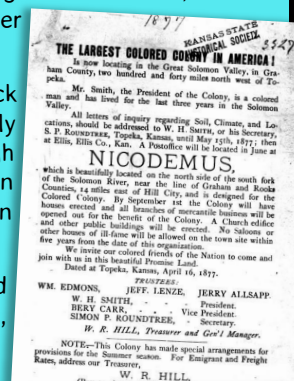
By 1886 Nicodemus had become a prosperous community surrounded by black-owned farms. The town had two newspapers, a drugstore, a bank, schoolhouse, three churches, and a general store. In March of 1887, the voters of the Township approved the issuance of \$16,000 in bonds in hopes to attract the Union Pacific Railroad extension from Stockton, KS to Nicodemus - some 19 miles away. Unfortunately, the town and the railroad could not agree on financial compensation, and the railroad withdrew its offer. The railroad established the extension six miles away south of the Solomon River, leaving Nicodemus an isolated village. Businesses began to relocate to the other side of the river to the Union Pacific Railroad camp that later became known as the town of Bogue. Nicodemus began a long gradual decline and the 1929 depression brought disaster, as farm prices fell. Young couples moved away.



Further devastation occurred when the area faced severe droughts in 1932, 1933, and 1934, followed by Kansas's infamous dust bowl days in the late winter and early spring of 1935. Entire families then left what had become a desolate region. By 1950 Nicodemus was reduced to 16 inhabitants, and the necessities of life had to be purchased in nearby Bogue. The post office closed in 1953.

In 1976, Nicodemus - Kansas's first black settlement, was designated as a National Historic Landmark. Twenty years later, on November 12, 1996, Nicodemus was designated as a National Historic site. This designation directs the National Park Service to assist the community in preserving historic structures and preserving the history for the benefit of present and future generations.

Today, Nicodemus is home to approximately 20 people. The only remaining business is the Nicodemus Historical Society Museum. Emancipation Day is celebrated every year, on the last weekend in July. The descendants of the Nicodemus settlers travel back home to honor their ancestors with a parade, food, and stories of heritage, determination, and family.



A group of descendants of the original settlers on the porch of one of the remaining historic buildings in Nicodemus.