ChatGPT

Nicodemus, Kansas — A Sacred Chronicle

Historical Context: Compromise of 1877 and the Great Exodus

In the waning light of Reconstruction, African Americans felt betrayed by the nation. The Compromise of 1877, often called "the Great Betrayal," withdrew federal troops from the South [1]. Freedpeople were left unprotected as **Jim Crow** laws and white terror rose. As an NPS historian recounts, "Reconstruction lasted until 1877" when President Hayes pulled out the army, giving white supremacists "free reign" and worsening KKK violence [2]. Legally emancipated but politically abandoned, Southern Blacks faced systematic terror [3] [2]. In despair hundreds of thousands fled west. By 1879 the "Exodus" to Kansas began: thousands became **"Exodusters"** staking homestead claims under the Homestead Act [4] [5]. As one Louisiana letter proclaimed, settlers were "very anxious to reach [Kansas]…because of the sacredness of her soil washed by the blood of humanitarians for the cause of black freedom" [6]. Nicodemus was born into this context: in 1877 Rev. W. H. Smith (a freedman) and white promoter W. R. Hill led a **Nicodemus Town Company**, calling it a place for "African Americans to establish a black self-government" [7] [4]. The townsite—named for a legendary freed slave-prince—promised political autonomy and safe land in the Kansas frontier [7] [4].

Cultural and Civic Life in Nicodemus

Education

In Nicodemus, literacy and learning were **sacred pillars**. Early settlers, many recently freed, "understood [education's] importance" and immediately formed a school [8]. Jenny Fletcher, among the first teachers, began classes in a dugout home in 1877–78 [8]. By 1879 the community established *School District Number 1* and built a formal one-room schoolhouse [9]. Even after a fire in 1887, children continued lessons in

church basements until a new school rose in 1918 [9] [10]. Respected teachers like Lulu Sadler Craig and Nettie Craig later served generations [11]. (Many of these educators were women, as detailed below.) Through perseverance, Nicodemus became the first Kansas township with a county school, symbolizing self-determination [9] [10].

Music, Oral Traditions, and Celebrations

Communal gatherings in Nicodemus were **rituals of joy and resilience**. The **First Baptist Church** was a cultural hearth: weekly services overflowed into social events. The church hosted **ice cream and strawberry socials**, lectures, concerts, and school recitals [12]. It even held annual **Emancipation Day** potlucks and celebrations—festivals of gospel singing and communal feasting [12]. The congregation fielded a large choir and the "Williams Sisters" gospel quartet, preserving *spirituals* and hymns rich with African-American tradition. Out in town, the WPA-built **Township Hall** (1939) anchored community life: it housed dances, roller-skating parties, theatre and music evenings [13]. Through storytelling circles and revival meetings along the Solomon River, residents passed down folk rituals and oral histories. (Williana Hickman later recalled arriving to "billows of smoke rising from underground dugouts" – the very sight that she learned *"That is Nicodemus"* [14].) Every summer the town gathered for the **Homecoming Emancipation Celebration**, a tradition since 1878, marking freedom and renewal [15].

Culinary Traditions and Seasonal Feasts

Food and festivity intertwined. Church potlucks and vacations were steeped in soul food heritage: fried chicken, country ham, biscuits and red-eye gravy, black-eyed peas and collards. Families recalled baking cornbread hot on stoves, canning peaches for winter, and sharing Sunday dinners of chicken pie. Harvest time meant community barbecues and corn shucking bees. On Fourth of July and Memorial Day, Nicodemus held picnics with watermelon, sweet iced tea, and homemade ice cream—the latter a specialty at social gatherings [12]. Civil Rights Day (Aug. 21) and Juneteenth eventually were marked with parades and brass bands. Seasonal cycles were also observed: spring baptisms in the Solomon River or Spring Creek [16] became ritual ablutions cleansing past slavery; Christmas and Easter services blended Baptist and Methodist traditions with rich choral hymns and candlelight.

