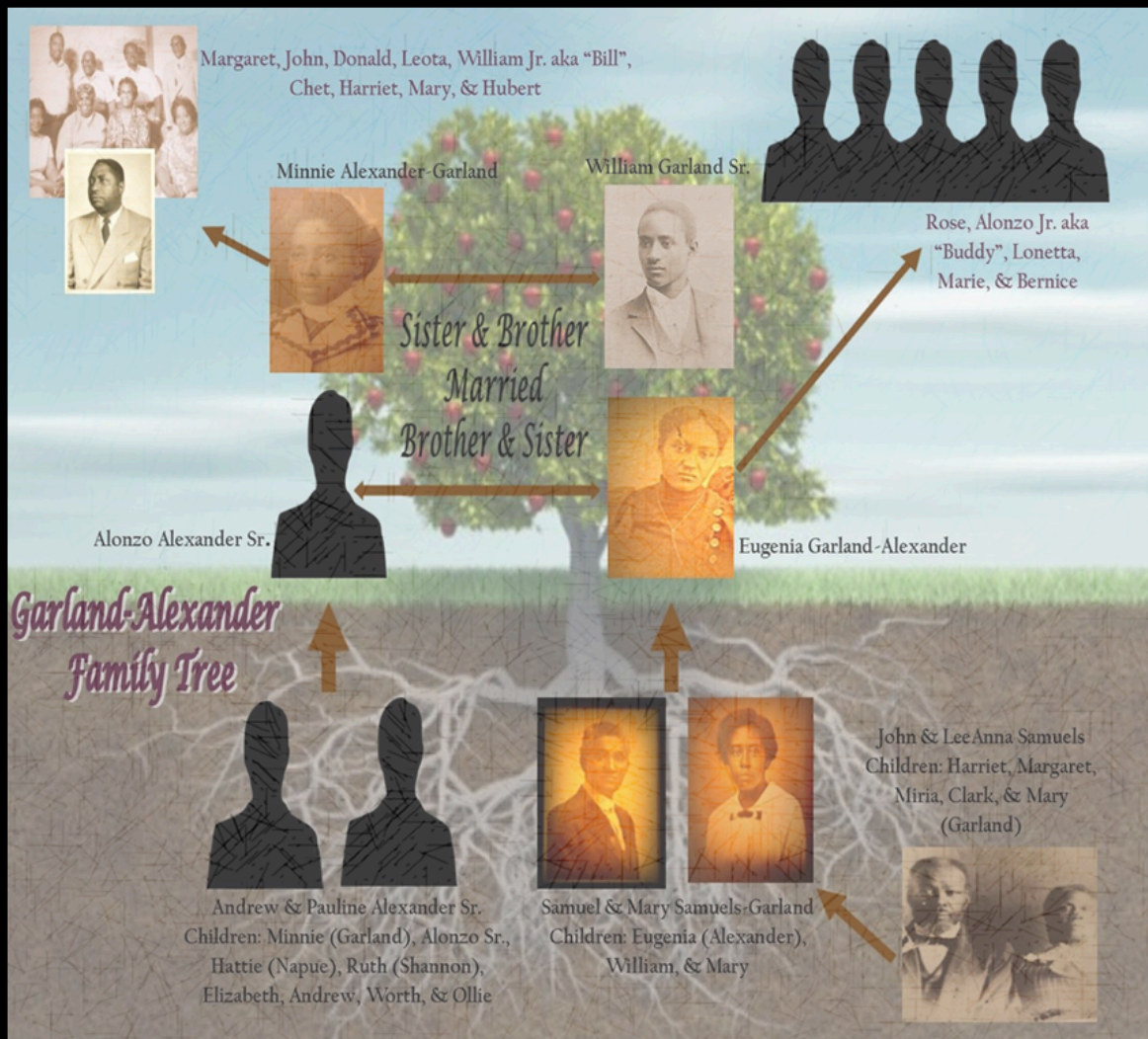




Advancing Descendant Engagement in Nicodemus, Kansas

A Reparative Approach to Preservation and Stewardship



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Introduction

The story of Nicodemus is central to understanding both African American resilience and the broader history of the United States. Founded during the Post-Reconstruction era, Nicodemus offered newly freed African Americans the opportunity to own land, build community, and shape a future defined by freedom and self-determination. At its height, the town thrived as a hub of Black culture, faith, and economic activity.

