

PROMISED LAND ON THE SOLOMON:

BLACK SETTLEMENT AT NICODEMUS, KANSAS



U.S. Department of the Interior
National Park Service
Rocky Mountain Region

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Cover Photograph: District No. 1 School, Nicodemus, Kansas
(Photograph: Clayton Fraser)

Title Page Photograph: Aerial view of Nicodemus, Kansas, 1953
(Photograph: Bernice Bates)

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PREFACE

During the last decades of the nineteenth century, hundreds of small agricultural communities appeared across the American Midwest and almost as quickly withered, leaving only scant remnants of their rich cultural heritage. Nicodemus, Kansas, is perhaps one of the most historically significant of these towns, embodying the aspirations of blacks who had fled the Upper South during Reconstruction.

In 1976, Nicodemus was designated as one of this country's National Historic Landmarks, a category of cultural resources recognized as nationally significant, possessing exceptional value or quality in illustrating or interpreting the heritage of the United States. The U.S. National Park Service, the agency charged with monitoring the status of National Historic Landmarks, became increasingly alarmed at the accelerating rate of physical deterioration in the town during the 1970s. In 1981, only a handful of long-time Nicodemus residents remained and many important historic structures were in an advanced state of deterioration or ruin.

Serious efforts began in 1981 to record for posterity this endangered National Historic Landmark, and to provide direction for future historic preservation within the townsite. Members of the Rocky Mountain Regional Office, National Park Service, developed the proposal to record the cultural landscape of Nicodemus. The goal was to document all known physical changes that have occurred at this townsite since its founding in 1877. Documentation format was to adhere to standards developed and monitored by the Historic American Buildings Survey, a National Park Service program that produces archival documentation of buildings through measured drawings, photographs, and oral and written histories.

Seeking wider support than its own financial and administrative resources would allow, the National Park Service solicited and received joint project sponsorship from: the Kansas State Historical Society; Kansas State University, College of Architecture and Design; and Entourage, Inc., a nonprofit organization specializing in historical research and preservation planning for minority communities. In addition to pooling their administrative and financial resources, the project sponsors sought and received generous financial assistance from the National Endowment for the Arts, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Most importantly, this project received the enthusiastic and generous support from the Nicodemus community itself.

The scope of work for this documentation project was determined by the project sponsors to be: (1) a series of townsite drawings in conformance with Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) standards, graphically depicting the evolution of the Nicodemus townsite from 1877 to 1983; (2)

photodocumentation of extant historic structures, in conformance with HABS standards; (3) a written history of the townsite, also in conformance with HABS standards; and (4) oral history interviews obtained from local residents familiar with the townsite and its history. After being incorporated into a publication for nationwide distribution, these materials are to be housed in the Library of Congress, a permanent written and pictorial record for future scholarly research.

In the summer of 1983, a team was assembled onsite to conduct project research and documentation. Under the field supervision of Everett and La Barbara Fly of Entourage, Inc., the field team participants were: Richard McNamara, student landscape architect, Louisiana State University; Ruth K. Parr, graduate student archeologist, University of Bradford, England; Marion L. Prucha, intern landscape architect, University of Oregon; Bettina C. Van Dyke, graduate student landscape architect, Kansas State University.

Additional project research was provided by: Kenneth M. Hamilton, Assistant Professor of History, Ohio State University; Clayton Fraser, Fraserdesign, Loveland, Colorado; and La Barbara Fly, Entourage, Inc., Austin, Texas. *Kansas History*, published by the Kansas State Historical Society and the University of Illinois Press, graciously gave their permission to use two writings authored by Kenneth Hamilton, which have been subsequently edited into the manuscript that comprises chapter 1 of this publication.

The Nicodemus HABS documentation project concluded in the fall of 1984, and the results of this collaborative effort are seen here. This project would not have been possible were it not for the cooperation and contributions of numerous individuals. Professor Richard Wagner, Kansas State University, was instrumental in conducting prefield team research. Onsite lodging for the field team was generously provided by Veryl Switzer, Dean of Minority Affairs, Kansas State University. Peggie Armour and Connie Garrison, both of Kansas State University, are to be commended for their tireless transcribing of the oral history tapes. Robert Richmond, Assistant Executive Director of the Kansas State Historical Society, helpfully handled the financial accounts for the project. Gregory D. Kendrick, Historian, National Park Service, edited the numerous manuscripts and wrote the Introduction. Bonnie J. Halda, Historical Architect, National Park Service, proofed the entire document prior to publication. General guidance and advice were gratefully received from de Teel Patterson Tiller, Chief, Branch of Project Review and Technical Assistance, National Park Service. Finally, special thanks go to the citizens of Nicodemus, whose boundless enthusiasm and support made this project possible.

J. Keith Everett, A.I.A., Project Coordinator
U.S. National Park Service

INTRODUCTION

In September of 1877, 350 weary black emigrants, recruited from Lexington, Kentucky, arrived at a preselected destination in northwestern Kansas. In stark contrast to the wooded mountains of their native Kentucky, they found a forbidding and treeless stretch of Great Plains along the Solomon River. Disheartened, some 60 families immediately returned eastward in search of more familiar surroundings and better economic prospects. Yet, most remained, and despite hardship, helped to establish Nicodemus, Kansas, the oldest and most famous black town in the Middle West.

This fall migration was neither the first nor last group of black settlers to select Nicodemus as their home. Ultimately, five separate black groups from the Upper South would form the nucleus of Nicodemus. However, the fall arrivals perhaps best reflected the initial disappointment and determination of these nineteenth-century homesteaders. The three essays which follow chronicle the hardship as well as the achievement of these freedmen. Although each article can stand alone, they are complementary in nature and the reader will benefit by following the sequential arrangement found here. Taken collectively, the essays demonstrate that the settlement of Nicodemus was representative rather than unique to the Middle West. In truth, the history of Nicodemus was not significantly different than the development of its neighboring white towns, except that Nicodemus was predominantly black.

The first black settlers, who fled the Upper South during Reconstruction to found Nicodemus, participated in the greatest migration of peoples in the history of the United States. During the last decades of the nineteenth century, thousands of land-hungry settlers, held back for a generation by the formidable natural and psychological barriers of the Great Plains, streamed into the Trans-Mississippi West. The small handful of former slaves who settled Nicodemus shared much the same motivations as those who had recently forsaken Europe or departed the increasingly crowded Mississippi Valley. Regardless of place of origin, all emigrants shared dissatisfaction at home and the hope for better economic prospects ahead. Intense persecution and poverty, springing from the failed policies of Reconstruction, pushed blacks north and westward from the South. Alluring political and economic futures pulled them to a Kansas made more attractive by reports that John Brown had successfully purged the state of racism and bigotry.

Settlement of Nicodemus was part of a planned and gradual migration into Kansas of blacks from the three states of Kentucky, Tennessee, and Missouri. Although poorer than their white neighbors, blacks of some means generally comprised this early migration. The approximately 10,000 blacks from the Upper South who entered Kansas between 1870 and 1879 repre-

sented a small current in the river of white settlers pouring into the state. By 1880, the number of blacks in Kansas accounted for only 4.3 percent of the state's total population. Their relative numbers have been magnified, in large part, due to the later sudden, disorganized, and massive exodus of blacks predominantly from the lower Southern States. This so-called "Kansas Fever Exodus" of 1879-1880 uprooted over 15,000 Southern blacks, imbued them with a millennium fever, and ultimately concentrated the large majority penniless in urban areas such as Topeka, Kansas. The establishment of Nicodemus and the handful of other black colonies in Kansas generally preceded this much publicized Exoduster movement. The residents of Nicodemus, along with the farmers of most poor agricultural communities in Kansas, considered themselves separate from these Exodusters and provided them no warmer welcome than any dirt-poor farmer could offer to the hungry and destitute needing to be fed.

The first article, "The Settlement of Nicodemus: Its Origins and Early Promotion," by Kenneth M. Hamilton, reveals that the small town followed a typical pattern of frontier settlement. The formation of Nicodemus cannot be directly traced, as some historians have suggested, to the colonizing efforts of Benjamin "Pap" Singleton or Henry Adams. Instead, the establishment of the black community is integrally linked to Western townsite and land speculation. Seven Kansans, one white and six black, formed the Nicodemus Town Company on April 18, 1877. This group, led by white promoter, W. R. Hill, successfully recruited the future Nicodemus residents, helped transport them to Kansas, and assisted the settlers in the selection and purchase of their homesteads and/or town lots. Later, when the railroad bypassed the town, Nicodemus suffered the same decline experienced by hundreds of small Midwestern communities which failed to obtain a rail line.

In the second chapter titled "Nicodemus: The Architectural Development and Decline of an American Town," Clayton Fraser sketches the town's urban development. Striking a theme common to Hamilton's first chapter, Fraser finds that Nicodemus' architectural history paralleled that of most Midwestern towns. During the first years of settlement, Nicodemus residents experienced the same frontier vicissitudes common to all pioneers who homesteaded west of the 98th meridian. Lacking adequate timber, the black settlers first constructed primitive dugouts. Like most of their type, these earth structures provided insulation but were plagued with a plethora of problems including poor ventilation, insect and rodent infestations, and leaking roofs. Later, above-grade sod houses and ultimately modest stone and frame residences completed the architectural evolution. However, when the town failed to obtain a railroad link, most merchants simply relocated their businesses and buildings to nearby communities located along a railroad right-of-way.

A handful of residents, however, chose to remain. In the third and final essay, "Into the Twentieth Century," La Barbara W. Fly paints a colorful social portrait of twentieth-century life in the small rural community. Using an intelligent assortment of oral histories, folklore, and folk medicine, the author provides a rare glimpse of day-to-day life in Nicodemus. The brief narrative begins with the intense disappointment experienced by Nicodemus residents after the railroad failed to arrive, and then continues through the Great Depression to the recent urban renewal efforts of the 1970s. Travelers visiting Nicodemus today will find a vernacular collection of stone and painted frame structures lining Washington and Second Streets no different from the architectural landscape of other Midwestern agricultural villages. Yet differences in degree do exist. A strong sense of historical accomplishment and community spirit pervade the town. Despite the gradual and steady decline, most residents have expressed a growing unwillingness to allow the history of Nicodemus to be forgotten. The Emancipation Celebration, held annually in Nicodemus on the first of August since 1878, perhaps best reflects the community's intense commitment to sustain the town's cultural heritage. This intangible sense of history, fueled by over one hundred years of perseverance and rugged determination, can still be detected today.

Gregory D. Kendrick, Historian
U.S. National Park Service

continued. Applying the
multistage strategy
reduces the number

1-800-451-4511

LANDMARK BLACK SETTLEMENT

NICODEMUS, KANSAS - A NATIONAL HISTORIC

SICOPOLIS, STANDAS RECORDING PROJECT

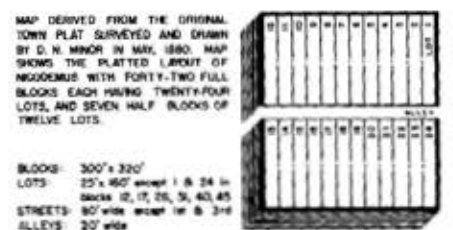
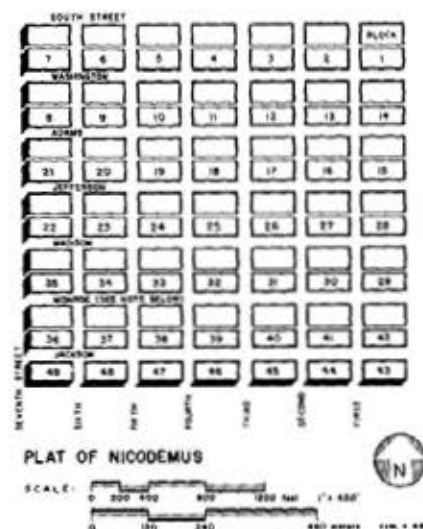
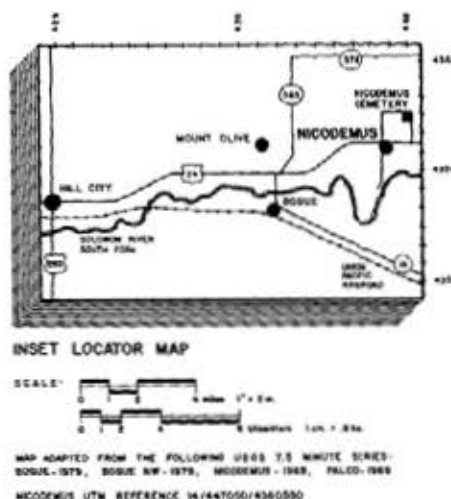


NICODEMUS, KANSAS, REPRESENTS THE EARLIEST AND MOST PROSPEROUS MIDWESTERN BLACK SETTLEMENT ASSOCIATED WITH THE MASSIVE WESTWARD MIGRATION OF FORMER SLAVES OUT OF THE SOUTH DURING RECONSTRUCTION. FOLLOWING A TYPICAL MIDWESTERN PATTERN OF TOWN DEVELOPMENT, THE NICODEMUS TOWN COMPANY WAS FORMED ON APRIL 18, 1877, BY SEVEN KANSANS (ONE WHITE AND SIX BLACK) ATTRACTED BY THE PROMOTIONAL LITERATURE OF BENJAMIN "PAP" SINGLETON AND LED BY WHITE PROMOTER W.R. HILL. FIVE SEPARATE INFUSIONS OF BLACK COLONISTS, PREDOMINATELY FROM KENTUCKY AND TENNESSEE, ULTIMATELY COMPRISED THE POPULATION OF THE TOWN. BY 1878, NICODEMUS COULD ROAST NEARLY 700 RESIDENTS. NICODEMUS' PROMINENCE, HOWEVER, WAS SHORTLIVED. WHEN THE RAILROAD BY-PASSED THE COMMUNITY IN 1886, THE MAJORITY OF BUSINESSES RELOCATED TO NEARBY COMMUNITIES AND THE TOWN SLOWLY WITHERED. A RESILIENT AND SELF-RELIANT NUCLEUS OF SETTLERS REMAINED. TODAY, 45 DESCENDENTS OF THESE ORIGINAL IMMIGRANTS RESIDE IN THE COMMUNITY, AND NUMEROUS HISTORIC STRUCTURES STILL EXIST.

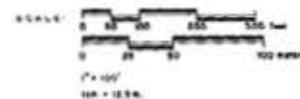
THIS HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDING SURVEY (HABS) PROJECT WAS CONDUCTED UNDER THE JOINT SPONSORSHIP OF THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, ROCKY MOUNTAIN REGIONAL OFFICE; THE KANSAS HISTORICAL SOCIETY, KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY, COLLEGE OF ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN; ENTOURAGE, INC.; THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS; AND THE NATIONAL TRUST FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION.

THE PROJECT COMMENCED DURING THE SUMMER OF 1983, AND CONCLUDED DURING THE FALL OF 1984, UNDER THE DIRECTION OF J. KEITH EVERETT, AIA, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, WITH ASSISTANCE FROM THE TOWNSHIP OF NICOMEDUS, HOWARD WAGNER, KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY, ROBERT RICHMOND, KANSAS HISTORICAL SOCIETY, AND JEELE PATTERSON TILLER AND GREGORY KENDRICK, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE.

PARTICIPANTS WERE: EVERETT L. AND BARBARA WISFALL, FLY, ENCOURAGE, INC.; RUTH K. PARR, UNIVERSITY OF BRADFORD, ENGLAND; MARION L. PRIMA, INTERIOR LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT, UNIVERSITY OF OREGON; BETTINA C. VAN DER GRADUATE STUDENT AND LAND ARCHITECT, KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY; RICHARD W. McNAMARA, STUDENT LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT, LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY; CLAYTON FRASER, FRASER DESIGN; KENNETH M. HAMILTON, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY; AND JAMES A. AND MARY M. GAUBERD, GAUBERD CALIF.



TYPICAL BLOCK LAYOUT



NOTE:
"MURKIN" ON ORIGINAL 1980 FLA
"MONK" ON SUBSEQUENT MARK

ON MICROFILM

NICODEMUS, KANSAS

TOWNSITE PLAN - 1877-1890



REFERENCE NUMBER	N.A.S. PHOTOGRAPH INDEX CODE	FEATURE (EARLIEST CONFIRMED YEAR)	1983 STATUS
1	-	R.T. DUNCAN FURNITURE STORE (1887)	NOT EXTANT
2	-	J.W. NILES LIVERY STABLE (1887)	NOT EXTANT
3	-	C. REESE LIVERY STABLE (1887)	NOT EXTANT
4	-	W. COTTON HOUSE (1888)	NOT EXTANT
5	-	G. CARPENTER HOUSE (1888)	NOT EXTANT
6	-	J.W. LEWIN FARM IMPLEMENT SHOP (1887)	NOT EXTANT
7	-	DOHANN & TAYLOR LIVERY STABLE (1887)	NOT EXTANT
8	-	S. GARLAND & D. WILLIAMSON FARM MACHINERY, CONTINENTAL INSURANCE COMPANY & LOAN OFFICE (1888)	NOT EXTANT
9	-	H. HARRIS BARNER SHOP IN GARLAND'S HARDWARE STORE (1888)	NOT EXTANT
10	-	J. RILEY HOUSE (DATE UNKNOWN)	NOT EXTANT
11	-	A. N. HARRIS HOUSE (1888)	NOT EXTANT
12	-	MASONIC LODGE (1888)	NOT EXTANT
13	-	H. HARRIS "BLUE FRONT" RESTAURANT (1887)	NOT EXTANT
14	-	W. GREEN DRY GOODS STORE (1888)	NOT EXTANT
15	-	C. H. NEWTH CITY DRUG STORE (1888)	NOT EXTANT
16	KS-49-A-7	S. S. WILSON GROCERIES & GENERAL MERCHANDISE STORE (1879)	NOT EXTANT
17	KS-49-A-7	H. S. HENRIE GENERAL MERCHANDISE (1888) (RELOCATED ACROSS STREET LATER IN THE YEAR)	NOT EXTANT
18	-	C. H. NEWTH HOUSE (1888)	NOT EXTANT
19	-	MRS. W. A. WARNER MILLWERY STORE (1888)	NOT EXTANT
20	-	MRS. W. T. FLETCHER MILLWERY STORE (1888)	NOT EXTANT
21	-	W. H. COTTON ATTORNEY'S OFFICE (1888)	NOT EXTANT
22	-	F. WILLIAMS GROCERIES & GENERAL MERCHANDISE STORE & POST OFFICE (1888)	NOT EXTANT
23	-	FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH (1888)	EXTANT
24	-	C. H. BURKHOLDER HOUSE (1887)	NOT EXTANT
25	-	H. S. HENRIE BARN (1887)	NOT EXTANT
26	-	G. WOODFORD BLACKSMITH SHOP (1879)	NOT EXTANT
27	-	B. P. MORELAND HARNESSEMAKER & SHOE REPAIR SHOP (1888)	NOT EXTANT
28	-	J. C. LAWERY ATTORNEY'S OFFICE (1887)	NOT EXTANT
29	-	D. WILLIAMSON FARMERS JOINT STOCK COMPANY STORE (1887)	NOT EXTANT
30	-	CRAGO & TURNER DRUG STORE (1888)	NOT EXTANT
31	-	S. C. HAYS "PREPARED" DRUG STORE (1887)	NOT EXTANT
32	KS-49-G-1 thru 3	S. C. HAYS & O. S. TALBOT "PALACE" DRUG STORE (1888)	NOT EXTANT
33	-	J. E. PORTER "PALACE" DRUG STORE (1888)	NOT EXTANT
34	-	R. M. BURNSIDE "PALACE" DRUG STORE (1888)	NOT EXTANT
35	-	H. S. HENRIE GENERAL MERCHANDISE (1888)	NOT EXTANT
36	-	M. R. HILL & C. H. BURKHOLDER GENERAL MERCHANDISE (1888)	NOT EXTANT
37	-	A. T. HALL GENERAL MERCHANDISE (1888)	NOT EXTANT
38	-	J. A. HALLER GROCERY STORE (1888)	NOT EXTANT
39	-	YOUNG & CRAVEN GROCERIES, SHOES, & WOODEN WARE STORE (1887)	NOT EXTANT
40	-	CRAVEN & LOVELADY GROCERY STORE (1887)	NOT EXTANT
41	-	S. CRAIG BUTCHER SHOP (1888)	NOT EXTANT
42	-	G. W. JONES ATTORNEY'S OFFICE (1887)	NOT EXTANT
43	-	LOWERY & LIGHTFOOT ATTORNEY'S OFFICE (1888)	NOT EXTANT
44	-	"PUBLIC SQUARE" TOWN WELL	NOT EXTANT
45	-	Z. T. FLETCHER GENERAL MERCHANDISE & POST OFFICE (1887) (BUILDING DEMOLISHED/REPLACED 1888)	NOT EXTANT
46	-	A. L. MCDONALD BANK OF NICODEMUS (1888)	NOT EXTANT
47	-	Z. T. FLETCHER LIVERY STABLE & FARM IMPLEMENT SHOP (1888)	NOT EXTANT
48	-	Z. T. FLETCHER SAINT FRANCIS HOTEL (1888)	EXTANT
49	-	J. GROVE & J. LOREO CITY MEAT MARKET (1887)	NOT EXTANT
50	-	J. B. CROMLEY GROCERIES & GENERAL MERCHANDISE (1887)	NOT EXTANT
51	-	Z. T. FLETCHER BARBOUT (1887)	NOT EXTANT
52	-	ELIZA SMITH'S GIBSON HOUSE HOTEL (1888)	NOT EXTANT
53	-	ELIZA SMITH & H. R. GAYTON COMMERCIAL HOUSE HOTEL (1887)	NOT EXTANT
54	-	D. WILLIAMS & S. GARLAND COMMERCIAL HOUSE HOTEL (1887)	NOT EXTANT
55	-	N. M. McFARLAND'S FISHER HOTEL (1888)	NOT EXTANT
56	-	ELIZA SMITH LIVERY STABLE (1888)	NOT EXTANT
57	-	A. BOLES HOTEL (1878)	NOT EXTANT
58	-	J. C. PARISH HARDWARE STORE (1888)	NOT EXTANT
59	-	J. C. PARISH GROCERIES & GENERAL MERCHANDISE (1888)	NOT EXTANT
60	-	S. CRAIG HOUSE (1879)	NOT EXTANT
61	KS-49-A-4, 11, KS-49-G-1 thru 3	DISTRICT NO. 1 SCHOOLHOUSE (1887)	EXTANT
62	-	FREE METHODIST CHURCH	NOT EXTANT

SCALE:
0 175 350 525 feet 0' 175'
0 20 40 80 160 meters 1 km = 20m

SOURCES:
NEWSPAPER ARTICLES, PRIMARILY FROM NICODEMUS CYCLOPS, WESTERN CYCLOPS, NICODEMUS ENTERPRISE
LAND TRANSFER RECORDS FROM GRAHAM COUNTY CLERK AND RECORDER
ORAL INTERVIEWS WITH NICODEMUS RESIDENTS, 1983

LEGEND:
 ■ KNOWN BUILDING LOCATION
 □ SPECULATIVE BUILDING LOCATION
 ● KNOWN WELL
 ○ SPECULATIVE DUGOUT
 ○ UNPAVED ROAD
 --- PATH
 --- RAILROAD

U.S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY, BUREAU OF GEOGRAPHIC NAMES, NICODEMUS, KANSAS, A NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK BLACK SETTLEMENT, KANSAS, COUNTY, GRAHAM COUNTY, KANSAS

ON MICROFILM

12345678910111213141516171819202122232425262728293031323334353637383940414243444546474849505152535455565758596061626364656667686970717273747576777879808182838485868788899091929394959697989910010110210310410510610710810911011111211311411511611711811912012112212312412512612712812913013113213313413513613713813914014114214314414514614714814915015115215315415515615715815916016116216316416516616716816917017117217317417517617717817918018118218318418518618718818919019119219319419519619719819920020120220320420520620720820921021121221321421521621721821922022122222322422522622722822923023123223323423523623723823924024124224324424524624724824925025125225325425525625725825926026126226326426526626726826927027127227327427527627727827928028128228328428528628728828929029129229329429529629729829930030130230330430530630730830931031131231331431531631731831932032132232332432532632732832933033133233333433533633733833934034134234334434534634734834935035135235335435535635735835936036136236336436536636736836937037137237337437537637737837938038138238338438538638738838939039139239339439539639739839940040140240340440540640740840941041141241341441541641741841942042142242342442542642742842943043143243343443543643743843944044144244344444544644744844945045145245345445545645745845946046146246346446546646746846947047147247347447547647747847948048148248348448548648748848949049149249349449549649749849950050150250350450550650750850951051151251351451551651751851952052152252352452552652752852953053153253353453553653753853954054154254354454554654754854955055155255355455555655755855956056156256356456556656756856957057157257357457557657757857958058158258358458558658758858959059159259359459559659759859960060160260360460560660760860961061161261361461561661761861962062162262362462562662762862963063163263363463563663763863964064164264364464564664764864965065165265365465565665765865966066166266366466566666766866967067167267367467567667767867968068168268368468568668768868969069169269369469569669769869970070170270370470570670770870971071171271371471571671771871972072172272372472572672772872973073173273373473573673773873974074174274374474574674774874975075175275375475575675775875976076176276376476576676776876977077177277377477577677777877978078178278378478578678778878979079179279379479579679779879980080180280380480580680780880981081181281381481581681781881982082182282382482582682782882983083183283383483583683783883984084184284384484584684784884985085185285385485585685785885986086186286386486586686786886987087187287387487587687787887988088188288388488588688788888989089189289389489589689789889990090190290390490590690790890991091191291391491591691791891992092192292392492592692792892993093193293393493593693793893994094194294394494594694794894995095195295395495595695795895996096196296396496596696796896997097197297397497597697797897998098198298398498598698798898999099199299399499599699799899910001001100210031004100510061007100810091010101110121013101410151016101710181019102010211022102310241025102610271028102910301031103210331034103510361037103810391040104110421043104410451046104710481049105010511052105310541055105610571058105910601061106210631064106510661067106810691070107110721073107410751076107710781079108010811082108310841085108610871088108910901091109210931094109510961097109810991100110111021103110411051106110711081109111011111112111311141115111611171118111911201121112211231124112511261127112811291130113111321133113411351136113711381139114011411142114311441145114611471148114911501151115211531154115511561157115811591160116111621163116411651166116711681169117011711172117311741175117611771178117911801181118211831184118511861187118811891190119111921193119411951196119711981199120012011202120312041205120612071208120912101211121212131214121512161217121812191220122112221223122412251226122712281229123012311232123312341235123612371238123912401241124212431244124512461247124812491250125112521253125412551256125712581259126012611262126312641265126612671268126912701271127212731274127512761277127812791280128112821283128412851286128712881289129012911292129312941295129612971298129913001



WASHINGTON STREET

ADAMS STREET

NATHAN STREET

THE SOUTHERN BOUNDARY OF NICOTINUS IS APPROXIMATELY 1 MILE NORTH OF THE SOUTH FORK OF THE SOLOWON RIVER

REFERENCE NUMBER	HABS PHOTOGRAPH INDEX CODE	FEATURE	1993 STATUS
1	-	LUELLA BRIDSON HOUSE	NOT EXISTANT
2	-	JAKE RILEY HOUSE	NOT EXISTANT
3	-	REVEREND SMITH HOUSE	NOT EXISTANT
4	-	BAXTER HOUSE (METHODIST PARSONAGE)	NOT EXISTANT
5	K5-49-B-1 thru 6	ACCOMMODUS TOWNSHIP HALL "CRACKER BOX" SCHOOL	EXTANT
7	-	PRISCILLA ANT CLUB BUILDING	FOUNDATION
8	K5-49-A-1, 2	"JOE WALSON'S" POST OFFICE	(EXTANT)
9	K5-49-A-102, 36	MASONIC LODGE	NOT EXISTANT
10	K5-49-A-5, 32, 36	G.M. SAYERS GROCERY STORE/HOUSE	NOT EXISTANT
11	K5-49-A-9	OLD FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH	EXTANT
12	-	RUDOLF BATES HOUSE / COMPLEX	NOT EXISTANT
13	-	G.M. SAYERS GRAMMAR & HENS	NOT EXISTANT
14	K5-49-M-1 thru 4	CHARLES WILLIAMS HOUSE	EXTANT
15	-	VERNA ROBINSON, SR. HOUSE	NOT EXISTANT
16	-	HOLBERT & VERNIA NAPUE HOUSE	RUIN
17	K5-49-N-1 thru 5	GOONS / ROBINSON HOUSE	EXTANT
18	K5-49-L-1 thru 5	FIRST BAPTIST PARSONAGE	EXTANT
19	-	ALVIN & ADA BATES HOUSE/COMPLEX	EXTANT
20	K5-49-A-10	NEW A.M.E. CHURCH	EXTANT
21	K5-49-F-1 thru 2 K5-49-G-1 thru 5	FRED & IVA SWITZER HOUSE/COMPLEX	EXTANT
22	-	"BLOW-IN" CAFE	EXTANT
23	-	FRED & IVA LEE SWITZER HOUSE	EXTANT
24	K5-49-D-1 thru 4	JERRY SCRUGGS, JR. HOUSE	EXTANT
25	-	FORNER HOLBERT & VERNIA NAPUE HOUSE (RUIN)	NOT EXISTANT
26	-	SARAH MOORE HOUSE	EXTANT
27	-	CLARENCE SAYERS HOUSE	NOT EXISTANT
28	-	DONALD & PEARLINA MOORE HOUSE	EXTANT
29	-	TUSS LACEY HOUSE (RUIN)	NOT EXISTANT
30	-	OLD A.M.E. CHURCH (NEVER COMPLETED, RUIN)	NOT EXISTANT
31	K5-49-C-1 thru 3	FARVIEW SCHOOL	EXTANT
32	K5-49-A-4, 11 K5-49-G-1 thru 5	DISTRICT NO. 1 SCHOOL/HOUSE/COMPLEX	EXTANT
33	K5-49-R-1 thru 4	CLEMENTINE VAUGHN HOUSE/COMPLEX	EXTANT
34	K5-49-P-1 thru 2	CALVIN SAYERS HOUSE	EXTANT
35	K5-49-Q-1 thru 3	TIM LACEY HOUSE	RUIN
36	-	REVEREND SMITH HOUSE (RUIN)	NOT EXISTANT
37	-	JERRY SCRUGGS HOUSE	EXTANT



SOURCES

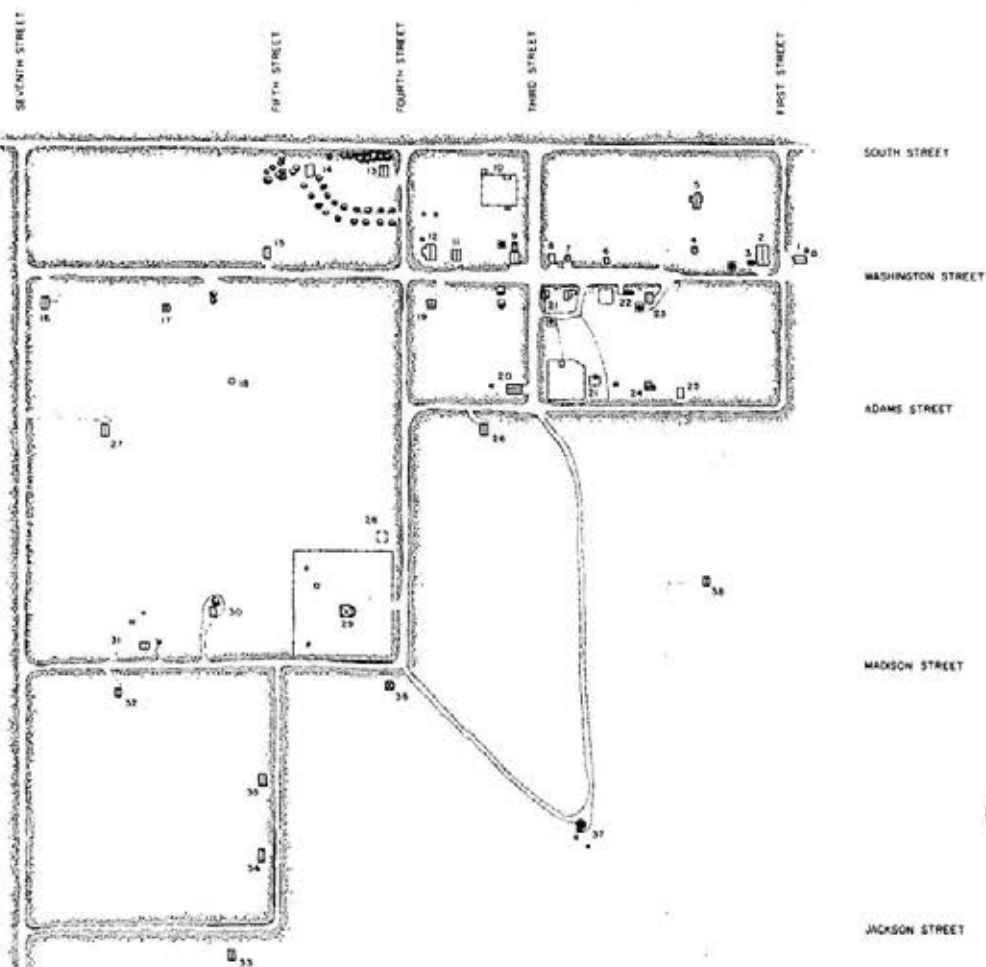
LAND TRANSFER RECORDS FROM GRAHAM COUNTY
CLERK AND RECORDS
ORAL INTERVIEWS WITH NIGGEMUS RESIDENTS
AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHS 1939, 1947, 1953

LEGEND:

[illegible]

NICODEMUS, KANSAS

TOWNSITE PLAN - CIRCA 1920



THE SOUTHERN BOUNDARY OF NICODEMUS IS APPROXIMATELY 1 MILE NORTH OF THE SOUTH FORK OF THE SOLOMON RIVER

REFERENCE NUMBER	HABS PHOTOGRAPH INDEX CODE	FEATURE	1983 STATUS
1	-	JANE RILEY HOUSE / COMPLEX	NOT EXTANT
2	-	ELLIE RILEY RECREATION HALL	NOT EXTANT
3	-	BLANCHE WHITE RESTAURANT	NOT EXTANT
4	-	WILSON HOUSE	NOT EXTANT
5	-	BAKTER HOUSE	NOT EXTANT
6	-	PRISCILLA ART CLUB BUILDING	NOT EXTANT
7	-	JOHNNIE RILEY RESTAURANT	NOT EXTANT
8	KS-49-A-12, 16	MASONIC LODGE	NOT EXTANT
9	KS-49-A-13, 32, 36	G.M. SAYERS GROCERY STORE/HOUSE	NOT EXTANT
10	-	G.M. SAYERS GRANARY & PENS	NOT EXTANT
11	-	MERCANTILE STORE	NOT EXTANT
12	KS-49-A-9	OLD FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH	EXTANT
13	KS-49-K-1 thru 7	CHARLES WILLIAMS HOUSE	EXTANT
14	KS-49-M-1 thru 4	MERCANTILE STORE	NOT EXTANT
15	-	CAROLINE SCOTT HOUSE	NOT EXTANT
16	-	BATRICE SWITZER HOUSE & CAFE	NOT EXTANT
17	KS-49-N-1 thru 5	STEWART/GOINS HOUSE	RUIN
18	-	STEWART/GOINS BARN	NOT EXTANT
19	KS-49-L-1 thru 8	FIRST BAPTIST PARSONAGE	EXTANT
20	KS-49-A-10	NEW A.M.E. CHURCH	EXTANT
21	KS-49-F-1 thru 31	2 1 FLETCHER HOUSE/COMPLEX	EXTANT
22	KS-49-G-1 thru 5	BATES CAFE	NOT EXTANT
23	-	JULIA LEE RESTAURANT	NOT EXTANT
24	-	CRAIG HOUSE	NOT EXTANT
25	-	JERRY SCRUGGS, SR. HOUSE	NOT EXTANT
26	-	TUSS LACEY HOUSE	NOT EXTANT
27	-	NAPUS HOUSE	NOT EXTANT
28	-	OLD A.M.E. CHURCH (NEVER COMPLETED, RUIN)	NOT EXTANT
29	KS-49-A-4, 11, KS-49-O-1 thru 5	DISTRICT NO. 1 SCHOOL/HOUSE/COMPLEX	EXTANT
30	-	CHARLIE MATHEW HOUSE (DUGOUT)	NOT EXTANT
31	KS-49-P-1 thru 7	CALVIN SAYERS HOUSE	EXTANT
32	KS-49-Q-1 thru 3	TIM LACEY HOUSE	RUIN
33	-	REVEREND SMITH HOUSE	NOT EXTANT
34	-	AUSTIN & ANNIE SMITH HOUSE	NOT EXTANT
35	-	WARREN BUCKNER HOUSE	NOT EXTANT
36	-	ALLEN THOMAS HOUSE	NOT EXTANT
37	KS-49-R-1 thru 4	CLEMENTINE VAUGHN HOUSE	EXTANT
38	-	ROBINSON HOUSE	EXTANT



SOURCES:
LAND TRANSFER RECORDS FROM GRAMM COUNTY CLERK AND RECORDER
ORAL INTERVIEWS WITH NICODEMUS RESIDENTS



ON MICROFILM

USE OF NATURAL STRINGS

ARTICLE 10

FOURTH: STABLEY

T-068 **STABILITY**

SECOND STUDY

First Street

● 此項為非正式之諮詢，不具正式之諮詢效力。

SOUTH STREET

WILSON BLVD. ST.

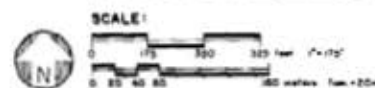
ADAMS STREET

MADISON STREET

ACADEMY STREET

THE SOUTHERN BOUNDARY OF NICODEMUS IS APPROXIMATELY 1 MILE NORTH OF THE SOUTH FORK OF THE SOLOMON RIVER

REFERENCE NUMBER	HABS PHOTOGRAPH INDEX CODE	FEATURE
1	-	ERNESTINE'S BAR-B-Q RESTAURANT
2	-	ERNESTINE VANDUVAL DUPLEX HOUSE
3	-	VERGIL B. JUANITA ROBINSON HOUSE
4	-	BERNARD & AWA BATES HOUSE
5	-	TOWN PARK
6	KS-49-B-1 Hwy 6	MOOSEHUS TOWNSHIP HALL
7	-	"CRACKER BOX" SCHOOL
8	-	PROSOLA ART CLUB FOUNDATION
9	KS-49-m-1,2	NEVINS RESTAURANT & GAS STATION (VACANT), FORMERLY JOE WILSON'S POST OFFICE (MOVED)
10	-	G. IRVIN & MINERVA SAYERS HOUSE/COMPLEX
11	-	NEW FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH
12	KS-49-A-9;	OLD FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH
13	KS-49-B-1 Hwy 4	CHARLES WILLIAMS HOUSE (VACANT)
14	-	"THE VILLA" (H.U.D. HOUSING COMPLEX)
15	-	MUNICIPAL GARAGE
16	-	MUNICIPAL FIRE HOUSE
17	-	MUNICIPAL SEWAGE LAGOON
18	-	HISTORIC LANDMARK SIGN
19	-	TEMOUR TERRY HOUSE
20	-	WILLIAM HENRY NAPIE HOUSE
21	-	CLARENCE & YVONNE SAYERS HOUSE
22	-	STONE PILE (FROM FORMER SAYERS STONE)
23	KS-49-N-1 Hwy 5	GOINS/ROBINSON HOUSE (RUIN)
24	-	VERGIL & ROBERTA ROBINSON, SR. HOUSE
25	KS-49-L-1 Hwy 5	FIRST BAPTIST PARSONAGE
26	-	ROBERT & ELLIE BRUGGER TRAILER
27	-	ALVIN & ADA BATES HOUSE/COMPLEX
28	KS-49-A-10;	NEW A.M.E. CHURCH (ABANDONED)
29	KS-49-D-1 Hwy 5; KS-49-D-1 Hwy 5	FRED & ORA SWITZER HOUSE/COMPLEX
30	-	VERYL & FERN SWITZER TRAILER
31	-	ORONAL & ALVENA ALEXANDER HOUSE/COMPLEX
32	KS-49-A-3;	LOYD WELLINGTON HOUSE/COMPLEX
33	KS-49-C-1 Hwy 4	HAROLD & BERNITA SWITZER TRAILER (VACANT)
34	KS-49-E-1 Hwy 3	FAIRVIEW SCHOOL/AMERICAN LEGION HALL (VACANT)
35	-	VERGIL ROBINSON, JR. TRAILER
36	-	HATTIE GRAY BURNETT HOUSE
37	KS-49-D-1 Hwy 4	JERRY SCRUGGS, JR. HOUSE (VACANT)
38	-	ORLANDO & ARNATHA NAPIE HOUSE
39	-	SARAH MOORE HOUSE/COMPLEX
40	-	FRED & IVA LES SWITZER HOUSE/COMPLEX
41	-	ROBERT & BERTHA CARTER HOUSE/COMPLEX
42	-	DONALD & PEARLINA MOORE HOUSE/COMPLEX
43	KS-49-R-1 Hwy 4	CLEMENTINE VAUGHN HOUSE (ABANDONED)
44	-	STONE PILE (FROM FORMER MASONIC LODGE)
45	-	BASEBALL FIELD
46	KS-49-J-1,2	ACE WILLIAMS HOUSE (ABANDONED)
47	KS-49-A-4,11; KS-49-D-1 Hwy 5	DISTRICT NO. 1, BRADYHOUSE COMPLEX / AMERICAN LEGION HALL
48	-	MUNICIPAL WATER TOWER
49	-	GUY W. & JUANITA REED HOUSE/COMPLEX
50	KS-49-P-1 Hwy 7	CALVIN SAYERS HOUSE (ABANDONED)
51	KS-49-D-1 Hwy 5	TIM LACEY HOUSE (RUIN)
52	-	OLA WILSON HOUSE
53	-	ROSA STOKES HOUSE



LEGEND:

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Table 1. Demographic characteristics of study population

with 100% efficiency.

continued on p. 10

WILSON, J. W., and J. W. WILSON. 1973. A comparison of the effects of different types of fish traps on the catch of fish in a river. *Journal of Fish Research Board of Canada* 30:1001-1004.

