

Unearthing a Hidden Past: Reconstructing Health & Environment

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Ads offering freedom for \$5



Main street in 1885



Nicodemus residents 1880s-1890s



Aerial view of Nicodemus 1953

Historical Background

Nicodemus is the only surviving black western town established during the Reconstruction period in the northwestern region of Kansas. Fleeing oppression and racism in Kentucky and Tennessee, the ex-slaves traveled by train and by foot to establish their own community based on home life, education, religion, hard work, and social, religious, and political organizations. “Lush, bountiful” land was advertised for five dollars a plot. Despite harsh conditions, the community was able to blossom. At its height the community boasted a population of almost 700 and included a bank, two hotels, several churches, two newspapers, a drug store, three general stores, a literary society, a law office, an ice cream parlor, a baseball team, a band, and a benefit society. A steady decline began when the Union Pacific Railroad decided to bypass the township and took many businesses with it.

Through historical research, it was evident that the community was able to survive their first winter in Kansas only through charity from the Osage Indians returning from a hunt and white Exodusters. When community members reached Kansas in 1877 they arrived too late to begin planting, had no horses to plow the land, and no money to purchase seeds.

Project Overview

This project sought to reconstruct the environment and health of African Americans in Nicodemus in order to measure the migrants' success in adapting to a new geographical region. Through analyzing the faunal remains and soil samples from several features on the Thomas Johnson and Henry Williams farm, the research was primarily concerned with shedding light on the daily life experiences of African Americans. Excavations in 2007 & 2009 focused on the root cellar, dugout/soddie, ash midden, school yard, and throughout the landscape. More specifically, the research sought to determine how the community was able to survive and adapt to a new geographical area through looking at adjustments to their environment and health. The most recent work centered on identifying potential health risks that may have been introduced to the community through parasites associated with two non-native rodent species in Kansas.

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Climate: Humid Continental

Environment

When the first wave of Exodusters arrived they were unaccustomed to the harshness of prairie life; many families returned to Kentucky and Tennessee. By spring of 1879 community members were living off what their gardens could produce, in addition to pigs and chickens. After 1879, they began planting bumper crops (string beans, watermelon, cabbage, turnips, and potatoes) in the fields that were able to thrive in the climate.

The residents altered the natural environment through buildings and farming, but most of the indigenous plant life has survived. The prairie is cut by a narrow, discontinuous ribbon of riverine forest. The community was located near the south fork of the Solomon River and was close to the Saline River, Bow Creek, and Spring Creek. There was also a weak branch of Spring Creek that flowed through the center of the Johnson and Williams farm. There are oral histories that tell stories of some of the men going on fishing trips, however, the faunal assemblage at this time does not reflect these stories.

Acquisition of Data & Insights

Methods

- Faunal Analysis
- Microscopic analysis
- Rodent Identification Key
- Species Account
- Soil Analysis
- Soil Rehydration

