



Nicodemus: The First Black Community West of the Mississippi

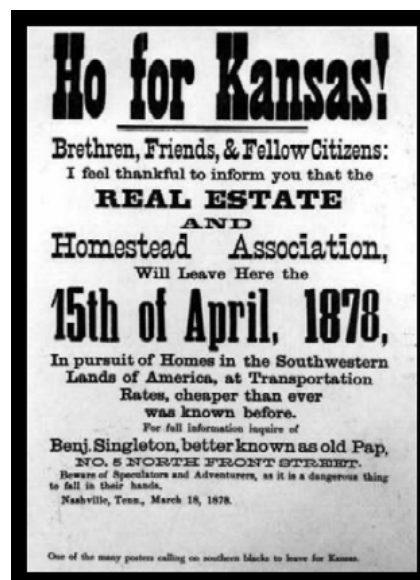
NAME: _____

Read about the community of Nicodemus and sketch a town plan as you imagine it. Include at least five people and places from the reading.

After the Civil War, many Black people wished to leave the places where they had been enslaved and start life anew. At that time, the U.S. government was giving away plots of land called “homesteads” to people who agreed to settle and farm them. Two men—a Black minister named W.H. Smith and a white land developer named W.R. Hill—decided to start a new community in Kansas. The state had declared itself free in 1861 and was far from the plantations of the South. They named their town Nicodemus, after a figure in the Bible, and in 1877 the first Black community west of the Mississippi River was born.

Now that they had a town, Hill and Smith set out to convince people to move there. They received help from Benjamin “Pap” Singleton, a carpenter from Tennessee. Pap traveled far and wide, handing out fliers about Nicodemus to other Black people looking for a fresh start. Pap couldn’t read or write himself, but he was an enthusiastic messenger. He handed out so many fliers, they nicknamed him the “Moses of the Colored Exodus” (exit), and those who followed were called “Exodusters.” Before long more than 300 settlers from Kentucky headed to Nicodemus, though many turned back when they saw how far-off and barren the land was. One of the settlers, Williana Hickman, remembered her reaction this way:

“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. I said, ‘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... The scenery was not at all inviting, and I began to cry.”





Nicodemus: The First Black Community West of the Mississippi (continued)



Soon the settlers built houses from sod, the grassy surface of the ground, and they were called “sodbusters.” As their first winter approached, they didn’t have enough tools, seed or money. They survived by selling buffalo bones, working for the local railroad and with help from Native Americans. As time went on, the townspeople built a stable, town hall, post office, bank, schools, churches and shops. By 1880, there were 500 people living in Nicodemus, which grew to include an ice cream parlor, hotels, two newspapers and even a baseball team.

Today, Nicodemus is a National Historic Site and only about 20 people live in the tiny town. Every July the residents hold a homecoming for the family members of the first settlers. They remember the hardships faced by those former enslaved people and the bravery it took for them to build a new life on the frontier.

SOURCES:

“Ho For Kansas!” April 14, 1878. Copyprint of handbill. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/african/afam009.html#obj9>.

Early Area Homestead—Nicodemus Historic District, Nicodemus, Graham County, KS. Photocopy of Historic Photograph. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/hhh.ks0077/photos.069503p>.

Legends of America. “Nicodemus—A Black Pioneer Town.” <https://www.legendsofamerica.com/ks-nicodemus>.

National Park Service. “Kansas: Nicodemus National Historic Site.” <https://www.nps.gov/articles/nicodemus.htm>.

Washington Street Showing First Stone Church and Williams General Store—Nicodemus Historic District, Nicodemus, Graham County, KS. C. 1885. Photocopy of Historic Photograph. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/hhh.ks0077/photos.069504p>.