WOLFE, 1974, p. 100

11/11/2007

Abstract

[illegible]

ON MICROFILM

CHAPTER I

THE SETTLEMENT OF NICODEMUS: ITS ORIGINS AND EARLY PROMOTION

Kenneth Marvin Hamilton

Economics, according to Kenneth M. Hamilton, provide the best vehicle to understand the history of Nicodemus, Kansas. Like most other Midwestern towns, speculation figured prominently in the founding and development of Nicodemus. Closely tracing the creation and subsequent booster activities of the Nicodemus Town Company, Hamilton presents a convincing case for the similarities uniting, rather than the differences separating, Nicodemus and other contemporaneous small, agricultural communities in Kansas.

The desire for profit inspired the founding and early promotion of Nicodemus, Kansas, the oldest of more than two dozen towns established in the Middle West for a predominantly black population.¹ Because of the racial identity of most of the Nicodemus citizens during its early years, as well as the present day, it has had a unique nature ascribed to its history.² It is important to recognize, however, that when Nicodemus is viewed as an integral part of the urban settlement process of the Trans-Mississippi West, it loses much of its assigned novelty. The founding and early development of Nicodemus occurred in the same social, economic, and legal context as did predominantly white towns in the same region. The founders of this town, moreover, possessed the same motivations as did the founders of white towns. Intense dissatisfaction at home drove blacks from the South, exaggerated tales of economic opportunity attracted them to the western fringe of Kansas. (FIGURE I-1)

The founders of Nicodemus, like the founders of the vast majority of towns in the Midwest, engaged in townsite land speculation. This is the process by which undeveloped land was purchased, platted into town lots, and then sold to newcomers. Speculators played an important role in the settling of the Midwestern frontier. In order to realize a profit on their investment, they advertised their holdings widely in the East and in Europe. This promotion, more than any other factor, informed foreign emigrants and native citizens alike as to where they could locate on the frontier. Moreover, the credit terms the promoters offered gave more people an opportunity to buy relatively cheap and highly productive land than did the terms offered by the Federal Government. Land speculators also helped to determine which areas of the West would be rural and which would be urban. These assertions are no less true for the promoters who developed towns which were populated predominantly by blacks than they were for all-white towns.

Both sets of promoters had to work within the context of the federal land law. Since Nicodemus was established during 1877 on federally-owned land within Kansas, the Townsite Preemption Act of 1844, as amended, guided the actions of its founders. This act, originally passed May 23, 1844, and amended March 2, 1867, stated:

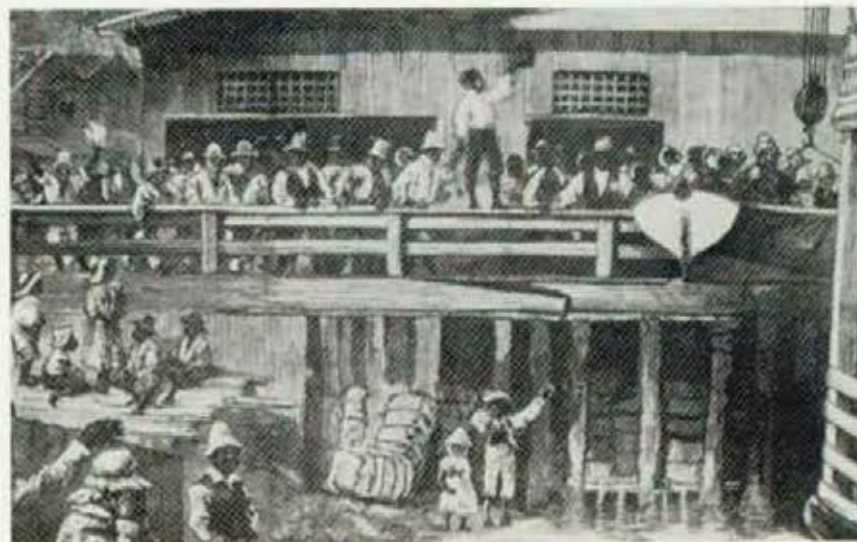


FIGURE I-1: Harper's Weekly showed its readers scenes such as this one depicting the mass exodus of blacks from the South in the years during and after Reconstruction. This movement has been called the Exoduster movement and its participants, Exodusters. (Source: Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas)

That whenever any portion of the surveyed public lands has been or shall be settled upon and occupied as a townsite . . . it shall be lawful, in case such town or place shall be incorporated, for the corporate authorities thereof, and, if not incorporated for the judges of the county court for the county in which such town may be situated, to enter, at the proper land office, and at the minimum price, the land so settled and occupied, in trust, for the . . . occupants thereof, according to their respective interests. . . .³

By its phraseology, the Townsite Preemption Act recognized two distinct interest groups in the location and formation of towns. One consisted of persons already settled on the land. Their rights, however, were not given precedence over those of organized groups of prospective settlers. Each alike had the first opportunity to purchase townsite lands at minimum price.⁴ The statute, moreover, encouraged groups of capitalists to form townsite trust associations and engage in speculation, historically an integral part of town development.⁵

Townsite trust associations performed several other important functions in the settling of the West. They were development companies which, more often than not, charged nonassociation settlers a fee for town lots and other services. Professor Glen Holt has asserted that town developers, using the Townsite Preemption Act, performed not less than three functions; (1) they provided a means for settlers who did not know each other to unite and participate in a "traditional real estate function for which the federal law made no provision whatsoever," i.e., town building; (2) in promoting their sites, the associations induced people to settle in their towns and the surrounding hinterland. This function not only brought people, but also Eastern capital to the West; (3) being real estate dealers, "they provided a form of townsite acquisition familiar to urban settlers." In sum, Holt stated, the association "gave specificity to the government's highly abstract model for town development."⁶

For 33 years Congress, the executives, and the courts made few changes in the preemption law. The Federal Government recognized speculation as an inherent function of American new town development. In the history of new town development in the American West, few towns came into being without speculation as one of the major inspirations. While allowing speculation, the act ensured the land-holding rights of individuals who had built a town for non-speculatory reasons.

On April 18, 1877, seven Kansans, cognizant of the potential in the townsite preemption law as a tool for developing unclaimed areas in western Kansas, formed the Nicodemus Town Company.⁷ This group was the first trust association that would attempt to develop a town on the Middle Border for an all-black population. Of the seven incorporators of the Nicodemus company, six were black. The signatures on the articles of incorporation indicate that only

two of these could write. One of the literate developers was S. P. Roundtree, a black minister who "wore a brand on one cheek as punishment for having received educational instruction from his master's son."⁸ Roundtree served as secretary of the company while W. R. Hill (**FIGURE 1-2**), the one white member, was treasurer. W. H. Smith, who with Hill was a prime mover of the Nicodemus project, was chosen president and Ben Carr, vice-president. The remaining incorporators were Jerry Allsop, Jeff Lenze, and William Edmonds.⁹



FIGURE 1-2: W. R. Hill, a white townsite promoter, deserves much of the credit for the establishment of Nicodemus, Kansas. A jack-of-all-trades, Hill selected the townsite, traveled south to promote emigration, guided immigrants to the new community and often loaned indigent settlers the capital necessary for survival on the rugged prairie. (Source: Kansas State University, Minorities Collection, Manhattan, Kansas)

All the incorporators were from Kentucky except Smith, who was from Tennessee.

The black members of the company had migrated from the South searching for an open society where they could live without fear of hostile whites. They had come to Kansas in search of free land. Much of their information about Kansas had come from the advertisement "reports" of Benjamin "Pap" Singleton's (FIGURE 1-3) Tennessee Real Estate and Homestead Association's activities in the state.¹⁰ The six black members of the Nicodemus Town Company would become part of the precursors to the "Exodusters," the name given to those blacks who left the South for Kansas during 1879 and 1880 in such numbers that Congress held hearings to determine the causes.¹¹

Singleton, formerly an escaped slave, helped establish and became the president of the Tennessee Real Estate and Homestead Association. The orga-



FIGURE 1-3: Although not directly involved with the establishment of Nicodemus, Kansas, historically prominent black figure, Benjamin "Pap" Singleton (shown superimposed on this photomontage dated April 15, 1879) is generally credited with stimulating the Exoduster Movement. The photograph shows black Exodusters in Nashville, Tennessee, eagerly awaiting the departure of an Ohio River steamboat. Caption on photograph reads "B. Singleton and S. A. McClure" Imagination [sic] and "Exodusters Ready to Leave Nashville." (Source: Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas)

nization recruited between 200 and 300 blacks and located them in Cherokee County, in the southeastern portion of the state. Like most emigrants, Southern blacks searched for lands resembling their homes, and in climate and topography, Cherokee County was similar to Tennessee. Few went on to western Kansas. From its inception, the Cherokee County colony prospered, and reports about its activities were widely circulated. This success prompted various Kansas railroads, which needed settlers to generate freight and passenger traffic, to send emigration agents into Tennessee and Kentucky to recruit more blacks, in the process offering reduced fares from Nashville to Topeka.¹²

Nicodemus Town Company President Smith, and a companion, Thomas Harris, came to Kansas during 1877 searching for land as agents for a group of their friends in Clarksville, Tennessee. Like the directors from Kentucky, Smith did not have any direct connection with Singleton or the Tennessee Real Estate and Homestead Association. The Nicodemus Town Company consisted of individual Southern blacks who heard of the availability of homestead land in Kansas and used Topeka merely as a jumping-off place en route to the public lands.¹³

Sometime between September 1876, and April 1877, Smith became a business associate of W. R. Hill, who also had come to the Solomon River Valley as a homestead locator and townsite promoter. Hill also may have acted as an emigration agent for the Kansas Pacific Railroad.¹⁴ He was an experienced townsite developer. Born and raised near Covington, Indiana, he moved as a young man to Hutchinson, Kansas, and took an active part in that town's early development.¹⁵ He then participated in the promotion of several additions to Wichita.¹⁶

Hill knew how to promote and develop towns. Smith knew that blacks wanted free land in Kansas, and that a large number could be persuaded to settle in the Solomon Valley. These two entrepreneurs, one white and one black, joined forces to establish two townsite companies. The first was the Nicodemus Town Company, founded April 18, 1877, with Smith as president and Hill as treasurer; the second was the Hill City Town Company, founded September 28, 1877, with Hill as president and Smith as treasurer. Each of the townsite companies had five additional directors who paid \$100 each for one share of stock.¹⁷ Smith had formed a black colonization organization with Hill as its agent.¹⁸ For a fee, he would locate the organization's members on government land.¹⁹

How the two men decided on the name Nicodemus for their black townsite remains a mystery. One claim is that because the leaders of the company were religious, they selected the name of the Pharisee, Nicodemus, who became a secret follower of Jesus and later helped bury him after the crucifixion.²⁰ The more likely explanation, one supported by a circular advertising the

formation of the colony, states that the company and later the town were named for an African prince who was brought to the American Colonies in 1692 and sold as a slave. The prince declared that the white people would someday regret having enslaved the black people, and he became famous as the first slave to buy his freedom in America.²¹

Although Smith lived in the Solomon River Valley about two years before Hill explored the area, Hill selected the site for the proposed town of Nicodemus. Nettie Craig, an early settler of the town, later recalled one popular account of how Hill selected the site for Nicodemus:

He had walked all afternoon trying to find the most favorable spot on which to locate the town. As the sun was dropping below the western horizon, Hill was admiring the beauty of the Western sunset. He lingered until night had settled around him. Then the tired man lay down to rest and think. He was awakened the next morning by the sun shining upon his face. He had found the perfect place.²²

Another account advanced by the *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, stated that Hill located the town at a spot where he was awakened and frightened by a huge snake.²³

The town's location and Hill's experience as a townsite developer indicate that the promoter took a more rational approach in deciding where to site Nicodemus. Hill seems to have recognized the advantages of locating the proposed town along the north bank, the higher of the two sides of the South Solomon River, one-half mile west of Graham County's eastern boundary. The town was located west of the 100th meridian, an area with a severe shortage of timber and water. The few trees that existed generally grew adjacent to the scarce streams. However, Hill's location provided the residents of Nicodemus with fresh water, and protection from occasional floods. In addition, the river, though unnavigable, gave the townsite potentially easy access, since westward travelers and railways often followed waterways. Hill must have considered these factors before he filed a 160-acre townsite plat with the government land office in Kirwin, Kansas, on June 8, 1877.²⁴ This registration gave the townsite company the first option to buy the proposed site.

Eight days later, and two days before the Nicodemus Town Company was incorporated with the Kansas Secretary of State, the company made its first attempt to sell town lots in what was to be an all-black town.²⁵ Led by Smith and Hill, the Nicodemus company was the first such organization to sell a Middle Border townsite to blacks only. Their specific strategy was to recruit blacks of some means from the Upper South. In adjusting to these constraints, the townsite promotion went through two distinguishable periods, each reflecting the changing economic and social conditions of Southern Afro-Americans. The first period began in 1877, just before the initial large wave of



FIGURE I-4: Beginning in the spring of 1879, blacks fled the South in such massive numbers that a Congressional investigation known as the Voorhees Committee was convened, and national periodicals such as *Harper's Weekly* covered the black exodus. This drawing entitled "Negro Exodusters en Route for Kansas, fleeing from the Yellow Fever," appeared in *Harper's Weekly*, August 16, 1879. Rumors of an imminent yellow fever epidemic precipitated many local migrations from the Deep South. (Source: Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas)

Southern blacks migrated to the Midwest. The second period began in 1890.²⁶ (FIGURE I-4)

ALL COLORED PEOPLE
THAT WANT TO GO
TO KANSAS
ON SEPTEMBER 5, 1877
CAN DO SO FOR \$5.00

From the end of Reconstruction in 1876, to the enactment of the first black disfranchisement law in 1890, blacks living throughout the South maintained an ambiguous social position. Most ex-slaves had little freedom and less personal or economic security. Southern whites had not found a uniform

means of dealing with their former slaves. No state had instituted a comprehensive code of segregation, nor had any state officially disfranchised their black citizens. Even so, many blacks faced racial discrimination, frequent segregation, white-perpetrated violence, and severe poverty. The Federal Government's failure to allocate land to the new freedmen relegated most black adult males to the loathsome position of being "farmers without land." In addition, black artisans, who held a near monopoly on skilled jobs at the end of the war, began to experience the contraction of their employment opportunities because of competition from white laborers, racial discrimination, and the establishment of all-white labor unions.²⁷

The South's equivocal handling of the "Negro problem," and the blacks' former condition of slavery, more than racial discrimination, were the special factors that affected the promotion of Midwest townsites intended for blacks during the first era. Bondage predetermined that the vast majority of Afro-Americans would start their lives as Southern freedmen with little or no money and with the lowest possible social prestige. Twelve years after their emancipation, at the beginning of the first era of all-black townsite promotion, the situation for most blacks remained unchanged.

The problem for the Nicodemus promoters, therefore, was to locate and identify those few blacks in the South financially able to buy town lots and willing to move to the Midwest. Smith's and Hill's promotional appeal in the initial period was to emphasize the money-making opportunities of Nicodemus. Profit, not escape from Southern white oppression, was their first theme.

The promoters' lack of funds prohibited them from employing boosting agents, placing advertisements in Southern newspapers and periodicals, or distributing boosting brochures. Instead, they distributed circulars, the cheapest means to advertise their town lots. Even in this tactic, they were selective, however. Their cheaply printed sheets were mailed directly to likely prospects in the Southern States. Smith and Hill were not seeking mass numbers eager to escape the South; they were aiming at those who had some financial means.

While they did not concentrate on appealing to blacks' sense of nationalism, they did explicitly direct advertising literature only to Afro-Americans. The earliest circular, dated April 16, 1877, told its reader that Nicodemus would become the "Largest Colored Colony in America." In addition, the flyer pointed out that Smith, the colony's president, was black. Another circular

FIGURE I-5: Handbills such as this one, printed July 7, 1877, were carried south by townsite promoters such as W. R. Hill, to persuade blacks to emigrate to Nicodemus. Although helpful in persuading blacks to leave their former homes, the handbills usually exaggerated the agricultural potential and environment of western Kansas. (Source: Kansas State University, Minorities Collection, Manhattan, Kansas)

THE BLACK WEST

To the Colored Citizens of the United States.

NICODEMUS, GRAHAM CO., KAN., July 2d. 1877.

We, the Nicodemus Town Company of Graham County, Kan., are now in possession of our lands and the Town Site of Nicodemus, which is beautifully located on the N. W. quarter of Section 1, Town 8, Range 21, in Graham Co., Kansas, in the great Solomon Valley, 240 miles west of Topeka, and we are proud to say it is the finest country we ever saw. The soil is of a rich, black, sandy loam. The country is rather rolling, and looks most pleasing to the human eye. The south fork of the Solomon river flows through Graham County, nearly directly east and west and has an abundance of excellent water, while there are numerous springs of living water abounding throughout the Valley. There is an abundance of fine Magnesian stone for building purposes, which is much easier handled than the rough sand or hard stone. There is also some timber; plenty for fire use, while we have no fear but what we will find plenty of coal.

Now is your time to secure your home on Government Land in the Great Solomon Valley of Western Kansas.

Remember, we have secured the service of W. R. Hill, a man of energy and ability, to locate our Colony.

Not quite 90 days ago we secured our charter for locating the town site of Nicodemus. We then became an organized body, with only three dollars in the treasury and twelve members, but under the careful management of our officers, we have now nearly 300 good and reliable members, with several members permanently located on their claims—with plenty of provisions for the colony—while we are daily receiving letters from all parts of the country from parties desiring to locate in the great Solomon Valley of Western Kansas.

For Maps, Circulars, and Passenger rates, address our General Manager, W. R. HILL, North Topeka, Kansas, until August 1st, 1877, then at Hill City, Graham Co., via Trego.

The name of our post-office will be Nicodemus, and Mr. Z. T. Fletcher will be our "Nashy."

REV. S. P. ROUNDTREE, Sec'y.

NICODEMUS.

Nicodemus was a slave of African birth,
And was bought for a bag full of gold;
He was reckoned a part of the soil 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.

CHORUS: 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.

dated July 2, 1877, that announced the location and other characteristics of Nicodemus, was addressed "To the Colored Citizens of the United States."²⁸ Even flyers primarily concerned with the boosting of Hill City, Smith's and Hill's all-white town, informed readers that only Afro-Americans would live in Nicodemus. The Hill City handbill invited "Men of Business, Capital and Energy" on a round-trip excursion from Topeka to the Solomon Valley, the location of Hill City and Nicodemus, to take place on June 28, 1877, at a cost of \$10 per ticket. The flyers stated that "colored citizens have the same rates to go and see their Nicodemus."²⁹ (FIGURE I-5)

The promotional material also emphasized the high moral tone of the new place. At the bottom of the July 2, 1877, handbill, the promoters printed a song glorifying Nicodemus, the man and the town.

NICODEMUS

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 this thumb.

Chorus:

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.³⁰

The April 16, 1877, leaflet, calling Nicodemus the "Promise Land," stated that by September 1, 1877, houses, business buildings, public buildings, and a church edifice would be erected. However, no "saloons or other houses of ill-fame" would be allowed during the town's first five years.³¹ In the July 2, 1877, leaflet it was boastfully reported that within 90 days the colony's officers had organized nearly 300 members.³² It further stated that a few of the colony's members, with plenty of provisions, had already located their claims.

More than any other aspect, however, the circulars emphasized the natural advantages of the South Solomon Valley and, implicitly, the economic opportunity to be found there. (FIGURE I-6) The flyers proclaimed the townsite's location as being beautiful and "designated for the Colored Colony."³³ In recognition of the symbiotic relationship between a town and its hinterland, the circular dated July 2 asserted that the soil around Nicodemus was "of a rich, black, sandy loam" and the area's rolling plains look "most pleasing

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 instalments 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.

FIGURE I-6: Nicodemus, Kansas, was promoted as a segregated, "all black town." The authors of these early handbills emphasized the role of blacks in the colony's organization while downplaying Hill's role. Not surprisingly, Hill's name is conspicuously absent from this September 5, 1877, flyer. (Source: Kansas State University, Minorities Collection, Manhattan, Kansas)

to the human eye." In an attempt to allay fear that the area might be short on water, the circular asserted that "the south fork of the Solomon river . . . has an abundance of excellent water . . . while there are numerous springs of living water . . . throughout the Valley."³⁴ The leaflet misrepresented the truth when it led readers to believe that the area possessed more than enough timber for heating and cooking and that coal would be found in the area.

To sell their town lots, the Nicodemus promoters relied heavily upon the formation of colony organizations. To accelerate recruitment among the largely illiterate ex-slave population, the townsites went in person to describe the advantages of the Solomon Valley and persuaded at least four groups to form emigration associations and move to the Nicodemus area.³⁵ Smith, Roundtree, and Fletcher organized the first colony in Topeka during the spring of 1877.³⁶ Hundreds of blacks had emigrated to Topeka from the Upper South as a result of the publicity given to Singleton's efforts at inducing blacks to relocate in Kansas and the reduced fares offered by Kansas railroad agents. Most of the Afro-Americans lived in three separate areas of the city called "Redville," "Tennessee Town," and "The Bottom."³⁷ Whites of Topeka donated land and used timber so that blacks could build shelter for themselves. Smith, who had temporarily resided in Topeka, knew that many of the blacks had no intention of making the capital city their permanent home. They regarded the town only as a departure point from which they would move south and west to new locations. Smith, Roundtree, and Fletcher capitalized on this desire and directed attention toward Nicodemus.³⁸ On July 30, 1877, Hill escorted 30 members of the colony from the Topeka Bottom to the townsites.³⁹ Most of these settlers, and those that later followed, settled on farm homesteads. They gave Hill from \$2 to \$30 each for locating them on suitable plots of land and helping with the filing procedures.⁴⁰ Those who located in Nicodemus paid the town company \$5 for an unoccupied lot.⁴¹

The success of the Topeka colony organization may have inspired the Nicodemus promoters to apply the technique in the South, for after the formation of the Topeka colony, the boosters formed at least three colonization groups in Kentucky and guided them to the South Solomon Valley. In the fall of 1877, they formed a group in Lexington, Kentucky, and in the spring of 1878, the promoters formed two groups in Georgetown, Kentucky. The members of the Georgetown colony organized after listening to Hill in a small Baptist church. The white townsites agent told his audience that blacks lived as equals with whites in western Kansas. He informed the group that 160 acres were available for those who wanted to homestead, and that a herd of wild horses in the area could be caught and tamed for farm work. He claimed that wild game in the valley would satisfy all their needs for meat.⁴² As a result of Hill's sales pitch, over 300 people in two groups moved to Nicodemus from

the Georgetown area.

When the black emigrants were in Nicodemus, their fundamental differences from white settlers became all too apparent. The Nicodemus promoters expected that the Afro-Americans would establish a town social order not unlike that of white-populated new towns. What they had not counted on, however, was the poverty and illiteracy that were the legacies from their long years in slavery. Even though the *Ellis Standard* asserted that the settlers of the second of five Nicodemus colony groups "look as though . . . they had not lacked for a plenty of good wholesome food, and their clothing was . . . up to the average of western immigrants," neither they nor any of the other groups of Nicodemus settlers had as much money as their white counterparts.⁴³ The few blacks that did possess enough money to relocate in northwest Kansas did not have access to large amounts of Eastern investment capital, a necessity in the rapid growth of all successful Midwestern towns. Moreover, the Afro-Americans' high illiteracy rate hindered their attempts to acquire wealth and to transact their town's business. These two factors combined to produce the major differences that existed between Nicodemus and its white counterparts.

Not all of Nicodemus' early developmental problems can be attributed to the settlers' slave legacy, however. The townsites promoters' feeble planning contributed significantly to the hardships of the town inhabitants. Smith and Hill simply failed to consider the limited funds of the colonists when they relocated settlers to Nicodemus and its surrounding area. Of the four colonies they located, this was especially true for the July 1877 group from Topeka and the September 1877 group from Lexington. The promoters settled these emigrants, some of whom owned teams, wagons, and plows, too late in the growing season for them to raise crops. In addition, the colonists who spent most of their money transporting themselves and their goods to Nicodemus found that the distance between their town and the populated areas of the state was an obstacle in obtaining jobs to tide them through the winter.⁴⁴ Their situation proved the *Ellis Standard* was wrong when it stated the "dusky sons and daughters of the south . . . have enough of everything to make a decent start."⁴⁵

During the first year, Nicodemus blacks found that in comparison to the South, making a living in northwest Kansas was very hard. The scarce timber supply forced them to live in sod, dugout houses (**FIGURE 1-7**), the most common form of shelter for new settlers on the High Plains, and to use sunflowers, willows, and buffalo chips as fuel.⁴⁶ They obtained their water from the South Solomon River until they could sink wells.⁴⁷ The colonists, unfortunately, found that most of the wild game that Hill so eloquently described during his recruiting addresses had migrated elsewhere.⁴⁸ Thus, the settlers could not supplement their meager provisions through hunting. The few emigrants

who possessed money usually had to walk 30 miles to purchase supplies at the nearest railroad. All but three of both groups of colonists' horses died soon after they arrived at the townsite, and none of the blacks were able to capture and tame any of the wild horses that pastured south of Nicodemus.⁴⁹

Some of the early settlers, accustomed to the woodlands of Kentucky and Tennessee, reacted negatively to the challenge of living in Nicodemus. When members of the first colony arrived at the townsite, they became so disappointed and angry with Hill that they sought to hang him. The promoter attempted to take refuge in a dugout of one of his friends, but the highly indignant blacks followed him. His friend's wife, a very large woman, used a shawl to hide Hill, a small man, behind her and helped him escape through their back door to the home of Reuben Lawlis. The Lawlis family mistook the noise from the nearby river as the sound of approaching blacks and drove Hill, who hid under hay in a wagon, to Stockton where he stayed until he thought it safe to return to the colonists.⁵⁰ Members of the Lexington colony reacted differently. Sixty families of that group displayed their unhappiness by returning eastward the day after they arrived at the townsite.⁵¹

When we got in sight of Nicodemus, the men shouted, "There is Nicodemus!" Being very sick, I hailed this news with gladness. 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. We landed and once again struck tents. The scenery time was not at all inviting, and I began to cry.

— Willianna Hickman, 1878

Those emigrants who remained displayed ingenuity and industry in surviving in the South Solomon Valley. The destitute condition of the colonists required that many of the men and some of the women had to seek jobs miles away from their families. Most found work in towns and on railroads east of Nicodemus. Others acquired employment in eastern Colorado. The blacks would repeatedly work a few days and then return to Nicodemus to take care of their families.⁵²

In spite of such efforts, blacks had to rely on charity for subsistence. The colonists began receiving assistance as early as the winter of 1877-1878, when Osage Indians, on their way to eastern Kansas, gave the black settlers some of the food they had obtained from their annual Rocky Mountain hunt and from the quarterly commodity subsidy they had just received at Fort Ogallala.⁵³ Although some of the whites in the area, especially the ranchers and cowboys, resented the colonists, neighboring whites also contributed some aid to the blacks.⁵⁴ By March 1878, the month Hill settled the first of three new colony

groups, the settlers began a systematic program for receiving and distributing goods obtained through charity. Under the leadership of the Topeka colony's officer, the blacks sent solicitors throughout the eastern portion of the state. They stored the subsistence aid that they received in a sod commissary. The building was later replaced with a stone-front dugout.⁵⁵



FIGURE 1-7: This rare historic photograph of an above-ground Nicodemus sod house, or "soddy," was identified as the Tuss-Lacey house by present-day local residents. Note that one elevation is of limestone construction, a popular but more expensive and time-consuming building method than was usually employed. The structure is no longer extant. (Photograph: Ernestine VanDuvall)

During the spring of 1878, the suffering Afro-Americans began to receive some relief from new groups of black colonists. The first new group, colony number three, had about 150 members. It arrived at the townsite, with Hill as its guide, from Kentucky. The fourth colony, consisting of about 25 emigrants, also originated in Kentucky during May 1878, with Roundtree as its leader. The last large group of settlers, led by Reverend Goodwin, had about 50 people and arrived from Mississippi during February 1879.⁵⁶ These groups and several unrecorded individuals and smaller groups, in comparison to the Topeka and Lexington colonies, had substantial amounts of cash, supplies, horses, and wagons, and they shared much of their wealth with the poorer settlers.⁵⁷

In addition, westward-bound white emigrants helped some of the blacks cultivate their claims. Nicodemus' relatively large population made the townsite and its surrounding area an ideal place for white travelers to rest and refresh themselves. For a short time during 1878, Nicodemus had between

600 and 700 residents, making it the most populous town north of the Kansas Pacific Railroad tracks and west of Beloit.⁵⁸ Eventually all but a few businessmen and others who could make a living in a frontier town resettled on homestead lands. However, those blacks who already had staked out their claims exchanged food and shelter for the use of the whites' plow teams to break up the land.⁵⁹

Those homesteaders who did not receive white assistance in farming their claims either improvised or obtained aid from the new colonists who possessed plow teams and farming implements. Before the arrival of wealthier blacks in 1878, many of the emigrants planted crops with only spades, mattocks, and hoes.⁶⁰ Some of them continued to use this crude method of farming. One man, who may have had a need to distinguish his land from that belonging to others at a glance, spaded a four-foot-wide hedgerow around his 160 acres of land. Other Afro-Americans hitched milk cows to plows. A black man and his wife broke 12 acres of tough prairie land and cultivated 8 acres of corn with a cow.⁶¹

A large segment of the early colonists still needed charity for survival, however. This need occurred even though the blacks found that they could earn additional money by selling buffalo bones, which they gathered on the prairie, for \$6 per ton.⁶² The emigrants attempted to obtain further aid through the state's governor. During March and April 1878, Kansas Governor George T. Anthony received several letters from Nicodemus' leaders and sympathetic whites asking for his help in acquiring governmental aid for the town.⁶³ The correspondence from John H. Edwards, a white real estate dealer from Ellis, seems to have had the most influence with the governor. Edwards's first letter to Anthony concerning relief for the blacks of Nicodemus was an introduction for Roundtree. The real estate dealer expressed disapproval for the black minister's plan to solicit the governor's assistance in requesting Congress for aid to needy Kansas blacks.⁶⁴ Edwards, who later claimed that the colonists would for some time "be a weight upon the state," proposed relief through private rather than governmental sources, a suggestion the governor quickly endorsed.⁶⁵ The people of Kansas had made a nationwide appeal for aid after the grasshopper invasion of 1874, and Anthony did not think that the state could afford to make another request so soon. A new solicitation, he thought, would deter new white settlers from relocating in the state.⁶⁶

Since the poor blacks of Nicodemus did not receive any assistance from the State or Federal Government, they continued until the spring of 1879 to canvass the older settled areas for aid.⁶⁷ In at least one recorded instance, they sent an agent out of state. Roundtree made a successful plea for assistance at the Michigan State Fair. Citizens of Michigan gave the colonists money and several train carloads of commodities.⁶⁸ During April 1879, the emigrants de-

cided at a mass meeting to cease soliciting aid and disband the colony organization established for that purpose. This occurred as a result of five factors: (1) their successful charity drives; (2) predictions of a good crop harvest; (3) the demoralizing effect of begging; (4) the realization that some of the colonists would rather beg than work; and (5) fear that many of the destitute Exodusters would be sent to the Nicodemus area.⁶⁹

The blacks made the decision to stop requesting aid under new leadership. The colonists had chosen W. H. Smith and S. P. Roundtree to head their self-governing organization until the summer of 1878, when they elected John W. Niles, a member of the Lexington colony, as president and Edward P. McCabe, as secretary.⁷⁰ Niles did not possess the literacy of some of the other emigrants, but he displayed an aggressive, energetic, dominating personality. A very forceful speaker, Niles would profess the greatness of blacks to any and all audiences. He once gave a lecture at the State Capitol Building where he addressed all the people of Kansas on the need for reimbursement of the colored people for loss and damage sustained while in slavery.⁷¹ Although he made his living as a deputy county clerk, a wood merchant, and banker, he was renowned for his uncanny ability to swindle. One of his exploits, the cheating of a bank, compelled W. L. Chambers, an early white settler of northwest Kansas, to write an exposé pamphlet describing Niles and his deeds.⁷²

Born a slave during 1842 in Mississippi to a European father and a black mother, Niles came to Nicodemus by way of Tennessee and Kentucky.⁷³ Although Niles had served time in a Tennessee penitentiary for killing a man in 1869, he later obtained a pardon.⁷⁴ After his release, Niles eventually emigrated to Lexington and became involved with Smith's and Hill's Nicodemus colony organization. He arrived at the townsite with the colony during September 1877. Soon thereafter, he became known for his colorful personality and eloquent speaking style that enabled him to become a masterful solicitor.⁷⁵ He personally brought in so many of Nicodemus' relief supplies that he claimed to be the colony's underwriter. A reporter from the *Atchison Weekly Champion* was so impressed with Niles that he asserted that "You can hardly be said to have seen Nicodemus if you have not seen Niles. . . ."⁷⁶

During 1881, this charismatic man "with a large head, two rows of very white teeth, and an everlasting flow of conversation" became Nicodemus' most notorious confidence artist.⁷⁷ Soon after the colonists ceased their efforts at gaining aid, Niles became deputy clerk to Edward P. McCabe, who had just received the county clerk appointment from Governor Anthony. With the money he earned from his new job coupled with what he made as a private banker and commodities trader for the blacks of Graham County, Niles began to display an elegant taste for clothes, carriages, and although he had a wife somewhere in the South, for women. To maintain his lifestyle, he occasionally

mortgaged his property to a white bank at Stockton. The last time he borrowed money from the bank, he was accused of fraud. Niles approached the owner of the bank, Jay J. Smyth, who lived in Iowa and infrequently visited the bank that his brother-in-law, C. C. Woods, operated, with a request to make a loan with nonexisting corn as collateral. Niles told Smyth, whose brother-in-law was out of town, that he had bought more than 1,500 bushels of corn from the area's blacks, for over 20 cents a bushel. He asserted to the banker that he wanted to hold the corn until he could receive at least 30 cents a bushel, but he needed a loan until the demand for the corn increased. Being from Iowa where corn was almost legal tender, Smyth immediately loaned Niles the money.

When the banker's brother-in-law, who knew that the blacks had only raised a few bushels of corn, returned, he informed the Iowan that Niles had deceived the bank. Woods had a warrant issued for Niles's arrest. The town constable found Niles in Hill City, 18 miles from the bank's location, where he was in the company of a "buxom dusky maiden." Niles asked and received the constable's permission to take the lady home before accompanying the peace officer to jail. The black man never returned to Hill City. Instead he attempted to make his escape by traveling through Nebraska partially on foot. Smyth gave the policeman a letter of credit and told him to "Go and find that nigger . . . dead or alive." Two weeks later, the constable captured Niles.

Several weeks after his return to Stockton, Niles appeared in court to defend himself against the charges of obtaining money under false pretenses. Although some of the town's best lawyers aided the prosecuting attorney in preparing his case, Niles represented himself. When the black man went to court, the local newspapers were sympathetic with his plight, thus increasing his chances of being tried by a sympathetic jury. Realizing the prevailing feeling toward him, Niles did not call one witness to testify in his defense, but relied solely on the mood of the jury, his oratorical skills, and his ability to convey to whites that they and the blacks shared many of the same problems of living in northwest Kansas. He presented a three-hour plea for his freedom that was reported as being "eloquent and soulful." His presentation centered on blacks' former condition of bondage, the wealth that many whites made from slavery, the lack of rain in Graham County, and the exploitive behavior of banks in the area. After his address, the jury debated his guilt or innocence at length. They finally agreed to exonerate Niles. The judge, who criticized the "jurymen for ignoring the evidence and their instructions," the county attorney, the assisting lawyers, and the bankers were all astonished at the verdict.⁷⁸

Niles soon left Nicodemus. He traveled to Washington, D.C., where he gave lectures pressing the Federal Government to give former slaves indemnity for their loss of liberty and wages during bondage. Although most of the Eastern newspapers ridiculed his ideas, a group of Congressmen introduced a

freedman compensatory bill which was quickly defeated. Having had only limited success in Washington, Niles returned to Arkansas where he was convicted on nine counts of fraud because he had fleeced many blacks out of their money under the pretense of selling them railroad lands. He was fined \$800 plus court costs, or the opportunity of working the fine off at 25 cents per day. Thereafter, Niles faded into oblivion.

While many whites perceived Niles as unscrupulous, they had no such image of McCabe, a free-born Northern black. **(FIGURE 1-9)** The man lived an extraordinary life. Born in Troy, New York on October 10, 1850, he lived for a while in Fall River, Massachusetts, attended public school in Newport, Rhode Island, and continued his education in Bangor, Maine, until his father died. Later he went to New York City where he worked as a clerk and porter on Wall Street. Traveling to Chicago, he took a job as a clerk at the Palmer House Hotel, and later became a clerk in the Cook County Treasurer's Office. After 18 months there, he joined Abraham T. Hall, Jr., city editor of the *Chicago Conservator*, and migrated west to Kansas.⁷⁹ At Leavenworth, McCabe and Hall signed on with John W. Niles, then a town agent for Nicodemus, and relocated in that predominantly black populated town.⁸⁰

According to an early settler of Nicodemus, McCabe had little money when he ventured to western Kansas, and he had to borrow from a Chicago seamstress, whom he later married. He eventually secured a job surveying for the government, while he engaged in real estate and transacted legal business for blacks in the Nicodemus area.⁸¹ During 1880, McCabe obtained Governor St. John's appointment as temporary county clerk. He did so after informing the governor that he did not want to be supported for office by the Millbrook slating petition. Without his permission or agreement, the white settlers of Millbrook placed his name on a petition with their candidates. Since most blacks in the county identified Millbrook with the Democratic Party, this was an attempt at gaining black signatures. McCabe told St. John that he desired to be considered for the clerk's office only on the Hill City petition, for the Millbrook movement favored "too much of the 'Old School' democracy" for him or his people "to touch, or handle the unclean thing."⁸²

During the period McCabe sought the county clerk's office, Hall petitioned and received the governor's appointment as the county census taker, and Nicodemus lost its bid for temporary county seat. The black town competed with Gettysburg and Millbrook, two all-white towns for the county government operation. Each town attempted to demonstrate that it had the widest popular support by submitting to the governor petitions with the greatest number of signatures. The settlers of Nicodemus claimed that citizens of Gettysburg used fraud in collecting their names. Hall and McCabe asserted to the governor that his slowness in selecting one of the towns as the county seat encour-



FIGURE I-8: Archival research uncovered scant photographic documentation of early black homesteads in Nicodemus. This early photograph of the Mitchell family shows their modest frame residence 4 miles north and $\frac{1}{2}$ mile east of Nicodemus. This structure no doubt replaced an earlier dugout or "soddy." (Photograph: Irvin and Minerva W. Sayers)

aged Gettysburg and other towns to employ deceptive measures in their attempts at gaining the appointment. To substantiate their allegation, the pair sent St. John several affidavits describing the tricks used by Gettysburg residents in getting blacks to sign their petition.⁸³ Neither these testimonies, the town's petition, nor later correspondence from the citizens of Nicodemus in-



FIGURE 1-9: Edward McCabe, an early Nicodemus resident, became one of the state's leading black political figures, serving first as secretary of the Nicodemus Town Company, county clerk, and eventually as Kansas state auditor. (Source: Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas)

duced St. John to make a favorable decision for the black town.⁸⁴ He appointed Millbrook as the first county seat of Graham County, which was organized on April 1, 1880.⁸⁵

Two months later, McCabe and other county officials supervised a special county-wide election to determine the location of the permanent county seat. Since many of the voters thought Millbrook obtained the temporary seat by deceit, the selection of Nicodemus as the polling place was probably the officials' attempt to reduce the number of fraud charges. The scandal-free election produced Millbrook as the winner, and in July 1881, W. R. Hill challenged and again failed to strip the county's headquarters from their town.⁸⁶ This factor contributed considerably to the near abandonment of Hill City.⁸⁷

The county experienced a major transformation in its population makeup during the three years between the arrival of the first black emigrants and the county's official establishment. The area changed from predominantly black to a governmental unit with a large white majority. This population shift relieved the fears of whites who thought they would bear an excessive share of the county tax burden with a poor black majority. Maria L. Stanley reflected the concern of many white settlers when she requested that the governor delay the organization of the county until the citizens could operate it without going into debt.⁸⁸

The change in the county's racial composition preceded the coming of three white businessmen to Nicodemus. Their enterprises initiated Nicodemus' primary function of profitably collecting and distributing goods. The poverty of the hinterland population delayed the town from providing the area's residents with a marketplace. Earlier, three different black emigrants had attempted to operate retail stores. During the winter of 1877-1878, Z. T. Fletcher (**FIGURE 1-10**) opened the first business in Nicodemus. He purchased a small amount of goods from a white man who owned a store near the town and for a short time unsuccessfully ran a retail store from a dugout.⁸⁹ His venture, as well as that of Henry Smith and Lewis Welton, two other blacks who attempted to operate retail stores, failed because the area's black homesteaders did not obtain enough money from work or cash crops to make the fledgling business ventures profitable.⁹⁰ After the spring of 1879, the colonists acquired money from outside jobs and were able to raise crops and livestock enough to enable three whites to successfully operate businesses at Nicodemus.⁹¹ S. G. Wilson, a New Yorker, and William Green, a Rhode Islander, owned general stores, while C. W. Newth, a European, operated a drugstore.⁹²

The presence of white businessmen did not prevent the blacks from dominating the politics of the township.⁹³ The former slaves controlled the township's elective offices and exerted a major influence in county-wide political affairs. During the election of 1881, they were able to have McCabe elected

to a full term as county clerk and Daniel Hickman, a minister and leader of one of the Kentucky colonies who lived in Hill City Township, county coroner.⁹⁴ During 1880, blacks outnumbered whites in Nicodemus Township almost five to one. Out of 316 people in the governmental unit, only 58 were white, but in



FIGURE I-10: Opening the first business in Nicodemus in 1877, Z. T. Fletcher soon became one of the town's most successful merchants. Fletcher was more fortunate than many early Nicodemus residents, for he arrived in Nicodemus from Nebraska with adequate capital to open a small general store. (Source: Veryl and Fern Switzer)

the county as a whole, blacks were outnumbered 3,774 to 484 for a meager 12 percent of the total county population.⁹⁵ The county-wide election of Afro-Americans indicates the lack of intensive white racial hostility present in the county and the higher degree of political sophistication possessed by area blacks. They appear to have united behind their candidates and made political deals with selected groups of whites.