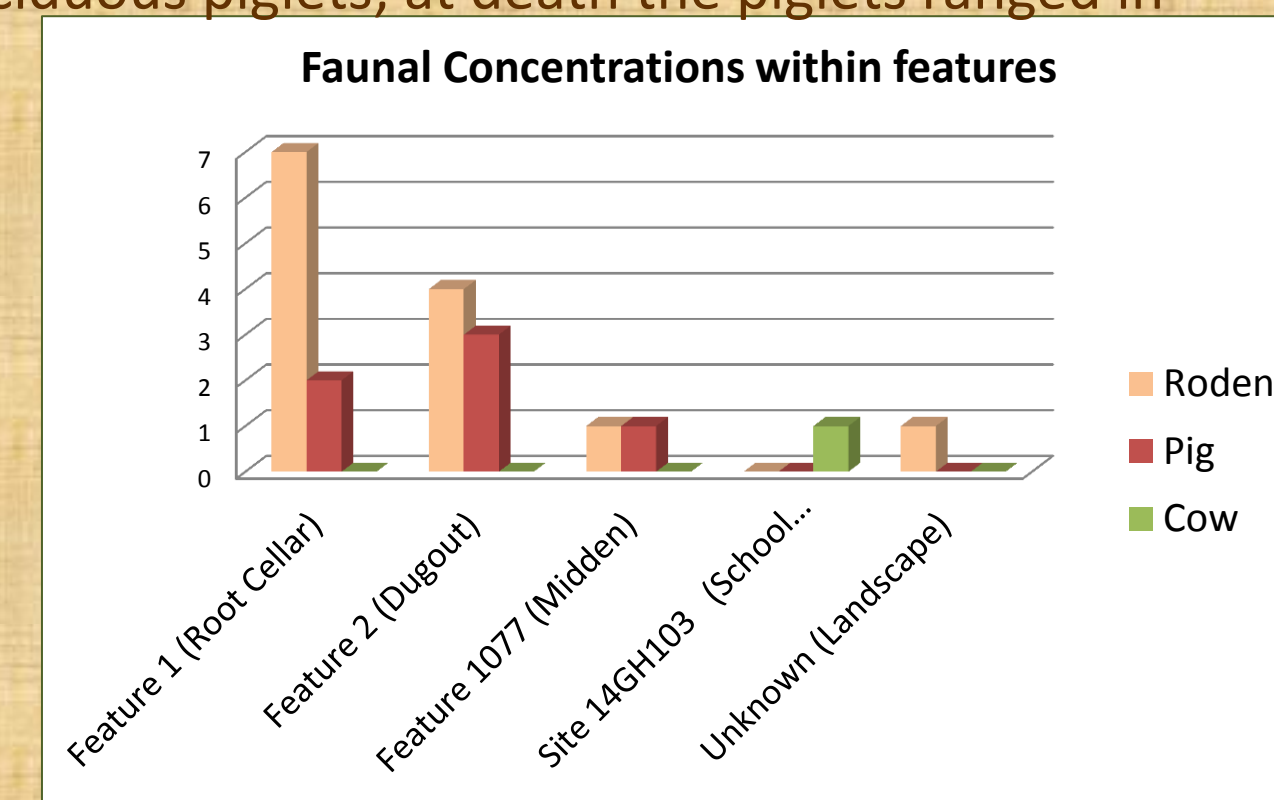
Insights

Initial research questions sought to determine the diet of the Exodusters during their first winter in Kansas by looking at the Johnson/Williams homestead excavations. The wide variety of species found suggests that these animals were commensal and are not representative of the community’s diet. Commensal animals are those that live off their human hosts but are not consumed. A viable explanation for their presence is that they were seeking shelter during the winter months. Oddly for a farming community, there is little evidence thus far that indicates animals such as the cow were consumed. Within the faunal assemblage there was single butchered left cow scapula and the mandibles of three deciduous piglets; at death the piglets ranged in age from two months to six months.

Table 1: Faunal Catalog from 2007, 2009 Field seasons

Nicodemus Faunal Catalog					
By Species & Type					
Species	Type	Count	Modification	Modification Type	MIN
Pig (sus)	mandible	3	yes	sawed	2
Cow (bos)	scapula	1	yes	butchered	1
Rabbit/Hare	tibia	1	no	complete	1
Small Carnivore	mix	27	no	N/A	N/A
Rodent	cranium/ mandible & long bone	14	no	N/A	13
Amphibian	uid	N/A	no	complete	N/A
Small Bird	mix	19	no	gnawed	N/A
Chicken	egg shell	9.7 g	yes	broken	N/A
Shell	UID (possibly mollusk/turtle)	10.1 g	yes	broken	N/A
UID Species	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
	Pelvis- sacrum	2	no	complete	N/A
	Pelvis- coxal	6	no	complete	N/A
	Toes	5	no	complete	N/A
	Ribs	12	no	complete	N/A
	scapula	2	no	complete	N/A
	Clavicle	2	no	complete	N/A
	Vertebra	28	no	complete	N/A
	Miscellaneous	-	yes	burned/broken	N/A

Table 2: Concentrations of fauna within excavated features



Deciduous pig mandibles

Health

Sample of faunal assemblage



So far the data suggests that the community had a diet that consisted mainly of vegetables. The lack of large mammals, little to no bone modification, and the large presence of small animals leads to the conclusion that meat was either not a large portion of their dietary consumption, it was not readily available, or it simply was too expensive. The presence of the butchered left cow scapula and deciduous piglets speak volumes about the lack of wealth in this community. Prime cuts of beef do not include the scapula and in a poorer community the likelihood of prime cuts are rare. The same concept would apply to pigs. In poor communities, especially African American ones at that time period, it made more sense economically to save the sow who could produce more piglets than it would be to consume her. This phenomenon is linked to the popularity of pig's feet in African American diets: the cuts were economical of closely guarded resources and easy to come by.

The large number of rodents present raised the possibility that the settlers may have faced additional health risks from their proximity, so a soil analysis was conducted to determine if parasites were present. In order to narrow down possible parasitic remains, we focused on identifying (if present) parasites that may have been carried by the two non-native rodent species, the house mouse and Norway rat. Although no parasitic remains were found within the soil samples, the samples did reveal some insights about the quality of the soil through the presence of snail remains.

Summary

Thus far there is insufficient data to provide insights about potential health risks that may have afflicted the community. However, the research has identified areas for future study that may help shed light on the overall health of the community. Future research can determine if the snails indicate heavy metal contamination which would lead to a variety of health problems. At the present stage, this research project does seem to indicate cultural and economic adaptation to a new geographical region. Culturally, Nicodemus was autonomous, rarely accepting help from nearby communities. After a few initial years of hardship, Nicodemus became a thriving town even if was short-lived.

The true hallmark of this project was not reconstructing environment and health for African Americans in the 19th century, but shedding light on little-known aspects on the life of African American pioneers. This research highlights the perseverance and the ability of African Americans to prosper even when faced with the harshest conditions.