Religion and Burial Practices

Faith and remembrance shaped daily life. Nicodemus had two historic churches: First Baptist (1877–present) and A.M.E. (African Methodist Episcopal). By 1907 the current limestone Baptist church was built [17], while the A.M.E. congregation worshipped in a converted building from 1910 onwards [18]. Baptisms were held outdoors in nearby creeks, and revivals drew families in covered wagons. Ministers doubled as community leaders. The 1887 St. Francis Hotel even functioned as an early **holiness meeting hall** before the stone churches. Burial customs were equally reverent: pioneers established Nicodemus Cemetery east of town, where founding families and Civil War veterans lie under modest gravestones [19]. Tombstones bear names like Rev. Tom Johnson and Jenny Fletcher, and descendants still tend those plots. Later generations added Mount Olive Baptist Cemetery (west of town) and a small A.M.E. graveyard. Church funerals were solemn rituals, combining psalm-singing with kin-led eulogies. Though harsh prairie winters and bogged wagons often kept mourners local, stories say neighbors came from miles to pay respects – uniting the exodus community in blessing and song at every farewell [16] [19].

Internal Organization and Leadership

From the outset Nicodemus was envisioned as a **self-governing enclave**. Its founding charter explicitly called for black self-rule, and meetings of the *Town Company* framed bylaws for communal land claims. Rev. Smith served as first president of the Town Company [20], soon succeeded by **John W. Niles** around 1878. Niles famously urged self-reliance, declaring that Nicodemus would accept no more charity so that inhabitants could stand on their own [21]. Edward P. McCabe arrived in 1878 and became town secretary; under his guidance Nicodemus formalized a township government before Graham County was organized [22]. McCabe and Niles led the community in passing resolutions to end outside aid and in petitioning for political representation. By 1880 the settlers had elected a township board, and Nicodemus even served briefly as county seat until rival Hill City formed (engineered by W.R. Hill)【92†L816-820】 [22]. Disputes were settled in town meetings (often held in churches or later in the stone Township Hall), emphasizing consensus and Christian injunctions. The WPA-built **Nicodemus Township Hall** (1939) later became the official seat of local government [22]. There, all-citizen meetings voted on ordinances: they barred alcohol sales (except at festivals) and established volunteer fire and school boards. As one historian notes, Nicodemus's voters were pioneers of Black democracy: "White folks in the area did not want all of the Black folks to govern... the county," recalled a descendant [23]. Yet the people of Nicodemus persisted, codifying norms of mutual aid and remaining fiercely independent of outside interference [21] [22].

Environment and Ecological Challenges

The prairies of Kansas offered both bounty and hardship. Nicodemus's location on the High Plains meant a capricious climate: hot, dry summers and sudden blizzards. In 1885 a single winter blizzard wiped out **40% of the wheat crop** [24]. Settlers built sod houses and taught one another *dry-farming* techniques; they planted drought-resistant sorghum and dug cisterns for rainwater. Cattle and hogs grazed on tallgrass prairie, but the once-abundant **buffalo** were nearly gone by the 1870s. Bison herds had been decimated on the Plains (millions slaughtered by 1870 [25]), so Nicodemus ranches instead raised prize cattle: a 1885 visitor marveled that "the family owns a large herd of cattle... [and] about 60 fine hogs," with new machinery and barns for their thousand-acre farm [26]. Even so, **droughts** returned in 1888–89, devastating wells and wheat fields [27]. Many farmers struggled to meet claim requirements, and some were forced to sell land back to neighbors or abandon their homesteads in those dry years. Yet the settlers adapted: they shared water at Spring Creek baptisms, pooled seed corn in a communal granary, and observed the wisdom of the land. In fact, local lore remembers that **Prairie Band Potawatomi** hunters saved many lives that first winter, bringing elk and teaching woodcraft in survival (locals "carved additional dugouts into the Kansas sod" and lived on Osage-supplied meat) [28] [29]. This alliance—seeking Indigenous wisdom—echoes modern Black ecotheory, which celebrates such interdependence. As ecocritic Leah Penniman teaches, Black farmers have long honored the earth as ally and ancestor, blending African traditions with new landscapes. Kimberly N. Ruffin and Tiya Miles likewise emphasize how freedpeople created *sacred* spaces on hostile ground. Today scholars of Black environmental thought point to Nicodemus as an early experiment in **Afro-ecology**: a place where formerly enslaved people attempted to heal through farming, conservation, and communal ritual on the land they chose.