There is some evidence that an unofficial understanding existed between blacks and whites in governing the township's school board. The school system usually consisted of two Afro-Americans and one white who was a Republican.⁹⁶ The former slaves demonstrated the importance they attached to education by establishing, during 1879, the first school in Graham County. Compared with whites in the area, blacks had a low literacy rate, but it was remarkably high for a group of people who had been in slavery only a few years earlier. Of the total black population, 39 percent could read, and 25 percent could write. The percentages increased substantially for the population between the ages of 15 and 45. Of the males in this group, 56 percent could read, while 48 percent could write.⁹⁷

Books were important to the colonists. William Kirtley, an ex-slave from Scott County, Kentucky who arrived in Nicodemus during 1878, relocated to northwestern Kansas with about a dozen books. These included Webster's *Unabridged Dictionary*, an elementary speller, and two Bibles.⁹⁸ The first attempt of the blacks to teach their children to read these and other books took place in a sod hotel belonging to Z. T. Fletcher, a school board member.⁹⁹ His wife, the town's first teacher, taught 15 children. The students "sat on seats that were made of big blocks with hewn logs laid over them."¹⁰⁰ Mrs. Fletcher and later teachers instructed the children in basic literature, arithmetic, moral values, and hygiene. During the period of extreme economic hardship for the settlers, a teacher told one little boy to comb his hair before coming to school. Next day his hair was cut right down the middle. When the teacher asked him why he cut his hair, the student replied that his family could not afford a comb.¹⁰¹ He and his classmates began school late in the winter after they had assisted with the harvest. The length of these children's school terms varied from three to six months.¹⁰²

The founding of the school coincided with the Nicodemus Town Company ending its promotional activities of Nicodemus. Two major factors induced the town company to stop advertising the town. First, the company could locate only a very few Southern blacks with money enough to relocate in northwest Kansas, buy a town business lot, and establish an enterprise. Of the several hundred people the promoters managed to relocate to Nicodemus, only a few dozen had any desire to permanently live there.¹⁰³ During 1878, 600 people resided in Nicodemus Township, most of them in the town.¹⁰⁴ Two

years later, only 316 persons occupied the township, and the vast majority of that number lived on farms.¹⁰⁵ The decrease in urban population was mostly due to the blacks utilizing the town as a way station to homesteads or other farm lands. The town company may have sold a substantial number of \$5 residential lots, but few \$75 commercial lots and the land units that would have provided the company a sizeable return on their initial investment. These small successes induced the company to continue its promotional activities, however.

Second, Hill's great interest in the promotion of Hill City diverted his attention from Nicodemus and deprived the company of a major inspirational force as well as his expertise. This speculator brought the first group of settlers to Hill City on February 1, 1878, five months after the initial settlement of Nicodemus.¹⁰⁶ For a year or so, Hill and Smith promoted both towns concurrently.¹⁰⁷ The size of the town's potential target market then inspired the townsite speculator to concentrate his boosting efforts on his namesake town.

Although Hill and the town company's lack of interest in promoting Nicodemus did not kill the town, the residents failed to initiate a second boosting stage for seven years. In addition to having the same constraints as the first stage boosters, between 1879 and 1886 the blacks experienced two other events that were not conducive to town promotion: poor crop years, and a serious challenge to their ownership of the townsite. Because of pests and adverse weather, the farmers of northwest Kansas, from 1880 through 1883, experienced very lean harvests. The people of Graham County suffered severely. The settlers received outside aid, but Nicodemus' population during 1884 fell to less than 50, while the township declined to 239.¹⁰⁸ Some of the emigrants relocated to farms, while others left the area in search of greater opportunities.

This meager population and a potential windfall profit induced Henry Miller, a white land speculator from Stockton, to enter a counterclaim for ownership of the townsite.¹⁰⁹ This claim could be made because the town company had neglected to meet the federal regulations for obtaining the final ownership papers for the townsite, making the lot claims of the residents vulnerable. The black settlers, who knew little about preemption, did not become aware of the Nicodemus Town Company's failure until March 1884, when Miller applied to the Federal Government for a timber entry claim on the town's land.¹¹⁰ If Miller's attempt was successful, residents would have to lease or rebuy their lots, or settle with the speculator to get him to discontinue his efforts before the government made a decision on his claim.

Miller's mercenary efforts failed. Nicodemus' townspeople, led by S. G. Wilson, a white merchant, and the "Committee of Nicodemus Concerned Citizens," which consisted of C. H. Newth, a white doctor, Z. T. Fletcher, a black

hotel owner, and A. N. Harper, secretary of the Nicodemus Chapter of the First Grand Independent Benevolent Society and the president of the Nicodemus Town Company, obtained the assistance of Lewis Harnback, their Congressional Representative.¹¹¹ Harnback appears to have expedited a hearing of the Nicodemus case by the United States Land Commission.¹¹² On May 23, 1885, the Kirwin, Kansas Land Office, speaking for the Land Commission, announced a hearing on Miller's claim. The hearing was scheduled for August 20, but it never took place. Miller failed to appear, losing his claim by default.¹¹³ Later, Harnback obtained a ruling from the Land Commission that allowed Nicodemus' 30 inhabitants to reenter their preemption claim for 160 acres. The Land Commission stated that although townsite preemption law did not have a provision for fewer than 100 inhabitants to enter less than 320 acres, it would allow the citizens of Nicodemus to preempt their townsite. Even before the residents had completed the standard application requirements, on June 9, 1886, they received their title.¹¹⁴

Nicodemus' trouble resulted in unsolicited publicity. The town's racial makeup helped inspire white Kansas newspapers, especially the *Atchison Weekly Champion*, to push the town as a solution to the "Southern question." The paper claimed that "if Nicodemus failed it would darken the whole future of the colored race in this country." It called the colony a hopeful alternative for Afro-Americans if life became too harsh for blacks under the "Southern Bourbon Politicians."¹¹⁵

One of the reasons that white newspapers boosted the formation of all-black towns was the desire for population increase in the western part of the state. In 1876, the frontier line in Kansas began in the western portion of Rooks County.¹¹⁶ At that time the western terminal of the Central Pacific Railroad was at Ellis, 100 miles from the Colorado border. The black town of Nicodemus and the white town of Hill City were over 30 miles northwest of Ellis, in the unsettled section of Rooks County, soon to become Graham County. The newspapers' interest, therefore, was to populate western Kansas. This population would provide a reason for railroads to extend their lines westward to connect the mineral-rich foothills of the Rocky Mountains with the industrial centers of eastern Kansas.

Meanwhile, the area's absence of a black church inspired the black colonists to organize one African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) and two Baptist congregations soon after they arrived in Graham County.¹¹⁷ Each of the groups held worship services in the crude dugouts of their respective members until 1879, when Reverend Daniel Hickman's (FIGURE I-11) Baptist sect built a sod church edifice a few miles west of Nicodemus. Named Mount Olive after Hickman's former church in Kentucky, the initial structure of worship in the county had a seating capacity of about 50 people.¹¹⁸ A year later, Rever-

end Silas M. Lee, a part-time farmer, led his Baptist congregation while they built a one-story stone church in Nicodemus.¹¹⁹ Soon after, the Methodists, who had organized with only five members, erected St. Paul's, one of the earliest sod structures in the town.¹²⁰



FIGURE I-11: The Reverend Daniel Hickman, who led one of four founding colonies of blacks from Kentucky to the Nicodemus townsite arriving in the years 1877-78. (Source: Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas)

The churches mostly served to satisfy the blacks' need for a communal worship, and only secondarily the purposes of social welfare and entertainment. These latter functions were mainly performed by the Nicodemus Chapter of the First Grand Independent Benevolent Society of Kansas and Missouri. Best known for its sponsorship of an annual August 1 celebration of the emancipation of the West Indies slaves by Great Britain, its main purpose was to care for its members in sickness, poverty, and any other periods of adversity.¹²¹ The Afro-Americans had brought this all-black association along with them when they migrated from the South.¹²² Publishing a newspaper in its headquarters in Topeka, the society, by 1879, had established 11 chapters in Kansas and 5 in Missouri. Nicodemus Chapter No. 7 was organized during 1880, the year after the colonists abandoned their self-governing association.¹²³ No evidence exists to suggest that this benevolent society indulged in either local or state politics, although it dominated the town's social scene.

The blacks of the Nicodemus area taxed the benevolent society's social welfare capacity less severely after 1884 and 1885. All northwest Kansas experienced renewed prosperity in those years as good harvests prevailed. Profits from these, together with settlement of the town's land title question, inspired the residents of Nicodemus during 1886 to initiate a second phase of boosting. Because many of the owners of the town's businesses were white, a biracial group led this effort.¹²⁴ These citizens realized that only a limited number of blacks would have enough money to buy town lots in Nicodemus. That realization induced the promoters to broaden the town's potential for gaining new settlers by addressing all races. In their eagerness for growth, they advertised Nicodemus to a cross-section of Americans, thereby relinquishing the town's unique position as the only place in Kansas that directed its promotional efforts exclusively toward blacks.

During Nicodemus' second development stage, its promoters also expanded the objective of their promotion. Along with increasing the town's population, they sought to secure a rail line. Of course, the two goals were intertwined. Improved accessibility would provide additional settlers, and a substantial increase in Nicodemus' population would help gain a railway.

**Boom!! Boom!! No town in Northwestern Kansas
boom(s) more just (at) present than Nicodemus.**

The renewed attempt at recruiting settlers began seven months before the residents of the town actively solicited a rail line. Active promotion began with the publication of the *Nicodemus Western Cyclone* by Arthur G. Tallman, its white owner and editor, on May 13, 1886.¹²⁵ Two months later he relinquished the editorship to H. K. Lightfoot, a white man who formerly had pub-

lished the *Webster (Kansas) Eagle*.¹²⁶ The *Western Cyclone* had a comparatively small readership. Tallman did not attempt to distribute the *Western Cyclone* in the eastern areas of the nation nor did he saturate Kansas with its issues. Instead he concentrated his circulation efforts mainly on Graham and Rook Counties.¹²⁷ The newspaper's limited readership did not discourage W. R. Hill and his business associate, George Sanford, from buying the *Western Cyclone*. They made the purchase in order to have another newspaper along with the *Hill City Reveille*, which Hill already owned, to drum up support for Hill City as the county seat and to back his slate of Republican candidates who favored the town for the county's elective offices. To accomplish this end, Hill installed Lightfoot as editor of the *Western Cyclone*.

After three months at the *Western Cyclone*, Lightfoot established the *Nicodemus Enterprise*, which competed with the newspaper of his former employer.¹²⁸ For personal or economic reasons, Lightfoot, through his newspaper, displayed an acute dislike for W. R. Hill. As early as the second issue, the *Enterprise* carried an editorial criticizing the townsitc speculator for attempting to lure businessmen to Hill City from the town of Millbrook, which a cyclone had wrecked.¹²⁹ For more than two months, almost every issue included one or more negative comments concerning Hill. Their intensity and frequency substantially increased after Hill and James Justus, the chairman of the Graham County Republican Central Committee, successfully denied recognition and seating to delegates to the Republican County Convention who did not favor making Hill City the county seat. The *Enterprise* championed the cause of the anti-Hill City delegates who withdrew from the regular convention and slated their own candidates.¹³⁰

During the weeks preceding the November elections, the *Enterprise's* attacks on Hill and some of his associates became vicious. Lightfoot, who in October made H. S. Henrie, a local merchant, a business partner in the newspaper, charged that Hill and Justus schemed with a few of their allies in Hill City the day before the convention to determine who would be seated as delegates.¹³¹ In response to the *Western Cyclone's* denial of Hill's manipulation of the convention, the *Enterprise* began to publish allegations of personal wrongdoings by Hill and several of the candidates he supported. It accused the townsitc speculator of defrauding blacks by selling them town lots on land that he did not own; deceiving illiterate men into signing warranty deeds by telling them the paper was a mortgage; and cheating "inoffensive women and children out of homes" and possessions. The newspaper alleged that B. Van Slack, a white Graham Township resident whom Hill supported as a candidate for reelection to the county clerk's office, unlawfully signed a \$5,000 bond for a bridge, and conspired with the railroad companies to defraud the county of railway land taxes. In addition, Lightfoot implied that the county clerk did not like blacks. Even a white office seeker from Nicodemus did not escape the *Enterprise's* indictment. The newspaper claimed that Sam G. Wilson, a merchant

and incumbent for the county treasurer's office, attempted to cheat a soldier's widow out of her land in Nicodemus, covered up the wrongdoings of Van Slack by destroying the evidence, and enforced the taxes only when they affected the poor.¹³²

For the most part, the *Western Cyclone* ignored the *Enterprise's* assaults on Hill and the slate of office seekers he endorsed. The newspaper never came to the defense of its owner, but it opposed the accusation with which Lightfoot charged Wilson. The *Western Cyclone*, calling the *Enterprise's* editor a "political prostitute," asserted that Wilson deserved to be reelected as the result of his past performance in office and his humanitarian dealings with the citizens of Nicodemus and Graham County. For five years the county treasurer carried families from Nicodemus and other townships that traded in his store on an open account. It also claimed that Wilson used his own money to pay the taxes on many of the county's poor and helped save Nicodemus from Henry Miller's title challenge. The *Western Cyclone's* editor did not defend Val Slack, but for several weeks, it printed an open letter he wrote to the newspaper readers denying each of Lightfoot's allegations and calling Lightfoot a liar.¹³³

Both newspapers ceased their verbal warfare immediately after the election. All of Hill's candidates won, and two weeks after the election, Hill and Sanford sold the *Western Cyclone* to M. C. Inlow, a recent white emigrant to Nicodemus.¹³⁴ By December 30, 1886, Lightfoot and Henrie had followed suit and sold the *Enterprise* to Inlow and his new partner, J. E. Porter, another white resident of the town. These two entrepreneurs merged the newspapers as the *Nicodemus Cyclone*.¹³⁵ This organ, unlike the *Enterprise*, expressed no animosity toward Hill and backed his successful efforts at gaining the county seat for Hill City.¹³⁶

Each of the newspapers provided their readers with multiple services. They printed national, state, and local news, Kansas stock and grain market reports, personal interest stories from around the world, advertisements for the area's businesses, a wide range of editorials which helped to set the social values of the town, and promotional materials for Nicodemus and its hinterland. They maintained similar formats. Having only four pages, they usually printed the world, national, and state news on the front and second pages; personal interest and market reports on the second page; and on the last two pages, news from neighboring towns, local news, editorials, advertisements, and boosting.

Other than news reporting, boosting was the most important service that the newspapers provided for the residents of Nicodemus. Proclaiming the welfare of Nicodemus as its main concern, the *Western Cyclone* and its counterparts attempted to portray in a glamorous manner almost every characteristic of the town except its racial makeup. The *Western Cyclone* typified the news-

paper's philosophy about boosting when it stated that it would "spare no pains to advance the interest of Nicodemus and her citizens."¹³⁷

Much of the boosting literature printed by the newspapers was similar to that used by the first stage promoters: both earlier and later groups neglected the geographical and climatic peculiarities of the Great Plains and expressed the congeniality of the townsite's natural environment, portrayed examples of the momentum in the town's development, the morality of the town's citizens, and Nicodemus' bright future prospects.

Some new promotional themes did appear in the paper, however. Editorials highlighted the town's interracial harmony which was reflected by its low crime rate. During the town's first nine years of life, the citizens experienced only one shooting incident, three fistfights, one actual and one attempted theft, and one disorderly conduct episode. The first fight was between Reverend John Anderson and Deacon J. Joseph over an interpretation of a Bible scripture.¹³⁸ The theft resulted in the victim printing an advertisement telling the burglar that he was well known and that if the stolen goods were returned, there would be no prosecution.¹³⁹ Three of the events took place during the 1887 celebration of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. A financial disagreement inspired two black men to exchange shots with each other, wounding a bystander in the process. In the second fistfight, a white man hit a black man, who retaliated by knocking out the white man. The disorderly conduct incident occurred when a group of white men and women became drunk in a hotel room.¹⁴⁰ Reviewing the course of its history, the *Enterprise* concluded that "a more peaceable (sic) set of people were never together than those who dwell in and around Nicodemus."¹⁴¹

While town boosters made much of it, most new towns on the Middle Border had low crime rates. Not even the notorious cattle towns experienced many crimes, especially not violent offenses. Robert Dykstra, in his *The Cattle Towns*, found that over a 15-year period, 5 of the most important cow towns averaged "only 1.5 homicides per cattle-trading season."¹⁴² W. Eugene Hollon in *Frontier Violence* asserts that crime in non-mining and cattle towns was very rare.¹⁴³ The towns' small populations and their residents' sense of communal cooperation deterred criminal activities.

Along with the theme of harmony, Nicodemus' newspapers proclaimed that town residents were very moral. They were especially boastful that no signs of impropriety could be found there. One newspaper article asserted that the town had "no wiskey shops, billiard hall or other gambling hole." It told its readers that Nicodemus residents were "moral, refined people," with "no drunkenness or rowdiness, no cussing or whopping."¹⁴⁴ Although the journals did not portray them as the town's dominant social force, for promotional purposes they frequently bragged about Nicodemus' churches and their activities.

By 1887, the townspeople had built stone buildings (**FIGURE I-12**) to house the town's first two congregations and had acquired two additional congregations: a Free Methodist and a Second Baptist. Other than as places of worship, the church buildings, especially the ones built from stone, served as places for social as well as religious gatherings. In both kinds of gatherings, but especially at concerts and large parties, all Nicodemus residents were welcome to attend.

The newspapers regarded all social activities, whether related to churches or not, as grist for the promotional mill. Like citizens of other towns on the Middle Border, Nicodemus residents organized and participated in literary societies, baseball clubs, choruses, riding tournaments, lecture series, dances, parties, and festivals. The latter activity produced the greatest amount of interest and the widest participation. Along with the celebration commemorating the emancipation of West Indies slaves, Nicodemus' residents usually held festivals to celebrate Thanksgiving, the Fourth of July, and the town's founding.

The First Grand Independent Benevolent Society, sponsor of the Emancipation Celebration, exerted more influence in determining the social values of blacks in the area than any other organization. Its membership transcended age, sex, and religion, touching the lives of all citizens at one time or another.¹⁴⁵

THE RAILROAD IS COMING!!!!

The newspapers gave the town's business needs just as much attention as it gave social events. In almost every issue, the papers advertised business needs and investment opportunities. For example, the *Western Cyclone* attempted to induce the establishment of a building supply company by asking, "Who will be the lucky man to start a lumber yard?"¹⁴⁶ Business boosting increased dramatically after it appeared that Nicodemus would gain a rail line in early 1888. The connection would help establish firms' growth, the papers asserted, and attract both new stores and new manufacturing establishments.¹⁴⁷

The citizens of Nicodemus began serious negotiations for a rail line in December 1886. Within the new two years, the town's promoters had conducted negotiations with at least three railroads in their attempt to increase the town's accessibility. The Missouri Pacific Railroad Company, the first railroad to contact the town's leaders, told them tentatively that the railroad would require about \$18,000 to provide the town with a rail line.¹⁴⁸ This request was not unusual. Most Midwestern towns, established by independent townsite speculators and platted away from existing railways, had to provide railroad companies with land or direct financial payments. In some cases, the railroad requested both land and money.¹⁴⁹

In the case of Nicodemus, the railroad demanded money. Sometime in

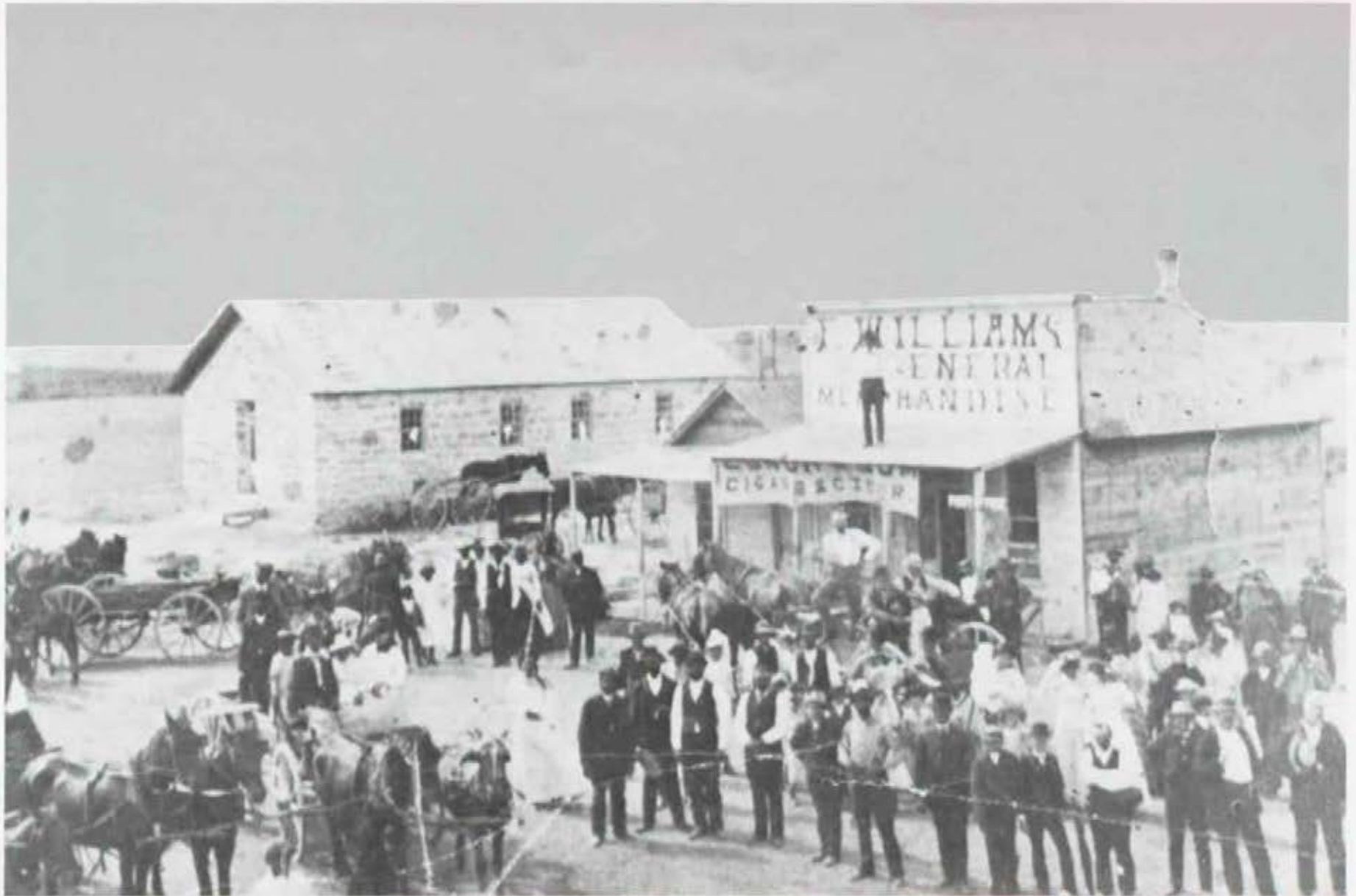


FIGURE 1-12: An early view of Nicodemus, Kansas ca. 1885. The stone construction of the First Baptist Church (the structure on the left of the photograph), organized by Reverend Silas Lee in 1880 and the false-fronted Foster Williams General Merchandise store signalled a brief period of prosperity in Nicodemus, as residents eagerly anticipated the arrival of a major railroad. (Source: Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas)

December 1886, W. W. Fagan, an agent for the Missouri Pacific Railroad, wrote a letter to the citizens of Nicodemus Township stating that the company was considering two alternative routes: from Stockton, Kansas, through Nicodemus and then on to Denver, or from Lenora, Kansas, a route that would bypass Nicodemus. Fagan asserted, "it rest(s) with people along the two proposed routes which will be the main line from the Missouri river to Denver."¹⁵⁰

The citizens of Nicodemus and the surrounding township responded to Fagan's letter in the week of January 20, 1887, by sending a delegation to see him. The group consisted of A. L. McPherson, owner of the Nicodemus Bank, T. J. and Z. T. Fletcher, owners of the Fletcher House Hotel, C. H. Newth, the town's only physician and druggist, S. G. Wilson, the county treasurer, and promoter H. K. Lightfoot. How much, they asked, would it cost to get the Missouri Pacific to choose the route favorable to their interest? The company declared that eight Graham County townships — Nicodemus, Alcona, Gettysburg, Hill City, Millbrook, Richland, Solomon, and Wildhorse — would have to provide an unrestricted gift of \$132,000. The amount each township was to give varied from \$10,000 to \$18,000. If its citizens and the people of the other townships paid the specified amounts, the railroad would cross the Solomon River near the southeast corner of the town of Nicodemus.¹⁵¹

The voters of the township met in Nicodemus town to discuss how to raise the money. With businessmen in the lead, the township gathering approved raising the money through a bond issue authorized by a township-wide vote. In addition, the group recommended that the railroad build a depot within one-half mile of Nicodemus town. The citizens then formed a committee of leading property holders to persuade owners to sell the necessary right-of-way within the township to the railroad company.¹⁵²

During the week of January 27, 1887, the promoters of Nicodemus obtained the legal number of signatures to place the bond issue on the ballot. That same week, Newth and Lightfoot visited the Missouri Pacific office in Stockton to lobby for the extension of the Stockton branch track to Denver.¹⁵³ Following through on their plan, the citizens of Nicodemus on March 22, 1887, voted 82 to 8 to issue railroad bonds valued at \$16,000.¹⁵⁴

At the time of balloting, the *Western Cyclone* thought the Missouri Pacific would lay tracks through Nicodemus Township by December 1, 1887.¹⁵⁵ During early May 1887, engineers from the railroad company surveyed Nicodemus town for the purpose of laying tracks and building a depot.¹⁵⁶ The passage of the bond issue and the surveying raised the residents' expectations for the railroad, but their hopes were short-lived. In September 1887, they learned that the Missouri Pacific had rejected the township's offer of nearly \$200,000 to extend its Stockton track west for 75 miles, and had chosen another route to Colorado.¹⁵⁷

The activity of two other railroad companies softened Nicodemus' disappointment at not gaining the Missouri Pacific line. As early as February 3, 1887, the town promoters reported that the Santa Fe Railroad proposed to run its tracks adjacent to the Solomon River westward by way of Stockton, Webster, and Nicodemus.¹⁵⁸ In March, the citizens of Nicodemus were told that the Central Branch of the Union Pacific would have a train in their town by the coming fall.¹⁵⁹ Promoters of Nicodemus joined a group of boosters from Webster and Millbrook to encourage the Santa Fe line to build a line extending from Stockton through their town.¹⁶⁰ Even though the Santa Fe Railroad Company surveyed the town, Nicodemus was bypassed when it laid tracks west.

The Union Pacific scheme continued to provide hope through September 1888. Between March 1887 and July 1888, the Union Pacific gave Nicodemus at least three major indications that tracks would be laid in the town's immediate area.

First, several railroad officials visited Nicodemus. The earliest reported visitor, Colonel Dean, the director of the Union Pacific Central Branch's westward extension, came to Nicodemus in March 1887, to examine the proposed route that would place tracks adjacent to the town.¹⁶¹ Then in May 1888, an unidentified group of railroad officials were reported in residence at the Fisher Hotel.¹⁶² J. H. McCalvin, a townsite agent for the Union Pacific Railroad Company, arrived July 23, 1888. While in Nicodemus, he further raised promoters' hopes of obtaining a rail line by informing the town's people that the Union Pacific Railroad Company intended to build a division station there on its new line through Graham County.¹⁶³

Second, before the Union Pacific Railroad began laying tracks in what seemed to be Nicodemus' direction, engineers from the company did two surveys in the vicinity. During January and February 1888, company surveyors spent several weeks in Nicodemus Township and Graham County, and in April the railroad company informed the citizens of the township that its surveyors, who had camped across the Solomon River, were making their final survey.¹⁶⁴ These surveys, and reports during July 1888 that tracks were being laid toward the town at about one mile per day, indicated to Nicodemus' promoters that their town would soon have its much-desired railroad.¹⁶⁵

The third indicator, the railroad's formal request for financial subsidy, occurred in February 1888.¹⁶⁶ This request coincided with the company's surveyors' extended stay in Graham County. The amount of money asked from Nicodemus is not known. Since the town boosters did not ask the township voters to approve an additional bond issue, and the promoters began propagating the idea that Nicodemus would become a junction for two Union Pacific Railroad lines, the township's \$16,000 must have covered the request. But the Union Pacific laid its tracks no closer than six miles from the town.¹⁶⁷



FIGURE I-13: Mrs. Ora Switzer, Nicodemus resident, being interviewed by summer HABS Team members in 1983. The large majority of Nicodemus residents have lived all their lives in the area, and know the history of the town well. More important, there is a conscious effort on the part of the older residents to instill pride and a knowledge of the town's heritage into the younger residents. (Photograph: Everett Fly)

The town's newspapers played many roles in Nicodemus' attempt to gain a railroad. First, they helped to mobilize public support for the township to put up the necessary money to get a rail line. Surprisingly, the *Western Cyclone* did not take the lead in supporting the town's attempt at securing one. When the Missouri Pacific Railroad Company asked the town and township for \$16,000, the paper expressed caution. The newspaper asserted, "We are on general principle opposed to voting bonds to corporations . . . but so long as the law will concede so long will they ask for all they can get." The newspaper asked first for the public's views on the subject before stating its own.¹⁶⁸

After the paper realized that the citizens supported the bond issue, it became the leading public advocate for the venture. Following the township meeting that elected to place the bond issue to a vote, the *Western Cyclone* stated "the bonds will carry by a big majority" and in a headline the newspaper proclaimed, "The Railroad is coming."¹⁶⁹ When the newspaper reported that petitions placing the bond issue on the ballot had obtained the required number of signatures, the *Western Cyclone* shifted positions slightly on the issue by stating, "We have all along advocated the necessity of a road and said that we should support a light reasonable bond."¹⁷⁰ The voting of the bonds inspired the newspaper to become an exhilarating supporter of the venture and to declare that election day was one "long to be remembered in Nicodemus; for that day the people decided . . . that we should develop into a town, with all advantages derived from a railroad."¹⁷¹

Second, the newspaper helped give the town a short growth boom, which in turn enhanced the attractiveness of Nicodemus to railroad builders. The portrayal by the *Western Cyclone* and its counterparts of Nicodemus as a railroad boom town helped to bring people to the community. Two weeks after the signing of the petitions that placed the railroad bond issue to a vote, the newspaper stated that Nicodemus was "booming more than any town in Graham County."¹⁷² Later the *Western Cyclone* informed its readers that a boom had "set in on account of the railroad."¹⁷³ During the weeks preceding the railroad bond election, the newspaper printed such notices as "Boom!! Boom!! No town in Northwest Kansas boom(s) more just (at) present than Nicodemus."¹⁷⁴ Even though the newspaper reported that in 90 days the number of the town's business houses would double, and that town lots were rapidly changing hands, it attempted to assure the potential settlers with small means that they would still be able to afford lots there. The *Western Cyclone* told readers that "reasonable prices are given to actual settlers."¹⁷⁵ To help substantiate its dubious assertions concerning the town's accelerating development, the newspaper stated that Eastern capitalists were finding the town "a fruitful field for investments" and that 50 to 200 percent was realized on money invested in Nicodemus.¹⁷⁶

The *Enterprise* and *Nicodemus Cyclone* presented their readers with a more moderate image of the boom. The *Enterprise* told its readers that Nicodemus had a "boom, not a boom of Mushroom variety, but a genuine old fashioned healthy boom, the variety that last(s) long."¹⁷⁷ The *Nicodemus Cyclone* asserted to its readers that Nicodemus was growing modestly, but "with a heavy emigration and a railroad in the early spring," it would boom.¹⁷⁸ Although cautious about the rate of growth, the two journals wanted readers to believe that Nicodemus was the leading urban center in Graham County. The *Enterprise* attempted to convey this idea when it stated, "by looking at our advertising columns the reader will see that Nicodemus is 'chuck full of business men.'"¹⁷⁹ The *Nicodemus Cyclone* had the same goal in mind when it reported "from the amount of hay being hauled into town, one would think that our liverymen are doing an immense amount of business."¹⁸⁰

Finally, the newspapers helped to sustain public hope in the town and its chances of gaining a rail line after several railroad companies failed to build through Nicodemus. When it became evident that the Central Branch of the Union Pacific Railroad would not lay tracks adjacent to the town, the *Nicodemus Cyclone* reassured its readers that Nicodemus would receive a line: "If Nicodemus don't get the C.B.U.P. this fall she will get the Santa Fe. Which will please us equally as well."¹⁸¹ After the *Nicodemus Cyclone* learned that the town might not obtain either of these rail lines, it attempted to reassure its readers by asserting that it had received reliable information that the Missouri Pacific Railroad would extend its Stockton, Kansas branch through Nicodemus.¹⁸²

Along with the newspapers, the Nicodemus boosters utilized many of the typical promotional techniques then available to new Midwestern towns during their second boosting stage. One means, the offering of land to potential new settlers, occurred only during the early months of 1887. Since Nicodemus had no formal organizations to offer inducements to would-be settlers, 7 of the town's leading businessmen offered the first 50 new families or single adults who settled in Nicodemus 1 free lot. There is no report that anyone took advantage of the offering.¹⁸³ The idea behind the benevolence was to increase town population which would enhance the possibility of a railroad.

The town's need for additional population and the efforts of the seven businessmen at inducing new emigration inspired the citizens of Nicodemus to establish the Nicodemus Emigration Association, founded during October 1887, and the Nicodemus Immigration Union, in January 1888.¹⁸⁴ Since both organizations had as their goal the increase of population, it is not clear why it was thought necessary to form two emigration associations.

The formation of the Emigration Association occurred in 1887 as a direct result of a town meeting called to discuss ways of initiating an "emigration

boom to Graham County in the early spring."¹⁸⁵ Although many of the town's most respected citizens were white, the organizers wanted to offer inducement and assistance for the "Colored people in the South" who wanted "to better their condition."¹⁸⁶ It was claimed that the town's real estate men had received numerous letters from blacks seeking information about the availability of land in the Nicodemus area. This was the first and only time during the town's second promotional stage that the boosters focused on black emigrants.



FIGURE I-14: As late as 1940, the landscape in and surrounding Nicodemus, Kansas, remained treeless and quite forbidding. The photograph of the A.M.E. Church taken in 1943 by William T. Belleau reveals the stark character of the isolated frontier town. (Photograph: William T. Belleau, 1943. Source: Fort Hays State College, Fort Hays, Kansas)

The residents who attended the organizational meetings chose five men as the Emigration Association's executive committee. Their jobs included answering inquiries concerning Nicodemus and its hinterland and to offer inducements to the area's potential settlers.¹⁸⁷ By January 5, 1888, the executive committee claimed to have induced 50 families to move to Graham County. There is no record of the families' race nor is there any record of the families' actual settling in the country. The committee did attempt to locate 50 farms that the alleged incoming families could lease.¹⁸⁸

The membership of the Nicodemus Immigration Union was composed primarily of businessmen but not exclusively. Only two of its members' names have been preserved, J. E. Porter, the organization's secretary, and Reverend C. H. Brown, its 1888 delegate to the Northwest Kansas Emigration Society's meeting.¹⁸⁹ The latter group was an organization of several northwest Kansas emigration associations.

The Immigration Union functioned much like the Emigration Association.¹⁹⁰ Both organizations distributed circulars that promoted Nicodemus. Of the two Immigration Union's circulars that survive, the earliest entitled "Poor Man's Paradise," dated February 3, 1888, made no mention of the town's racial makeup. Moreover, the document was addressed to all industrious laborers of the Eastern cities. After proclaiming the town's attributes and falsely asserting that Nicodemus had "undisputed control of trade for a radius of ten miles," the handbill invited readers, "who after years of toil and privation had failed to accumulate more than a cramped home in a worthless part of some city," to relocate in Nicodemus Township.¹⁹¹

During the second week of March 1888, the Immigration Union distributed a second flyer, which was reprinted in the *Nicodemus Cyclone*. The handbill titled "Nicodemus and Her Advantages," addressed all citizens who contemplated emigration. After describing the town's people, businesses, schools, and churches, the circular informed the reader that Nicodemus had a good source of water power and prospects for one or more railroads. In addition, it asserted that Nicodemus needed a furniture store, farm implement store, harness shop, grain mill, shoemaker, hardware store, photographer, silversmith, and a "first class physician." In a statement directed to Southern farmers, the flyer asserted that "a farmer from Georgia had experimented in cotton" and harvested one bale per acre.¹⁹²

Although the techniques used by the second stage boosters of Nicodemus did not attract a rail line, they did for a time substantially increase the population and businesses of the town. By 1886, the *Western Cyclone* claimed that the town was the second largest in the county.¹⁹³ During the next year, Nicodemus had grown to 200 residents. The town had four dry goods stores, at least three grocery stores, three drug stores, two millinery shops, one bank, four hotels, two livery stables, two newspapers, two blacksmith shops, two barbers, one shoe shop, two agricultural implement stores, and one land company.¹⁹⁴ The citizens also had built a two-story school building that cost over \$1,000, which was headed by J. E. Porter, a former principal of the Leavenworth High School.¹⁹⁵ During the early part of 1888, citizens attempted to bring a telephone line and a library to Nicodemus.¹⁹⁶

The residents of Nicodemus made marked material progress during the three years they actively sought a railroad depot. Some of the citizens had

enough money to buy luxuries such as a Smith American organ.¹⁹⁷ One of the town's settlers, A. L. McPherson, the owner of the Bank of Nicodemus, paid the largest personal property tax in the county.¹⁹⁸ A white man, McPherson emigrated to Kansas from Massachusetts. He had lived in the state for 20 years before he moved from Jewell, Kansas to Nicodemus.¹⁹⁹ The relatively rapid growth of the town, and the accumulation of substantial capital by the area blacks, induced the banker to move his business to the town. Some of the black residents of Nicodemus made large amounts of money in a short period of time. Foster Williams, for example, came to Nicodemus from Memphis in 1886, with little means. He established a grocery business and after only ten months he was worth \$3,000.²⁰⁰ The *Hill City Reveille* stated that "strange to say, these people, many of whom were raised in slavery, are among the thriftiest and most prosperous class of settlers" in northwest Kansas.²⁰¹ The blacks' new wealth inspired Henry Root, a special correspondent to the *Atchison Weekly Champion* to call Nicodemus, "one of the most thriving rapidly growing towns of Graham County."²⁰²

During the late months of 1888, Nicodemus' development ceased. When the town failed to obtain a railroad, people started to move elsewhere. All the white and most of the black businessmen moved to places with more opportunity. Some left the county entirely, while many moved their stock of goods, and in some cases their buildings, to the new town of Bogue, a railhead six miles south of Nicodemus.²⁰³ The majority of blacks that did not make their living from merchandising maintained residences in Nicodemus longer than the businessmen.

Those who remained discontinued all active promotion. Like most new towns on the Middle Border that failed to gain a rail line, Nicodemus could no longer efficiently perform its primary function of collecting and distributing goods. Thus, the town's people chose not to compete with towns in the area that had secured a rail connection. Nicodemus maintained a small population throughout the remainder of its history, but it became merely a black symbolic social center. Most blacks in the area visited the town only on special occasions, such as the Emancipation Day Celebration. For almost one hundred years this event has been held annually. The August 1 event attracted black residents of western Kansas, former residents of the area, many of the descendants of the county's early black settlers, and interested visitors.

The history of Nicodemus paralleled that of most new towns on the Middle Border. Other than for the few differences produced by racial composition, the saga of Nicodemus could have been that of any other Great Plains or Trans-Mississippi West settlement. The unique heritage of the black settlers limited the amount of wealth they possessed or had access to, but it did not alter the pattern of Nicodemus' founding or its process of development. Regard-

less of the racial factor, if a town did not gain a rail line, it either specialized its boosting, or, like Nicodemus, it stopped growing. Thus Nicodemus experienced a fate common in the West. Relatively few of the total number of towns founded on the Trans-Mississippi West obtained rail lines, and the great majority of the losers faded into insignificance.