Yet, like many historic Black communities, Nicodemus has faced systemic neglect. Preservation resources have been limited, official recognition has not guaranteed equitable investment, and descendant voices have too often been sidelined in decisions that directly affect their heritage. The challenges in Nicodemus reflect broader national patterns of underinvestment in Black historic sites and the ongoing erasure of African American contributions from public memory.

Against this backdrop, the Nicodemus Genealogy Engagement Project was developed to center descendant voices in shaping the future of preservation. By conducting surveys and focus groups, and by introducing the Nicodemus Rubric, this project affirms that reparative preservation must be led by descendants themselves. The lessons from Nicodemus provide not only a roadmap for local action but also a model that can be adapted across other historic Black locations and descendant communities worldwide.

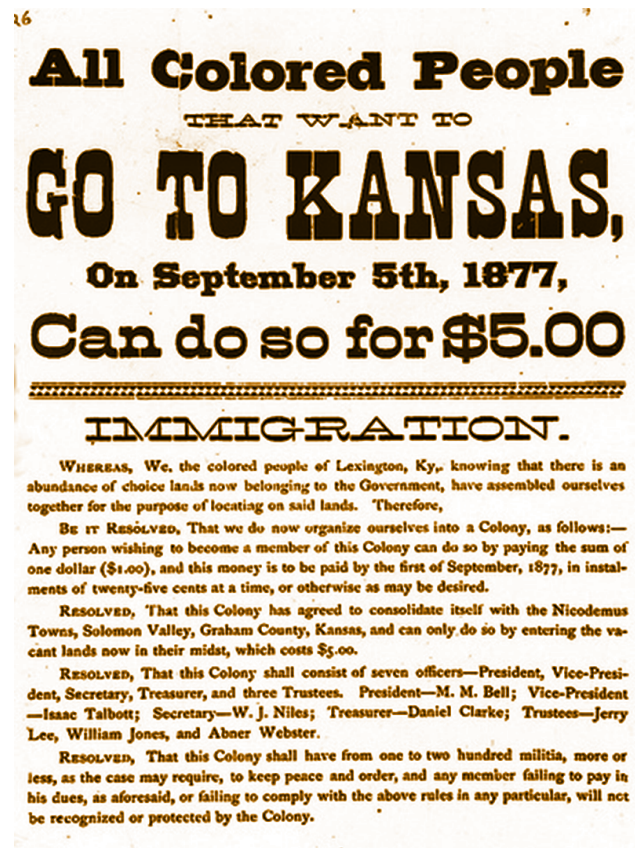


Figure 1 (cover). Garland-Alexander Family Tree

Figure 2. Town Promotional Flyer, Courtesy of the Nicodemus Historical Society

Executive Summary

Nicodemus, Kansas, founded in 1877 by formerly enslaved African Americans, remains one of the last surviving historic Black towns west of the Mississippi River. It stands as a national symbol of Black resilience, vision, and community self-determination. Despite its recognition as a National Historic Site, Nicodemus continues to face structural inequities. These include underrepresentation in preservation systems, limited descendant participation, and fragile infrastructure.

To address these challenges, the Nicodemus Historical Society launched the Nicodemus Genealogy Engagement Project. The project was led by Dr. Ashley Adams, a descendant and Board President. Through surveys and focus groups with over 35 descendants across 13 states, the project documented descendant priorities and introduced a new evaluative framework: **the Nicodemus Rubric for Descendant Engagement**.

Findings highlight descendants' desire for stronger involvement in preservation, increased digital access to genealogical archives, sustained investment in infrastructure, and opportunities for youth and intergenerational engagement. The Nicodemus Rubric provides a roadmap for equitable, reparative, descendant-led stewardship that can be adapted across other historic Black towns.

Recommendations include:

- Strengthening Descendant Leadership
- Sustainable Investment
- Digital Access and Technology
- Educational and Intergenerational Engagement
- Cross-Community Partnership

By advancing descendant-centered strategies, the Nicodemus Rubric affirms that historic preservation is not only about protecting physical sites. It is also a tool for justice, cultural healing, and collective memory.

