

Nicodemus — The Promised Land

Following the Civil War more than half a dozen communities sprang up in Kansas dedicated to providing homes, land and a livelihood for former slaves. Nicodemus was the only one to survive. On July 30, 1877, the first small group of about thirty former slaves, including men, women and children, arrive at their destination on the fertile, but not so appealing to the eye, Kansas prairie. They have chosen a site in Graham County just north of the Solomon River in northwestern Kansas.

Another 350 homesteaders arrived in September of that year. A third party of 150 arrived in March of 1878, followed by a fourth group of 50 and a final group of 25 concluded the arrivals for that year.

The thing that distinguished this group from previous groups and groups that followed was that they were all black Americans. They were the first of a vast movement that became known as the “Negro exodus”. A movement away from the south and to the hopeful lands of Kansas and other northern states.

They named their community Nicodemus, not after the biblical character, but for an African Prince who was brought to the states in 1620 and sold as a slave. He became famous for being the first slave to be set free in America as a result of purchasing his own freedom. (Note: Wikipedia still claims that the community is named after the biblical Nicodemus.) Slaves on the southern plantations sang a song to Nicodemus:

*Nicodemus was a slave of African birth,
And was bought for a bag of gold,
He was reckoned as a part of the salt of the earth,
And he died years ago, very old.*

Members of the Nicodemus settlement added their own hopeful chorus to the original tune:

*Good time coming, Good time coming,
Long, long time on the way;
Go tell Elijah to hurry up pomp,
To meet us under the cottonwood tree,
In the great Solomon Valley to build up
The City of Nicodemus at the break of day.*

In the history of America’s colored people Nicodemus has been compared to what Jamestown is to the white people. It was here that people that were once slaves attempted for the first time the serious experiment of settling upon their very own land under the provisions of the Homestead Act.

The men involved with the founding of Nicodemus were black men with the exception of a white man named William R. Hill, a minister and real estate developer. Some sources say he was born in Indiana and others say that it was Excelsior Springs, Missouri in 1840. It is known that he came to Kansas in 1876 because he wanted to take part in the large fees that homesteaders were paying for help in locating land to homestead, filing papers and any other assistance they might need to secure a piece of land to make a home.

The site of the town was decided, as a story goes, when Hill walked all afternoon looking for the most favorable spot. 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 he laid down to rest and think. He was awakened the next morning by the sun shining upon his face. He had found the perfect spot.



Hill enlisted other men to assist him in bringing the area to the attention of the intended occupants, former slaves or, as they were otherwise known, "Exodusters." One of those men, and one that provided the most help was Benjamin "Pap" Singleton.

It was relatively easy to lure the former slaves to leave the South in search of freedom and a new way of life. Plus, there were already hundreds of black folks in Kansas that were looking for land to settle on. Soon Hill and Singleton had groups of settlers heading for the area that would become Nicodemus.

The first group reached the townsite in late summer of 1877, too late for planting any crops that year. Having spent all of their meager savings on transportation and paying fees, they were sorely disappointed with what they found. Why would they not be disappointed? In the settlement there was no shelter of any kind, no wells for water. There were no trees which meant no lumber for building and no wood for heating or cooking.. Their homes had to be dug out off the sides of the bluffs or hills. Heating came from dried buffalo dung or sunflower stalks. The buffalo were extinct and there was no game, as they had been promised, was available in abundance. Some at least had security in the old home. Some had left fairly good positions and homes. Several of the new settlers were mad enough to make an attempt to hang Hill who fled to the safety of a friend.

The white settlers in the area resented Hill intensely for bringing in the Exodusters that he was forced to flee from them also.

When he returned to this part of Kansas later he was received with high regard. Hill City was named after him and became the county seat for Graham County. He served as the first mayor. He remained in Kansas for many years. In 1896 he went to Colorado to enter into the mining business. He died on February 21, 1905 in East Lynne, Missouri, and was returned to Hill City for burial.

The buffalo were gone, but the prairie was strewn with the bones of the buffalo that had been slaughtered for their hides. The settlers would collect the bones and haul them to the nearby town of Wakeeney where they would be paid \$6.00 for a ton. Not much, but it did allow for purchase of some necessities. The bones were ground into a powder and shipped back east for use as fertilizer. Early in 1879 a long sod building was erected and it was not unusual to see 20 wagons in the stable loaded with bones waiting for delivery to Wakeeney.