FIGURE I-15: Historic photograph of the Reverend John and Lee Anna Samuels. Reverend Samuels gave the land for the nearby Samuels Cemetery. He also served as the town's shoemaker. (Photograph: Bernice Bates)

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Throughout this chapter the term "predominantly black-populated town" is interchanged with "black town" and "predominantly white-populated town" is interchanged with "white town."
- ² Heretofore, studies of Nicodemus have been concerned primarily with the role of race in its origins and development and have minimized or ignored other factors which were part of the town's process of development. For example, see Glen Schwendemann, "Nicodemus: Negro Haven on the Solomon," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, vol. 34, no. 1 (Spring, 1968), pp. 10-31; and Norman L. Crockett, *The Black Towns* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1979).
- ³ U.S., *Statutes at Large* (1844), vol. 5, p. 657 (1844).
- ⁴ For example, the 1867 amendment only changed the maximum acreage that could be preempted. The amendment allowed towns with 6,000 or more settlers built on public land to preempt 1,700 acres. The 1844 Act only allowed for the preemption of 320 acres. U.S., *Statutes at Large* (1844), vol. 5, p. 657; U.S., *Statutes at Large* (1867-1868), vol. 14, p. 541.
- ⁵ Any group whose members met the qualifications of their respective states could incorporate and become a town company and make a claim to any unclaimed government land for townsite purposes, thus becoming a townsite trust association.
- ⁶ Glen Holt, unpublished critique of Rita Napier, "The Spirit of Speculation: A Study of Town Site Pre-emption and Land Use in Four Frontier Kansas Towns," paper presented at the Missouri Historical Conference, Columbia, Missouri, 24 April 1971.
- ⁷ Kansas, Secretary of State, *Articles of Incorporation of the Nicodemus Town Company*, vol. 7, p. 434, Archives Department, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas.
- ⁸ Federal Writers' Project of the Works Projects Administration, *Kansas: A Guide to the Sunflower State* (New York: Viking Press, 1939), pp. 330-331; Jim McVey, *Pioneering in the West* (Hill City, Kansas: Graham County Library, 1973), p. 22, claimed that the brand looked like the letter "O." He asserted that some of Roundtree's contemporaries thought that he was born in Africa and that the brand had been given to him as a tribal marking.
- ⁹ Kansas, Secretary of State, *Articles of Incorporation of the Nicodemus Town Company*; no biographical information is available on Carr, Allsop, Lenze, and Edmonds.
- ¹⁰ *Topeka Commonwealth*, 25 March 1879.
- ¹¹ U.S., Congress, Senate, *Report of Select Committee of U.S. Senate to Investigate the Causes of Removal of Negroes from Southern States, etc.* (1880), 3 parts (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office).
- ¹² *Topeka Commonwealth*, 3 March 1879.
- ¹³ *Smith Center (Kansas) Pioneer*, 21 March 1874.
- ¹⁴ "Ho! for the Great Solomon Valley of Western Kansas," circular in "Benjamin 'Pap' Singleton Scrapbook," Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas.
- ¹⁵ *Wichita Beacon*, 1 October 1933; Federal Writers' Project, *Kansas: A Guide to the Sunflower State*, p. 329; Orval L. McDaniel mistakenly stated that Hill was a minister from Excelsior Springs, Missouri. Orval L. McDaniel, "A History of Nicodemus, Graham County, Kansas," (Master's Thesis, Fort Hays State College, Fort Hays, Kansas, 1950), p. 42.
- ¹⁶ *Wichita Beacon*, 1 October 1933.
- ¹⁷ Kansas, Secretary of State, *Articles of Incorporation of the Nicodemus Town Company*, vol. 8, pp. 243-244; vol. 7, p. 434.
- ¹⁸ "Largest Colored Colony in America!" and "To the Colored Citizens of the United States," circulars in "Benjamin 'Pap' Singleton Scrapbook," Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas.
- ¹⁹ *Wichita Beacon*, 1 October 1933.
- ²⁰ *Bouge (Kansas) Messenger*, 25 February 1932.
- ²¹ "To the Colored Citizens of the United States;" McDaniel, p. 50.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 44.
- ²³ *Nicodemus (Kansas) Western Cyclone*, 21 April 1887.
- ²⁴ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 13 May 1886; 1 April 1887.
- ²⁵ "Largest Colored Colony in America!"
- ²⁶ For the best discussion of pre-1890 emigration, see Nell I. Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas After Reconstruction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Press, 1977).
- ²⁷ C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), pp. 205, 229; Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1944), vol. 1, pp. 280-281.
- ²⁸ "To the Colored Citizens of the United States;" "Ho! for the Great Solomon Valley of Western Kansas."
- ²⁹ "Ho! for the Great Solomon Valley of Western Kansas."
- ³⁰ "To the Colored Citizens of the United States."
- ³¹ "Largest Colored Colony in America!"
- ³² "To the Colored Citizens of the United States."

- ³³ "Largest Colored Colony in America!"
- ³⁴ "To the Colored Citizens of the United States."
- ³⁵ *Smith Center Pioneer*, 21 March 1879; *Ellis (Kansas) County Farmer*, 28 May 1879.
- ³⁶ *Atchison (Kansas) Weekly Champion*, 23 July 1881.
- ³⁷ *Ellis County Farmer*, 28 May 1879.
- ³⁸ *Atchison Weekly Champion*, 23 July 1881.
- ³⁹ McDaniel, p. 42; *Hill City (Kansas) Times*, 27 June 1968.
- ⁴⁰ *Wichita Beacon*, 1 October 1933.
- ⁴¹ "Nicodemus Town Company Membership Certificate" in "Benjamin 'Pap' Singleton Scrapbook," Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas.
- ⁴² *Kansas, Rooks County Record*, 29 March 1934.
- ⁴³ *Ellis (Kansas) Standard*, 22 September 1877; *Salina (Kansas) Journal*, 12 January 1950.
- ⁴⁴ *Atchison Weekly Champion*, 23 July 1881; *Hill City Times*, 8 September 1949; Schwendemann, p. 16; *Topeka Daily Capitol*, 11 May 1958.
- ⁴⁵ *Ellis Standard*, 22 September 1877; William J. Belleau, "The Nicodemus Colony of Graham County, Kansas" (Master's Thesis, Fort Hays State College, Fort Hays, Kansas, 1943), p. 11; *Kansas City Times*, 28 May 1959; McDaniel, pp. 44-45. An early settler of Nicodemus stated that her mother claimed that the black emigrants "looked like a bank of tattered refugees from Uncle Tom's Cabin! With all their worldly possessions tied in bundles balanced on top of the women's bandana covered heads and in gunny sacks thrown over the shoulders of the men." *Ellis County Farmer*, 28 May 1959.
- ⁴⁶ McDaniel, p. 47; Belleau, p. 13-14. Members of the second colony attempted to build lean-tos, but the strong Kansas winds blew away the sheets covering the framework. They quickly learned how to build dug-outs. "A man would stake off ground about 14 x 15 feet and make a rectangular excavation to a depth of six feet. Steps were dug for descent. Walls were sod brick; over a ridgepole, willow sapplings, straw weeds and dirt formed the roof." *Hill City Times*, 5 September 1940; *Ellis County Farmer*, 28 May 1959. The first Lexington County built their initial sod house as a group project so that Henry Williams's mother would have shelter when she gave birth to him, the first child to be born in Nicodemus. *Hays (Kansas) Daily News*, 31 July 1955; *Salina Journal*, 12 January 1950; Belleau, p. 14; *Kansas City (Missouri) Star*, 26 January 1905; Belleau, p. 9.
- ⁴⁷ McDaniel, p. 47.
- ⁴⁸ Belleau, p. 9.
- ⁴⁹ McDaniel, p. 50; Newspaper clipping in the Kansas State Historical Newspaper Scrapbook about Nicodemus, 1 March 1910; *Atchison Weekly Champion* 23 July 1881; *Kansas City (Missouri) Times*, 28 May 1959.
- ⁵⁰ *Hill City Times*, 22 August 1940; McDaniel, p. 43-44.
- ⁵¹ McDaniel, p. 45.
- ⁵² *Topeka Daily Journal*, 30 April 1879; Noble L. Prentise, *A History of Kansas* (Winfield, Kansas: E. P. Greer Press, 1899), p. 153; *Atchison Weekly Champion*, 23 July 1881; *Wichita Evening Eagle*, 3 December 1953.
- ⁵³ McDaniel, p. 56.
- ⁵⁴ Since the farmers were eliminating needed grasslands with their plows, the cowboys harassed both white and black settlers. The cowboys would drive their cows on the settlers' newly plowed ground and young wheat fields. They crippled one white families' team of horses and at one point during a two-week time span in 1878, the cowboys made six raids on the settlers in attempts to drive the farmers away. Mrs. A. L. Stanley to Governor George T. Anthony, 6 April 1878, correspondence file, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas (hereafter cited as Anthony Papers). Once the cowboys, in a dispute over watering their cattle along the Solomon River, ran off some of the cows belonging to the blacks of Nicodemus. The settlers "retaliated by capturing one of the cowboys and holding him as a hostage until the cattle were returned." Floyd Benjamin Streeter, *The Law, the Heart of the Nation* (New York: Farrar and Henehart, 1941), p. 199. There was also some deep resentment toward the blacks from nonranching whites. As a result of the anti-black feelings among northwest Kansas whites, the settlers of Nicodemus could not find a surveyor in Graham County to survey their homestead plots. They finally acquired the services of John Landers, a white man from Norton, Kansas. After he completed the job, someone shot and killed him from ambush in Northern County. George A. Root, "Biographical Sketch of Reverend Daniel Hickman," Manuscript Collection, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas, undated; p. 1, *Wichita Beacon*, 1 October 1933.
- ⁵⁵ *Kansas City Times*, 28 May 1959; Belleau, p. 56-57; *Atchison Weekly Champion*, 23 July 1881.
- ⁵⁶ *Topeka State Journal*, 7 January 1922; Lee Ella Blake, "The Great Exodus of 1879 and 1880 to Kansas" (Master's Thesis, Kansas State College of Agriculture and Applied Science, Manhattan, 1942), p. 54; *Smith Center Pioneer*, 21 March 1879. Many of the settlers fell into the habit of calling Nicodemus "Nigger Demus." Arna Bontemps and Jack Conray, *They Seek A City* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1945), p. 44.
- ⁵⁷ Many of the later colonists left the South with a substantial amount of

wealth in comparison to most blacks of that era. For example, Jordon Dotson had over \$1,000 worth of goods shipped to Nicodemus. Jordon Dotson to Governor George T. Anthony, 29 April 1878, Anthony Papers.

⁵⁸ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 21 April 1887.

⁵⁹ Van B. Shaw, "Nicodemus, Kansas: A Study in Isolation" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Missouri, 1951), p. 94.

⁶⁰ Prentise, p. 153.

⁶¹ *Seneca (Kansas) Courier*, 17 September 1880; *Hill City Times*, 5 September 1940.

⁶² Belleau, p. 27; *Hill City Times*, 24 November 1955.

⁶³ John H. Edwards to Governor George T. Anthony, 11, 15 March 1878; S. P. Roundtree to Governor George T. Anthony, 4 April 1878; S. P. Roundtree to Governor George T. Anthony, 2 April 1878; W. R. Hill to Governor George T. Anthony, 23 March 1878; John W. Niles to Governor George T. Anthony, 14 March⁹ 1878; W. P. Tomlinson to Governor George T. Anthony, 23 March 1878, Anthony Papers.

⁶⁴ John H. Edwards to Governor George T. Anthony, 11 March 1878, Anthony Papers; Painter, p. 151.

⁶⁵ John H. Edwards to Governor George T. Anthony, 15 March 1878, Anthony Papers.

⁶⁶ Painter, p. 151.

⁶⁷ Although there is no evidence that blacks of Nicodemus and its hinterland received aid from private relief organizations operating outside of Graham County, one national association and several statewide associations were established to assist freedmen emigrating to Kansas. The blacks of Topeka formed the Kansas Colored State Emigration Bureau, 3 May 1879, while biracial groups created the Kansas Freedmen's Committee, during April 1879. The latter group had the Governor of Kansas as its chairman. In addition, Kansans and non-Kansans organized the National Emigration Society, 10 April 1879. Blake; pp. 33, 42; Clara H. Hazelrigs, *A New History of Kansas* (Topeka: Cran and Company, 1949), p. 189; *Ellis County Farmer*, 28 May 1959; *North Topeka Times*, 25 April 1879. The blacks of Graham County may have had to obtain assistance from the Graham County Central Aid Association, which organized May 20, 1880. This group appealed "to the people of Central and Eastern Kansas" to assist the many needy families of the county. The lack of rain during 1880 in northwest Kansas placed many of the area's people in a destitute condition. *Hill City (Kansas) Western Star*, 20 May 1880.

⁶⁸ Federal Writers' Project, *Kansas: A Guide to the Sunflower State*, p. 330.

⁶⁹ *Topeka Daily Journal*, 30 April 1879; Blake, p. 54.

⁷⁰ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 13 May 1886.

⁷¹ *Topeka Commonwealth*, 19 November 1880, as quoted in Graham County (Kansas) Lever, 26 November 1880; W. L. Chambers, *Niles of Nicodemus: Exploiter of Kansas Exodusters, Negro Indemnity and Equality of Blacks with Whites His Obsession, Beats Bankers, Bench, and Barristers; Courter League of Post-War K.K.K. Riots and Finally Prison* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Washington High School, Vocational Training Press, 1925), p. 5; *Roscoe (Kansas) Tribune*, 30 July 1880.

⁷² Chambers, Forward, n.p.

⁷³ U.S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Tenth Census of the United States* (1880), National Archives, Washington, D.C.

⁷⁴ Chambers, p. 19.

⁷⁵ A. T. Hall and E. P. McCabe met Niles at Leavenworth, Kansas, while the black man from Nicodemus was soliciting for relief for his town. Belleau, p. 51.

⁷⁶ *Atchison Weekly Champion*, 23 July 1881.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Niles told the jury "you have heard the evidence and the talk of these big lawyers. They think they have proved me guilty. Guilty of what? Is it a crime to get what belongs to you, on an old account running long before anybody in this room was born? I have no witness to refute the witnesses of the other side. There are many things done in this world that have the appearance of wrong on the surface, but hold a degree of justification when everything is taken into account. I can't get these things in as evidence, because the gentlemen will all object; and the judge who measures out justice according to the books and the rules, will sustain them, but I can tell them to you and you can be the judge. A colored man pleading his own case in a white man's court must appeal to its sense of what's right and just, whether it is set forth in the statutes or not. To depend on the law books is to invite his own condemnation, but to plead before the bar of eternal justice up yonder, which you are the jury of, more than of this one in the Stockton courtroom, is different. I ain't got any contempt for this one, but I have a mighty lot of respect for that one. I am charged with getting the bank's money without having a lot of corn back of my note. If the good Lord didn't allow the colored people of Demus to raise a crop this year because he hadn't enough rain to spare, we couldn't help it. I mortgaged what should have been there. I am the leader of the flock and it all would have come into my hands. I was sure broke, and to keep up my station I was forced to borrow. Mr. Smyth let me have it and I gave my note for it. The only thing lacking was the corn, which he thought was there. What's corn anyway, except to a hog who can eat it? But when you come back to the first principles, wasn't the money mine, or rather the colored folks? Don't I

belong to a race that came out of the ark with Noah, in the person of Mr. Ham, and settled in Africa? For a long time we were happy and free until the white man came, loaded us with chains and brought us over to this land to be slaves. For many years we have bent our backs in toil for him, for which we got no pay. He and his forefathers took away from us all we earned, making him rich, while all we got was a little food and a few cloths, (most of which we had to purloin), many kicks, blows and the lash. He bought and sold us like cattle, tore our wives and children from us, robbed us, kept us ignorant, degraded. My lot has not been so hard, I am young and we have been freed seventeen years; but most of my people have known what it was to serve long in bondage, I am pleading not only for myself, but for the colored people whom I represent. Now because I got a little money from a white man's bank and had no corn for security, I am to be punished. Maybe I can pay it back when it becomes due. If I do, then how about the big illegal interest he held out on me? That man charged me three percent a month, and he took out ninety days in advance. Thirty-six, yes more than forty percent a year. Maybe you-alls been treated the same way when you got a loan. Maybe he took your team, your cows and your hogs when you couldn't pay. With me they are going to deprive me of my liberty once more, without waiting to see if I will pay back the money - because I am one of that black race they stole from so long. If you believe the good Lord loves all his children, taking no account of their color, their riches or their poverty; if you think the recording angel will square everything just as it ought to be, according everybody's deserts, you will find a verdict for me." Chambers, *passim*.

⁷⁹ William S. Simmons, D. D., *Men of Mark: Eminent, Progressive and Rising* (Cleveland: G. M. Rewell and Co., 1887; Arno Press Edition, 1968), pp. 1055-1058.

⁸⁰ Schwendemann, p. 22.

⁸¹ Blake, p. 82; Schwendemann, p. 22.

⁸² E. P. McCabe to Governor John St. John, 7 March 1880, correspondence file, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas (hereafter cited as St. John Papers).

⁸³ Two illiterates, Samuel Foster and George Johnson, claimed that Simone Knowlton and an unknown white man tricked them into making their marks on the Gettysburg petition. The men told Johnson that the petition was for a site north of the Solomon River, the side on which he lived. He subsequently learned that Knowlton was an owner of the townsite of Gettysburg and the petition supported the town. Johnson did not want his name on the white settlement's petition because "the people of that town have tried to ignore my race of people always." These two men deceived

Foster by telling him that their petition was for Nicodemus and not Gettysburg. Affidavit of George Johnson of Nicodemus, 30 October, 1879; Affidavit of Samuel Foster of Nicodemus, 30 October 1879, St. John Papers.

⁸⁴ Five Nicodemus citizens to Governor John St. John, 21 February 40, 1880, St. John Papers.

⁸⁵ Margaret S. Moore, "Story of Hill City, Kansas," Graham County Public Library, Hill City, Kansas, 1972, p. 1.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ At one point in time during the fall of 1883, Hill City had no residents. Tirzila Garnett, who lived on a homestead, ran the post office during the day and returned home at night. An *Atchison Weekly Champion* newspaper reporter stated when he was in "Hill City there was only one store building standing, solitary and alone." The original population of the town either moved to farms, to other towns, or out of the county. After the extraordinary good crop year of 1884, Hill, with the assistance of James P. Pomeroy, a millionaire from Boston by way of Atchison, revitalized the town. James, the son of R. M. Pomeroy, president of the Atchison and Pike's Peak Railroad Company, made large investments in Hill City where he held the position of land commissioner and general manager with his father's railroad, two jobs that gave him considerable experience in land development. Pomeroy moved to Atchison during 1878, where he owned and operated a company that supplied coal to the Pike's Peak Railroad. After the railway became the Union Pacific Central Branch, Pomeroy sold his coal company and became involved with Hill in western Kansas land development. The town promoter sold Pomeroy on the money-making opportunities in Graham County. Because of better profit potential, Pomeroy invested a substantially greater amount of money in Hill City than in Nicodemus. During 1887, he gave Graham County a \$20,000 courthouse for moving the county seat from Millbrook to Hill City. In addition, he built 2 hotels, a general store, 40 residences, and several office buildings. By contrast, he bought only two undeveloped lots and contributed to the building of a church in Nicodemus. All of his investments in Graham County, which also included a large model farm, were managed or made with the assistance of Hill, his land agent. Moore, p. 4; *Atchison (Kansas) Globe*, 20 June 1907; *Hill City Times*, 6 July 1961; *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 8 July 1887.

⁸⁸ Mrs. A. L. Stanley to Governor George T. Anthony, 6 April 1878, Anthony Papers.

⁸⁹ *Atchison Weekly Champion*, 23 July 1881; McDaniel, p. 57; *Kansas City Star*, 26 January 1905.

⁹⁰ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 21 April 1887.

⁹¹ Wages for farm labor in Graham County during 1879-1880 ranged from \$13 to \$16 per month with board. Carpenters were paid \$2 to \$3 per day; wagon makers \$2 to \$2.80 per day; harness makers \$2 to \$2.75 per day; washer-women from \$.75 to \$1 per day; and domestic servants \$1.50 to \$2.50 per week. Kansas State Board of Agriculture, *Second Biennial Report of the State Board of Agriculture* (1880), vol. 7, pp. 286-287; *Lawrence (Kansas) Daily Journal* asserted that the blacks of Nicodemus, during the winter of 1879, "average from three acres to fifty acres of winter wheat each." The yield would have provided the farmers with enough wheat to sell on the open market. *Lawrence Daily Journal*, 11 January 1879.

⁹² *Atchison Weekly Champion*, 23 July 1881; *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 5 May 1887.

⁹³ Kansas statutes did not allow towns with less than 200 residents to incorporate. Nicodemus and other small towns were governed by their townships, which were subdivisions of county governments. Each township had a trustee, clerk, treasurer, road overseer, and at least two constables and justices of the peace. Townships with extraordinarily large populations had more than two constables and justices. Each officer, with the exception of the justices, came up for re-election every year. The justices were elected every two years. Once a year, the trustee who headed the administration made a complete report to the county commissioners about his township's affairs.

⁹⁴ George A. Root, "The Nicodemus Colony," Manuscript Collection, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas, 1913, pp. 1-2.

⁹⁵ U.S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Tenth Census of the United States* (1880), *Schedule I Manuscript for Nicodemus Township, Kansas*.

⁹⁶ Root, "The Nicodemus Colony," p. 2.

⁹⁷ *Tenth Census of the United States* (1880), *Schedule I Manuscript for Nicodemus Township, Kansas*.

⁹⁸ *Hill City Times*, 5 September 1940.

⁹⁹ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 21 April 1887.

¹⁰⁰ *Hill City Times*, 5 September 1940.

¹⁰¹ *Hutchinson (Kansas) Daily News*, 31 July 1955.

¹⁰² Belleau, pp. 22-25.

¹⁰³ Many of the blacks who left the South for Nicodemus never arrived in the northwest Kansas town. For example, a group of colonists led by Reverend Daniel Hickman and Hill left Scott County, Kentucky with 300 members, but arrived in Nicodemus with less than 200 settlers. The people that

did not complete the journey settled in St. Louis, Kansas City, or some other place along the route. Root, "The Nicodemus Colony," p. 3.

¹⁰⁴ Belleau, p. 20.

¹⁰⁵ *Tenth Census of the United States* (1880), claimed that Nicodemus Township had 452 people, but *Schedule I Manuscript* has only 316 names. *Tenth Census of the United States* (1880), *Schedule I Manuscript for Nicodemus Township, Kansas*.

¹⁰⁶ *Hill City Times*, 6 July 1961; Moore, p. 1.

¹⁰⁷ One of the Hill City Town Company's trustees was Z. T. Fletcher. *Articles of Incorporation of the Hill City Town Company*.

¹⁰⁸ Belleau, p. 20.

¹⁰⁹ C. H. Newth to United States Land Commissioner, 28 December 1884, Kirwin, Kansas Land Office, Kansas-Nicodemus Townsite, National Archives, Washington, D.C., (hereafter cited as Land Office Papers).

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ S. G. Wilson to U.S. Representative Lewis Harnback, 8 December 1884; Committee of Nicodemus Concerned Citizens to U.S. Representative Lewis Harnback, 1 January 1885, Land Office Papers. There is no available source to determine how Harper became president of the town company. He once asked the Land Commissioner if it was possible for the townsite to "go into the hand-of" Nicodemus' state-chartered benevolent corporation, which would "pay out on this town site for the purpose of benevolence and put it in a proper condition." A. N. Harper to U.S. Land Commissioner, 20 April 1885, Land Office Papers.

¹¹² Decision of the Kirwin, Kansas Land Office, 20 August 1885, Land Office Papers.

¹¹³ Assistant Land Commissioner S. W. Stockloger to U.S. Representative Lewis Harnback, 13 January 1886, Land Office Papers.

¹¹⁴ Receipt from the Kirwin, Kansas Land Office for \$199.70 as proof of sale to the residents of Nicodemus, 9 June 1886, Land Office Papers.

¹¹⁵ *Atchison Weekly Champion*, 23 July 1881. The lot of Nicodemus also received word of mouth promotion. This type of boosting brought several new citizens to the town. For example, Sam Garland, an early black settler in Graham County, made the decision to emigrate to northwest Kansas, after a group of his Southern friends told him about their plans to locate in the Nicodemus area.

¹¹⁶ Although the population of Kansas increased more than ninefold between 1860 and 1880, the U.S. Census Bureau showed no people in the western counties of Rooks and Graham. Sherman, Thomas, and the western part of Sheridan, had less than two people per square mile. Most of Sheridan and Graham had only 2 to 6 people per square mile, while the greater part

- of Rooks County, the first county east of Graham County, had a mere 6 to 11 people per square mile. *Tenth Census of the United States* (1880), p. 61-65.
- ¹¹⁷McDaniel, p. 60; Root, "Biographical Sketch of Reverend Daniel Hickman," p. 5; Belleau, p. 18.
- ¹¹⁸Root, "Biographical Sketch of Reverend Daniel Hickman," pp. 5-6.
- ¹¹⁹*Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 5 May 1887; *Kansas City Times*, 28 May 1959.
- ¹²⁰*Kansas City Times*, 28 May 1959.
- ¹²¹The British freed their slaves 1 August 1834; *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 13 May 1886.
- ¹²²*Hill City Times*, 5 September 1940.
- ¹²³The Society located Chapter Nos. 1 and 10 in Leavenworth, 2 in Lawrence, 3 in Topeka, 4 in Valley Falls, 5 in Halton, 6 in North Topeka, 8 in Atchison, 9 in Iola, and 11 in Tecumseh. *Topeka Benevolent Banner*, 23 July 1887; *Hill City Times*, 5 September 1940.
- ¹²⁴Cash Entry 4851, Kirwin, Kansas — Townsite of Nicodemus 159, Land Office Papers; *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 13 May 1886.
- ¹²⁵*Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 13 May 1886.
- ¹²⁶*Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 15, 22 July 1886.
- ¹²⁷*Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 13 May 1886. Tallman sent his first issue, free of charge, only to settlers of Graham and Rooks Counties. The paper never stated that issues were sent any place else, and reprints mostly came from newspapers in the western Kansas area.
- ¹²⁸Before they purchased the it, the newspaper took a neutral stand concerning the Hill City and Millbrook county seat fight. *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 29 July 1886; 12 May 1887; *Nicodemus (Kansas) Enterprise*, 19 October 1887; *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 2 June 1877; *Nicodemus Enterprise*, 29 July 1886; 12 May 1887.
- ¹²⁹*Nicodemus Enterprise*, 24 August 1887.
- ¹³⁰*Nicodemus Enterprise*, 14 September 1887.
- ¹³¹*Nicodemus Enterprise*, 21 September; 26 October 1887.
- ¹³²*Nicodemus Enterprise*, 26 October 1887.
- ¹³³*Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 4 November 1887.
- ¹³⁴*Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 11, 25 November 1887.
- ¹³⁵*Nicodemus (Kansas) Cyclone*, 30 December 1887.
- ¹³⁶Hill City obtained the government operations during 1888, after the county commission, with two of its three members being political allies of Hill, called a special election. Nicodemus citizens voted 115 to 1 in favor of Hill City. *Nicodemus Cyclone*, 2, 9 March 1889; *Hill City Times*, 27 May 1954.
- ¹³⁷*Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 13 May 1886. In the editor's salutation, the *Nicodemus Enterprise* asserted "our interests are in Nicodemus and for her welfare and advancement we shall put forth our best efforts." *Nicodemus Enterprise*, 30 December 1887. When the two papers merged, the owners told their readers that "our interests are centered in Graham County and particularly in Nicodemus and we shall deem it a duty and privilege to work night and day for their success." *Nicodemus Cyclone*, 30 December 1887. Even after Hill bought the *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, its editor claimed that publishers "came to Nicodemus to stay and work for the interest of the town." *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 19 May 1887.
- ¹³⁸*Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 2 April 1886. The second fight was between two young men for some unknown cause.
- ¹³⁹*Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 24 March 1887.
- ¹⁴⁰*Nicodemus Western Cyclone* also claimed that the would-be thief was spotted and that he could pay for the broken "window glass he broke, or take the consequences, as great as they may be." *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 16 December 1887.
- ¹⁴¹*Nicodemus Enterprise*, 17 September 1887.
- ¹⁴²W. Eugene Hallon, *Frontier Violence: Another Look* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 194-216.
- ¹⁴³*Ibid.*
- ¹⁴⁴*Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 13 May 1886.
- ¹⁴⁵In most cases, the newspapers printed short accounts of forthcoming events, but when it covered the society's activities, the account often would be several lines long. In fact, they often were longer than coverage of the area's railroad activities.
- ¹⁴⁶*Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, July 1887.
- ¹⁴⁷For example, the 24 February 1888, issue of the *Nicodemus Cyclone* stated that Nicodemus ought to have a broom factory, a lumber yard, a canning factory, a flour mill, a furniture store, a harness shop, and a hardware store.
- ¹⁴⁸*Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 30 December 1886.
- ¹⁴⁹Glen C. Quiett, *They Build the West* (New York: D. Appleton Century Press, 1934), passim.
- ¹⁵⁰*Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 30 December 1886.
- ¹⁵¹*Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 20 January 1887.
- ¹⁵²The committee consisted of C. H. Newth, Z. T. Fletcher, S. G. Wilson, Eliza Smith, J. Lindsey, C. Reynolds, Lewis Welston, S. Steman, W. May, and Mary Wellington. *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵³*Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 27 January 1887.
- ¹⁵⁴*Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 24 March 1887.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 5 May 1887.

¹⁵⁷ *Nicodemus Enterprise*, 14 September 1887.

¹⁵⁸ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 3 February 1887.

¹⁵⁹ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 17 March 1887.

¹⁶⁰ *Nicodemus Enterprise*, 17 August 1887.

¹⁶¹ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 17 March; 7 April 1887.

¹⁶² *Nicodemus Cyclone*, 6 June 1888.

¹⁶³ *Nicodemus Cyclone*, 27 July 1888.

¹⁶⁴ *Nicodemus Cyclone*, 24 February; 6 April 1888.

¹⁶⁵ *Nicodemus Cyclone*, 13 July 1888.

¹⁶⁶ *Nicodemus Cyclone*, 30 December 1886.

¹⁶⁷ *Nicodemus Cyclone*, 24 February; 30 March 1888.

¹⁶⁸ *Nicodemus Cyclone*, 30 December 1886.

¹⁶⁹ *Nicodemus Cyclone*, 20 January 1887.

¹⁷⁰ *Nicodemus Cyclone*, 28 January 1887.

¹⁷¹ *Nicodemus Cyclone*, 24 March 1887.

¹⁷² *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 20 February 1887.

¹⁷³ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 17 March 1887.

¹⁷⁴ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 10 March 1887.

¹⁷⁵ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 17 March 1887.

¹⁷⁶ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 29 May 1887.

¹⁷⁷ *Nicodemus Enterprise*, 14 September 1887.

¹⁷⁸ *Nicodemus Cyclone*, 5 January 1888.

¹⁷⁹ *Nicodemus Enterprise*, 17 August 1887.

¹⁸⁰ *Nicodemus Cyclone*, 27 January 1888.

¹⁸¹ *Nicodemus Cyclone*, 19 August 1887.

¹⁸² *Nicodemus Cyclone*, 9 March 1888.

¹⁸³ The men were C. H. Newth, S. G. Wilson, H. S. Henrie, Z. T. Fletcher, A. N. Harper, A. L. McPherson, and A. Woodward. *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 17, 24 March 1887.

¹⁸⁴ *Nicodemus Enterprise*, 19 October 1887. For the inception date of the Immigration Union, see *Nicodemus Cyclone*, 20 January 1888.

¹⁸⁵ *Nicodemus Enterprise*, 19 October 1887.

¹⁸⁶ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 10 October 1887.

¹⁸⁷ *Nicodemus Enterprise*, 19 October 1887.

¹⁸⁸ *Nicodemus Cyclone*, 5 January 1888.

¹⁸⁹ *Nicodemus Cyclone*, 3 February 1888.

¹⁹⁰ There is no available information on the relationship between the Nicodemus Immigration Union and the Northwest Kansas Emigration Society, nor is there any concerning the relationship between the Immigra-

tion Union and the Nicodemus Emigration Association.

¹⁹¹ McDaniel, appendix G.

¹⁹² *Nicodemus Cyclone*, 3 March 1888.

¹⁹³ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 15 July 1886.

¹⁹⁴ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 17 March; 24 June 1887; *Nicodemus Enterprise*, 17 August 1887.

¹⁹⁵ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 30 December 1886; 29 July 1887.

¹⁹⁶ *Nicodemus Cyclone*, 20 January; 2 March 1888.

¹⁹⁷ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 13 May 1886.

¹⁹⁸ *Nicodemus Cyclone*, 30 December 1886.

¹⁹⁹ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 17 March 1887.

²⁰⁰ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 19 May 1887.

²⁰¹ *Hill City Reveille*, 1 December 1886.

²⁰² *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 17 March 1887.

²⁰³ Schwendemann, p. 30.



Nicodemus Township Hall, Nicodemus, Kansas.



African Methodist Episcopal Church, Nicodemus, Kansas.



First Baptist Church, Nicodemus, Kansas.



First Baptist Church, Nicodemus, Kansas.

(Photographs: Clayton Fraser)

CHAPTER II

NICODEMUS: THE ARCHITECTURAL DEVELOPMENT AND DECLINE OF AN AMERICAN TOWN

Clayton Fraser

The architectural history of Nicodemus followed a typical frontier pattern, according to Clayton Fraser. Of necessity the town's first inhabitants built primitive dugouts or "soddies." As soon as their financial condition improved, however, residents quickly replaced these crude sod structures with frame and stone buildings. When the long-hoped-for railroad connection failed to materialize, however, many merchants simply relocated their businesses and buildings to the more fortunate nearby communities which had attracted a rail link. Today, only a handful of simple, utilitarian structures remain to remind visitors of Nicodemus' rich heritage.

Nicodemus is booming. New buildings are going up all around us. Hurrah for Nicodemus and surrounding country. Nicodemus is located in the midst of one of the finest counties in the state, looking from the town you can see for miles. The country is so level that you can see what your neighbors are doing in the next township. If there is paradise on earth, it certainly is here.¹

This proclamation, printed in the inaugural issue of the *Nicodemus Western Cyclone* in May 1886, reflects tellingly both the nature of the fledgling community during its most prosperous time and the fervent hopes of the people that settled it. A peculiarly American amalgamation of the ideal and the

pragmatic, Nicodemus relied on a traditional vehicle for advancement. For despite the racial idealism behind the community and the idyllic image projected by the townspeople, the "negro haven on the Solomon," as it was later called, was at its roots a speculation town. As such, it was subject to the same economic forces and architectural development as its white contemporaries. And despite the circumstances of its settlement and the perseverance of its black residents, Nicodemus eventually proved all too vulnerable to the same political and financial trends which controlled the destinies of thousands of other small towns across the country.

Nicodemus was founded during the years following the Civil War, when America was experiencing a sweeping migration of people searching for new home territories. Driven from the East, the South, and from Europe by poverty, oppression, and lack of economic opportunity, emigrants were lured westward by the promise of cheap government land, available through a series of public land acts. Potential pioneers were further encouraged by the railroads and town boomers, both of which had a tremendous stake in seeing that the Trans-Mississippi West was settled quickly.



FIGURE II-1: The Charles Williams house. A typically modest residential structure in Nicodemus, the gable-end portion dates to the pre-1920s, and the lean-to addition was added in the 1930s. Like a number of wood frame structures in Nicodemus, the building has been stuccoed with a plaster mixture of cement, water, sand, and hog hair. Interestingly, the northeast room of the house was operated as a post office by William's wife, Elizabeth, in the 1930s. (Photograph: La Barbara Fly)

The impetus to move was felt by people in all of the country's social strata, both black and white. But perhaps no segment of the population felt it more strongly than the four million newly freed slaves in the South. Long held at the lowest level of the country's social and economic scale, they were suddenly thrust to seek a place in free society after decades, and even lifetimes, of enslavement. The great majority of freedmen were field hands, uneducated and destitute. Most chose or were forced to live within the vicinity of their former masters' farms. Some even remained on the plantations which had held them before the war, trading enforced bondage for economic dependence as tenant farmers with little appreciable improvement of lifestyle. But a sizeable minority splintered off from rural Southern living to move to cities or to move West. For many blacks the key to economic freedom appeared to be through land ownership.² When the hoped-for redistribution of Southern farmlands during Reconstruction never fully materialized, thousands looked elsewhere for affordable acreage. And elsewhere was generally the prairie region to the west.

In 1870, land in Iowa, Missouri, Minnesota, and eastern Kansas and Nebraska, which embraced the nation's most verdant farm acreage, had already been homesteaded by land-hungry settlers. This effectively drove prospective settlers in the 1870s further west — beyond the 98th meridian onto the Great Plains of western Kansas and Nebraska, Oklahoma, the Dakotas, and eastern Colorado, Wyoming and Montana. Flat, treeless, thinly soiled, and semi-arid, with an annual rainfall below 15 inches in some areas, the region had long been thought unsuitable for settlement.

Latter-day sodbusters, however, were enticed by the prospect of readily obtainable land — of any description — on the Great Plains. Determined to settle despite the elements, they pioneered the region using federal land laws: the Homestead Act of 1862, which allowed claims of 160 acres to pioneers; the Timber Culture Act of 1873, which allowed an additional 160 acres of land if a percentage was planted with trees; and the Desert Land Act of 1877, which allowed a full section of land at \$1.25 an acre, if placed under irrigation. They were aided by technologically improved farm implements — the steel-bladed prairie plow and, later, the mechanized tractor and harvester. And some Midwestern emigrants were convinced of the "rain follows the plow" concept — the improbable belief popularized by promoters that increased cultivation of the land would alter regional climate and actually increase rainfall.

These self deluded people should be brought back to central and eastern Kansas by force if necessary, and controlled by the militia or by the superintendents of the insane asylums.

For hundreds of thousands of the homeless, the Great Plains offered a home. For others, settlement of the plains represented sheer lunacy. In 1879, the editor of the *North Topeka Times* advocated stern measures to bring the wayward homesteaders in western Kansas back to their senses or at least back to eastern Kansas: "These self-deluded people should be brought back to central and eastern Kansas by force, if necessary, and controlled by the militia or by the superintendents of the insane asylums. They would not listen to facts when they made homes in the desert and can only be forced to give up their delusions by the severest personal experience. The rainfall of Kansas is well-known to all people who can read themselves or who listen to the reading of others."³

The semi-aridity made dry-land farming a tenuous venture, subject to alternating seasons of rainfall and drought. Additionally, the pioneers, both white and black, faced blistering summer heat and bitter winter cold, cyclones, blizzards, tornadoes, plagues of insects, an absence of trees except on the river bottoms, and even the thick mat of buffalo grass covering the thin topsoil. Richard Lingeman dramatically summarized High Plains homesteading in *Small Town America*:

If the plains brought out resourcefulness and innovation, they put such a high price on success that a cruel toll was extracted from the many unable to meet this price. The area that represented the last dream of the landless, of those seeking a new life, turned into a nightmare for many. Here there were no hostile Indians to unite against, no forests to clear away in cooperative labor — here the enemy was implacable Nature and a cruel isolation that turned many inward and sent them down the route to madness.⁴

Interspersed among the isolated homesteads were emergent farming towns. These followed the rapidly expanding western agricultural frontier in the late-nineteenth century, planted along rivers or railroads and almost everywhere else across the arid landscape. Typically conceived by speculating preemptioners or absentee owners acting singly or in cartels through local agents, these towns were intended as profit-making ventures for land speculation. They were somewhat derisively termed "spec" towns. The fact that many of these communities never progressed past the paper stage, or failed soon after initial settlement, did not seem to deter the promoters, many of whom simply moved to other areas. Nor did it stop the settlers coming westward in droves. Fortunes were made and family stakes lost, often in distressingly similar scenarios across the Midwest.

It was in this social, economic, and geographic milieu that town promoters for Nicodemus cheerily depicted their nascent community to Southern freedmen as "the Promise Land."⁵ As the first settlers arrived and began building the rudiments of a town and as later emigrants settled, Nicodemus would fol-

low a typical architectural pattern with only minor deviations from the Midwestern mainstream.

SETTLEMENT

Despite the idealized racial appeal to the freedmen by the town promoters, Nicodemus had, from the start, been designed principally to make money for the directors of the Nicodemus Town Company. The profit-making format that the directors had chosen was one that had become a standard of the West: the speculation town. But what the unknowing settlers found upon arrival at Nicodemus was in stark contrast with the fraudulent reports of the Nicodemus Town Company. Few of the promises proved true. As counterpoint to W. R. Hill's and S. P. Roundtree's overblown claims of paradise on the plains, a newspaper correspondent from Atchison more accurately described the region:

The valley of the south fork of the Solomon is not, beyond Stockton, the most fertile or beautiful body of land on earth. There is a proneness to sand; a tendency to cactus; a predilection in favor of soap weed. The "magnesia," as it is called, a sort of a compromise between a clay bank and a stone quarry, is quite apparent in the low bluffs. A few miles beyond Stockton the timber suddenly ceases, and thereafter the Solomon is a miniature Arkansas. There are the same low banks, the same stretches of yellow sand along the shores in the bends, marking the high water wanderings of the stream; the same heaped up mounds of sand held together by crane grass, scattered about the low ground.⁶

Despite the exaggerations, the first colonists from Kentucky began to settle. "They finally reached their goal," wrote W. L. Sayers, a later resident, "a prairie quarter section, just north of the Solomon River — just a plain prairie country — no horses, no wells, no shelter of any kind and winter setting in."⁷ Securing shelter was the first major hurdle for the newly arrived settlers. There was no milled lumber (no nearby mill; no money to buy materials) and precious little native timber from which to construct shelters. Lacking time, tools, and capital, members of the second colony quickly erected some lean-to tents upon arrival, but the sheets were quickly blown from their frameworks by the wind.⁸ Soon thereafter, the Nicodemus settlers dug in, literally, for the first hard winter. Like their contemporary white settlers, they resorted to a traditional frontier structure, successfully constructed in the region since initial settlement in the 1840s and continued to be used well into the 1880s. They built dugouts.⁹

Dugouts were holes in the ground, burrows cut from the sides of hills, bluffs, or ravines and covered by pole-raftered roofs. They represented the most rudimentary form of shelter and could be erected quickly with a mini-

mum of tools and construction experience. And they could be put up using nearby native materials: earth for the floor; earth or stacked sod bricks for the front, rear, and side walls; logs, saplings, or willow branches for the ridge beam and rafters; brush for the roof sheathing; and layered sod and earth for the roofing. Nicodemus lore relates that the initial group from Lexington, Kentucky, erected the colony's first earth shelters as a communal effort to house the birth of the group's first native-born child.¹⁰ (FIGURE 11-2) Built either wholly or partially underground, these buildings all featured basic configurations as modestly scaled single- or double-pen rectangles covered with shallowly pitched gables. In each, the main (only) entrance and the single (if any) window were located in the exposed gable end.

I confess to feeling disappointed. I had never seen a "dug-lur" nor a "sod-up," and I had not the least conception of how either of them looked.