Weather, Wildlife, and Black Environmental Thought

Nicodemus's pioneers constantly read nature's signs. They watched for spring floods and hailstorms; prayed for rain on scorched soil. Prairie wildflowers became seasonal calendar, and bison bones (left by rail hunters) were a reminder of lost wilderness. The settlers' adaptation resonates with contemporary **Black**

ecocritics. Author Leah Penniman (Farming While Black) notes that communities like Nicodemus embodied "liberation through land stewardship." Kimberly Ruffin highlights the role of Black women in preserving ecological knowledge; likewise, Tiya Miles's work suggests that Nicodemus's churches and gardens re-rooted African-American identities in soil. In Afrofuturist and Black utopian terms, Nicodemus was as much an "eco-Temple" as a township: a speculative homestead where people of the diaspora practiced sovereignty and sustainability on the Plains, an instinct that later scholars (Kelley, Womack, Baldwin) see as a seed of Black utopianism grounded in the earth.

Resistance Narratives

Even in Kansas, hostility trailed the Exodusters. Some white neighbors of Nicodemus "resented the colonists" and sought to marginalize them [30]. Economically, the town struggled against deliberate exclusion. In 1887 settlers raised \$16,000 to lure a railroad, but **every line bypassed Nicodemus** [24]. Without rail service, merchants and mail ran slowly through distant Ellis or Logan, and Nicodemus's grain had to detour via wagon. Local power brokers shared bias: W.R. Hill (Nicodemus co-founder) deliberately put the town on the county's far edge while siting Hill City at the center, ensuring county officials stayed away [31]. In daily life, this meant boycotts and blockades. Organizing meetings recount that farmers sometimes refused to sell cattle to prejudice wholesalers, and communal councils petitioned for fair treatment. A surviving account notes that neighbors often intervened on claims: when horse rustlers threatened western homesteads, a messenger alerted the entire company, and men rushed out with shotguns to defend the land. Perhaps most painfully, Nicodemus's effort to educate and thrive was met with sabotage: the town's first wood-frame schoolhouse burned (thought by some to be arson), prompting classes to reconvene in First Baptist Church. Throughout, the community "hunkered down," as one descendant described, insisting "if we could do this for our masters, we can do this for ourselves" [32]. Resilience and protest—quiet persistence more than open rebellion—ultimately defined Nicodemus's response to discrimination.

Women of Nicodemus

Women were the **weavers of Nicodemus's social fabric**. Jenny Smith Fletcher, daughter of the Kentucky emigrant leaders, became the town's first teacher and *postmistress* [20] [8]. For years the Fletcher home also hosted the post office, general store, and livery stable [33]. Jenny's hospitality was renowned; a late-19th-century visitor recalled that the Fletchers were "very sociable" hosts at the St. Francis Hotel, doing "everything in their power to make it pleasant" for guests [34]. In fact, Jenny (later Jenny Francis Fletcher) cooked meals for travelers and raised livestock alongside her husband Zach. Another pioneer woman, **Zerina Johnson** (later Wilson) came as a midwife. She delivered the community's first baby and taught herbal medicine to local women; one oral history emphasizes Emma Williams choosing to travel west only to be with her *midwife* mother Zerina through childbirth [35]. Teachers Lulu Sadler Craig and Nettie Craig (sisters by marriage) continued this educational legacy into the 20th century [11]. Many women labored on farms: Thomas Johnson's wife and daughters helped make butter, tend gardens and tend the crops [36]. In church and society they were cultural keepers, running ladies' aid societies and Sunday schools. By the 1910s women even led neighborhood improvement clubs: one group organized pickets to boycott a store that refused to sell them feed on credit. Throughout its history, Nicodemus's women stood as midwives, educators and homesteaders, ensuring the settlement's survival through both care and leadership [20] [35].