There were only three horses in the entire settlement and fewer plows, so the ground had to be broken using spades, axes, or any other equipment that could be had. One fellow broke five acres of land with nothing but a spade. One enterprising family used the family cow to break 12 acres of land. He cultivated eight acres of corn. His wife drove the cow and kept the flies off the animal.

The men would walk to eastern Kansas, Colorado and Nebraska in search of work while the wife and children held down the home and tilled the soil the best way they could. And at harvest time every grain had to be pulled by bare hands.

Hill enticed the settlers to come with tales of 160 acres available for the asking. He filled their eager heads with stories of unlimited wild game and buffalo. He told them hundreds of wild horses roamed free and were easy to tame and turn into farm animals. None of the stories were true. Almost all the wild game was long gone and there was only one herd of wild horses and not one of them was ever captured or tamed.

By March of 1879, Nicodemus had thirty-five dwelling houses above the ground, one general store and post office, one real estate office, one hotel, two livery stables, a Methodist and a Baptist Church and six schools in dugouts. Later it would have a blacksmith, a restaurant and a drug store.

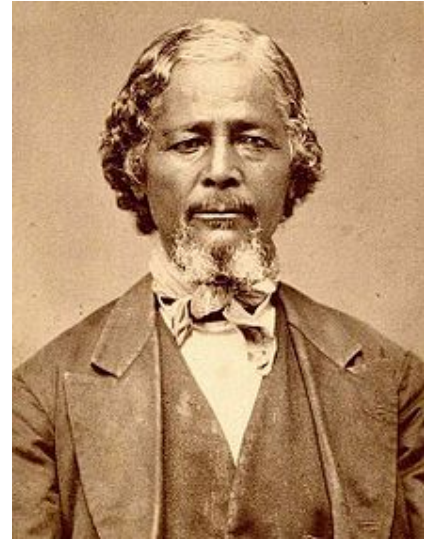
In time there would be a colored Farmers' Alliance, a Masonic Lodge, an academy and one of the best bands in northwestern Kansas. At one point it even had two newspapers, *The Western Cyclone* and *The Enterprise*.

By the early 1880s the town boasted of a population of 1,000, all of the black race. There was two white storekeepers, but they did not live in town. Up to the end of 1968 there had never been a white resident and that probably holds true even to this date.

The early success of the community was the result of the enterprising town folks, but also to one particular man, Benjamin “Pap” Singleton, the man that led them to their Canaan.

Singleton was a mulatto slave born in Nashville, Tennessee in 1809. He was trained as a carpenter and cabinet maker. He was sold a dozen times or more, but always ran away and returned to Tennessee. Eventually he did runaway from slavery and Tennessee and ended up in Ontario, Canada before returning to the states, in Detroit, Michigan.

While in Detroit he became interested in the welfare of his people and began his movement to get them to move out of the South. It was 1869, the war had been over for four years but Singleton still thought that: “There was no hope, bread, or protection for the colored man or his family. Liberty had become a mockery: emancipation, a curse; freedom, a delusion.



He was called “Pap” because of his age and kindly disposition. He returned to Tennessee and organized the Tennessee Real Estate and Homestead Association. His aim was to get the black folks to save their money, buy land in the South, own their own homes and be their own bosses. His plan was doomed from the beginning because of high land prices and prejudices of the white people. In 1871 he turned his thoughts toward Kansas and 1873 he visited Kansas and was greatly impressed with what he was shown. With great enthusiasm he returned to Tennessee to organize and lead bands of former slaves to the “land of Canaan.” The railroads were most eager to transport people to Kansas regardless of race, color or creed.

Pap’s hand bills and circulars promised land at \$3 per acre, ten years credit, no taxes for six years and other benefits that led to a land rush to Kansas. Singleton claimed that by the end of 1878 he was personally responsible for bringing 7,432 former slaves to Kansas and earning the nicknames “Moses of the Negro Race,” “Father of the Exodus,” “The Moses of the Colored Exodus” etc.

There had been blacks in Kansas from the earliest of times. In 1855, records show there was 151 free and 192 slaves present. In 1860 the figures were 625 free blacks and 2 slaves. Within a decade the population had swollen to 17,100.

During the decade of the great exodus, 1870 to 1880, the black population of Kansas grew to 43,107. One source says that migration of folks from the 15 slave holding states to Kansas alone was 59,193 whites and 19,116 blacks.