— Abraham Hall, 1878, on seeing Nicodemus



FIGURE 11-2: The Williams Family, one of the earliest Nicodemus families, claims the first born child in Nicodemus, Henry (center). Other family members in this ca. 1886 photograph include: Charles Williams Sr., Emma, Charles Jr., Clara, and Neal. (Photograph: Irvin and Minerva W. Sayers)

The construction technique they used was typical of the Plains: "A man would stake off the ground about 14 x 15 feet and make a rectangular excavation to a depth of six feet. Steps were dug for descent. Walls were of sod bricks; over a ridgepole, willow saplings, straw weeds, and dirt formed the roof."¹¹ The above-grade portions of the dugouts were constructed of stacked sheets of sod, a type of construction which created hybrid structures combining features of the true underground dugout and the above-ground sod house, or "soddy." **(FIGURE II-3)** Later sod structures in Nicodemus were usually built about three feet into the ground, with the remainder above grade.¹² Sod plows had been developed to cut even slices through the thick buffalo grass mat of the prairie floor, and later black homesteaders used them extensively to break ground and build shelters for their farms. But the earliest Nicodemians had few farm implements and fewer head of stock to pull them.¹³ In that first year most were forced to cut the sod by hand, using spades.¹⁴ Typically, bricks 12 by 14 inches and about 4 inches thick were cut and stacked 2 wythes thick using a common staggered bond. Header bricks were laid at intervals along the walls to tie the two rows of bricks together. Later the walls were parged with "magnesia," a dissolved limestone wash applied to the building with whitewash brushes.¹⁵ The stucco-like magnesia repelled water and added a finished appearance to the building. The structure was capped by a log ridgepole which ran down its centerline, upon which willow pole rafters were draped. Branches and weeds were then laid over the rafters, then a layer of sod, and finally a top layer of dirt.¹⁶

Described by one contemporary account as "quite equal to the average soddy," the structures built by the black homesteaders provided shelter, but little else.¹⁷ Like most of their type, they withstood the relentless winds and maintained steady interior temperatures, but tended to be cramped and, with minimal fenestration, dark and poorly ventilated. They leaked profusely when it rained and were dirty when it was dry.¹⁸ Pieces of grass and dirt from the ceilings continually fell into the rooms below, and occasionally entire roof structures collapsed. Additionally, they were continually vexed by a menagerie of rodents, insects, fleas, and snakes, to which one resident reacted, "you killed them if you could, and if not, you just slept with them."¹⁹ Built and inhabited by people with virtually no money, these early dwellings were typically modestly scaled, sparsely furnished, and marginally decorated. An 1879 newspaper article depicted one of them:

(It was) roofed with poles and brush, with a covering of earth sufficient to keep out the rain. As lumber floors were regarded as an unnecessary luxury, all the lumber required was for a door and its frame, and one window. A fireplace at one end, in most cases, takes the place of a stove, and serves the double purpose of heating and cooking.²⁰

Furniture was constructed primarily of woven willows or salvaged materials and crates, beds made of straw or hay ticking, and the houses outfitted with any other items which could be found, salvaged, or purchased cheaply.²¹ Later, as funds permitted, manufactured furniture and household items would be introduced into most of the dwellings. Milled lumber and tar paper replaced the willows and dirt in the roof structure; earth floors were covered with boards.²² With scant timber in the area, sunflowers, buffalo chips, and willows were used for fuel.²³ Tightly woven flannel materials smoldering in cans provided dim light in the dusky rooms.²⁴ Another contemporary report described one of the houses:

Inside it was very dark, and there were some cheap pictures on the walls. One sees out here the colored prints, the "Janes" and "Elizas," banished from the towns a good while ago. There was a pile of cornstalks near the door, the favorite fuel of Nicodemus. In the space about the house were numerous chicken coops, made of corn stalks, and in front were marigolds and bachelors' buttons and four-o'clocks.²⁵

As succeeding blacks arrived, more dugouts and soddies were built, almost all oriented eastward. The buildings were put up in irregular clusters in and around Nicodemus — north and northwest of the townsite and south of the Solomon River, southwest of the townsite.²⁶ Additionally, three satellite clusters formed in the surrounding hinterland: one short-lived community associated with the Samuels, Scruggs, and Garland families approximately five miles southwest of Nicodemus; the Fairview community, three miles north of the townsite; and the Mount Olive area, about five miles northwest.²⁷ **(FIGURE II-4)** Primarily family enclaves, these settlements later supported schools, churches, and/or cemeteries. Though the family ties among the colonists may have been strong, the prospect of a subterranean village dug into a windswept prairie disheartened many of them. Some 60 families from the second colony left the townsite and returned eastward the day after their arrival.²⁸ Abraham T. Hall, who came from Chicago and later became a land dealer and lawyer in town, recalled his introduction to Nicodemus in May 1878:

Mr. Niles bade us look to the north. In the direction he was pointing, just beyond the fringe of trees, where we'd seen some black spots. That was "Nicodemus." I confess to feeling disappointed. I had never seen a "dug-lur" nor a "sod-up," and I had not the least conception of how either of them looked.²⁹

Another 1878 newcomer, Reverend Daniel Hickman's wife, Willianna, reacted more dramatically at her arrival:

We left (Ellis) for Nicodemus, traveling overland with horses and wagons. We were two days on the way, with no roads to direct us save deer trails and buffalo wallows. We traveled by compass. At



FIGURE II-3: This historic photograph of a nineteenth-century sod house in western Kansas shows what typical, first-generation buildings in Nicodemus must have looked like. These combination half sod and half dugout structures were easily and quickly constructed from local materials. Reputedly warm in winter and cool in summer, nonetheless, life in these structures must have been hard at best. (Photograph: Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas)

night the men built bonfires and sat around them, firing guns to keep the wild animals from coming near. We reached Nicodemus about 3 o'clock on the second day. When we got in sight of Nicodemus the men shouted, "There is Nicodemus!" Being very sick, I hailed this news with gladness. 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. We landed and once again struck tents. The scenery time was not at all inviting, and I began to cry.³⁰

Despite the hardship of initial settlement, or perhaps because of it, many of the first colonists of Nicodemus persevered.³¹ By spring of 1879, the nucleus of the town had been formed, consisting of 35 dwellings, a general store, post office, hotel, real estate office, 2 livery stables, and 2 churches — Baptist and African Methodist Episcopal, with congregations of 40 and 25 members, respectively.³² Additionally, as many as six schools were in operation, all in dugouts.³³ Most of the sod-sided structures were scattered in an informal pattern around the southern section of the townsite.³⁴ The general store — "generally



FIGURE II-4: Of the three nineteenth-century satellite communities surrounding Nicodemus, only one, Mount Olive, exhibits physical remains today. This ruin is all that remains of the Mount Olive Church. One of the three standing limestone ruins associated with the community, this structure was burned during the 1930s when a routine "burning off" of the grass in the nearby cemetery got out of control. Two similar ruins, a school house and a residence, stand nearby. (Photograph: Clayton Fraser)

out of everything store" — was the town's and the county's first, founded and operated by Z. T. Fletcher, one of Nicodemus' leading citizens.³⁵ As a 28-year-old emigrant from Nebraska, Fletcher had helped to proselytize among blacks in Topeka for the Nicodemus Town Company in the spring of 1877.³⁶ He brought his family to Nicodemus that June with the first colonizing group, and until the arrival of the second group in September, his wife Jenny was the only woman in the townsite.³⁷ Fletcher was corresponding secretary for the Nicodemus Town Company from its inception to its dissolution.³⁸ He opened his store in November 1877 with a meager inventory — cornmeal and syrup, by one account — bought from a nearby white merchant.³⁹ His first emporium was in a dugout on the bank of Spring Creek. By 1879, Fletcher had moved to another earth shelter on the corner of Third and Washington Streets, from which he also ran the settlement's post office as its first postmaster.⁴⁰ He had faced some incipient competition in 1878 and early 1879 from two other general mercantile businesses run by Louis Welton and W. H. Smith, president of the Lexington Colony.⁴¹ But the impoverished community could barely support a single store, much less three, and the latter two failed quickly.

Another early business casualty was Nicodemus' first hotel. A rough sod building built in late 1877, or early 1878, on the southwest corner of Washington and Third Streets, it was short-lived and was soon replaced by two others by 1879.⁴² The Myers House, operated by Reverend J. M. Myers, and Hiram Burley's Union House were also housed in sod structures, Myers's near Fourth Street and Burley's near Washington Street.⁴³ Hotels in only the loosest terms, these enlarged houses combined one or two guest rooms within the proprietor's residence and served meals to the customers from the single main kitchen. Neither Myers nor Burley remained in business for any length of time.

The first hotel structure had been acquired in 1878 by A. T. Hall and E. P. McCabe, two other influential figures in the fledgling community.⁴⁴ Raised in Chicago, Abraham Hall had spent a year in medical school before becoming a sailor on the Great Lakes (for more detailed biographical information about McCabe, see chapter 1). Hall later worked as a reporter for several newspapers and served for a time as city editor of the *Chicago Conservator*, a black paper.⁴⁵ Hall convinced McCabe to move to Nicodemus, and the two arrived at the townsite in April 1878. Described as "young men of refinement and culture," they were among the few settlers that were literate. They set up a land office in the hotel building and billed themselves as attorneys and land agents, surveying land and locating settlers on their claims.⁴⁶

Another of the significant early black settlers to arrive at that time was Samuel Garland, a native of Holly Springs, Mississippi. Garland came to Graham County in the spring of 1879 with three other families from Wyandotte, Kansas. He had emigrated to the eastern part of the state in the early 1870s

and had married a Kentucky woman there.⁴⁷ He homesteaded a tract of public land six miles southwest of town and soon became one of the colony's more successful farmers.⁴⁸ He would later open an implement sales business in town and from that would branch out as owner of a hotel and president of the Nicodemus Land Company.

EMERGENCE

The spring of 1879 marked a time of transition in the economic and architectural development of Nicodemus. The last of the colonizing groups had arrived from Mississippi in February, and the earlier settlers had begun to establish themselves economically. The grasshopper plague that had destroyed the previous summer's crops did not reappear. Though still struggling near subsistence level, the townspeople and surrounding farmers now could more ably support traditional commerce. Retail operations in the first two years of settlement had been handled entirely by black colonists as part-time ventures to augment their farming income. Housed in soddies or dugouts, these struggling businesses tended to be chronically undercapitalized and short of marketable stock, and failed with predictable frequency. In the first three years after initial settlement, Nicodemus witnessed the failure of three hotels and two general stores. And the one remaining storekeeper, Z. T. Fletcher, was faltering without adequate stock to trade and sufficient capital reserves. To capitalize on this situation, three white shopkeepers opened retail businesses in the community during 1879. This marked the first white residency and commercial participation in the previously all-black settlement.

Nicodemus began to assume the appearance of a town.

William Green from Rhode Island and Samuel Wilson, a 34-year-old merchant from Massachusetts, both opened general merchandise houses which handled dry goods, hardware, groceries, and sundries.⁴⁹ C. H. Newth, an English emigrant born in 1857, had come into the area from Nebraska in 1879 at the age of 22, and had settled on a homestead 3 miles from Nicodemus.⁵⁰ That same year he married the daughter of A. Woodard of Roscoe and moved into town to open a drug store and physician's office. In 1880, he added a meat market to his operation, which in April was reported "on the way with a fair prospect of having meat soon."⁵¹ Nicodemus had from the start functioned as the religious and social focal point for the black community. These three stores, however, represented an economic shift for the colony, as it began to change from an agrarian village into a commercial center for the town's residents and the outlying farming population. Wilson, Green, and

Newth formed a new layer in the economic and social stratum of the young black community: white and mercantile.

If the expansion of a merchant class in Nicodemus represented a major step in the town's economic growth, the buildings that the newcomers built for their businesses signaled the arrival of the second generation in the small town's architectural development. The year 1879 marked the point at which Nicodemus began to rise out of the ground, with structures erected entirely above grade. **(FIGURE II-5)** Perhaps one or two rough stone houses had been put up among the dugouts on the townsite in the two preceding years. Reverend S. P. Roundtree claimed to have built the town's first stone house in June 1877.⁵² John Anderson reputedly built another that September.⁵³ But late in 1879 the town received its first truly permanent nonresidential structure when S. G. Wilson built a two-story commercial block on the northwest corner of the intersection of Third and Washington Streets. **(FIGURE II-6)** Early the next year, William Green completed a similar two-story building across Third Street on the northeast quadrant of the corner.⁵⁴ The structures were substantial, comprised of cut stone exterior bearing walls with dimensional lumber framing. At about the same time Newth put up a single-story frame building, west of Wilson's, to house his drug store — perhaps the first all-frame primary structure in town.⁵⁵

Facing across the street from Fletcher's then-defunct emporium, and Hall's and McCabe's land office, the Wilson and Green buildings formed two cornerstones for what was to become the center of Nicodemus' business district. Their construction marked the first substantial commercial development on the townsite and the first real delineation of a part of the town's platted grid. Washington Street was soon alternatively called Main Street and its intersection with Third became commonly known as the "public square." The corner immediately became the commercial and visual center for Nicodemus. This was reinforced in 1881, when residents dug a town water well in the middle of the intersection.⁵⁶ The influence the so-called public square exerted on Nicodemus would last for almost a hundred years, and help to shape the pattern of subsequent businesses and buildings in the townsite.

The Wilson and Green buildings acted as bellwethers for one other aspect of Nicodemus' progress: the introduction of cut stone into the architectural vernacular of the settlement. Stone was the natural evolutionary building material for Nicodemus. **(FIGURE II-7)** Like the willows, sod, and magnesias which had made up the initial dugouts, laborers could procure it directly from the land, without purchase from a manufacturer or supplier. Although harder to tool and erect than sod, stone had the alternative advantages of durability, permanence, and architectural sophistication. Structural grade limestone was cut from nearby quarries in the sides of bluffs less than two miles from town.⁵⁷



FIGURE II-5: This remarkable photograph of the Bates' family homestead near Nicodemus, Kansas offers a detailed glimpse of homestead life in semi-arid western Kansas in the late-nineteenth century. Note the simple wood frame construction of the house and the introduced vegetation. (Photograph: Irvin and Minerva W. Sayers)

Black laborers sawed building blocks at these quarries and transported them to the building sites by team-drawn sledges and wagons.

They cut and dressed the stone themselves, and at least one black stonemason, Jonas Moore, later contracted for stone supply and building construction.⁵⁸ Nicodemus was not the only area settlement to use stone as a principal building material: similar stone structures appeared concurrently in many of the predominantly white towns in the region.

The stone walls of the buildings were typically laid two wythes thick in a coursed pattern with lime grout joints. Single-stone lintels spanned over windows and doors. Rafters, joists, shingles, interior partitions, and finish trim for the new buildings were made up of milled wood components from lumber yards in Stockton, Webster, and Hill City, or from (white) B. S. White's limited stock in Nicodemus, opened late in 1879.⁵⁹ This availability of milled lumber and dressed stone marked another architectural coming-of-age for the fledgling community.

Although the two stores were the first to use tooled and coursed stone,



FIGURE II-6: Samuel G. Wilson, one of the first early white emigrants in Nicodemus, operated this general store in 1880. The modest store building was considered the "handsomest in Graham County" at that time. The business was subsequently acquired by H. S. Henrie and later purchased by W. L. Sayers. The structure was demolished in 1981. (Photograph: William T. Belleau, 1943. Source: Fort Hays State College, Fort Hays, Kansas)

others soon followed. The congregation of the First Baptist Church constructed a stone building on the northeast corner of Washington and Fourth Streets early in 1880. The group had been organized by Reverend Silas Lee soon after arrival at Nicodemus and had met in dugout dwellings around the townsite until the construction of a sod church structure in 1879. In May 1880, they completed their stone edifice.⁶⁰ Like the other stone buildings in town, the First Baptist Church was a simply-massed rectangular block. One story high with a moderately pitched gable roof, its spatial organization was characteristic



FIGURE II-7: Rectangular in plan with a clipped gable roof, the John Edwards house features cut limestone quarried from bluffs near Nicodemus. Simple cut limestone, hand-quarried from the ground, represented the most sophisticated and efficient method of construction in Nicodemus. Note the wood lintels over the windows and door. (Photograph: Clayton Fraser)



FIGURE II-8: A 1943 photograph of the First Baptist Church shows the structure after a 1930s windstorm blew off the original bell tower. Local tradition has it that the present structure, which was completed in 1907, was built around an earlier and smaller church. After the exterior of the present building was completed, the older structure was removed piece by piece through the front door. (Photograph: William T. Belleau, 1943. Source: Fort Hays State College, Fort Hays, Kansas)

of most small-scale churches of the period: linearly arranged with the main entrance centered on the front, several rows of pews flanking a center aisle, and a modest sanctuary at the rear. A single unadorned door on the south gable wall formed the entrance; the side walls were each lined with four, six-over-six, double-hung wood windows. A small bell was mounted on a tripod at the roof ridge near the front, in lieu of a steeple.

Built around the same time as the church were a handful of other stone and frame buildings, which housed a variety of functions. John W. Niles put up the Douglass House Hotel, a rough stone structure located on the corner of Second and Adams Streets. In July 1880, Anderson Boles, "a very serious old gentleman, who conducts his house with much dignity," bought the building from Niles.⁶¹ As the only guest accommodations then in Nicodemus housed in a stone structure, the Boles House ranked in 1880 as the best hotel in the county.⁶² Not surprisingly, the hotel soon outlasted both the sod-structured Myers House and the Union House. Additionally, above-grade stone and

frame houses began to appear in the townsite. S. G. Wilson erected a stone house in 1880, which was purchased the following year by the Methodists and converted into a church and mission school.⁶³ C. H. Newth also built a frame house at about the same time.

Another inn soon appeared in Nicodemus as Zach Fletcher erected his own stone hotel building on the south side of Main Street, just east of the public square. **(FIGURE II-9)** Fletcher and his brother Thomas advertised the Saint Francis Hotel as "in first-class order, prepared to furnish the best accommodations to the traveling public."⁶⁴ It supplanted the Boles House as the best in town, and the latter soon folded. (By 1886 Boles' stone building had been reduced to a pile of rubble behind Nicodemus' next hotel, the Gibson House.)⁶⁵ The Fletchers' building was massed as a simple two-story stone block with a shingled gable roof, adjoined on the east by a single-story stone kitchen with a shed roof. Featuring exterior coursed limestone walls 18 inches thick, the 2-story section was organized with a living room and dining room on the ground floor, and two guest rooms on the floor above. Fletcher later built a



FIGURE II-9: The Saint Francis Hotel (now referred to as the Fletcher-Switzer residence). Zach Fletcher's 1881 hotel is the two-story stuccoed portion to the right, and originally featured a cut limestone appearance with a one-story stone kitchen addition on the east. This historic structure has received numerous alterations and additions over the years, but remains as one of the oldest extant historic buildings in Nicodemus today. (Photograph: Clayton Fraser)

large frame barn behind the hotel to house an associated livery stable.⁶⁶

Although these commercial and institutional buildings represented Nicodemus' best, and the Wilson and Green buildings had been described in one 1881 account as "the handsomest in Graham County," they were in reality very modest structures.⁶⁷ Wilson's store was a stylistically unremarkable stone box, covered by a single-ridged gable. The unembellished entry was centered in the south gable wall and was flanked on both sides by large show-case windows. The Green Building had a more commercial character, with a shallowly sloped shed roof and stepped stone parapet. Like Wilson's building, it featured a single-leaf main entrance on the south wall, framed by two oversized fixed windows. The cornice consisted of a single-stone corbel coping. The stepped stone quoining along the two front corners of the building and the handcarved datestone inset into the front wall were probably the most noteworthy examples of stonework ever to appear in the small town. None of the buildings exceeded 2,500 gross square feet, and none featured architectural delineation much beyond simple boxed cornices or plain, dressed stone lintels. The modestly scaled stone buildings of Nicodemus reflected the typically utilitarian character of Midwestern rural architecture.

BOOM

The spring of 1886 began a period of tremendous growth and speculation for Nicodemus. The rains that had been elusive in the early 1880s had returned by 1884, bringing with them greatly improved farming. The economic base of the region had also improved, along with the rest of Kansas. As transportation networks developed, homesteaders proved up on their lands, and the region became more settled. But most importantly, the black community in 1886 was abuzz with the prospect of securing a stop on one of the westwardly expanding rail lines. Forseeing success and permanence with the eminent arrival of the railroad, the *Nicodemus Western Cyclone* boasted in July 1886:

Nicodemus, the second town in size in the county, was originally settled by the colored race, and by their patience and untiring energy have succeeded in gaining a grand glorious victory over nature and the elements, and what used to be the Great American Desert, now blooms with waving grain. The period of suffering that once characterized this country is passed and peace and plenty reigns.⁶⁸

In 1886, two of the original three white storekeepers from 1879 were still running stores in Nicodemus. C. H. Newth, who had left to operate a rural general store during the doldrums in the early 1880s, had returned in 1884. At that time he purchased William Green's store and inventory and opened the City Drug Store, a medical practice and a general merchandise operation in Green's 1880 building on the corner of Third and Washington.⁶⁹ S. G. Wilson

was the only one of the original white merchants who had remained in business continuously since 1879, prompting the *Western Cyclone* to praise him: "S. G. Wilson's name is a household word in the entire county; having stood by the people in their hours of want, well does he deserve the respect he now commands." Wilson had run as the Republican candidate and was elected Graham County treasurer in 1885.⁷⁰

These merchants were soon joined by several other store owners, both black and white, vying competitively for the revitalized market in and around Nicodemus. In May 1886, the town had three general stores, two implement dealers, blacksmith shop, hotel, livery stable, physician, stone mason, harness maker, barber shop, real estate broker, and loan company. Additionally, white editor A. G. Tallman had started a weekly newspaper, the *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, in May.⁷¹ By mid-June, between 25 and 30 new structures were under construction.⁷² Milled lumber was by then readily available from several sources. Although Nicodemus still did not (and never would) have a full-fledged lumber yard of its own, transportation from yards in Webster, Hill City, and Stockton had improved, and the materials for construction were brought in by wagon on a regular basis.⁷³ The boom encouraged quick construction of commercial and residential structures; most were light-timber framed and wood sided. Some merchants, however, continued to erect stone buildings.

One of these was the owner of the Gibson House Hotel. After the Boles House closed sometime before 1885, the Saint Francis Hotel had been left as the town's only hostelry. With limited facilities, though, the structure was filled to capacity most nights.⁷⁴ Early in 1886, Eliza Smith, an emigrant from Denver, began construction of a second hotel on the corner of Second and Washington.⁷⁵ In August she opened the Gibson House for business. A 30-foot-square, 2-story stone block, the building contained 11 guest rooms and was the first traditionally configured hotel built in Nicodemus.⁷⁶ Like the Saint Francis, it had an attached dining room and a detached frame livery barn at the rear. Smith sold the hotel the next year to black businessmen David Williams and Samuel Garland, who redecorated it and rechristened it the Commercial House.⁷⁷ As the building changed hands again a year later, it was again renovated and renamed the Fisher Hotel.⁷⁸

Another major commercial stone building erected in 1886-1887 became the showroom for H. S. Henrie's general store. Harvey Henrie had bought out S. G. Wilson's stock in September 1886, when the latter closed his store to become the county treasurer.⁷⁹ Henrie moved into Wilson's building on the public square and within a month had built a new sidewalk in front. In November he began construction on a new stone store building on the south side of Main Street, across from the First Baptist Church.⁸⁰ Martin Lavell was contracted to provide 25 cords of cut stone for the walls and foundation of the 40-by-64-

foot, single-story structure. Framing was completed the next spring, and in June 1887, Henrie was open for business in the new building.⁸¹ Like the stone commercial blocks put up seven years earlier by Wilson and Green, the Henrie Building was very utilitarian — a foursquare box featuring only minimal ornamentation.

A more modest — and more typical — structure was the store built by Foster Williams on the north side of Main Street, across from Henrie's store. Williams had moved to Nicodemus from Memphis in 1886. Starting with limited means, he opened a grocery and general mercantile store, replaced Z. T. Fletcher as the town's postmaster, and within months of his arrival had become one of the town's most successful businessmen. The building he erected to house the post office and his booming grocery and general mercantile business was a single-story, frame structure, about 20 by 25 feet, with a plain false-front facade. The double-leaf main entrance was covered by a simple porch, and was flanked on both sides by double-hung windows. The gable roof was wood-shingled, the exterior walls shiplap wood-sided, and painted only on the front. Architectural detailing was limited to a simple boxed cornice across the parapet of the facade wall. On the front of the building, Williams painted a sign on the siding, "F. Williams, General Merchandise," in stylized block letters. His business typified the commercial buildings which were sprouting up along Washington Street during Nicodemus' boom period. Quickly and cheaply erected, they were characteristic of first-generation, commercial buildings found in emerging small towns across the West and Midwest.

One type of commerce conspicuously absent from Nicodemus was any sort of pleasure establishment. The Nicodemus Town Company had determined from the start that lot ownership would carry with it a degree of enforced social responsibility. Officers of the company were adamant prohibitionists and included in the town charter a device to assure that Nicodemus would remain dry. When people bought lots from the company, they were required to sign a covenant forbidding the sale of intoxicating beverages on their lots for five years after the date of purchase. Moreover, the town charter prohibited saloons and liquor stores.⁸² Residents seemed scrupulous in upholding a strong and highly visible moral ideal for the black community. No saloon, card room, or house of prostitution is known to have ever operated. Despite the official commitment to temperance in the town charter, however, some 50 residents signed a petition in early 1887 to allow Walt Korb to dispense "prescription whiskey" at his drug store.⁸³

As the townsite began to mature into a more characteristic Midwestern settlement, some of the residents became more self-conscious about the visual image that Nicodemus projected. They pointed to the vestigial soddies and dugouts still scattered around the townsite. "Nicodemus begins to assume the

appearance of a town," stated the *Western Cyclone* in July 1886. "Why can't we have some of the old sod ruins leveled off and begin to think of planting trees and devise (sic) other means to beautify our town? With the anticipation of a lumber yard and the location of several new business houses we expect such a boom as the past is only a foreshadow of."⁸⁴

Apparently no such townwide beautification ever developed. One reason for this is that Nicodemus was never incorporated as a town. Without a municipal framework, no governmental zoning existed to propose landscaping, enforce building codes, or to direct the type and location of commercial and residential development on the townsite. A form of defacto zoning was clearly in effect in 1886, though, as new structures were springing up. Washington Street had been unofficially renamed Main Street. The principal commercial corner in town had been delineated six years before by Fletcher, Wilson, and Green as Third and Main (Washington) Streets. This developmental inertia, combined with the supposition that a railroad would be eventually routed through the town along Adams Street, tended to pull subsequent development to the northern tier of townsite lots.

With virtually all of the construction occurring in the north, the southern half of the townsite, where the original dugouts had been located, received comparatively little activity during the boom. Nicodemus had been laid out by the Nicodemus Town Company using a rectangular grid with 49 blocks, each 320 by 300 feet, with 24 lots along a central east-west alley.⁸⁵ Most of the lots in this ambitious plat had been bought in multiplot parcels by speculators, however, and had never been developed. A large portion of the townsite also remained undeveloped. Although the block corner points for the town grid had been surveyed and staked by D. N. Minor in 1880, and resurveyed by County Surveyor Billings in 1886, apparently many of the proposed streets in the south and west sections of the townsite had not been graded.⁸⁶ Only First, Fourth, and Seventh Streets extended south of Adams, and Fifth and Sixth Streets were probably no more than footpaths over most of their lengths. Jackson and Madison Streets existed only in truncated form; Monroe and Jefferson Streets appear never to have been built at all.

The original plat had not differentiated between business and residential lots, nor had it given developmental direction through street layout or naming. (FIGURE II-10) Ordinarily, Midwestern towns were platted with two sizes of lots: residential lots were sized for average single-family residences and were typically 50 by 100 feet, or 50 by 120 feet; business lots were usually smaller, typically half the size of residential lots. Nicodemus' house lots, though, were unusually narrow and deep — 25 by 150 feet — and were thus sized the same as the business lots. With this organization, the central business district was not delineated explicitly on the original plat, other than by First and Third Streets,



FIGURE II-10: Aerial photograph of Nicodemus, Kansas in 1953. Seventy-six years after its founding, the townsite still has a barren, isolated appearance. The intersection of the two wider unpaved streets (Washington and Third Streets), at the center of the photograph, was referred to as the "public square." Note the general scarcity of trees, though a consciously planted group can be seen at the lower left, located at what is referred to today as town park. (Photograph: Bernice Bates)

which had been platted 20 feet wider than the rest. (As it turned out, the principal street in town would be neither of these, but an east-west artery — Washington Street. Curiously, the northernmost street on the town plan is named South Street, indicating perhaps that the Town Company had planned a vastly enlarged town which would expand northward.) The only appreciable difference between the two lot types lay in the prices set by the original Town Company: residential lots had been priced at \$5 each, business lots at \$75. (FIGURE II-11)

Commercial and residential expansion fueled construction in town, and by the winter of 1886 Nicodemus had about 150 residents.⁸⁷ Newly built store buildings lined Main Street in the blocks immediately east and west of the public square. The intersections with Second and Fourth Streets soon became secondary commercial corners. The Second Street corner eventually featured the Gibson House Hotel, J.B. Crowley's General Store, and the Masonic Lodge.



FIGURE II-11: Nicodemus Town Company Membership Certificate, printed ca. 1870. Five dollars entitled a newly arrived member to choose any 25' x 150' vacant townsite residential lot; unusually narrow and deep lots for Midwestern towns being platted at the same time as Nicodemus. Business lots were sized the same, but cost \$75. (Source: Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas)

(FIGURE II-12) The Fourth Street corner was anchored by the stone First Baptist Church (1880), across from which David Williamson erected the Farmer's Joint Stock Company store in 1887. Smaller frame structures infilled between the principal stone corner building.

The Bank of Nicodemus was located, predictably, in the heart of the downtown area, just off of the public square. A. L. McPherson, the bank's white owner and cashier, came to the area from Jewell County, Kansas, and bought a small unfinished frame building on Main Street in November 1886.⁸⁸ He immediately began remodeling it into a bank. Two weeks later the safe arrived from Mosler, and by mid-December the building was reported completed except for the painting.⁸⁹ By the end of the year, the Bank of Nicodemus, the town's first financial institution, was open for business. With this, Nicodemus had become the financial, as well as commercial and social, center for the black community in Graham County.

The amount of construction activity in Nicodemus was modest by most standards, but the heated atmosphere continued into the first part of 1887. During that spring, J. B. Crowley completed his new frame store building — the largest structure in town — on the corner of Second and Main.⁹⁰ For a period, frame houses were being completed at a rate of one per week.⁹¹ And it appeared that Nicodemus would finally get its full-scale lumber yard when the Chicago Lumber Company bought eight lots north of Main Street.⁹² By August, the *Nicodemus Enterprise* reported: “four general stores, two grocery stores, two drug stores, two hotels, two livery stables, two millinery stores, one bank, two land and loan agents, one law firm, one physician, two blacksmith shops, one shoe shop, one barber shop, two implement dealers, two good church buildings and a 1500 dollar public school building now in the course of erection.”⁹³ Nicodemus was nearing its zenith of development.

The prosperity that Nicodemus was experiencing was not unlike those of

many small Midwestern towns in anticipation of rail service. Nor was it the only one in the area. Five other towns had been formed in Graham County in the late-1870s: Roscoe, Millbrook, Gettysburg, Smithville, and Hill City. These were predominantly white, and with more sufficient start-up capital most had advanced more rapidly through their initial stages than Nicodemus. By 1879, the six towns were vying with varying degrees of success for the temporary seat of newly formed Graham County.⁹⁴ Although Nicodemus was the oldest of the six communities and had campaigned for the county seat designation, the black town lost the highly contested petition drive to Millbrook and was forced to concede to its white neighbor. Gettysburg and Smithville never amounted to much and folded soon thereafter. Roscoe had been the first platted; it grew to be the largest town in the county, but was abandoned in favor of Hill City in 1886. Hill City itself had experienced uncertain beginnings, but early that spring, like Nicodemus, it had entered a speculative boom. Millbrook tried to keep pace but could not. After a large portion of the town was destroyed by a cyclone in August 1887, the county seat was transferred to Hill City, and Millbrook was gradually deserted.

Unlike the development in Nicodemus, which was financed by several small businessmen, Hill City benefitted tremendously from a single wealthy investor — J. P. Pomeroy.⁹⁵ A businessman from Massachusetts, Pomeroy erected several substantial commercial structures in the town, including the county courthouse (1888), and poured hundreds of thousands of dollars of capital to fan the economy of the town and the region.⁹⁶ Pomeroy and several other minor white businessmen were responsible for the rapid expansion of Hill City through the late-1880s. The same railroad anticipation that buoyed Nicodemus boosted Hill City a great deal more, and the “metropolis of north-west Kansas,” W. R. Hill’s alternative creation, flourished along with Nicodemus.⁹⁷

Parcels of Nicodemus town lots and tracts of outlying land changed hands quickly in characteristically speculative fashion. Speculators treated land, both raw and developed, as a marketable commodity, and some of Nicodemus’ merchants dealt in real estate as a sideline to their retail businesses. In 1886, a group of the town’s leading businessmen, both black and white, formed the Nicodemus Land Company as a financial venture to handle investment properties and broker land transactions.⁹⁸ With much to gain from a rapidly escalating real estate market, the Land Company was an active supporter of the boom; it sold 400 acres in a single week in July 1886.⁹⁹ That month the company advertised: “The best land in all Kansas is in Graham County, in the beautiful Solomon Valley — come and see for yourself. Come one and all, and settle in the garden. Thousands of acres of wild lands, improved farms and stock ranches for sale in Graham and Rooks counties. If you want to get land



FIGURE II-12: Masonic Hall (built ca. 1880) was photographed in 1943. This cut limestone structure housed membership functions for the Masons and its affiliated women’s group, Eastern Star. Located at the corner of Washington and Third Streets, the building was used for ice cream socials and dances in the 1920s and 1930s, until the larger township hall was completed in 1939. Falling into a pattern of general disuse and neglect, the building became a safety hazard and was razed in 1972 to make way for a children’s playground on the site. (Photograph: William T. Belleau, 1943. Source: Fort Hays State College, Fort Hays, Kansas)

cheap, call on us soon, as land is rapidly increasing in value."¹⁰⁰

In the midst of this, editors of both the town's weekly newspapers were promoting heavily. "Nicodemus is on the boom! Boom, boom, boom, BOOM!" boomed the *Western Cyclone* in March 1887.¹⁰¹ Competing editors A. G. Tallman and H. K. Lightfoot often compared the black community favorably with nearby white towns and encouraged land speculation for profit. The *Enterprise* boasted: "Nicodemus is surrounded by the finest farming country in North-West Kansas, and money invested here will realize to the investor one hundred percent in twelve months."¹⁰² The *Western Cyclone* tried to downplay land speculation in a May 1887 article, while at the same time fanning the boom: "Real estate in this city 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."¹⁰³

In September 1886, W. R. Hill, as Pomeroy's agent, bought 80 acres of land south of the townsite as the location, it was believed, for a future railroad depot (for a more comprehensive examination of the town's attempt to attract a railroad, see chapter 1).¹⁰⁴ The following January, representatives from the town began negotiating with the Missouri Pacific Railroad for favorable routing of the road in exchange for a cash subsidy from the townships of southeast Graham County.¹⁰⁵ Early in 1887, Nicodemus learned that both the Santa Fe and Union Pacific railroads were also contemplating rail extensions through the area, and town promoters began talking separately with officials of these other two companies.¹⁰⁶ In March 1887, optimism was at an all-time high when the town overwhelmingly approved a bond issue for the cash award for the Missouri Pacific. The *Western Cyclone* jubilantly reported:

Last Tuesday was a day long remembered in Nicodemus: for that day the people decided by overwhelming majority that we would be a cross-roads postoffice no longer, but that ere another year should pass, that we should develop into a town, with all the advantages that are to be derived from a railroad and telegraphic communication with the outer world. The price of real estate has already taken a jump and is being eagerly sought after by outside parties. New business men are looking over the town preparatory to locating here, outside capital is beginning to look this way, and the boom is on. Not a mere blow, but a boom that will roll on indefinitely.¹⁰⁷

BUST

But a railroad would never come. Construction of commercial buildings continued into 1887. The pace, however, had begun to slow by late summer when no solid news of a railroad was forthcoming from either the Union Pacific

or the Missouri Pacific railroads. The *Western Cyclone* repeatedly ran encouraging notices: "As yet we are without a railroad but no less than five lines have been surveyed through the county during the past year. Three of these we are sure of obtaining."¹⁰⁸ Despite the printed optimism, confidence in the small town's future had begun to wane.

Success for a speculation town in the nineteenth century depended on a wide range of factors. Although disparate and unpredictable, these centered on the confidence of potential investors and residents in the area's and the town's future. Simplistically put, an upstart community typically depended on attracting two principal entities for survival: transportation and government. Probably the single most important determinant was whether the town could secure a link on one or more of the national or regional railroads. As a further symbol of stability and recognition, a community would also compete with rivals to attract a significant governmental facility: the county seat on a local level, or on a state level, the State Capitol, university, or penitentiary. Nicodemus had already conceded the county seat designation to Hill City. Failure to secure a stop on a railroad — any railroad — would likely spell disaster.

In September 1887, the townspeople learned that the Missouri Pacific Railroad had rejected the township's subsidy offer, and would instead follow a route between Stockton and Colorado, which would not include Nicodemus. The attention of the town was then turned toward the Union Pacific and the Santa Fe railroads, and spirits were high during the summer of 1888, when construction crews began laying the grade for the Salina-Oakley Branch of the Union Pacific through eastern Graham County. But the track was laid south of the Solomon River; Nicodemus had again been bypassed. The Santa Fe soon announced that it, too, would not be entering the town. The frustrating realization that all three railroads had passed by Nicodemus was exacerbated by the fact that the Union Pacific, which was also heavily involved in land speculation and town promotion, had decided to create a town of its own along its newly-laid rail line, just six miles south. Inelegantly named Bogue, it had begun as a camp for the railroad's construction crews. It was platted by the Union Land Company, a subsidiary of the Union Pacific Railroad, in September 1888. The formation of a rival commercial center with a rail link immediately halted Nicodemus' business growth and precipitated a catastrophic decline for the black settlement.

Optimists in town still looked forward to the arrival of another railroad in 1888 or early 1889. In September 1888, the *Nicodemus Cyclone* tried to stem the growing tide of desperation:

We are sorry to see several of our businessmen 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 businessmen 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.¹⁰⁹

But the majority of the shopkeepers reacted no differently than their counterparts in countless other failing Midwestern towns when faced with more promising prospects elsewhere: they packed up and moved. By October 1888, most of the leading businessmen had either moved from Nicodemus or were preparing to do so. (This included *Nicodemus Cyclone* editor J. E. Porter, who, ironically, was himself preparing to flee as he implored others to stick it out in Nicodemus. Two months after this editorial appeared in the last issue of the paper, Porter opened a drug store in Bogue.)¹¹⁰ When it became apparent that the town would no longer support the level of commerce which had thrived during the peak years, the white shopkeepers all closed their businesses and moved either to the rival town or out of the area. A. L. McPherson was among the first to leave, taking with him Nicodemus' only bank business. This he soon transformed into the Bank of Bogue.¹¹¹ Borin and Taylor closed their Banner Livery Stable, and J. C. Parrish moved his stock of dry goods and boots to Bogue.¹¹² Even the venerable C. H. Newth closed his commercial and professional interests in Nicodemus.

**Don't get frightened. Hold on to your property
and be ready to enjoy the real boom that will surely come.**

Most of the black merchants left as well. Foster Williams, Samuel Garland, H. S. Henrie, A. N. Harper, and David Williamson numbered among the dozens of prominent blacks who moved from Nicodemus in 1888 and 1889. Some families joined the back-to-Africa movement, a remigration of blacks to Liberia or the Gold Coast, sponsored by several independent organizers. Many of the families stayed within the black community of Graham County, relocating in Bogue, Hill City, Millbrook, or into the countryside. A sizeable minority moved westward to Colorado or California. Garland, "one of the (town's) most influential colored men," closed his real estate and implement sales businesses and led six other families to Colorado in 1913 to start the Manzanola Colony in the Arkansas River Valley.¹¹³

Along with the shopkeepers went many of their buildings. Most of Nicodemus' frame commercial structures were moved, either intact or in pieces, to Bogue.¹¹⁴ Even some of the masonry structures were reportedly dismantled and moved to the new town, stone by stone. The exodus resembled



FIGURE II-13: Historic photograph taken in front of Samuel G. Wilson's store (later called Sayers Store). George Sayers is seen standing at left, Zach Lewis sitting on the bench, and George Fletcher sitting on the step. (Photograph: Bernice Bates)

more of a stampede than a trickle, taking place during the three months between September and December of 1888. The Nicodemus correspondent for the *Bogue Signal* stated hopefully in December that, "At present, we have loaned all our vacant buildings to Bogue until the C.B.R.R. from Stockton is built to this place, which will be in early spring."¹¹⁵ By the end of the year, Bogue consisted of 103 people and 37 buildings, most of which had been moved from Nicodemus.¹¹⁶ The commercial center of Nicodemus by that point had been decimated. Only a few of the buildings erected on Main Street over the previous two years still remained.

SUBSISTENCE

A few black merchants remained. Some had been among the first colonist groups of the 1870s. The Fletcher brothers, Nicodemus' perennial capitalists, still operated the Saint Francis Hotel (stylishly renamed the Hotel de Saint Francis), the livery stable, and an implement sales business. Jenny Fletcher, Zach's wife, ran a millinery shop. Jake Riley operated another livery stable, and A. J. Lovelady had bought out A. N. Harper's general store in February 1889.¹¹⁷ At least one instance of remigration back to Nicodemus from Bogue occurred in spring of 1889. Louis Welton, one of the original black colonists,



FIGURE II-14: Looking west down Washington (Main) Street from the Second Street intersection, in 1922. This extremely rare photograph gives a glimpse of the town's decline in the decades immediately following the failure of a railroad to locate here. In the left foreground is Julia Lee's Cafe; beyond is the Fletcher-Switzer House, formerly the Saint Francis Hotel. On the north side of Washington is (from front to rear) the Masonic Hall, Sayers Store, and the old First Baptist Church (its bell tower still intact). A dog seems to be one of the town's few residents. (Photograph: Ernestine VanDuvall)



FIGURE II-15: Looking east down Washington (Main) Street from the Second Street intersection, ca. 1940. Compare this view with that of Figure II-14, and the only noticeable changes in almost twenty years are the installation of electric poles and the construction of Township Hall (1939). The stormy appearance of this photograph recalls the great dust storms which lashed the town in the "Dirty '30s." (Source: Black American West Museum, Denver, Colorado)

sold his farm for \$1000 and 5 lots in Bogue and then returned 2 months later to reopen a livery stable in Nicodemus.¹¹⁸ But this was clearly the exception. The others would never return. Fletcher and the others directed their newspaper advertising to the *Bogue Signal* until it, too, ceased publication in November 1890. With commerce dwindling, Nicodemus merchants found it difficult to compete with retail outlets in Bogue and Hill City and eventually closed their businesses.