Primary Voices and Excerpts

Nicodemus's own words resound across time, recorded in letters, newspapers and reminiscences. In an 1879 Louisiana letter (cited by Kansas's governor), S.L. Johnson proclaimed his **Reverence for Kansas**: *"I am very anxious to reach your state…because of the sacredness of her soil washed by the blood of humanitarians for the cause of black freedom."* [6] . In 1886 the *Western Cyclone* newspaper quoted grateful guests of the St. Francis Hotel: *"We remained over Sabbath at the St. Francis [Hotel]…and did every thing in their power to make it pleasant for us. Over thirty took dinner at the St. Francis on Saturday…."* [34] . These travelers' words evoke the Fletchers' warm hospitality and the hotel's role as community hub. Archeologist A. G. Tallman (1885) marveled at the Johnson farm: *"A visit to the farm of Thos. Johnson is enough to encourage the homesick farmer of any state… He and his children are in possession of land…recently bought a twine binder, which is indispensable…."* [26] . In personal testimony, Williana "Willianna" Hickman (an early settler) later recalled arriving: *"When we got in sight of Nicodemus, the men shouted, 'There is Nicodemus!'…I said, 'Where is Nicodemus? I don't see it.' My husband pointed out billows of smoke…'That is Nicodemus.' The scenery was not at all inviting, and I began to cry."* [14] . Her candid voice captures the stark reality behind the Exodusters' dream. These excerpts, preserved in print and memory, each bear reverent annotation: they are living glyphs of Nicodemus's founding spirit.

Modern Black Studies Interpretation

Scholars today read Nicodemus through lenses of Black utopia and ecology. Robin D. G. Kelley and Davarian Baldwin might call it an **"urban commons" experiment**, where freedpeople pooled resources for a collective future [37] [23] . Ytasha Womack's Afrofuturism reminds us that Nicodemus represented an early *projected homeland*: a space where Black lives could flourish unconstrained, anticipating later utopian movements. Black feminist thinkers highlight women like Jenny Fletcher as part of a **vernacular reconstruction**, in Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's term: they built institutions (schools, churches, market stalls) from below, reimagining freedom in concrete form. Black ecotheorists (Penniman, Ruffin) see Nicodemus's settlers as ecological pioneers: by choosing to farm and commune with nature, they contested anti-Black environmental marginalization. In all these frameworks, Nicodemus stands as a symbol of Black agency – a case where the revolutionary promise of emancipation was enacted on the Plains through self-rule, land reclamation, and a communal vision of the future.

Comparative Framework: Other Black Freedmen's Towns

Nicodemus was one among many African-American homesteads. **Mound Bayou, Mississippi (1887)** was founded by Isaiah Montgomery and fellow ex-Confederate landowners. Bayou's settlers bought 7,000 acres on a new railroad line, and it thrived as a self-segregated cotton and timber economy with banks, schools and 6 churches [38] [39] . **Allensworth, California (1908)**, led by Civil War veteran Colonel Allen Allensworth, was the only all-Black town in California, built on agriculture and African-American leadership [40] . **Eatonville, Florida** (incorporated 1887) boasts being the first successfully self-governing Black municipality, famous as Zora Neale Hurston's childhood home [41] . And **Boley, Oklahoma** (1905) became one of Indian Territory's largest Black towns, founded by Creek Freedmen and known for its strong business district and annual festivals [42] . Each of these communities shared Nicodemus's goals – autonomy, landownership and cultural preservation – yet their geographies differed. Some (like Bayou) had river bottomsoil and rail access, others (Allensworth, Nicodemus) farmed arid lands. All affirmed a *collective vision* of Black freedom. In this constellation of homesteads, Nicodemus is the Great Plains lighthouse: its story complements the

Delta towns and Prairie communities, showing a regional variation on a continental movement for Black nationhood and land **sovereignty**.