In one year alone, April 1, 1879, to April 1, 1880, 15,000 to 20,000 black people settled in Kansas. About one-third were given teams and farming tools and were expected to become self-sufficient in 12 months. Another third were settled in towns where they were employed as house-servants or day-laborers and were expected to take care of themselves as long as the labor market did not become overly crowded. The final third were haphazardly placed at work with white farmers and herders with no hope of becoming homeowners or furthering themselves without considerable assistance.

In a land where at that time the lowest estimate required to take up, improve and make a farm successful was \$400. Only a very few of the many thousands that flocked to Kansas had anywhere near that amount of money. And soon the newspapers and magazines of the country reached the foregone conclusion regarding the “Exodusters”: *“The idea that the colored man—or the white man either, for that matter—can go upon the public lands with a special dispensation of Providence in his favor, and make for himself a farm, without a team and tools and funds enough to provide for his family until at least one crop can be raised, is a specious and ensnaring fiction that cannot be too soon exploded.”*

On May 8, 1879, a Kansas Freedman's Relief Association was formed and headed by Governor John P. St. John and much was done to provide relief to the black people. Large sums of money were donated from various places, \$2,000 from Chicago, \$3,000 from England, etc. The association also collected clothes and provisions. \$25,000 was collected in cash and 300,000 pounds of merchandise valued at over \$100,000 was received and distributed. One third of the sum was raised by the Society of Friends.

In January 1890, Jay Gould, railroad magnet, gave \$5,000 for the settlers along the Kansas Pacific Railroad. John Hall, a Quaker, gave \$1,000. The bulk of the contributions came from the industrial and working classes and people of modest circumstances. Not one dollar of public funds were ever expended to support the black settlers.

Despite all this assistance the plight of the immigrants became acute. Congress held an investigation, but as in most congressional investigations nothing was accomplished. Many had to return to their old homes because they couldn't find work in overcrowded Kansas. White folks grumbled about the black surplus labor force and depressed wages. The head of the Exoduster was finally turned, much like the head of a stampeding herd of cattle.

Nicodemus was looking good and the thought was that it might weather the storm. But a series of crop failures ensued. Even in 1883 when the rest of Kansas had a good harvest, Nicodemus was plagued by searing southwest winds.

Membership in the Farmer's Alliance dwindled and then died. From an estimated population of 700 to 1,000 in 1880 had dwindled to about 150 people. These of course were the successful ones. Others drifted to other parts of Kansas in search of work or returned to their old homeland.

There were definite successes. One Exoduster arrived in Nicodemus with \$4 in his pocket and eventually raised high grade hogs and cattle on 500 acres of land that he had acquired. Early in Nicodemus history it has been told that the Exodusters shut off the water along the Solomon to the cattlemen. In retaliation the cowboys took some of the settler's livestock. The settlers captured a cowboy and held him hostage until their livestock was returned.

Another major factor in the failure of Nicodemus came when the railroads failed to follow up on their intentions to extend the railroad lines that far. The Union Pacific failed to raise the necessary funding. The Missouri Pacific did not come because the people could not raise the necessary funds to grade the difficult terrain that the town sat on.

For over 80 years on August 1st Nicodemus celebrated what they called "Emancipation Day." It was also called "Demus Day." On that day in 1834 the British House of Commons voted twenty million pounds sterling to compensate slaveholders for freeing 800,000 slaves in the West Indies. On August 1, 1886, four to five thousand people descended on Nicodemus. Hundreds of visitors from all over Kansas plus Oklahoma and Missouri took part in the barbecue and watermelon feast.

The post office that was established in 1878 was discontinued on November 31, 1953. The word from Washington was that it was an economic decision that had to be made.

Starting in the 1970s Nicodemus underwent a process of revitalization and restoration. Donations from former residents led to efforts to repair damage to the deteriorating town buildings. New improvements were made to the town including low-income housing units, construction of a 100-foot tall water tower, and the pavement of the major town streets. These efforts succeeded in preserving Nicodemus and rebuilding its popularity. The town developed a new identity as a retirement destination for former residents. The Emancipation celebration, renamed Homecoming, changed to become a gathering of old residents to celebrate their roots and common history and continues to be celebrated annually.

In 1976, Nicodemus was named a National Historic Landmark. But as of 2018, its First Baptist Church, African Methodist Episcopal Church, and other historic buildings are in such poor shape that they cannot be opened to the public.

References: *Nicodemus – The Promised Land* by Donald N. Bentz, *Golden West Nov. 1968*
Nicodemus – A Black Pioneer Town – Legends of America