(Nicodemus') early glory is gone: the highways and the railroads all passed it by, and the stone of some of its important buildings has been hauled away.

Hill City, by comparison, continued to thrive throughout the 1890s. The Union Pacific had crossed the Solomon River west of Nicodemus to allow for a depot in Hill City, securing the town's place as the commercial and governmental center for the county. In November 1888, as Nicodemus was agonizing over its breakup, the population of Hill City had been boosted to almost 500. By one report the bustling community had four newspapers, six general stores, three drug stores, three banks, four hotels, three restaurants, ten real estate offices, two bakeries, three livery stables, three hardware stores, three lumber yards, five carpenter shops, two wagon shops, and several other active businesses.¹¹⁹ Town lots were selling for between \$25 and \$75, and business properties sold for \$300 and \$400.¹²⁰ Bogue, it seems, fared only marginally better than Nicodemus. Not incorporated until 1910, the small railroad town had been one of three in Graham County platted by the Union Land Company in 1888, and had never really gained the commercial momentum necessary for prosperity.

After the economic disintegration in 1888, many black farmers who had been living in Nicodemus began to return to their original homesteads in the surrounding township. Some had held both town lots and homesteaded lands in the quarter sections nearby, and had moved into Nicodemus during the prosperous times. When their more lucrative town jobs as retailers, laborers, teamsters, or construction workers disappeared, they returned to agriculture for subsistence and income. Although the townsite and the surrounding community suffered a decline in population from the peak years, the population in Nicodemus Township apparently stabilized after 1890, and remained steadily around 300 people until 1905.¹²¹ Successive crop failures in 1889 and 1890 forced a number of black farmers off their farms, either voluntarily or through foreclosure. As some of the land was bought by whites, the racial composition of the township began to shift back away from all-black to a more integrated balance.

Although the regional economic base had expanded considerably over the preceding dozen years, the commercial climate in Nicodemus itself after 1888 quickly reverted to its pre-1879 state, with blacks running basic-service businesses for an overwhelmingly black clientele. Even in its heyday, Nicodemus had never been incorporated as a town. Conversely, at its nadir after the exodus to Bogue, the townsite still remained the social and spiritual center for the surrounding black community. By 1890, the financial sector had left and the commercial sector was drastically curtailed. The population of Nicodemus Township dwindled from a little over 400 in 1888, to 317 in 1890; the population of the townsite itself is thought to have declined even more dramatically.¹²² Nicodemus continued to exist into the twentieth century, but in a diminished function. By the turn of the century, the small community had settled into its sometimes uneasy role as small, poor agricultural village.

After 1890, the developmental history of Nicodemus slowed dramatically. The town never experienced its long-sought revival. Few new buildings of note were erected, and as later businesses failed or people vacated their residences, many of the existing buildings were abandoned, allowed to deteriorate, and eventually were razed or moved. Farming improvements were made only as the result of increased mechanization. Yet, the community, which had always been based on a subsistence economy, continued to avert economic insolvency. As original settlers moved or passed away, fewer people moved in to replace them, and with each succeeding generation the population dwindled. Norman Crockett in *The Black Towns* described the town's plight:

Indeed, "things" had changed. From a population of approximately six hundred in 1877, Nicodemus, Kansas, dwindled to less than two hundred by 1910. Poverty then settled over the town. A visitor here in 1918 found only two businesses in existence, one a restaurant with a "two-by-four counter, a box turned upside down for a table, and the rest of the fixtures of the same type." At the time, most of Nicodemus' sixty residents lived in dilapidated houses, few of which showed a sign of paint in recent years. The old men of the town ritually gathered at the post office around three o'clock every afternoon to talk over the happenings of the day while waiting for the mail to arrive. In 1939, a researcher for the Federal Writers' Project saw children playing in the dusty streets before wooden or stone huts that contain only the bare necessities — often wooden chairs and a table, a stove and an iron bed. One tavern was all that remained of Nicodemus' once-proud business community, only churches possessed electricity, and those wishing to make a telephone call had to travel six miles to Bogue. No stores remained in 1950, and three years later the government withdrew its post office there. The black haven on the Solomon had become almost a ghost town.¹²³

The *Wichita Beacon* reported the forlorn condition of the town in 1933:

(Nicodemus') early glory is gone: the highways and the railroads all passed it by, and the stone of some of its important buildings has been hauled away. Its streets now are grass-covered ruts and there is only a fourth class post office maintained in a parlor of a home. It is still the home of 300 descendants of the first settlers who till the soil and are happy in the homes that were literally hewed from the earth by their fathers.¹²⁴

Over the years the appearance of the townsite gradually changed as the older buildings were razed or altered and new buildings were constructed. Wilson's and Green's buildings had escaped the flight to Bogue, as had the First Baptist and A.M.E. Churches and the Saint Francis Hotel. The Green Building was made into the Masonic Temple in 1893. The Masons, customary second-floor dwellers, occupied the upper level, and a series of marginal retailers occupied the space below. The Wilson Building was purchased in 1900 by G. M. Sayers, who operated the town's only general store, and later gas station, for decades to follow. The Saint Francis Hotel was turned into a private residence by heirs of Z. T. Fletcher, and subsequently received numerous additions. The First Baptist Church eventually was left as the only active congregation in town; the building was greatly expanded by the addition of a side anteroom and corner steeple after the turn of the century. Since then, the exterior stone walls have been stuccoed and buttresses added.

Throughout Nicodemus' history, its residents made only a modest aesthetic impact on the land. The town's utilitarian, small-scaled buildings reflect this conservative trend. Characteristically, very little was done to provide landscape amenities for the booming commercial district during its heyday, beyond construction of wood plank sidewalks in front of the store buildings. (Even this was done on an individual basis by the store owners; the walks tended to be placed piecemeal alongside the dirt thoroughfares.) Dirt streets extended to the front doors of many stores and houses that lined them. Most remarkable, though, was the fact that citizens of Nicodemus had not planted any substantial number of trees before the 1950s. A small grove of cottonwood trees, planted by R. B. Scruggs, just outside of town, provided the only natural break in an otherwise treeless horizon. Contrary to almost universal Midwestern tradition, the town was virtually treeless over its first 80 years of occupancy.

Today, Nicodemus remains an unincorporated, rural agricultural village. Some of the streets have been paved, and electricity and phone service have been extended to the townsite. The First Baptist Church has been replaced as the congregation's meeting house and receives only intermittent use. The Saint Francis Hotel is vacant most of the year. Both the Green and Wilson

buildings have been razed. Yet, by all rights, Nicodemus should have disappeared after the economic collapse of 1888; most other Midwestern towns did under similar circumstances. Settled by freedmen, the town soon lost its all-black distinction when white merchants joined blacks along the main street. But when the railroads bypassed the town, the whites quickly moved out, and it is through the perseverance of the black settlers and their descendants that the town continues to survive.



FIGURE II-16: The Alexander Duvall house, ca. 1915, was part of a typical local farmstead with barns, windmills, shed, corrals, coops, granaries, and brooder houses. The frame house, which replaced an earlier sod house on the same site, was abandoned ca. 1915. (Photograph: Clayton Fraser)

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ *Nicodemus (Kansas) Western Cyclone*, 13 May 1886.
- ² James Davidson and Mark Lytle, *After the Fact* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), p. 200.
- ³ *North Topeka Times*, 11 July 1879.
- ⁴ Richard Lingeman, *Small Town America* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1980), p. 239.
- ⁵ "The Largest Colored Colony in America" advertising handbill signed by W. R. Hill, Topeka, Kansas, 16 April 1877, in "Benjamin 'Pap' Singleton Scrapbook," Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas.
- ⁶ *Atchison (Kansas) Weekly Champion*, 23 July 1881.
- ⁷ W. L. Sayers, "The Black Pioneer," *Bogue (Kansas) Messenger*, 25 February 1932. O. C. Gibbs, correspondent for the *Chicago Tribune* in April 1879 took a less romanticized (and more racist) view of the initial settlement: "In October and November of the same year (1877), large accessions were made by the arrival of new immigrants, who, with the usual want of forethought of the race, pushed out to the then extreme frontier at the commencement of winter, in almost utter lack of the means to shelter, feed, and clothe themselves during the winter," quoted in *Lawrence (Kansas) Daily Journal*, 30 April 1879.
- ⁸ *Ellis (Kansas) County Farmer*, 28 May 1959; *Hill City (Kansas) Times*, 5 September 1940.
- ⁹ George A. Root, "Biographical Sketch of Reverend Daniel Hickman," Manuscript Collection, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas, undated, *Bogue Messenger*, 25 February 1932; *Topeka Journal*, 10 April 1920.
- ¹⁰ *Hays (Kansas) Daily News*, 31 July 1955.
- ¹¹ *Hill City Times*, 4 September 1940.
- ¹² *Ibid.*; interview with Bernice Alexander Bates, by La Barbara Fly, 29 June 1983.
- ¹³ *Atchison Weekly Champion*, 23 July 1881; *Lawrence Daily Journal*, 30 April 1879.
- ¹⁴ Root, "Biographical Sketch of Reverend Daniel Hickman;" Glen Schwendemann, "Nicodemus: Negro Haven on the Solomon," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, vol. 34, no. 1 (Spring 1968), p. 18; Noble L. Prentis, *A History of Kansas* (Winfield: E. P. Greer, 1899), p. 153.
- ¹⁵ Interview with Alvin Bates, by La Barbara Fly, 29 June 1983.
- ¹⁶ Catherine Wiggins Porter, "Building a Kansas 'Soddy' — 1885," *The Kansas Magazine* (Manhattan: Kansas State College Press, 1942); interview with Juanita Williams Redd, 8 July 1983, Bernice Alexander Bates, 7 July 1983, Ola Wilson, 1983, by La Barbara Fly.
- ¹⁷ *Atchison Weekly Champion*, 23 July 1881.
- ¹⁸ Two later Nicodemians, Alvin and Bernice Bates, recalled life in a soddy. Alvin: "I know that the tops of them were made out of dirt, sod and willows. No floor in them; just dirt floor. I know my grandmother's sod house, I remember particularly. She swept the floor so much that when you stepped in the door, it was about that much lower than the door. You know, sweeping it every day, why you sweep all the dirt away." Bernice: "When it'd rain, mostly it'd rain, leaked and rained in the house and leaked indoors. When it started to rain, mama'd say, 'Get a pan, get a pan.' You'd hear ping, pang, and it was a regular song."
- ¹⁹ Interview with Juanita Williams Redd, by La Barbara Fly, 8 July 1983.
- ²⁰ *Lawrence Daily Journal*, 30 April 1879.
- ²¹ *Atchison Weekly Champion*, 23 July 1881.
- ²² Interview with Juanita Williams Redd, by La Barbara Fly, 8 July 1983.
- ²³ *Kansas City (Missouri) Star*, 26 January 1905.
- ²⁴ Interview with Ora Wellington Switzer, by La Barbara Fly, 23 June 1983.
- ²⁵ *Atchison Weekly Champion*, 23 July 1881.
- ²⁶ Orval L. McDaniel, "A History of Nicodemus, Graham County, Kansas" (Master's Thesis, Fort Hays State College, Hays, Kansas, 1950), pp. 45-46; *Topeka Capital*, 15 November 1953.
- ²⁷ Interviews with Anita Alexander, Juanita Williams Redd, and Alvin Bates, by La Barbara Fly, 8 July 1983.
- ²⁸ McDaniel, pp. 45-46.
- ²⁹ Abraham T. Hall to Kathryn Henrie, Manuscript Collection, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas, 6 September 1937.
- ³⁰ *Topeka Capital*, 29 August 1937.
- ³¹ One Nicodemus resident, when asked in 1879 if he was sorry to have come, replied: "It seems to me as if de right thing for ebery man to do was to git a home; and heah's the only place where we could git it; and Isa bound to stick to it and ain't sorry I come." *Chicago Tribune*, 25 April 1879.
- ³² *Smith Center (Kansas) Pioneer*, 21 March 1879.
- ³³ These schools were all privately owned. The first public school district in Graham County was organized in Nicodemus on 19 June 1879. Kansas State Board of Agriculture, *First Biennial Report of the State Board of Agriculture*, vol. 6, p. 378; *Kansas City Star*, 6 January 1879.
- ³⁴ Several white-operated state and regional newspapers watched Nicodemus' progress with interest, and reacted respectfully when the black community persisted despite the enormous hardships. O. C. Gibbs, correspondent for the *Chicago Tribune*, wrote: "This is the only colony organization I have ever known in the West which has not gone to pieces through internal commotion," as quoted in *Lawrence Daily Journal*, 30 April 1879. Noble Prentis reported to *Atchison Weekly Champion* in 1881:

"Nicodemus. There was something genuinely African in the very name. White folks would have called their place by one of the romantic names which stud the map of the United States, Smithville, Centreville, Jonesborough; but these colored people wanted something high-sounding; and biblical, and so hit on Nicodemus. A village like Nicodemus, with a population of colored folks, is not a novelty. To live in villages is a specialty of the race. The hopeful feature is, that so few people live in Nicodemus. . . (After) the drouth of 1880, and still, as far as I could learn, no man flinched. It must have been a great temptation, that thought of the old Kentucky home, but they did not go back. And so, amid all sorts of privations and calamities, the Kansas Kentuckians have held on to their land, and were holding it when the writer found them." *Atchison Weekly Champion*, 23 July 1881. The *Atchison* paper reported again in 1883: "One bad season after another has visited that remote region; even the present, a fruitful season elsewhere, is said to have been marked by hot winds and consequent destruction at Nicodemus. And yet the colored colonists refuse to abandon their claims and yield the title to the lands which they have gained, through so much privation and suffering." *Atchison Weekly Champion*, 1 September 1883. O. C. Gibbs wrote this commentary in 1879: "The country has not got through with the negro question yet. We thought, after Emancipation, the work of the Freedman's Bureau, and the Fifteenth Amendment, that the whole thing was settled. But the negroes have been bulldozed and abused, deprived of civil and political rights, cheated, whipped, and shot; and now they are coming North en masse, under such conditions and circumstances as to impose upon the Christianity and philanthropy of the country the duty of prompt and liberal action on their behalf. The only other alternative to settling them on (government) lands is to scatter them in small numbers in the older portions of the state, in the probability that they may find work and self-support. But this gives them no chance to secure homes of themselves, and puts their labor in competition with the laboring men already in sufficient numbers in all communities to meet any demand for labor. Intelligent colored men with whom I conversed at Kansas City, Wyandotte, and Nicodemus, express the same opinion; that they should be put on to land, given a start, and then let alone to work or starve. If left in towns, they say, they will become lazy and demoralized, and in a little time utterly worthless. But knowing as I do, what is involved in a frontier settlement in this state, it would be cruel and wicked to put them on public lands, unless they can be followed up for at least two years with intelligent supervision and necessary aid to put them in a condition for self-support," *Lawrence Daily Journal*, 30 April 1879.

³⁵ Abraham T. Hall to Kathryn Henrie; *Smith Center Pioneer*, 21 March

1879; *Kansas City Star*, 26 January 1905.

³⁶ Nell I. Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas After Reconstruction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Press, 1977), p. 150.

³⁷ Schwendemann, p. 13.

³⁸ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 13 May 1886.

³⁹ Norman L. Crockett, *The Black Towns* (Lawrence, Kansas: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1979), pp. 7-8; McDaniel, *passim*.

⁴⁰ *Topeka Commonwealth*, 19 September 1877; *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 26 August 1886; *Kansas City Star*, 26 January 1905; *Kansas: A Cyclopedic of State History* (Chicago: Standard Publishing Company, 1912), pp. 369-370; *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 5 May 1887.

⁴¹ Schwendemann, pp. 24-25.

⁴² The building was later distinguished as the polling place for the first election held in the county. Schwendemann, p. 25; *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 28 April 1887.

⁴³ *Graham County (Kansas) Lever*, 12 December 1879.

⁴⁴ Abraham T. Hall to Kathryn Henrie; Schwendemann, p. 25.

⁴⁵ "Autobiography of Abraham Thomson Hall, Sr.," as quoted in William J. Belleau, "The Nicodemus Colony of Graham County, Kansas" (Master's Thesis, Fort Hays State College, Hays, Kansas, 1943), pp. 51-53.

⁴⁶ Schwendemann, p. 22.

⁴⁷ Painter, p. 150.

⁴⁸ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 13 May 1886.

⁴⁹ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 28 April 1887.

⁵⁰ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 13 May 1886.

⁵¹ *Hill City Western Star*, 29 April 1880.

⁵² *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 5 May 1887.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Topeka Daily Journal*, 11 December 1879.

⁵⁵ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 13 May 1886.

⁵⁶ Abraham T. Hall to Kathryn Henrie; McDaniel, *passim*. The citizens of Nicodemus reportedly dug the city well 60 feet to water, but the stream flow was too strong for the lining and it kept collapsing. The well was repaired twice before it was finally filled in. As it sank several times more, it was repeatedly refilled. The well collapsed for the last time in 1905.

⁵⁷ *Graham County Lever*, 12 December 1879; *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 24 June 1887. The stone in the region was relatively free and could be fractured easily; it could be quarried on a relatively small-scale basis, with a small work force and a modest capital investment in tools and equipment.

- ⁵⁸ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 13 May 1886.
- ⁵⁹ *Hill City Western Star*, 29 April; 20 May 1880.
- ⁶⁰ Schwendemann, p. 26.
- ⁶¹ *Atchison Weekly Champion*, 23 July 1881.
- ⁶² *Hill City Western Star*, 19 February 1880.
- ⁶³ *Graham County Lever*, 14 May 1880; 4 February 1881.
- ⁶⁴ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 27 May 1886.
- ⁶⁵ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 21 April 1887.
- ⁶⁶ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 13 May 1886; 21 April 1887.
- ⁶⁷ *Atchison Weekly Champion*, 23 July 1881.
- ⁶⁸ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 15 July 1886.
- ⁶⁹ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 13 May 1886.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁷² *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 17 June 1886.
- ⁷³ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 1 July 1886.
- ⁷⁴ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 1 July 1886; 26 May 1887.
- ⁷⁵ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 13 May 1886.
- ⁷⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁷ *Nicodemus Enterprise*, 17 August 1887; *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 22 July 1887.
- ⁷⁸ *Nicodemus Cyclone*, 7 September 1888.
- ⁷⁹ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 23 September 1886.
- ⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 18 November 1886.
- ⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 17 June 1887.
- ⁸² Crockett, p. 54.
- ⁸³ *Ibid.*
- ⁸⁴ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 1 July 1886.
- ⁸⁵ This description of the original town organization is based on the Nicodemus Town Plat, surveyed and drafted by D. N. Minor and dated 14 May 1880. The plat is located at the Graham County Clerk and Recorder's Office, Hill City, Kansas.
- ⁸⁶ *Ibid.*; *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 22 July 1886.
- ⁸⁷ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 9 December 1886.
- ⁸⁸ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 18 November 1886; 13 January 1887.
- ⁸⁹ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 16 December 1886.
- ⁹⁰ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 24 March 1887.
- ⁹¹ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 26 May 1887.
- ⁹² *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 24 March 1887.
- ⁹³ *Nicodemus Enterprise*, 17 August 1887.
- ⁹⁴ Myrtle D. Fesler, *Pioneers of Western Kansas* (New York: Carlton Press,

- 1962), pp. 186-188; *Lawrence Daily Journal*, 30 April 1879; *Topeka Commonwealth*, 16 February 1879; *Hill City Lively Times*, 14 July 1881.
- ⁹⁵ Pomeroy aided Nicodemus also, but to a much lesser extent than Hill City.
- ⁹⁶ *Topeka Capital-Commonwealth*, 14 November 1888; *Hill City Times*, 2 August 1951; 27 May 1954.
- ⁹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁹⁸ The officers of the company were: Samuel Garland, president; J. T. Young, vice-president; David Williamson, treasurer; William H. Cotton, secretary; and A. G. Tallman, corresponding secretary. *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 1 July 1886.
- ⁹⁹ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 1 July 1886.
- ¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰¹ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 24 March 1887.
- ¹⁰² *Nicodemus Enterprise*, 17 August 1887.
- ¹⁰³ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 5 May 1887.
- ¹⁰⁴ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 30 September 1886.
- ¹⁰⁵ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 9, 16 December 1886; 20 January 1887.
- ¹⁰⁶ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 5 May 1887.
- ¹⁰⁷ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 24 March 1887.
- ¹⁰⁸ *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 9 March 1888.
- ¹⁰⁹ *Nicodemus Cyclone*, 7 September 1888.
- ¹¹⁰ Crockett, p. 175.
- ¹¹¹ *Bogue Signal*, 20 December 1888.
- ¹¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹¹³ *Atchison Daily Champion*, as quoted in the *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 26 August 1886; Crockett, p. 175.
- ¹¹⁴ Schwendemann, p. 30. Records regarding the moved buildings do not exist, and none of the moved buildings are known to exist still in Bogue. They have either been subsequently removed or altered beyond recognition.
- ¹¹⁵ *Bogue Signal*, 20 December 1888.
- ¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹⁷ *Bogue Signal*, 28 February 1889.
- ¹¹⁸ *Bogue Signal*, 21 March; 9 May 1889.
- ¹¹⁹ *Topeka Capital-Commonwealth*, 14 November 1888; *Hill City Democrat*, 23 February 1888.
- ¹²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹²¹ Kansas, State Board of Agriculture, *Biennial Reports of the State Board of Agriculture* (1877-1940), vols. 6-37.
- ¹²² *Ibid.*
- ¹²³ Crockett, p. 176.
- ¹²⁴ *Wichita Beacon*, 1 October 1933.



Stewart/Goins house, Nicodemus, Kansas.



Mount Olive Church and Cemetery, Nicodemus vicinity, Kansas.



Henry Williams house, Nicodemus vicinity, Kansas.



Emma Williams house, Nicodemus vicinity, Kansas.

(Photographs: Clayton Fraser)

CHAPTER III

INTO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

La Barbara W. Fly

Although few long-time residents remain in Nicodemus today, their recollections remain quite vivid and make for fascinating reading. La Barbara Fly has compiled a colorful collage of oral histories which provide a rare glimpse of twentieth-century life in Nicodemus from the Great Depression to the present. The Emancipation Celebration, held annually since 1878 and now called Homecoming, remains foremost in the minds of many Nicodemus residents and perhaps best embodies the community's intense commitment to preserve the past.

Throughout the twentieth century, Nicodemus continued its slow downward population spiral. Experiencing the same economic and population pressures facing hundreds of small Midwestern farming communities, Nicodemus witnessed its younger generations leaving to seek employment in the nation's urban and industrial sectors. For many residents, however, the decision to leave was never considered.

Graham County's 1906 *Standard Atlas* reflects the commitment to those few individuals who chose to remain in Nicodemus. Issued 25 years after the town's founding, the atlas contains a photographic listing of some of the more successful black families, farmers, stockraisers and merchants.¹ Nicodemus was well represented. For example, W. L. Sayers, outstanding county attorney, who lived and practiced in Hill City but from Nicodemus, was listed as an upstanding citizen; and G. M. Sayers (W. L. Sayers's brother) was the only merchant listed in Nicodemus (he operated a general store, vacated by H. S. Henrie in 1888, on the corner of Third and Washington Streets). Sayers Store,



FIGURE III-1: America Bates (left) and her four daughters (clockwise from Mrs. Bates): Sarah Sayers, Martha Scruggs, Rose Espolius, and Eliza Sayers. (Photograph: Bernice Bates)

stocked with dry goods and small clothing items, was supported by the 200 villagers and 300 outlying farmers.

Those residents who remained, however, promoted the town's cultural and social heritage. Literary activities increased, with clubs such as the Three K Club, Priscilla Art Club, Masons, and the Eastern Star Women's Auxiliary. A number of educated individuals would exchange printed material as it became available, staging plays, recitations for the children, and book reviews.² The Three K Club and Priscilla Art Club were similar in their directive: sponsoring drives for the less privileged, visiting the sick, sewing, and quilting.³ The Masons sponsored a dance social each spring, catered by the Eastern Star. They also sponsored drives for less fortunate families and scholarships for students.⁴ Most of the independent clubs were for adults; programs for children were generally locally conducted through the school or church.

Yet, getting to and from these events often proved difficult. Thunderstorms through spring and early summer converted the dusty streets

to quagmires, impossible for wagons to pass. To reduce the drainage problem, ditches were installed and graded periodically by the township board. Originally, these road graders were horse-drawn by teams of four to six horses. Only the main thoroughfares — Washington, Third Street from South Avenue to Adams Street, Fourth Street from Washington to Madison Streets, and Madison Street from Fourth to Seventh Streets — were graded in order to travel along the commercial corridor to church and school.

This was also true of the road system in the township. Narrow paths to and from Nicodemus were as important as the town roads since the farm land was still heavily populated in the 1920s. Township residents relied heavily upon these roads to go to school and church in Nicodemus and to travel to nearby towns for supplies. Even the Nicodemus Cemetery, approximately one mile north and one-half mile east of Nicodemus (at the county line), was relatively difficult to reach before section roads were built. The direct paths through deep grasses resulted in "roads all over the prairies" until county roads or "section roads" delineated each square mile.⁵

... that our grandchildren can read about the history. And they won't have, say, such a hard time wondering and figuring out the way we had (it) when we come along... because a lot of our young people around here now don't know nothing about the history. People never tell them any. Let them know about what happened.

— Lloyd Wellington, Nicodemus resident, 1983



FIGURE III-2: The 1915 class at Fairview School, Nicodemus, Kansas. Each year the single-room school would typically feature one class of youngsters, from grade school to high school age. After 1945, all children in the Nicodemus area went to the District No. 1 School, and the Fairview School building was moved to the District No. 1 School site, for additional classroom space. (Photograph: Bernice Bates)

Despite the absence of a reliable transportation network and without notable architectural fabric, Nicodemus continued to serve as the social-cultural center of black life in the county. The annual Emancipation Celebration, perhaps best embodied this community spirit.⁶ For most of the town's history, the celebration was held in Scruggs Grove, a small grove of cottonwoods, partially planted by R. B. Scruggs, near the river. Gradually, the small grove became recognized regionally.⁷ **(FIGURE III-3)** Most people lived nearby, so the travel back and forth for the three-day event was not inconvenient. Over the years, the celebration became a popular affair, drawing thousands of people from nearby settlements. Wagons and automobiles would line Highway 24 north of Nicodemus, for three miles in each direction.⁸ People would travel from California and Colorado back to their home to see families and friends. Everyone, blacks and whites, looked forward to the picnic — 12 to 20 food stands of barbecue, lemonade, poke salad, Sadie Hall's and Alva DePrad's fried chicken, Ora Switzer's ice cream sodas, and plenty of desserts — under the mature trees.⁹

The celebration usually opened with a spirited Friday afternoon political rally and closed on a more tranquil note with a Sunday morning church cere-

52nd EMANCIPATION Day Celebration

NICODEMUS, KANSAS

JULY 31-AUGUST 1, 1939

ANNUAL THE CELEBRATION WILL BE HELD IN THE SCRUGGS GROVE ONE MILE SOUTHWEST OF TOWN.

MASTER OF CEREMONIES EARL ALEXANDER

ENTERTAINMENT

There will be Horse Shoe Pitching each day. A purse will be given if you enter, for first and second place winners. All wishing to enter, see H. H. Clark for further information.

BAND MUSIC, Hill City High School.

BASEBALL GAMES

The teams that have entered: Hutchinson Colored Monarch, Norton League, Bogue, WaKeeney, Nicodemus Old Hickory.

3 - BIG DAYS - 3

JULY 30-31 and AUGUST 1

Fast, Classy Games Each Day.

BOXING MATCHES

Three Matches Each Day.

McCurdy and Jackson and others.

Members of the Golden Glove Contest.

PLATFORM DANCE EVERY AFTERNOON AND EVENING

FLOOR SHOW BY DIXIE MELODY ENTERTAINERS

(Mixed Group of Ten Colored Dancers) WILL BE GIVEN AUGUST 1 AT 1 p. m.

SPEAKERS OF THE DAY AUGUST 1: Jerry Driscoll, Russell; Edward J. Kirchner, Topeka; Ex-Senator Simon J. Fishman, Tribune.

OFFICE OF THE DAY: Jerry Scruggs, Rev. VanDusen. **PROGRAM:** Ollie B. Scruggs, BASEBALL GAMES, Andrew Alexander, DANCE MANAGER, A. W. White. **PRAYER:** led by Rev. M. H. Houston.

For Further Information, write or see R. H. SCRUGGS or J. D. WILSON.

FIGURE III-3: A 1939 handbill advertising that year's annual Emancipation Celebration. Held at the beginning of August each year since the founding of the town, the celebration was, and still is, the biggest social event of the year in Nicodemus. It is the one occasion that brings friends and relatives back to Nicodemus each year to enjoy the festivities and, in so doing, rekindles the spirit of the town. (Source: Black American West Museum, Denver, Colorado)

mony. Mary Elizabeth Alexander Gage remembered that the celebration was "something we looked forward to from one year to the next. I think we were as anxious for the Emancipation Celebration affair . . . as we were about Christmas."¹⁰ Picnic tables, barbecue pits, and tents would be scattered over 160 acres of the total 720 acres of Scruggs' property. In open areas on the south side of the road, carnival equipment, with their peculiar sounds and flashy lights, would entice the children for miles around and coax their parents to leave home early, going to the celebration. Often the celebration provided parents with an opportunity to persuade their children to tackle long overdue responsibilities. Gordon Williams recalled for example, "My father was farming and he always made us milk cows and do all the other chores before we could get down there to get to the dance."¹¹

But there were also festivities for adults: horse races, dice boards, card games, bingo, a band, and dance floor. As one past resident said, "Las Vegas didn't have nothing on them."¹² By far the most popular and perhaps most vividly imprinted memory was the baseball games. As Gordon Williams recalled late in life:

"We used to have some good baseball. One year they even had the Monarchs to come out and play. They all drove . . . I think 1928 Fords down . . . They drove them out from Kansas City to play, to put on a game. I don't know whether we had a team big enough to play; Nicodemus did have a baseball team, but it wasn't no competition to them, because they . . . were what they called the Kansas City Monarchs and they were a good ball club."¹³

Alvin Bates further remembered some of "the great players like Satchell Paige and all those, they use to play with the Monarchs. They use to come right here in Nicodemus."¹⁴ The Nicodemus Blues baseball team (FIGURE III-4) would play teams from Texas and Louisiana, as well as local teams from Bogue, Norton, Hill City, Wakeeney, Stockton, and Damar.¹⁵ R. B. Scruggs provided the baseball diamond and stands on a portion of his homestead. During the 1920s, the Monarchs' women's team, the Stepping Sisters, played on a makeshift field next to the Masonic Lodge.

The annual celebration at the grove was an experience for the entire family. Those families who lived a considerable distance away would camp at the grove.¹⁶ The children, especially, looked forward to the carnival, merry-go-round, ferris wheel, horse races, baseball games, and evening dances.

Everyone, of course, eagerly anticipated the good home cooking. Ora Switzer, who enjoyed the spectacle as well as anyone, provided a detailed description of the cooking:

" . . . we'd have a lot of personal stands, they would come out and serve whatever they'd chose to in their stands. Watermelon, fried chicken, barbecue, or whatever. Some of them would boil old hens

and have dumplings and all. I seen one man who put a big old cook stove in there and just run a pipe out off so it wouldn't run his face on out. He put stew stuff on that stove and have cabbage a'smelling. Now they would give you a good old dinner. They would have cornbread and everything. It was too comical for words. Because there'd be 20 stands on the ground. I ran it for five, four years myself. And managed it. And I let people come in, that's the way you made your little money. You get a little something off your concession stand, maybe you would charge \$25 for the 3 days. And then let them go and they would make it."¹⁷

Throughout the 1920s, the Emancipation Celebration remained the annual highlight. Perhaps, the celebration became even more festive, as the 1920s were some of the best years for crop yield per acre. Even today Nicodemus farmers particularly remember the mid-twenties as excellent years for corn crops. The mid-twenties relieved most farmers and strengthened their economic position before the drought devastations of the early-thirties.



FIGURE III-4: The 1907 Nicodemus Blues baseball team. Probably the most exciting and memorable activity associated with each year's Emancipation Celebration, baseball was popular with young and old; there was even a women's team called the Stepping Sisters. The Nicodemus Blues played teams from surrounding communities, as well as teams from as far away as Texas and Louisiana. (Photograph: Fred and Ora Switzer)

The stock market crash of 1929, however, brought America's prosperity to a sudden halt, affecting all strata of American society. Nicodemus was no exception. The Great Depression severely touched the American farmers who traditionally relied heavily on the stability of the marketplace to recover their previous year's planting debts.¹⁸

Kansas farmers watched helplessly through the first years of the 1930s as their crops were destroyed by a seemingly endless series of dust storms and droughts. The longest consecutive and continuous drought in Graham County occurred between 1932 and 1934, producing the most disastrous crop-raising period in the history of the county. The lack of rail service, inadequate housing and economic opportunity, and the high death rate among elderly in and around Nicodemus, exacerbated the situation, forcing more farmers into foreclosure and to abandon their farmsteads for California and the Pacific Northwest. Previously tilled land became unoccupied or fallow for a great portion of the 1930s, since those remaining had little extra means to reinvest or they were uncertain of their own survival. As a consequence, substantial black landholdings transferred to lending institutions, reducing the descendants of the original homesteaders to tenant-farmer status.¹⁹

Long-time Nicodemus residents tell tragic stories of survival and disappointment during the early-thirties. Although these descriptions parallel the commentaries of farmers throughout the Midwest, the recollections provide a colorful glimpse of life in Nicodemus during the Great Depression. Alvin Bates, long-time resident and village mechanic, farmed north of Nicodemus in the 1930s and recalled,

"I remember all of the bad years. During the dirty thirties, we couldn't raise nothing. It wasn't the fact that we didn't get any rain, it was . . . the dust. . ."²⁰

His sister-in-law, Bernice Bates (FIGURE III-5), elaborated further on the effect of the storms:

" . . . some left and some stayed. But you didn't raise anything. I know we lost all the stock that we had, horses and cows because there wasn't anything for them to eat. We couldn't raise anything."²¹

The cracked and parched ground would support neither crops nor livestock. Nearly all the livestock in Nicodemus perished. Nicodemus residents also suffered. All property — homes, pastures, fence lines, etc. — was marred with a thick layer of fine black dirt. (Many sufferers were wrapped with blankets and restricted to their home in order to keep them from literally choking to death.) Alvin's wife, Ada Bates, recalled her desperate attempt to protect their baby daughter from the dust:

"I remember well the first dust storm that I seen. It was all black in

the northwest. Billie over here was a little baby. And we had to cover her up with a wet sheet in her bed to keep her from choking to death. The dust was that thick in the house. Of course, we didn't have nothing but lamps in them days. You'd have to light the lamps right in the daytime because it was so dark."²²

Despite all attempts, dust inevitably infiltrated houses. Occasionally, this substance mixed with oil and would stick to walls, furniture, and clothes. Lamps and lights were kept burning day and night since the unexpected storm would blacken the sky for days. Juanita Williams Redd "had to hang sheets, you know, dampen 'em and hang 'em up to keep the dust from coming in so bad. When you would lay on a pillow, why you could just see where our heads were because the rest of it was just dirt."²³

I remember all of the bad year. During the dirty thirties, we couldn't raise nothing.

Even early warnings could not prevent the storm from inflicting some damage if it lingered for more than several hours. Bernice Bates recalls how a particular storm hindered her from attending her club's social:

"I was getting ready to go to a Priscilla Art Club social and we always wore white when we went and had our socials. I was standing on the side of the table pressing my white dress that I was going to wear and my husband was sitting on the other side of the table. And I looked out the west window and I saw this big black cloud coming. It was just as black as this (referring to an object on the table). I said, 'Harry, come quick and look at this cloud.' Before he could get around the ironing board, I had to lay the ironing board on the table, I don't know what I had, a washboard stuck in a chair, but by the time he got around that chair, the dirt had hit our place. And it blew out a window in the bedroom and we had to run in there and we nailed a comforter over the window and pushed a dresser up against the window to hold it. And that dirt that way blew all night long. It must have had oil in it 'cause it stuck to the walls. And, then, it just continued for, let's see, we had dust storms, not that black dirt continued that long, but old fashioned dust storms for, I imagine, two or three years."²⁴

In 1934, Nicodemus residents began a gradual recovery and methodical clean-up campaign. Slowly over the years, homes were cleaned, fences rebuilt, and cattle restocked. One resident said later, "I don't know how we, we just existed somehow. The Lord took care of us."²⁵

To assist in the nation's recovery, the Federal Government initiated several recovery programs, including the Federal Land Bank, to assist farmers on the brink of dispossession.²⁶ On July 1, 1934, Graham County contributed to



FIGURE III-5: Mrs. Bernice Bates, long-time Nicodemus resident, holding family photographs on her porch in 1983. Mrs. Bates passed away in 1984. (Photograph: La Barbara Fly)

the national recovery on the local level by establishing a Farm Bureau to immediately assist farmers and ranchers.²⁷ By 1936, residents of Nicodemus had designated S. D. Desbien as their representative to the Farm Bureau. Ironically, the common misery of the Depression, in some ways, helped to strengthen unity among Nicodemus farmers and residents. In order to minimize the struggle of future disasters, remaining farmers, both black and white, often shared equipment and manpower.²⁸

Unfortunately, only a few original black homesteaders, such as Bates and Williams, remained owners and occupants of their farms. Most farmers became tenants and rented land.²⁹ A few farmers, such as the Alexander and VanDuvall families, leased their farm land to oil companies.³⁰

During the worst years of the Great Depression, the population of Nicodemus dropped to about 40 people. Many of these were employed through Works Progress Administration (WPA) programs. For example, a team of approximately 12 men, with limited building experience, was hired to build the WPA Nicodemus Township Hall. (Figures III-6 & 7) Rock was quarried near the present Webster Reservoir in Rooks County and transported to this vacant site, where Nicodemus residents watched Garold Napue cut the stone blocks and pattern them with a mallet.³¹ Gilbert Alexander, project manager and timekeeper, supervised the two-year project.



FIGURE III-6 & 7: Dedicated in 1939, Nicodemus Township Hall is shown under construction in these historic photographs. A team of 12 black and white local residents undertook this WPA project using locally quarried stone. It is the largest structure in town today. (Photographs: Angela Bates)

While the building was under construction, residents used the largest structure available on the townsite for weekly dances — the Masonic Hall. An addition to the rear made it convenient to have dances and other social functions, such as an ice cream parlor, on the first floor. When the WPA building was completed and dedicated in 1939, community meetings, dances, and elections were held in the larger structure.³² The existence of this structure, on the corner of Second and Washington Streets, created the impetus for a town center, since it sat in the same block with the Masonic Hall, newly-established Priscilla Art Club's "Cracker Box" School building, and several restaurants, (such as Helena's, and the Green Lantern Cafe in the old Saint Francis Hotel).

Most young men and women decided not to return to Nicodemus after World War II. As a result, small farm settlements such as Fairview could no longer support their schools. In 1945, Fairview School, District No. 78, was closed and the structure was moved to the District No. 1 site, north of the Nicodemus School. Nicodemus residents, on the other hand, still generated more than enough students for District No. 1, requiring additional space for the overflow.

Many teenagers hired out in the summer to area farmers to help support their families or obtain enough money to attend college. Others helped their parents with harvest, fall ground preparation, and/or livestock chores. Learning from the lean years of the thirties, farmers selected more drought-resistant plant varieties; most began substituting wheat, milo, barley, and rye for corn. Most black farmers continued to rely on dry-land farming techniques, unable to afford an elaborate, mechanized irrigation system for their tracts. White farmers, on the other hand, began investing in various irrigation schemes.

Many families supplemented their diets with garden vegetables, native plants, and herbs found in and around Nicodemus. Some residents brought seeds from Kentucky, including lady peas, spring peas, blackeye peas, drowder peas, and sunflower peas. Native vegetables included wild lettuce (poke salad), tomatoes, dandelions, and narrow duck. The wild tomatoes were a favorite of Ora Wellington Switzer who remembered:

*They make the prettiest little old greens, and you know I saw one bunch this spring . . . and that wild tomato after it got so old why it'll got little balls that come on top, kind of like a tomato. It actually tasted like a tomato. But it sure does season up the greens good.*³³

The majority of the "greens" were found on the rolling prairie outside Nicodemus. Poke salad, on the other hand, grew wild along the river banks. "We would have to go to the creek to find the poke salad," reported Ora Switzer. "It grows in a square and you got to be sure and find the right thing. Then you cut it off."



FIGURE III-8: Nicodemus town resident Mrs. Juanita Redd, standing in front of the Henry Williams house, photographed in 1983. Mrs. Redd, who was 74 at the time, was raised in this house. Her father, Henry Williams, was the first black baby born in Nicodemus (in 1878). (Photograph: Richard McNamara)

In addition to vegetables, a surprising variety of culinary and medicinal herbs flourished near Nicodemus, including fever weed, horehound, wild sage, gourd tea, and snakeroot. Snakeroot, a bitter-tasting root taken orally for medicinal purposes, "was awful bad down in these pastures and the people dug that stuff and made money," relayed Ora Switzer late in her life. "They'd dry the root and then you'd go to town and you'd get 25 to 30 cents a pound for it. And when they was broke they would get out here and try to dig it and then take it and dry and go over and sell it to the man."³⁴

Finally, wild berries, currants, and plums were harvested seasonally. Some residents planted rows of apple, peach, and pear trees. Many harvested wild fruits and berries in and around the town. Ora Switzer recalled "we use to have chokecherries down here on the river. We'd have to hunt for them . . . currants, they grow wild. And then we get wild plums down there on the river. And I make a jelly out of things like that you know. And you make a butter from the plum because they are big enough (that) after you get your jelly to boil up, you can run it through a colander . . . pour your juice off and make your jam."³⁵

After a long period of drought and parched land in the thirties, 1951 and 1953 were years of terrible flooding. Many residents considered the 1951

flood as the worst flood the county had experienced, and in 1956, Webster Reservoir and Dam were built to reduce possible flood devastation. Ponds and terraces were also created to hold water in the fields rather than allowing it to run off as in the past.