Key Findings

Preservation Gaps

- Black historic sites remain underfunded and underrepresented in national preservation systems.
- Descendant voices are largely absent from formal decision-making processes.
- Limited services, building disrepair, and insufficient archival space weaken visitor and community engagement.

Descendant Priorities

- Strong desire for expanded genealogical research tools and digitized archives.
- Emphasis on cultural pride, family connection, and narrative justice.
- Calls for more youth leadership pathways and sustained intergenerational involvement.

Barriers Identified

- Poor coordination across organizations and limited unification of the descendant network.
- Inadequate physical infrastructure, services, and accommodations at annual gatherings.
- Technology and digital ethics underdeveloped, with no centralized platform for data access and governance.

Opportunities for Action

- Develop a digital genealogy database to strengthen descendant connections nationwide.
- Expand youth programming through storytelling, fellowships, and educational initiatives.
- Formalize partnerships with Indigenous communities to acknowledge shared land histories.
- Apply the Nicodemus Rubric as a scalable model for other descendant-led preservation projects.



Figure 3. Nicodemus National Historic Site Historic Buildings. From Top Row (Left) St. Francis Hotel (Fletcher-Switzer Residence), (Right) AME Church; Bottom Row (Left) Nicodemus Township Hall, (Middle) Historic First Baptist Church, (Right) District Number 1 School.

Recommendations

Strengthening Descendant Leadership

Formalize governance structures such as advisory councils and shared authority agreements. Ensure descendants hold meaningful decision-making roles in planning, preservation, and evaluation processes.

Sustainable Investment

Direct resources equitably and transparently. Fund long-term infrastructure, archival facilities, and visitor services to support both preservation and community vitality. Prioritize funding strategies co-designed with descendants.

Digital Access and Technology

Create a centralized, descendant-governed genealogy database. Co-develop ethical guidelines for digitization that ensure consent, transparency, and cultural representation in all archival and AI-based practices.

Education and Intergenerational Engagement

Launch youth heritage fellowships, storytelling apprenticeships, and curriculum partnerships that embed Nicodemus history into schools and community programming. Cultivate leadership among younger generations to ensure continuity.

Cross-Community Partnerships

Deepen collaboration with Indigenous communities through co-created interpretive content, land acknowledgments, and shared stewardship models. Build alliances with local, state, and national reparations initiatives.

Policy and Implementation Implications

The Nicodemus Rubric offers a practical evaluative tool for descendant-centered preservation. Grounded in equity, cultural healing, and sustainability, the rubric aligns with:

- The American Public Health Association’s recognition of racism as a public health crisis, which reinforces preservation as a public health strategy.
- The United Nations reparations framework, particularly its principles of truth-telling and guarantees of non-repetition.
- The growing U.S. reparations movement, which calls for descendant-led governance, inclusive interpretation, and reparative investment.

By embedding these principles into preservation practice, the Nicodemus Rubric transforms historic preservation into an act of justice and community wellness.



Figure 4. Nicodemus Descendant Survey: (Left) Dr. Ashley Adams and Ms. Angela Bates, Nicodemus Homecoming 2023; (Right) Nicodemus Descendant Survey Participants at Homecoming 2023.

Conclusions

Nicodemus tells a vital story of freedom, resilience, and vision. Today, its descendants continue to safeguard this legacy against systemic erasure and underinvestment. The Nicodemus Rubric for Descendant Engagement provides a framework for reparative preservation that uplifts descendant voices, strengthens intergenerational continuity, and advances cultural healing.

Preserving Nicodemus is not just about one town. It is about reshaping national public memory and ensuring that African American history is fully honored within America's story. The lessons from Nicodemus demonstrate that when descendants lead, preservation becomes a pathway to justice.



*The **Community to Community (C2C) Impact Accelerator** at Northeastern University was designed to deepen the university's commitment to community engaged research at each of its global campus locations. We strive to move the needle on societal problems at the local level, benefitting the areas our university calls home, while also promoting knowledge transfer across communities that are grounded in the local context.*