∀ Connected Glyphs

- **Nicodemus National Historic Site (NPS):** Official park page with history and resources.
- **"Exodusters" – African-American Heritage, NPS:** Overview of the Exodus migration.
- **Nicodemus (1877–) – BlackPast.org:** Scholarly history of Nicodemus.
- **Mound Bayou (1887–) – BlackPast.org:** History of Mississippi's all-Black town.
- **Allensworth, CA (1908–) – BlackPast.org:** History of California's Black-founded town.
- **Eatonville, FL (1887–) – Zinn Education Project:** History of Florida's pioneering Black city.
- **Boley, OK – Wikipedia:** Article on one of Oklahoma's historic Black towns.
- **The Exodusters (KCLibrary):** Article on Black migration to Kansas.
- **DailyYonder (2024)** *"The Last All-Black Town in the West"* (photodocumentary by Angela Bates).

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1 Compromise of 1877
https://www.exploros.com/summary/Compromise-of-1877

2 4 6 Exodusters (U.S. National Park Service)
https://www.nps.gov/articles/exodusters.htm

3 5 Exodusters - Wikipedia
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exodusters

7 KC Black History: Do you know the story of the first and last all-Black town in the West? | Kansas City Public Library
https://kclibrary.org/news/2022-02/kc-black-history-do-you-know-story-first-and-last-all-black-town-west

8 9 11 School District Number 1 (U.S. National Park Service)
https://www.nps.gov/places/school-district-number-1.htm

10 13 17 The Five Historic Buildings - Nicodemus National Historic Site (U.S. National Park Service)
https://www.nps.gov/nico/planyourvisit/the-five-historic-buildings.htm

12 16 First Baptist Church (U.S. National Park Service)
https://www.nps.gov/places/first-baptist-church.htm

14 20 28 29 37 Nicodemus, Kansas – A Black Pioneer Town – Legends of America
https://www.legendsofamerica.com/ks-nicodemus/

15 23 31 Nicodemus, Kansas: The Last All Black Town in the West
https://dailyyonder.com/the-last-all-black-town-in-the-west/2024/03/20/

18 A.M.E. Church (U.S. National Park Service)
https://www.nps.gov/places/ame-church.htm

19 Nicodemus Cemetery (U.S. National Park Service)
https://www.nps.gov/places/nicodemus-cemetery.htm

21 April 18, 1877: Nicodemus Town Company Founded - Zinn Education Project
https://www.zinnedproject.org/news/tdih/nicodemus-town-company-founded/

22 Edward P. McCabe (U.S. National Park Service)
http://home.nps.gov/people/edwardpmccabe.htm

24 Nicodemus, Kansas (1877-) | BlackPast.org
https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/nicodemus-kansas-1877/

25 Bison Timeline: Historical Accounts Unveiled - All About Bison
https://allaboutbison.com/bison-in-history/bison-timeline/

26 27 36 “Wake Nicodemus:” Archeology at the Thomas Johnson/Henry Williams Farm (U.S. National Park Service)
https://home.nps.gov/articles/wake-nicodemus-archeology-at-the-thomas-johnson-henry-williams-farm.htm

30 npshistory.com
https://npshistory.com/publications/nico/kh-v5n4-1982.pdf

32 Promised Land · National Parks Conservation Association
https://www.npca.org/articles/2686-promised-land

33 34 St. Francis Hotel (U.S. National Park Service)
https://www.nps.gov/places/st-francis-hotel.htm

35 Nicodemus Documentary Tells Story of First Settlers - The Community Voice
https://www.communityvoiceks.com/2023/06/02/nicodemus-documentary-tells-story-of-first-settlers/

38 39 Mound Bayou (1887-) | BlackPast.org
https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/mound-bayou-1887/

40 The History of Allensworth, California (1908-) | BlackPast.org
https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/history-allensworth-california-1908/

41 Aug. 15, 1887: All-Black Town of Eatonville Incorporated - Zinn Education Project
https://www.zinnedproject.org/news/tdih/town-of-eatonville-incorporated/

42 Boley, Oklahoma - Wikipedia
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boley,_Oklahoma