To augment the agricultural learning experience and broaden the responsibility of young teens, Blanche White founded and sponsored the 4H Club in Nicodemus around 1940. Mrs. White's love for children found a natural and creative outlet in the activities of the club. Beginning at age 50, she devoted her time to teaching the members of the club — male and female — how to raise and care for animals, raise crops, garden, prepare meals, and beautify their townsite. In the 1940s, the beautification movement became the responsibility of the 4H Club. Mrs. White secured the trees from the county extension service agent and instructed the children in their planting and nurturing. Exposure to summer camps, county fairs, exhibitions/competitions, and other cultural events experienced by "urban" children, would often require that she get a truck from a neighbor and drive the members (ranging from 10 years old to 20 years old) to Wakeeny, Hill City, Salina, Downs, and Cawker City.³⁶



FIGURE III-9: Washington Street in Nicodemus, looking east in the 1940s. Though the Depression and dust storms of the 1930s are over, this view of the town causes one to question the town's recovery. From left to right, these structures are: the Masonic Hall, Jenny Riley's Restaurant, the Priscilla Art Club, and Township Hall. (Photograph: Black American West Museum, Denver, Colorado)

Most children looked forward to joining the 4H Club, not only for its outdoor activities, but because it symbolized the transition from child to adult. Veryl Switzer, for example, recalled "from the time I was 8 or 9 years old I always wanted to be in the 4H because all my older brothers and sisters were in and there were some things that just inspired me. . . . Then I think, after a year or two I was able to become a full-fledged member, 4H member. I think that 4H though stayed with me until I was about 17 years of age, or 18."³⁷

While teenagers flocked to the 4H, adults socialized in the network of taverns and restaurants. By the 1950s, beer was served in some of the eating establishments. An owner of such a business either occupied an existing house, moved a one-story frame unit to a site he owned and renovated it, or combined several structures in order to enlarge his enterprise. "The Joint" or "Blamm," Green Lantern Cafe (family style), Helena's, DePriest Tavern, and Blow-In Cafe provided their customers with entrees, beer, snacks, and exceptional desserts.³⁸ These restaurants not only catered to residents but also catered to area farmers. As they had developed before, all the restaurants existed within a one-block area from the Township Hall, on Washington Street and east of Third Street. This reinforced the town center concept, which began with the construction of the Township Hall in 1939. Further development and delineation of this district occurred in 1952, when the American Legion purchased the Fairview School building, located north of Nicodemus School, and had Deak King move it diagonally across from the Township Hall.³⁹ (The American Legion purchased the building, since the shrinking District No. 1 did not have use for it any longer.) By 1953, the building had been renovated for use as an American Legion Hall, and became a secondary dance hall/club space when the deteriorating Masonic Hall was not operable.

The relocation was particularly effective in stimulating community interaction at that end of Nicodemus; it generated new interest in the annual Emancipation Celebration. For more than 50 years, the celebration had been held in Scruggs Grove, despite the growing chorus of protests from carnival companies. Most carnival companies had for years complained of the inconveniences attendant to setting up their equipment amidst the trees. Finally, in 1950, the threat to discontinue service to Nicodemus was heeded.⁴⁰ Ultimately, three American Legion board members agreed to relocate the celebration on the townsite. The carnival rides were assembled just east of the Township Hall, across from the Legion Hall. The American Legion parade route was along Washington Street to the Township Hall. According to Gordon Williams, an American Legionnaire, the celebration in 1953 "was one of the largest ones they've ever had (since) they never had a carnival up in town before then."⁴¹ Like all other celebrations held before in the grove, there were hundreds of participants and spectators attending.

Around the time that the celebration transferred to the townsite, Nicodemus received overhead electric service from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Rural Electrification Administration (REA). (By 1958, only a few families had secured the service.) Prior to the electric service, residents had used oil lamps in their homes, and for the celebration, Alvin Bates had ingeniously engineered electric lights, hooking them up to a small engine which puffed and smoked.⁴² He could supply enough electricity for the bandstand and for a four-block area around the grove. (This electric supply was utilized primarily by the carnival companies.) Despite the luxury of lighting for the celebration, Nicodemians managed their community and family affairs without street lights, telephone service, or utility service.



FIGURE III-10: District No. 1 School, Nicodemus, Kansas, photographed in 1943. This one-story, wood sided structure with a hipped roof was built in 1918, on the same site of the original school, a ca. 1887 structure that burned. District No. 1 School closed in 1955 and Nicodemus children have commuted to Bogue, Kansas ever since. In 1983, the American Legion purchased this building for meetings and gatherings. Nicodemus was the first community to establish a school in Graham County, a demonstration that education was important to the black community from the outset. (Photograph: William T. Belleau, 1943. Source: Fort Hays State College, Fort Hays, Kansas)

Although public improvements were slow arriving to rural western Kansas, and particularly to Nicodemus, some other services generally taken for granted began to disappear during this period. Nicodemus lost its post office on November 30, 1953, after President Dwight Eisenhower closed thousands of rural post offices in an effort to consolidate and streamline the U.S. Postal Service.⁴³ Reverend Joe Wilson, who had been assessor, justice of peace, and postmaster for the past seven years, conducted the only business in Nicodemus in his home.⁴⁴ When the post office closed, Reverend Wilson began selling candy to the children on the townsite from his one-story residence. (This structure was a four-room frame unit with a gable roof.) As the seventh postmaster in the village since 1878, and pastor of the A.M.E. Church, he was one of the guiding forces in the community's development.

Throughout the late-1940s and much of the early-1950s, Nicodemus was considered the "center" of black affairs for Graham County. This attitude prevailed more during this period than any prior decade in the twentieth century.⁴⁵ Activities on the townsite partially generated redistribution of families in addition to the shrinking of the Fairview settlement. People began to use the townsite for various social activities, thus, existing structures were recycled and occupied. Unfortunately, residents had had very little income to maintain structures or town lots. Some efforts are worth noting: In 1949, both the First Baptist Church and the Saint Francis Hotel were stuccoed to prevent further deterioration of their limestone facades.⁴⁶ Some of the elderly relocated to the townsite for security. Many of these people had lived in the township most of their lives but felt more comfortable living in the village nearer to others their age. After high school, outmigration among young people was prevalent. By the close of the period, there were only 12 families residing on the townsite, few with children attending Nicodemus School. Based upon the reduction of demand, District No. 1 School was closed circa 1960. **(FIGURE III-10)**

1960-1974 GRADUAL DECLINE

The black population in Nicodemus continued to decline throughout the 1960s. Only 12 children attended grade school in Hill City and high school in Bogue. Most young adults had moved away, while the elderly who remained in the community either rented, sold, or bequeathed their land, to reduce the burden. Eventually, the elderly migrated to the townsite. Residents who survived on Social Security had virtually no means of maintaining their homes; thus, residential structures on the townsite deteriorated.⁴⁷ As others died, property was left unattended, creating a number of empty, decaying frame structures scattered throughout the township.

Washington Street seemed abandoned; there were more vacant lots now than structures. Most of the remaining buildings, such as Sayers Store and the

Masonic Hall, in the once-prosperous business district were vacant and stood like monuments to the earlier black colonists who had built them. Only a few of the historic structures (Nicodemus Township Hall, Saint Francis Hotel, First Baptist Church and parsonage, and Stewart/Goins house) along Washington Street were occupied or in livable condition. Although a few residences were moved on the townsite (for example, residences owned by Robert and Bertha Carter, Lloyd Wellington, Guy and Juanita Redd, and Iva Lee and Freddie Switzer), and a few others were expanded (for example, the Terry family's residence, and Clarence and Yvonne Sayers' residence), there was relatively little activity. The population reduction forced many literary, social, and cultural clubs (such as the Masons, Eastern Star, and American Legion) to inactivity. There just were not enough people to support many of the ongoing civic projects and activities.

As the population diminished, physical deterioration of historic buildings also occurred. The only business to open during this period was Nevins Restaurant in 1968. The owner, Arnetta Nevins, purchased and moved the post office building approximately one block north in 1967. She renovated the one-story frame building by covering the existing walls with asbestos siding and reroofing with asphalt shingles to open a gas station/cafe. (Ms. Nevins vacated the structure in 1973 when demand from tourists and truckers on their way to Colorado diminished.)

The emigration forced Nicodemus to evaluate its future. The large contingent of past residents who had moved to California and the Pacific Northwest were still interested in maintaining ties with Nicodemus. In 1977, these concerned individuals agreed to invest in Nicodemus' future by creating an incorporated body, Nicodemus West, Inc. The corporation, including Orlo and Verdell VanDuvall and Andre Clark, was formed to assist in business education, provide scholarships and personal loans, and finance improvement projects for their homeplace.⁴⁸ Although these families left Nicodemus for better opportunities elsewhere, they did not wish to relinquish or jeopardize the concept of community they had discovered in Nicodemus. This revitalization effort helped to make Nicodemus unique when compared to other black settlements established between 1865 and 1920. Most black settlements of this period either disappeared (for example, Allensworth, California) or were consolidated within expanding urban areas. Nicodemus, on the other hand, maintained its historic identity, in part by reaching beyond Kansas to former Nicodemus residents for financial assistance.

California residents were not the only ones who refused to sever ties with Nicodemus. Past residents of Nicodemus all around the country returned to Kansas annually to visit family and friends in nearby communities. As it became increasingly difficult to make several trips home and as the Emancipation

Celebration became a vehicle by which to get together, the title and scope of the three-day affair was altered to reflect the change. The Emancipation Celebration was renamed Homecoming and scheduled on the last weekend of July, or the first weekend of August, to allow more families to take off from their jobs and return to Nicodemus.⁴⁹ By the mid-1970s, families were planning their vacations around Homecoming and inviting their friends in respective states to join them for the weekend in Nicodemus. (FIGURE III-11)



FIGURE III-11: Emancipation Celebration (also known as Homecoming by many local residents) parade, photographed in 1983. The annual site of the celebration was moved in 1950, from Scruggs Grove along the Solomon River, to the town itself. The parade thus became one of the many festivities associated with the celebration, and residents and visitors alike participate. (Photograph: Everett Fly)

With the nation's Bicentennial approaching, residents of Nicodemus felt a paramount need to document the heritage of Nicodemus and its significance, and bring that history to the attention of more Americans. Lloyd Wellington, for example, advocated compiling a written and visual record of the town so "that our grandchildren can read about the history. And they won't have, say, such a hard time wondering and figuring out the way we had (it) when we come along. . . because a lot of our young people around here now don't know nothing about the history. People never tell them any. So I think it is

good if they'll tell everybody the history. Let them know about what happened."⁵⁰ These small but enthusiastic efforts continue today.

1975-1983 RESETTLEMENT AND RENEWAL

Throughout the years between 1975 and 1983, Nicodemus residents made concerted attempts to rehabilitate historic structures in town and within the nearby township. During these years, several houses located outside of Nicodemus, for example, homes owned by Ola Wilson, Rose Stokes, the Napue family, and Virgil Robinson, Jr., were relocated to town. Fortunately, these structures required only minor repairs. The typical residences were one-and-one-half-story frame units, covered with horizontal wood or asbestos siding, and had either a simple gable or hip roof covered with asphalt shingles. In addition, a steady flow of trailers arrived in town, owned by the Brogdens, Switzers (Harold and Veryl), and Sayers. The trailers reflected the desire by some natives to return for extended periods to Nicodemus.

In 1975, Reverend L. C. Alexander embarked upon the first significant step towards the construction of a new First Baptist Church sanctuary, just north of the existing church.⁵¹ The new structure would exist on the same site as the earlier 1880s dugouts and sod houses. Under the direction of the pastor, volunteers — past and present Nicodemus residents — executed all construction work except the brick veneer finish, which was done by a contractor from Wichita, Kansas.⁵² The building was dedicated the following September 28, 1975. Upon completion, the 1907 stone structure was converted into a Fellowship Hall and still serves the community today.⁵³

Despite the villagers' desire to preserve the significant structures, time was not always on their side; by 1972, the Masonic Hall was torn down and a marker, compiled of parapet elements of the building, was set into a concrete slab and erected.⁵⁴ In 1980, Sayers Store was also razed and removed for public safety. The stone building had remained unoccupied and deteriorating for several years prior to demolition. (The stone remnants were piled near the ruins of the Stewart/Goins house on the townsite for future use.)

Given the rapid physical deterioration, loss of human resources, and the need for assistance to help preserve that which remained, a historic district nomination was prepared for the National Register of Historic Places, by the Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation, in 1974. Nicodemus was designated and approved as a National Historic Landmark in 1976. This designation provided urgency and priority to the village's request for assistance. It also conveyed the town's survival should be a national concern.

The National Historic Landmark designation may have helped to persuade the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to award a long-awaited elderly and low income housing project in Nicodemus.

The idea was originally conceived in Ora Switzer's home in December 1969, by six young men, all natives of Nicodemus.⁵⁵ From 1970 to 1975, Lois Alexander, the Township Board, and several key citizens struggled to secure new, inexpensive housing for the elderly, and funds for rehabilitating homes owned by Nicodemus residents.⁵⁶ Their efforts were rewarded in 1975, when HUD approved the \$250,000 Turnkey Housing Project. By 1976, five duplex units were built west of the First Baptist Church, at the corner of Washington and Fourth Streets.⁵⁷ (FIGURE III-12) Before the end of the year, they were occupied. Since the HUD process was delayed, and appropriated HUD funds would not cover the intended scope of the project, community development funds were then secured to complete the community center — hall, kitchen and small office — on the southeast corner of the site, and initiate limited street pavement in 1976.⁵⁸ A township fire station to the west of the project was built in 1978, when the streets adjacent to the housing project were resurfaced. As families prepared to move into the HUD housing, or the "Villa," as local residents call it, others were preoccupied with rehabilitating their homes. Residences and other structures on the townsite underwent extensive weather-



FIGURE III-12: Mrs. Clementine Vaughn, in front of her "Villa" duplex, photographed in 1983. In 1976, a HUD housing complex consisting of five duplex units, was built at the corner of Washington and Fourth Streets. Referred to by local residents as the "Villa," this housing complex for the elderly also features a community center. (Photograph: LaBarbara Fly)

proofing, electrical and plumbing improvements, and facade restoration. By 1976, each house also had a well or cistern.

The addition of substantial housing helped to generate the return of former residents — retirees and the elderly — who wished to spend their final days in their homeplace. Lloyd Wellington, a former Nicodemus resident, decided to return in order to avoid the "hustle and bustle" of California.⁵⁹ The increase of population in the mid-1970s and an initial demand for commodity services, also drew Ernestine VanDuvall back to Nicodemus in 1974 to establish the first and only business on the townsite in ten years, Ernestine's Bar-B-Que.⁶⁰ The structure consists of a conglomerate of frame (board and batten), concrete block, and asphalt shingle.

By 1978, the population had increased to 100 residents. The increase of traffic on dirt roads and the necessity to entice others to return, resulted in the establishment of a Community Development Board, comprised of the Housing Authority executive director and the Township Board members.⁶¹ They secured HUD funds to pave the remaining streets in the townsite; since there had been only defacto zoning and structures had been built in the public right-of-way, street alignments had to conform to the existing condition.⁶² Telephone and electrical wiring were buried and curbs and gutters were installed when streets were paved.

Most residents viewed these changes with a mixture of nostalgia and a feeling of optimism. "It really gives me a good feeling to know that these things are happening in Nicodemus," reported Mary Elizabeth Alexander Gage. "Because I still think of this as home, although I was born and raised out on the farm, this is where I socialized and, of course, my brother and sister-in-law still live here. So this is where my roots are."⁶³

The demand for a more reliable water source and system was generated in the late-1970s. According to the 1980 census, taken by Yvonne Sayers, there were more than 27 families on the town site and an 11 additional families residing in the township. An Economic Development Administration grant allowed Nicodemus to install a 100-foot-tall water tower on Block 20, and a water system, which was used by the "Villa" and 7 families in town.⁶⁴

The increase of residents also generated a demand for local recreation. Washington Street developed into the chief recreational zone. With the Township Hall anchoring the east end of the block, a playground was built on the site occupied earlier by the Masonic Hall. A combination basketball/tennis court and practice court was later built in the middle of the same block.⁶⁵ The remodelled Priscilla Art Club's party room completes the village facilities which are frequently used for wedding receptions, club parties, special picnics, harvest celebrations, and Homecoming activities. Behind these facilities, is a public park and travel rest area. This designated open space is used by the resi-

dents of Nicodemus for private and community picnics and by travelers as an overnight rest stop. Large trees shade the area and provide a backdrop for the historic landmark marker.

This is where my roots are.

Other land tracts in and nearby Nicodemus were transferred to farmers who were sometimes unaware or simply unwilling to preserve the historic properties. For instance, by 1975, Scruggs Grove had been sold to a new owner, who cleared the entire tract of cottonwood trees and planted an alfalfa field in its place.⁶⁶

Despite all the improvements made in the area and the anticipation of people planning to return permanently, Nicodemus helplessly watched the steady deterioration of the Stewart/Goins house, on the west end of the townsite.⁶⁷ It was one of the few early stone structures still remaining on the townsite as an example of vernacular residential architecture of that period. During the winter of 1982, the stone structure was severely damaged and became a ruin by spring of 1983.

More structured social interaction has been restored through the resurgence of church activities. Since Reverend Helm, pastor of the First Baptist Church, became a resident in the townsite in July 1983, weekly Bible Training Union meetings, church meetings and conferences, choir rehearsal, and usher and elder board meetings have resumed with great regularity and diligence. Seniors utilize their five-day-a-week lunch program at the "Villa" community center to transfer community news and upcoming events. Young residents assist in organizing the lunch program, taking the elderly on errands to the doctor or store in the village's newly-acquired bus/van, and maintaining the town park and playground. Various special committee meetings (such as Homecoming and Historic Preservation) and the volunteer fire department drills offer civic involvement and companionship.

Although only 58 residents still reside in Nicodemus, to most the town remains a place to which to return — to retire. The community retains its historic agricultural character, vast skies, and expansive views. Small frame houses, painted an assortment of colors, line Washington and Second Streets. During the day, residents are preoccupied with farming responsibilities as the weather permits or visiting a neighbor for lunch at the "Villa" community center. Most important, a strong feeling of community still permeates the town. A feeling cultivated and fueled by more than one hundred years of perseverance and unwillingness to give way.

Nicodemus is still an unincorporated town in the Nicodemus Township, but the course of its history and the issues it faces for the future are not different

from the issues of incorporated towns. It is very much like Middle-American rural villages, but it is also unique as a nineteenth-century black settlement. Very few villages or towns can boast of the endurance and accomplishment exhibited by Nicodemus.⁶⁸ Whether two families or two hundred families reside there for years to come is not vital, and in fact, inconsequential, to Nicodemus' survival. For Nicodemians and many other residents in black settlements, Nicodemus is a reality because it is in the minds and hearts of those who have ever lived there. There will always be a dream for Nicodemus, just as its forefathers had envisioned. This collective dedication to the dream will allow Nicodemus to transcend the realities of tomorrow because Nicodemus has become what it is and will endure over time based upon its residents' commitment to the concept of "community."



FIGURE III-13: The American Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church was organized in Nicodemus as early as 1879. However, the congregation, which had previously been housed in a structure north of the school, did not move into this 1885 structure until 1910. (Photograph: Clayton Fraser)

FOOTNOTES

¹ The *Standard Atlas of Graham County* (1906) (occupants of Nicodemus and Nicodemus Township), included the following people and their occupations:

General Merchandise

G. M. Sayers

Farmer

Blackman, Henry Section (S) 28 Township (T) 7 Range (R) 21

Grant, John (retired) S11T7R21

Lored, J. W. S3T8R21

Robinson, Lissie S24T7R21

Smith, B. B. S21T7R21

Welton, M. S21T7R21

Williams, Emma E. S22T7R21

Farmer and Stockraiser

Alexander, Andrew S23T7R21

Bates, J. P. S4T8R21

Cannon, David S24T7R21

Coleman, W. C. S26T7R21

DePrad, J. A. S27T7R21

Fletcher, T. J. S15T7R21

Girley, Richard S24T7R21

Red, Lewis (sic) S26T7R21

Sissal, William S27T7R21

Weaver, J. A. S22T7R21

Negro occupants

J. S. Napue

R. B. Napue

Mr. and Mrs. James C. Atkinson

Mr. and Mrs. John Jackson

J. C. B. Lewis

William Dabney

James P. and Annie B. Bates

John W. Lored

T. S. Bonty

Carrie Dabney

Perry Bates

J. A. Weaver

² A few abandoned houses — the VanDuvall, Calvin Sayers, and Vaughn homes — in the township and on the townsite had libraries filled with

books, albums, and sheet music.

³ Interview with Mary Elizabeth Alexander Gage, by La Barbara Fly, Nicodemus, Kansas, 5 August 1983, p. 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁵ Interview with Alvin Bates, by La Barbara Fly, Nicodemus, Kansas, 13 July 1983, pp. 32-33. The old Stockton Trail, three miles north of Nicodemus and due east of Stockton, was an early stage route which became known as the White Way, a white chalky road surface. In 1937, it was black-topped and changed to Highway 24, or North 40, until circa 1964, when Highway 24 was relocated three miles south, on the north edge of Nicodemus. (The relocation provided better accessibility for residents in Nicodemus.) Another county road was built ten miles south of the townsite, known as the Red Line or South 40. It was considered the route to Ellis. West of Nicodemus, Highway 18 intersects Old Highway 24, or North 40. This junction is identified by two physical elements: a beacon or radio tower and the "Big Curve," or "Balance Curve," named because of the radius of the road. Supposedly, cars could go fast around the curve and remain upright, whereas, with a 90 degree corner, it was impossible to travel at such speeds. Interview with Bernice Bates, Nicodemus, Kansas, 7 July 1983, pp. 24-25; interview with Bernice Bates and Alvin Bates, Nicodemus, Kansas, 29 June 1983, p. 20 (7a), pp. 1-2 (7b).

⁶ *Nicodemus (Kansas) Western Cyclone*, 8 July 1886. According to this newspaper report, the original Emancipation Celebration commemorated the emancipation of the West Indies from slavery.

⁷ Interview with Bernice Bates, 13 July 1983, p. 5.

⁸ Interview with Alvin Bates, p. 5.

⁹ Interview with Orlo VanDuvall, by La Barbara Fly, Nicodemus, Kansas, 30 July 1983, p. 8.

¹⁰ Interview with Mary Gage, p. 5.

¹¹ Interview with Gordon Frederick Williams, by La Barbara Fly, Nicodemus, Kansas, 2 August 1983, p. 3.

¹² Interview with Orlo VanDuvall, p. 9.

¹³ Interview with Gordon Williams, p. 4.

¹⁴ Interview with Alvin Bates, p. 5.

¹⁵ Interview with John W. Vaughn, by La Barbara Fly, Nicodemus, Kansas, 30 July 1983, p. 12.

¹⁶ Interview with Orlo VanDuvall, p. 12.

¹⁷ Interview with Ora Wellington Switzer, by La Barbara Fly, Nicodemus, Kansas, 23 July 1983, p. 12.

¹⁸ William L. Katz, *Eyewitness: The Negro in American History* (New York: Pitman Publishing Corporation, 1967).

¹⁹ It should be understood that Negro landowners were not the only ones affected by the dust storms and drought of the thirties. Farmers across the Midwest, particularly Kansas and Oklahoma, were devastated, leaving their farms for other sources of employment. Most of them did not return to farming as their principal employment, but migrated to urban centers for steady revenues.

²⁰ Interview with Alvin Bates, p. 18.

²¹ Interview with Bernice Bates, p. 14.

²² Interview with Alvin Bates, p. 18.

²³ Interview with Juanita Williams Redd, Nicodemus, Kansas, p. 15.

²⁴ Interview with Bernice Bates, p. 14.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 15.

²⁶ Van B. Shaw, "Nicodemus, Kansas, A Study in Isolation" (Masters Thesis, University of Missouri, 1951), p. 110. The Federal Land Bank assisted most Negro farmers on the brink of dispossession.

²⁷ George A. Griffes, "Papers," Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas, 1938.

²⁸ Katz, p. 424.

²⁹ George A. Griffes, "Old Town of Nicodemus, the Nicodemus Grove and Heim's Zoological Collection," Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas.

³⁰ This phenomenon did not become apparent until the late-1950s, when numerous mineral leases were recorded on County Deed Records.

³¹ When interviewed, residents were unable to recall any prior structure on this site from 1900 to 1939. One of the oldest citizens, Clementine Vaughn, 98 years old, was uncertain, but vaguely remembered an earlier Masonic Hall that burned down, existing on the site in the 1890s.

³² Over the years, the building has been maintained and improved. In the 1940s and 1950s, trees were planted to enhance the grounds around the Township Hall. (The wood floor was well maintained through the indoor roller skating years.) Mechanical, electrical, and plumbing improvements have been made in recent years.

³³ Interview with Ora Switzer, p. 10.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 11.

³⁶ Most of the trees that were planted around the Township Hall and park area have matured and remain healthy today. Recently, young parents have encouraged their youth to water and care for the existing trees on the townsite, as a continuation of what Mrs. White initiated. No other formal efforts were made over the years, until today; individuals voluntarily maintain their respective lots.

³⁷ Interview with Ora Switzer, p. 13.

³⁸ Interview with Fredonia Robinson DePriest, by La Barbara Fly, Nicodemus, Kansas, 22 July 1983. The Blow-In Cafe was the only establishment which served liquor in Nicodemus.

³⁹ Interview with Gordon Williams, p. 5.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 4.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 5.

⁴² Interview with Orlo VanDuvall, p. 9.

⁴³ "Story of Nicodemus," *Hays (Kansas) Daily News*, 12 November 1983.

⁴⁴ Ora Wellington Switzer, who ran the Green Lantern Cafe, moved to Topeka, Kansas temporarily, while her son, Veryl, was attending Kansas State University; the other restaurants had lost clientele, or closed.

⁴⁵ Interview with Alvin Bates, p. 22.

⁴⁶ Most stone structures, such as the Stewart/Goins house, Sayers Store, and Masonic Hall, began to show facade deterioration, crumbling, and rotting of frame members by 1959. Left unattended, they were subject to collapse in later years.

⁴⁷ This is especially true of people who once had large homes in the township. Since their children married and moved away, and/or their spouse had died, there was no need for additional space or maintenance efforts.

⁴⁸ "Enthusiasm to Rebuild Town is Evident at Nicodemus 93rd Annual Homecoming," *Wichita Eagle Beacon*, 1980. Although the organization is headquartered in Los Angeles, California, it is incorporated in the State of Kansas and is often confused with the unincorporated village of Nicodemus.

⁴⁹ Interview with Irvin and Minerva Sayers, by La Barbara Fly, 14 July 1983 p. 20; interview with Bernice Bates, pp. 19-20.

⁵⁰ Interview with Lloyd L. Wellington, Nicodemus, Kansas, 8 August 1983, p. 15.

⁵¹ "Pastor Builds Own Church," *Wichita Eagle Beacon*, 1975.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ By 1975, the First Baptist Church was the only functioning church in the town. It has served the town for 75 years. Presently, dinners and special presentations are held in the large hall. Long range plans for the 29-foot limestone building, now covered with stucco, include major restoration for use as the village's museum and archives.

⁵⁴ Interview with Alvena and Ordral Alexander, by La Barbara Fly, Nicodemus, Kansas, 10 August 1983, p. 16; interview with Orlo VanDuvall, p. 13. When the building was razed by "Lean-to-Len," Len Schamber of Damar and Vernon VanDuvall removed the building marquee and built the marker as a gesture. The stone building, from the upper

two floors, was buried in the basement of the Masonic Hall, which was northwest of the Vaughn place. (The property was transferred to the Department of Community Development and Housing when the playground was built.)

⁵⁵ "Housing Project in Works, Spirits on Rise in Nicodemus," Darrell Morrow, *Wichita Eagle Beacon*, 28 March 1971. Lee Everett Switzer and Veryl A. Switzer were among the six planners who conceived the idea of elderly and low income housing in Nicodemus.

⁵⁶ Interview with Alvena and Ordral Alexander, pp. 16-17.

⁵⁷ The project was designed by Ralph Keller, architect, and built by Pfeifer Construction, both of Hill City, Kansas.

⁵⁸ Only the adjacent streets were paved in 1976. The remaining streets in Nicodemus were hard-packed, dirt roads, without curbs and gutters.

⁵⁹ Interview with Lloyd L. Wellington, p. 14.

⁶⁰ Interview with Ernestine VanDuvall, by La Barbara Fly, Nicodemus, Kansas, 1976, untranscribed. Ernestine VanDuvall was an experienced entrepreneur, having served in California as Walt Disney's personal cook and later, having operated a similar restaurant with her husband for ten years in Pasadena, California. Upon the VanDuvalls' return to Nicodemus in 1974, Phil, her husband, suffered a fatal heart attack. Mrs. VanDuvall continued with the establishment of her restaurant, with minimal assistance from local carpenters, such as Virgil Robinson, Jr. Residents patronized her business initially, but the majority of her clientele lived miles away in neighboring towns and cities. As Kansas residents learned of Nicodemus, they discovered Ernestine's home cooking and her success in Nicodemus. To date, Ernestine's Bar-B-Que remains the only commercial enterprise in Nicodemus, Kansas.

⁶¹ Interview with Alvena and Ordral Alexander, pp. 16-17; interview with Lois Alexander, by La Barbara Fly, Nicodemus, Kansas, 1976, untranscribed.

⁶² For example, Second Street does not conform absolutely to the grid street pattern because when Lloyd Wellington's house was moved in by his sister, Ora Wellington Switzer, it was sited too far to the east. The porch additions and reorientation of the entrance made it impossible to maintain a straight center line on Second Street when it was paved.

⁶³ Interview with Mary Gage, p. 22.

⁶⁴ Those on the Nicodemus water system include: the First Baptist Church and parsonage (Reverend Helm), Switzer, Alexander, Bates, Sayers, Napue, and Redd.

⁶⁵ Interview with Alvena and Ordral Alexander, p. 16.

⁶⁶ After R. B. Scruggs's death, his second wife, Ollie B. Scruggs, sold the

property to the King family, who sold it to James and Marilyn Thyfault of Damar, Kansas.

⁶⁷ Built in 1909 with the assistance of Jerry Scruggs, this structure was considered one of the finest residences in Nicodemus. In 1982, this unoccupied home was in a poor condition, when Virgil Robinson, Sr. began construction of his residence.

⁶⁸ Nicodemus is symbolic of the pioneer spirit of blacks who dared to leave the only region in this country they had known, in a search for personal freedom and an opportunity for self-advancement.

APPENDIX

List of Drawings:

Settlement in Nicodemus Township, Landowners, 1880-1900

Settlement in Nicodemus Township, Landowners, 1920

Settlement in Nicodemus Township, Landowners, 1983

Nicodemus Cemetery, Plan and Roster

Mt. Olive Cemetery, Plan and Roster

The First Baptist Church, Site Plan

The First Baptist Church, North Elevation

The First Baptist Church, South Elevation

The First Baptist Church, East Elevation

The First Baptist Church, West Elevation

The First Baptist Church, Floor Plan

The First Baptist Church, Section

The First Baptist Church, Section

District No. 1 School, Site Plan

District No. 1 School, Elevations

District No. 1 School, Plan and Section

The Fletcher-Switzer Site, Site Plan, 1880

The Fletcher-Switzer Site, Site Plan, 1930

The Fletcher-Switzer Site, Site Plan, 1983

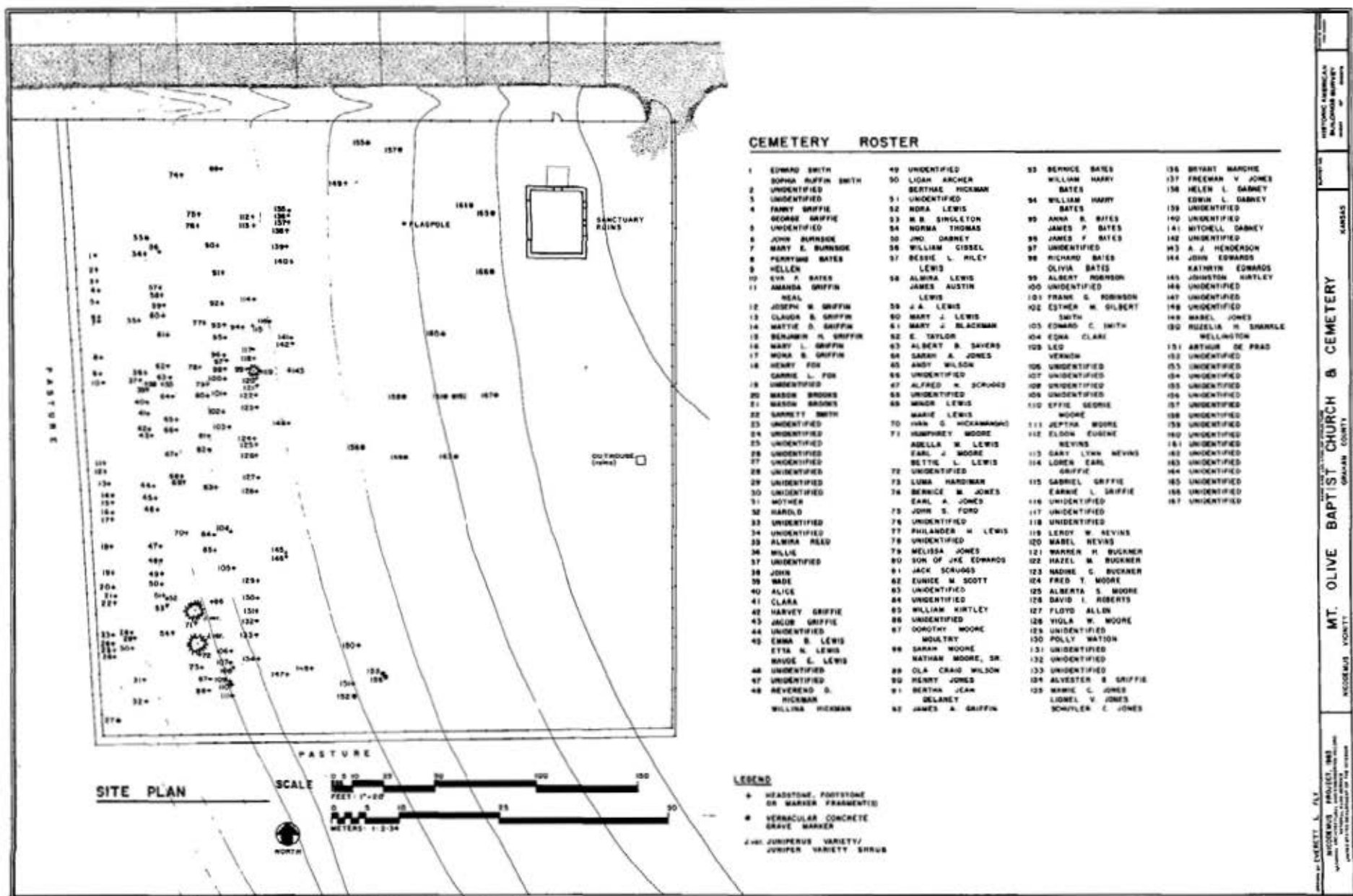
The Fletcher-Switzer House, North and South Elevations

The Fletcher-Switzer House, East and West Elevations

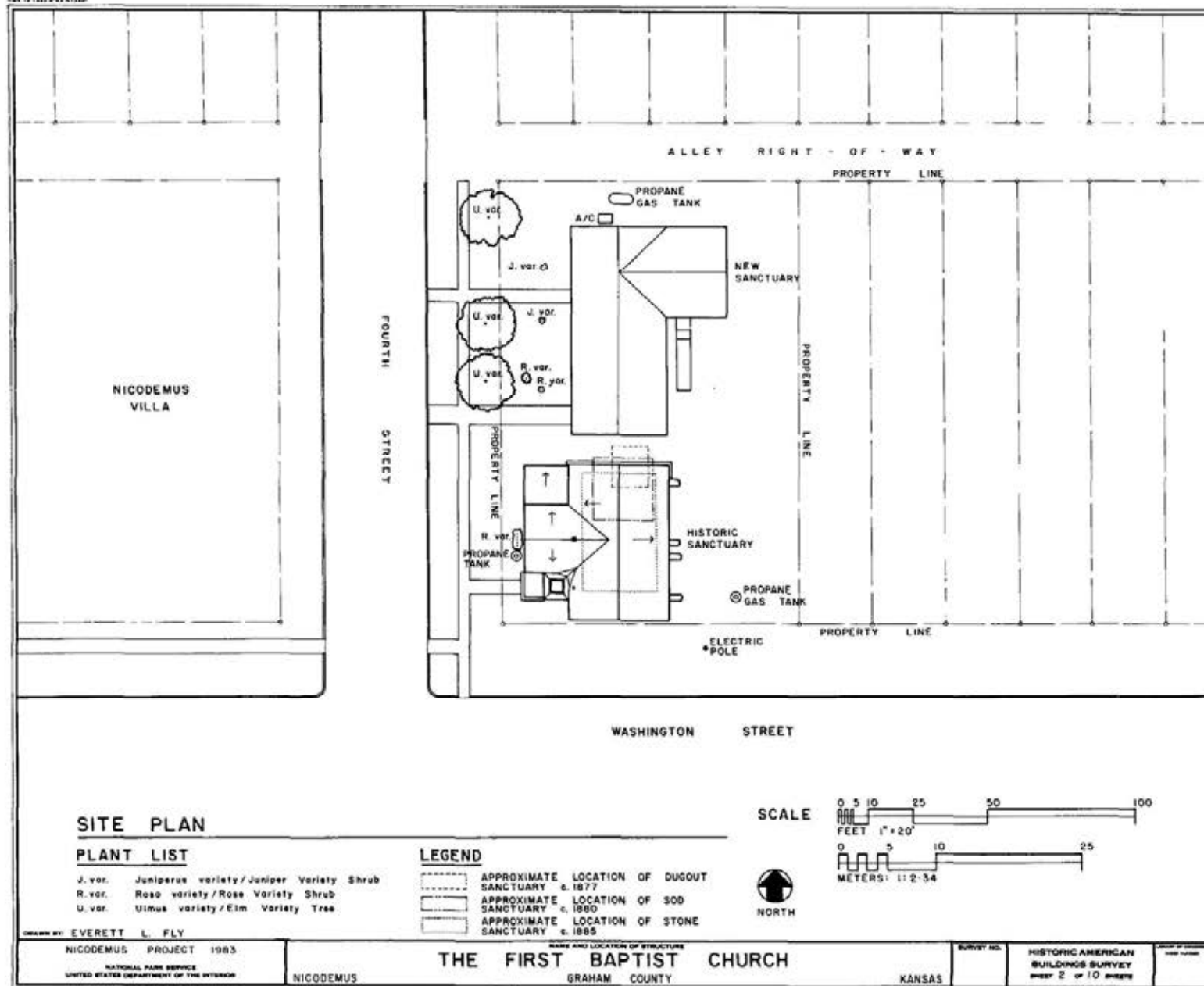
The Fletcher-Switzer House, First Floor Plan

The Fletcher-Switzer House, Second Floor Plan

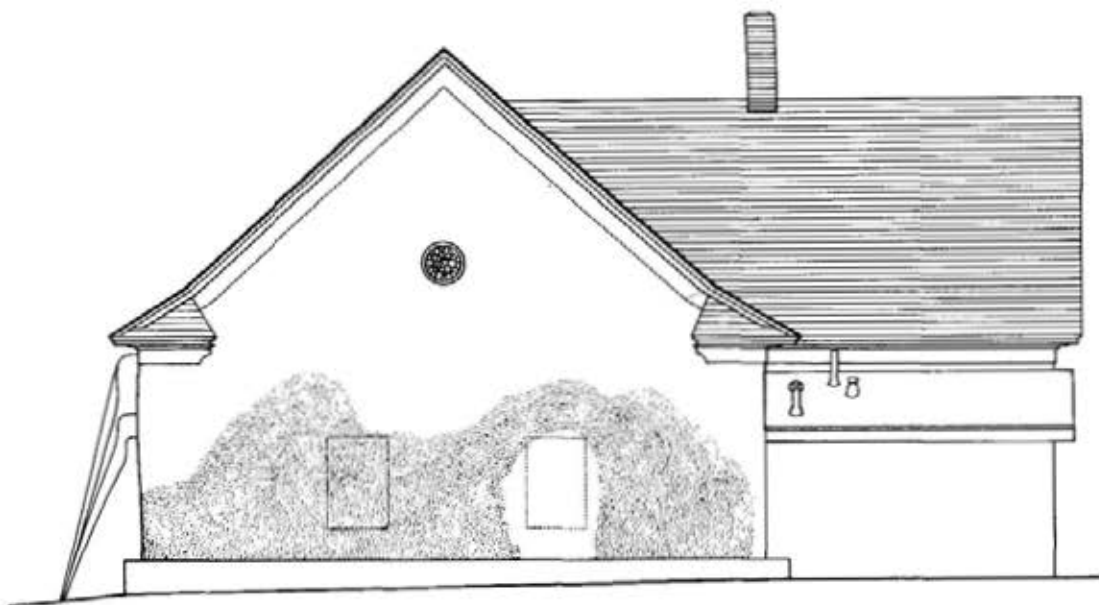
The Henry Williams Farm, Site Plan



Mt. Olive Cemetery, Plan and Roster



The First Baptist Church, Site Plan



NORTH ELEVATION

SCALE
 0 1 2 3 4 5 10
 FEET 1/4" = 1'-0"
 0 1 2 3
 METERS 1:48

MATERIALS

FOUNDATION: CONCRETE
 WALLS: STUCCO OVER LIMESTONE; ADDITION, STUCCO OVER MASONRY BLOCK
 BUTTRESSES: STUCCO OVER LIMESTONE
 FRIEZE: WOOD
 FASCIA: WOOD
 ROOF: WOOD SHINGLES; ADDITION, ROLL ASPHALT
 CHIMNEY: BRICK

DRAWN BY: EVERETT L. FLY

NICODEMUS PROJECT 1983

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
 UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

NICODEMUS

NAME AND LOCATION OF STRUCTURE
THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH
 GRAHAM COUNTY

KANSAS

SURVEY NO.

HISTORIC AMERICAN
 BUILDINGS SURVEY
 SHEET 4 OF 10 SHEETS

DATE OF SURVEY
 FIELD NUMBER

IF REPRODUCED, PLEASE CREDIT: HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, NAME OF DELINEATOR, DATE OF THE DRAWING

The First Baptist Church, North Elevation



SOUTH ELEVATION

SCALE
 0 1 2 3 4 5 10
 FEET 1/4" = 1'-0"
 0 1 2 3
 METERS 1:48

MATERIALS

WALLS: STUCCO OVER LIMESTONE
 BUTTRESSES: STUCCO OVER LIMESTONE
 WINDOWS: WOOD
 FRIEZE: WOOD
 FASCIA: WOOD
 ROOF: WOOD SHINGLES
 CHIMNEY: BRICK

DESIGNED BY: EVERETT L. FLY

NICODEMUS PROJECT 1983

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
 UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

NICODEMUS

NAME AND LOCATION OF STRUCTURE
THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH
 GRAHAM COUNTY

KANSAS

SURVEY NO.

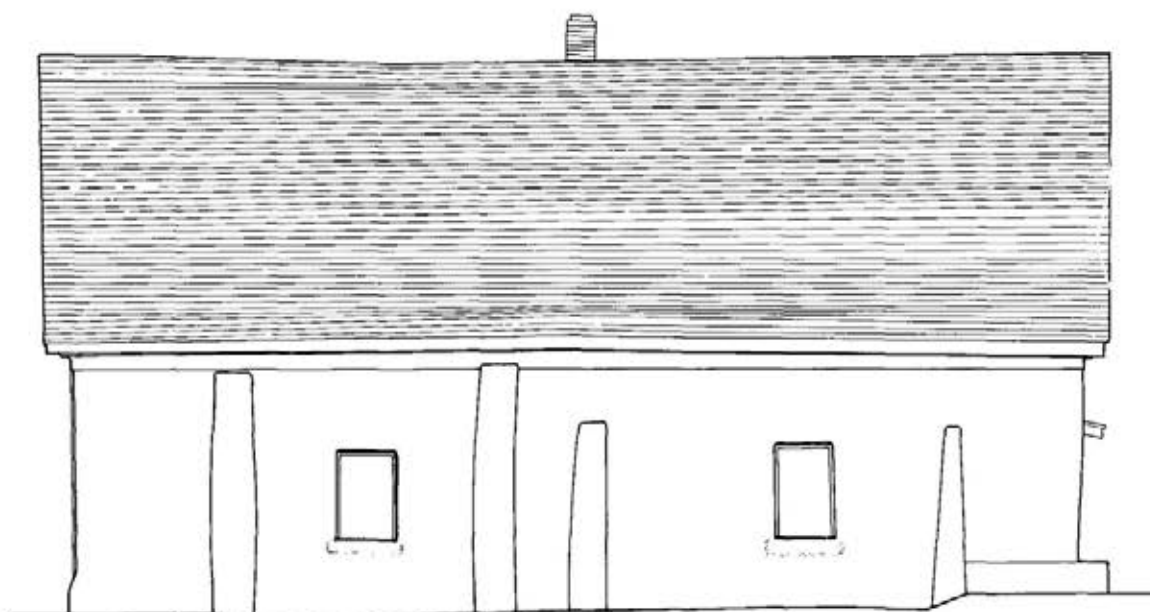
HISTORIC AMERICAN
 BUILDINGS SURVEY
 SHEET 5 OF 10 SHEETS

DATE OF DRAWING

BY: [blank]

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The First Baptist Church, South Elevation



EAST ELEVATION

MATERIALS

FOUNDATION: CONCRETE
 WALLS: STUCCO OVER LIMESTONE
 BUTTRESSES: STUCCO OVER LIMESTONE
 WINDOWS: WOOD WITH WIRE MESH SCREENS
 FRIEZE: WOOD
 FASCIA: WOOD
 ROOF: ASPHALT SHINGLES
 CHIMNEY: BRICK

SCALE

0 1 2 3 4 5 10
 FEET 1/4" = 1'-0"
 0 1 2 3
 METERS 1:48

DRAWN BY: EVERETT L. FLY

NICCODEMUS PROJECT 1963

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
 UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

NICCODEMUS

NAME AND LOCATION OF STRUCTURE
THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH
 GRAHAM COUNTY

KANSAS

SURVEY NO.

HISTORIC AMERICAN
 BUILDINGS SURVEY
 SHEET 6 OF 10 SHEETS

DATE OF SURVEY

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The First Baptist Church. East Elevation



WEST ELEVATION



MATERIALS

FOUNDATION: CONCRETE
WALLS: STUCCO OVER LIMESTONE
WINDOWS: WOOD WITH WIRE MESH SCREENS
DOORS: WOOD
FRIEZE: WOOD
FASCIA: WOOD
ROOF: WOOD SHINGLES
CHIMNEY: BRICK

DRAWN BY: EVERETT L. FLY

NICODEMUS PROJECT 1983

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

NAME AND LOCATION OF STRUCTURE
THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH
GRHAM COUNTY

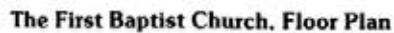
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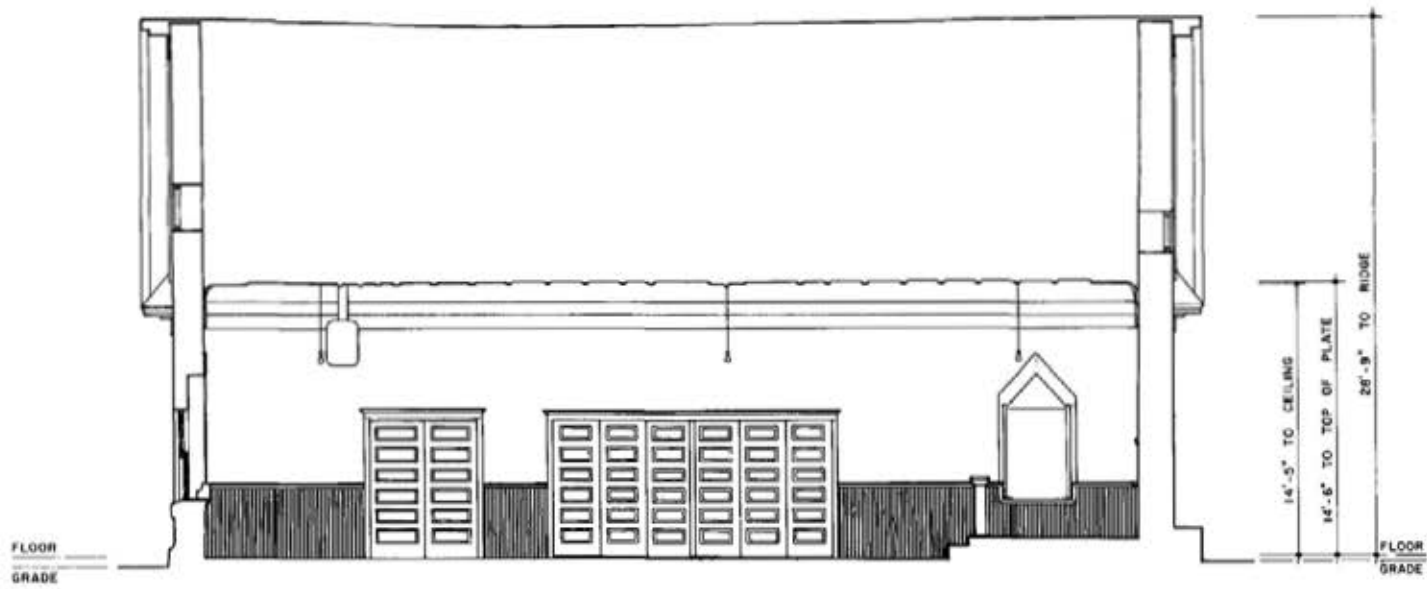
KANSAS

HISTORIC AMERICAN
BUILDINGS SURVEY
SHEET 7 OF 10 SHEETS

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The First Baptist Church, West Elevation





SECTION A-A

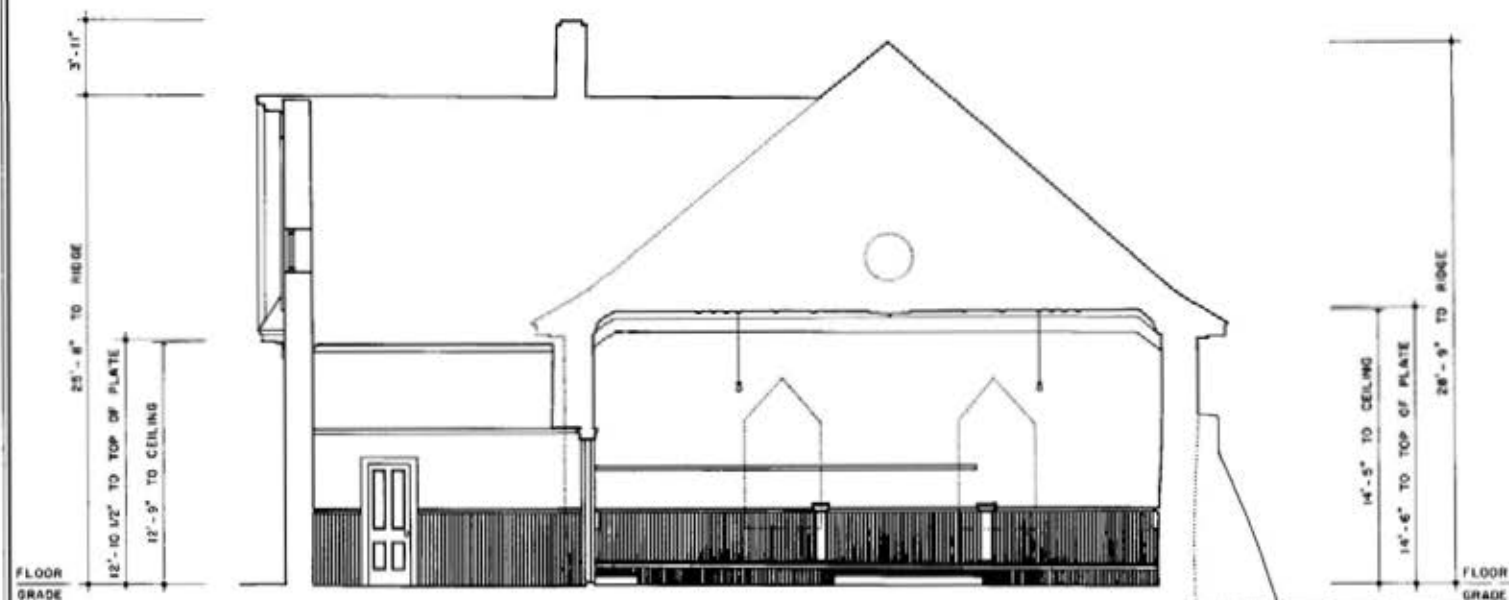


MATERIALS
 FOUNDATION: LIMESTONE
 FLOOR: RANDOM OAK PLANKS
 WALLS: STUCCO OVER LIMESTONE, EXTERIOR; PAINTED PLASTER OVER LIMESTONE WITH PAINTED
 BEADED WOOD WAINSCOT, INTERIOR
 CEILING: PRESSED TIN
 ROOF: WOOD SHINGLES OVER RANDOM BOARD DECK

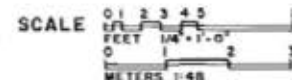
DRAWN BY: EVERETT L. FLY NICODEMUS PROJECT 1983 NATIONAL PARK SERVICE UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR	NAME AND LOCATION OF STRUCTURE THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH NICODEMUS GRAHAM COUNTY KANSAS	SURVEY NO. HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY SHEET 8 OF 10 SHEETS
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The First Baptist Church, Section



SECTION B-B



MATERIALS

FOUNDATION: LIMESTONE
FLOOR: RANDOM OAK PLANKS
WALLS: STUCCO OVER LIMESTONE, EXTERIOR; PAINTED PLASTER OVER LIMESTONE WITH PAINTED
BEADED WOOD WAINSCOT, INTERIOR
CEILING: PRESSED TIN
ROOF: WOOD SHINGLES OVER RANDOM BOARD DECK

DRAWN BY: EVERETT L. FLY

NICODEMUS PROJECT: 1983
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

NICODEMUS

NAME AND LOCATION OF BUILDING
THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH
GRAHAM COUNTY

KANSAS

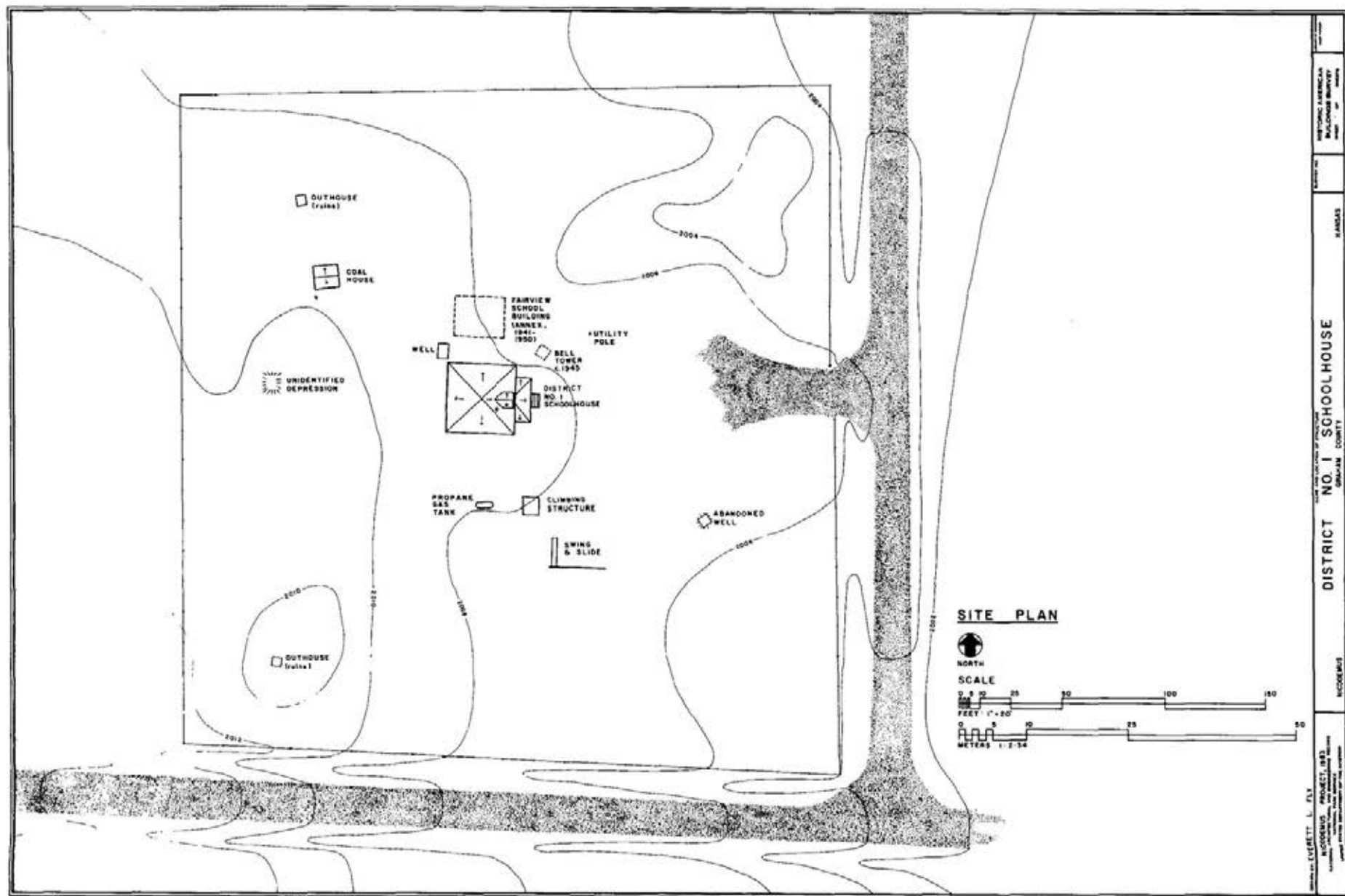
SURVEY NO.

HISTORIC AMERICAN
BUILDINGS SURVEY
SHEET 9 OF 10 SHEETS

DATE OF SURVEY

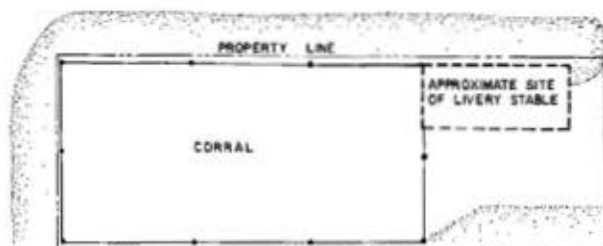
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The First Baptist Church, Section



District No. 1 School, Site Plan





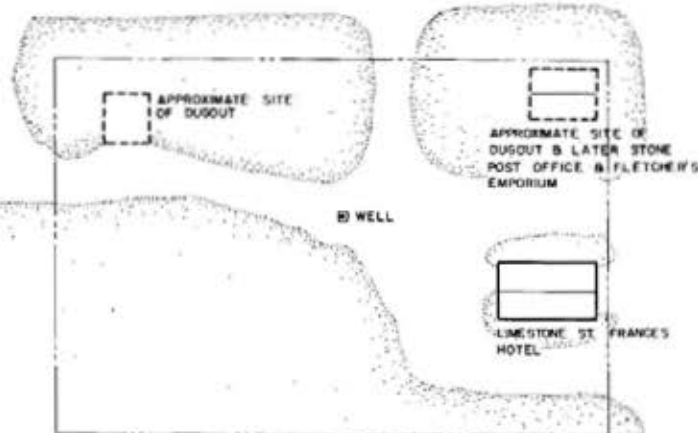
HISTORIC OVERVIEW

THE FLETCHER-SWITZER SITE WAS AN IMPORTANT FOCUS OF ACTIVITY ON THE NICODEMUS TOWN-SITE. THE EXISTING HOUSE AND OUTBUILDINGS ARE REMNANTS OF A COMPLEX WITH HISTORIC ORIGINS AND FUNCTIONS. THE HOUSE IS ONE OF THE FEW REMAINING EXAMPLES OF EARLY RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECTURE LEFT ON THE TOWN-SITE.

THE FIRST OWNER OF THE SITE WAS Z. T. FLETCHER WHO WAS SECRETARY OF THE COLONY WHICH ARRIVED IN NICODEMUS IN JULY 1877. HE AND HIS WIFE LIVED IN A DUGOUT ON THE NORTHWEST CORNER OF BLOCK 12; LOT 12. THERE HE OPENED A POST OFFICE AND SHE RAN A SCHOOL.

IN 1880, FLETCHER BUILT THE ST. FRANCES HOTEL ON LOT 10 AND A LIVERY STABLE ON LOTS 13 AND 14. A LIMESTONE STRUCTURE WAS EVENTUALLY BUILT AROUND THE DUGOUT WHERE THEY CONTINUED THE POST OFFICE UNTIL 1886 AND RAN AN EMPORIUM WHILE LIVING IN A RESIDENCE ON BLOCK 14.

AFTER RAIL SERVICE FAILED TO MATERIALIZE, HE SOLD HIS TOWN LOTS TO THE ORIGINAL PROMOTER, W. R. HILL, BUT CONTINUED TO RUN THE BUSINESSES. THE SITE REVERTED TO GRAHAM COUNTY FOR A TIME BUT WAS BOUGHT BACK INTO THE FAMILY IN THE 1920'S BY FRED SWITZER, A GREAT NEPHEW RAISED BY THE FLETCHERS. WHEN SWITZER MARRIED ORA WELLINGTON IN 1921 THEY MADE THE HOTEL THEIR HOME. HE FARMED IN THE TOWNSHIP AND SHE RAN A RESTAURANT IN THE RESIDENCE AND LATER RENTED OUT THE BUNK HOUSE.



15	12
14	11
13	10
12	9
11	8
10	7
9	6
8	5
7	4
6	3
5	2
4	1

LOTS OWNED BY FLETCHERS & SWITZERS IN BLOCK 12 OF NICODEMUS TOWN-SITE

1880 - LOTS 9-14

13	12
12	11
11	10
10	9
9	8
8	7
7	6
6	5
5	4
4	3
3	2
2	1

1930 - LOTS 8-14

13	12
12	11
11	10
10	9
9	8
8	7
7	6
6	5
5	4
4	3
3	2
2	1

1983 - LOTS 5-24

SITE PLAN 1880



DRAWN BY: RUTH K. BARR

NICODEMUS PROJECT 1983
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

NICODEMUS VICINITY

NAME AND LOCATION OF STRUCTURE
THE FLETCHER-SWITZER SITE
GRAHAM COUNTY

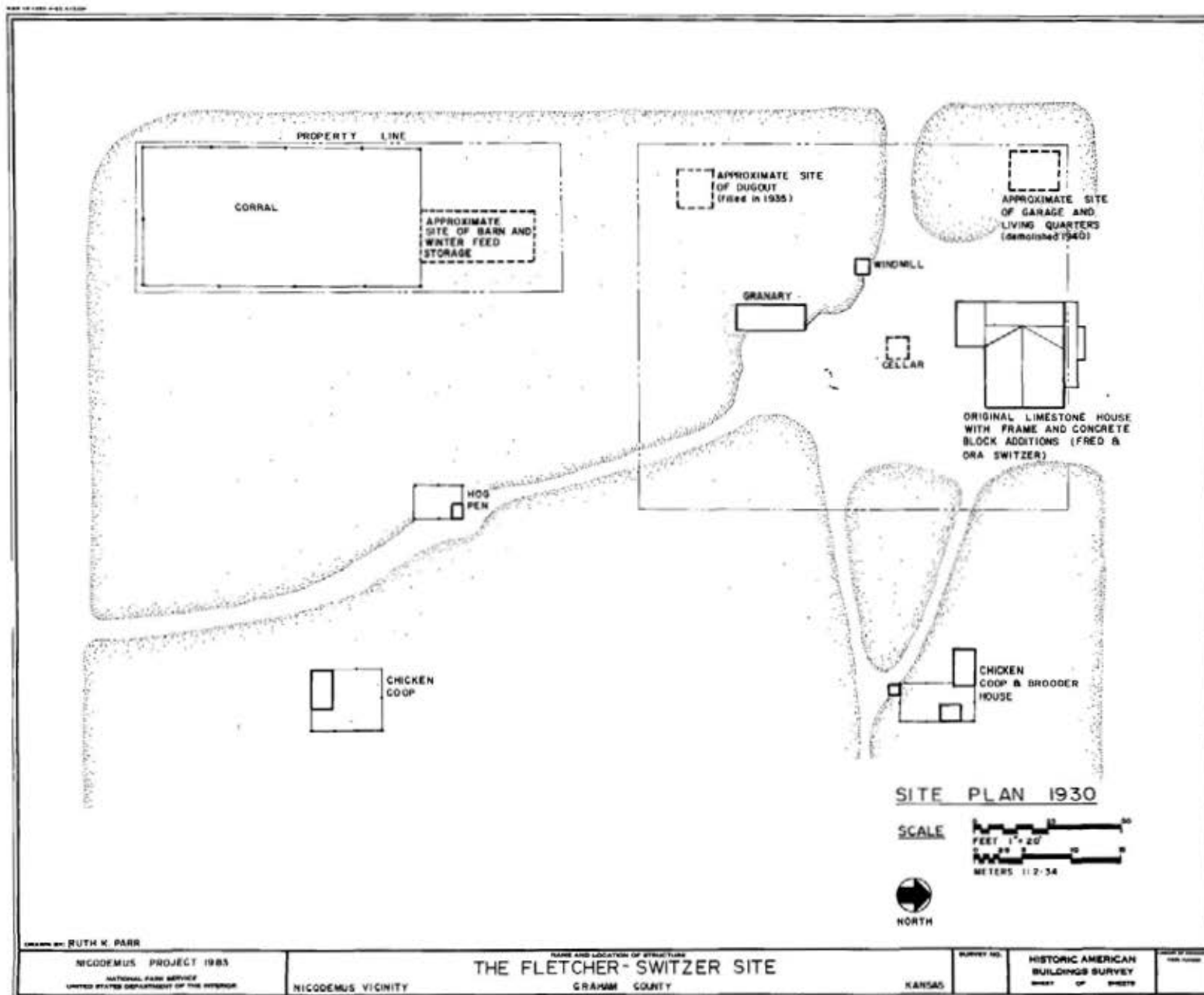
KANSAS

DATE OF SURVEY

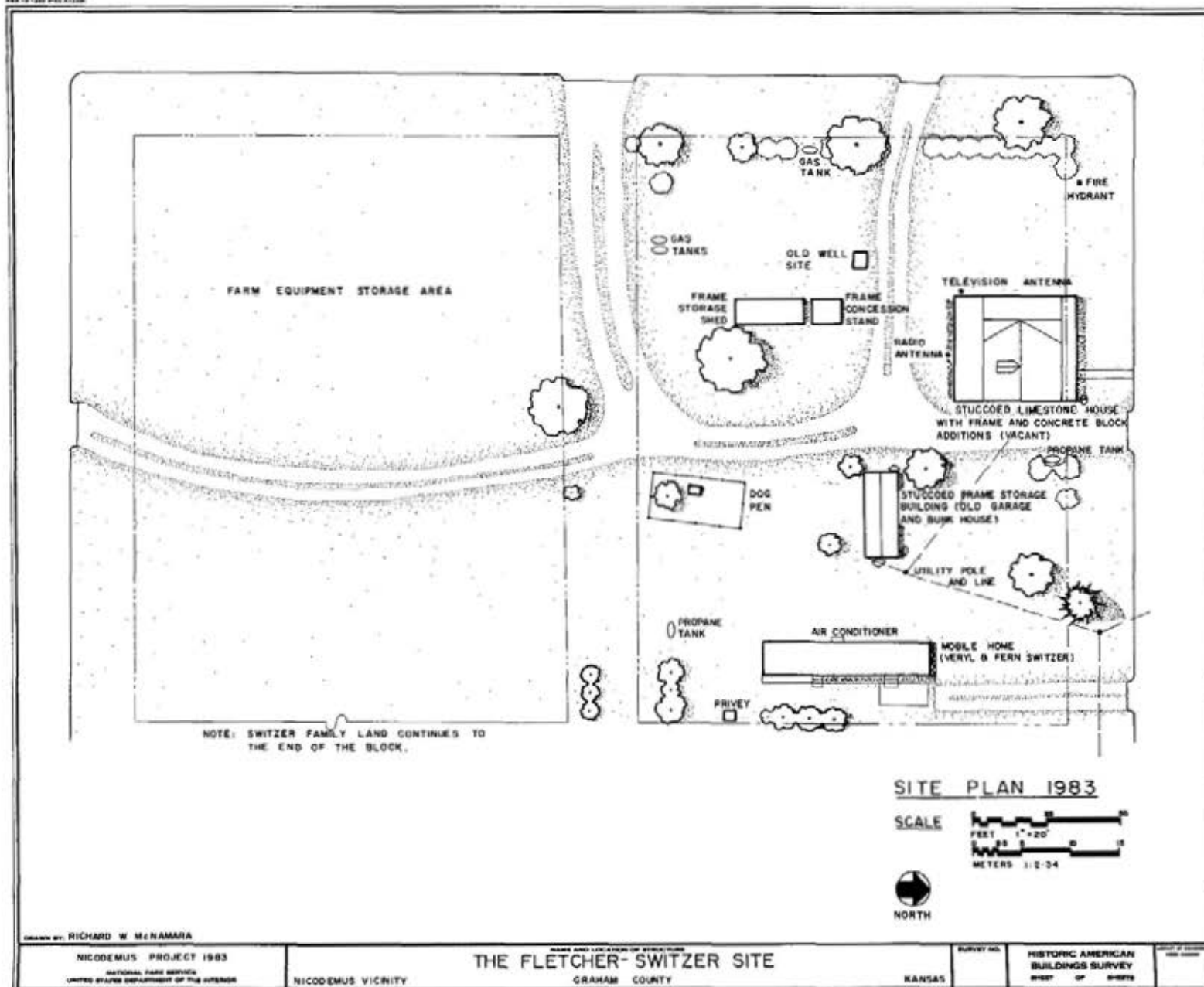
HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
SHEET OF SHEETS

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The Fletcher-Switzer Site, Site Plan, 1880



The Fletcher-Switzer Site. Site Plan. 1930



The Fletcher-Switzer Site, Site Plan, 1983

FINISHED
SECOND FLOOR

FINISHED
FIRST FLOOR
IN ADDITION

FINISHED
FLOOR IN
PORCH



NORTH ELEVATION

SCALE



MATERIALS

FOUNDATION: CONCRETE
WALLS: LAPPED COMPOSITION
BOARD, FIRST STORY;
STUCCO, SECOND STORY
WINDOWS: ALUMINUM WITH
WIRE MESH SCREEN,
WOOD WITH STORM
SCREEN & GLAZING
FASCIA: WOOD
ROOF: WOOD SHINGLES

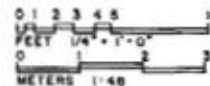
FINISHED
SECOND FLOOR

FINISHED FIRST
FLOOR IN ORIGINAL
STRUCTURE



SOUTH ELEVATION

SCALE



MATERIALS

WALLS: STUCCO
WINDOWS: WOOD; WOOD WITH
WIRE MESH SCREEN
FASCIA: WOOD
ROOF: ROLL ASPHALT, FIRST STORY;
WOOD SHINGLE, SECOND STORY

FINISHED
SECOND FLOOR

FINISHED
FIRST FLOOR
IN ADDITION

DRAWN BY: EVERETT L. FLY

NICODÉMUS PROJECT 1983
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

NICODÉMUS VICINITY

THE FLETCHER-SWITZER SITE

GRAHAM COUNTY

KANSAS

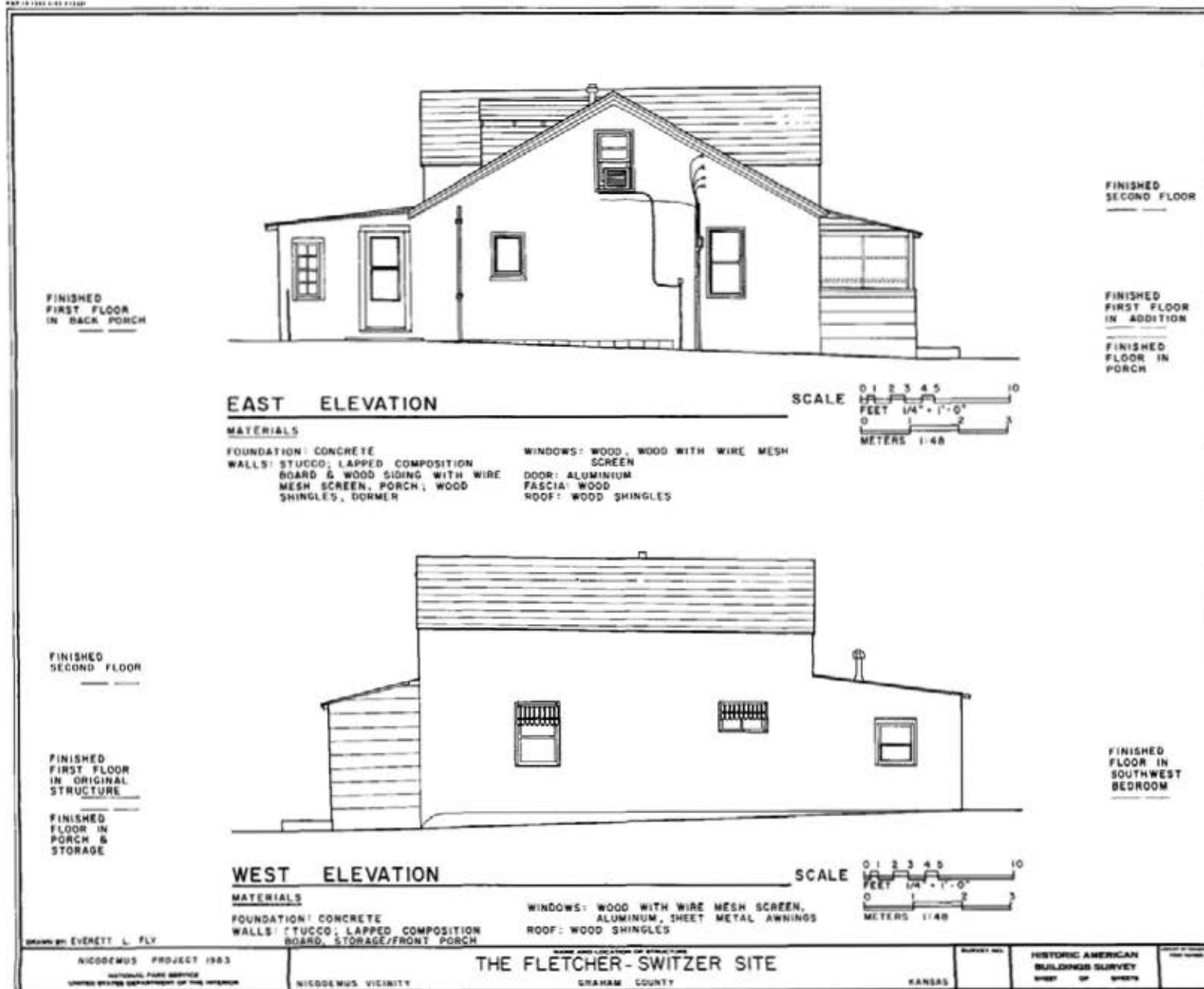
SURVEY NO.

HISTORIC AMERICAN
BUILDINGS SURVEY
SHEET 104 10500

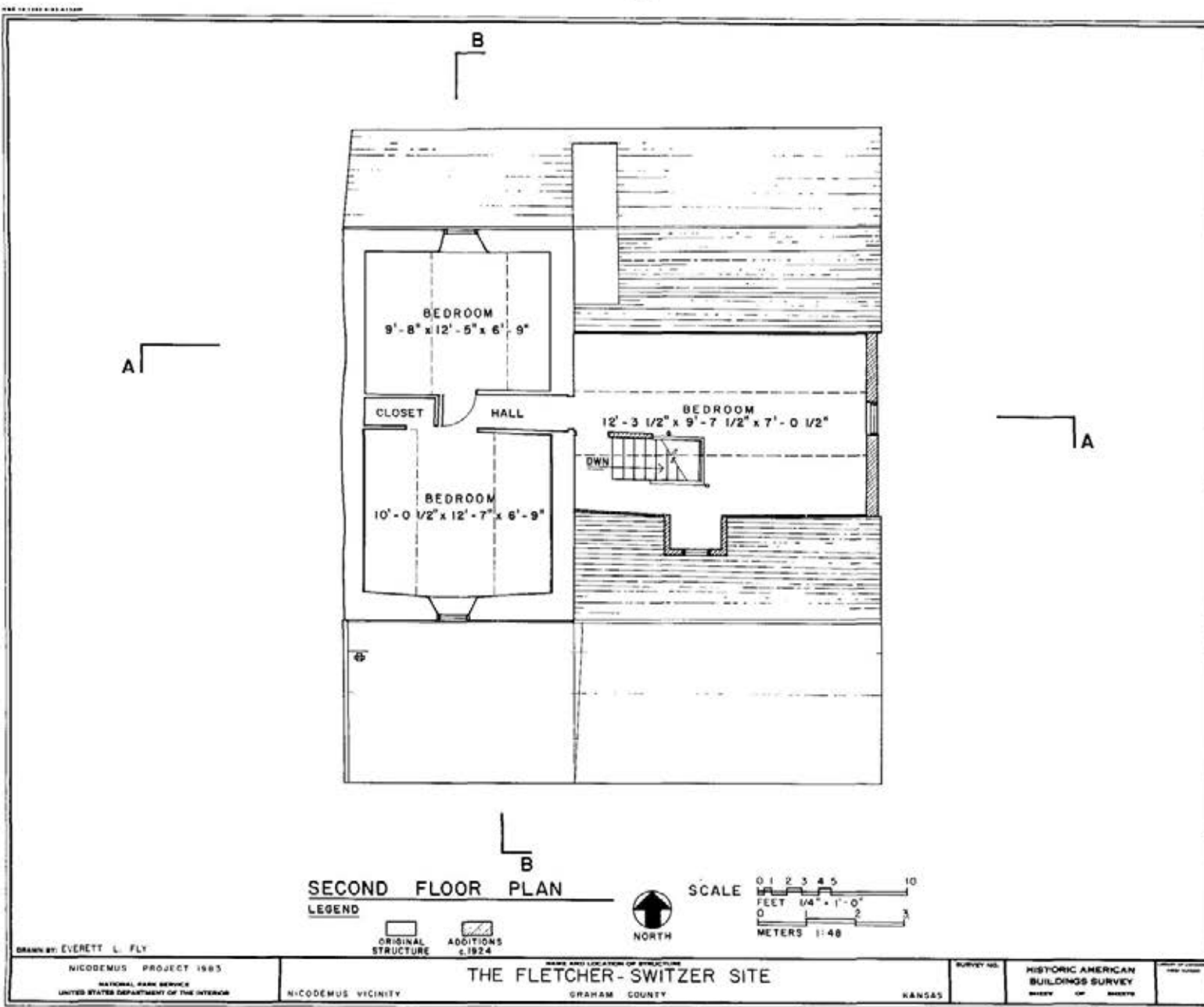
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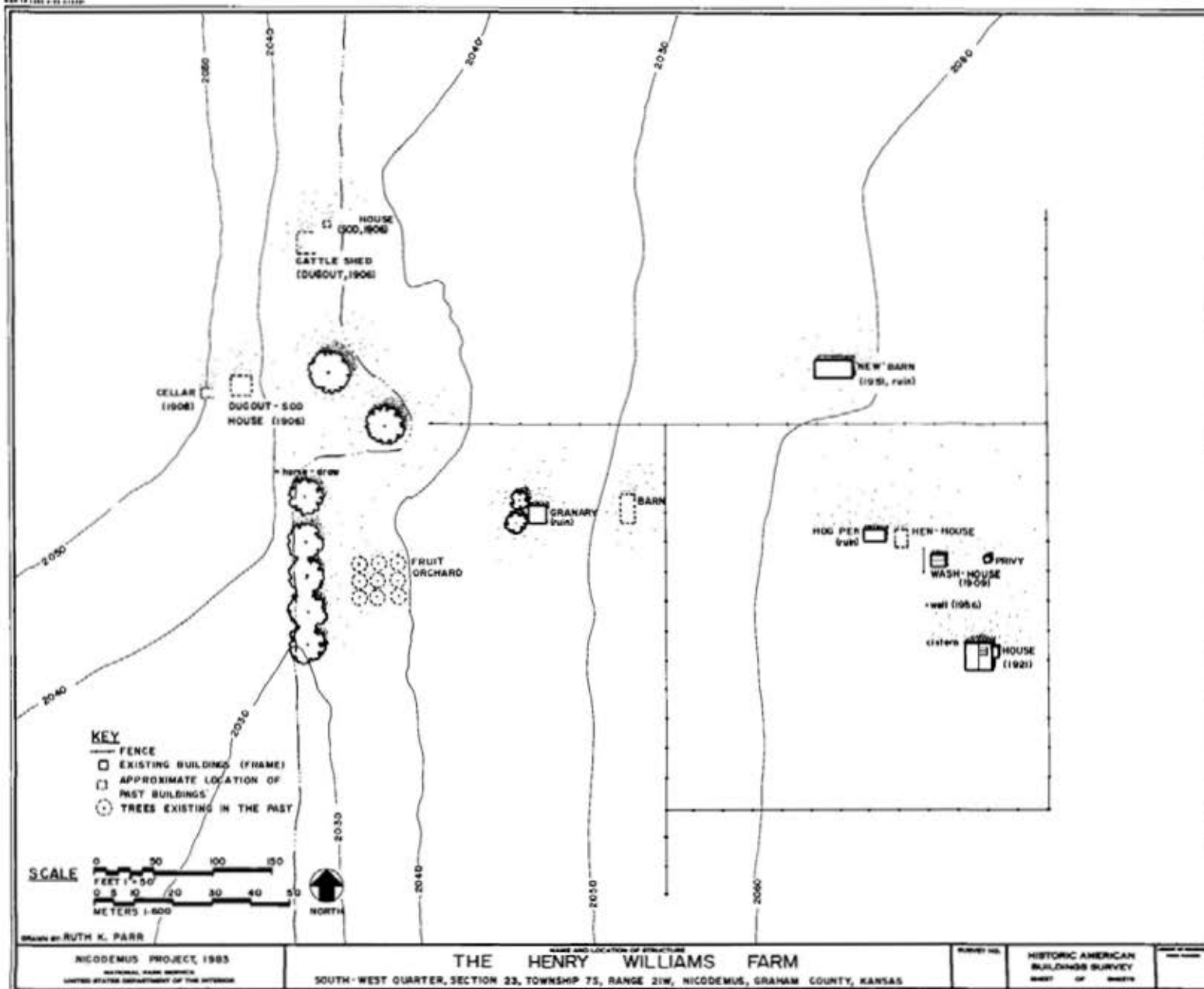
The Fletcher-Switzer House, North and South Elevations



The Fletcher-Switzer House, East and West Elevations



The Fletcher-Switzer House, Second Floor Plan



The Henry Williams Farm, Site Plan