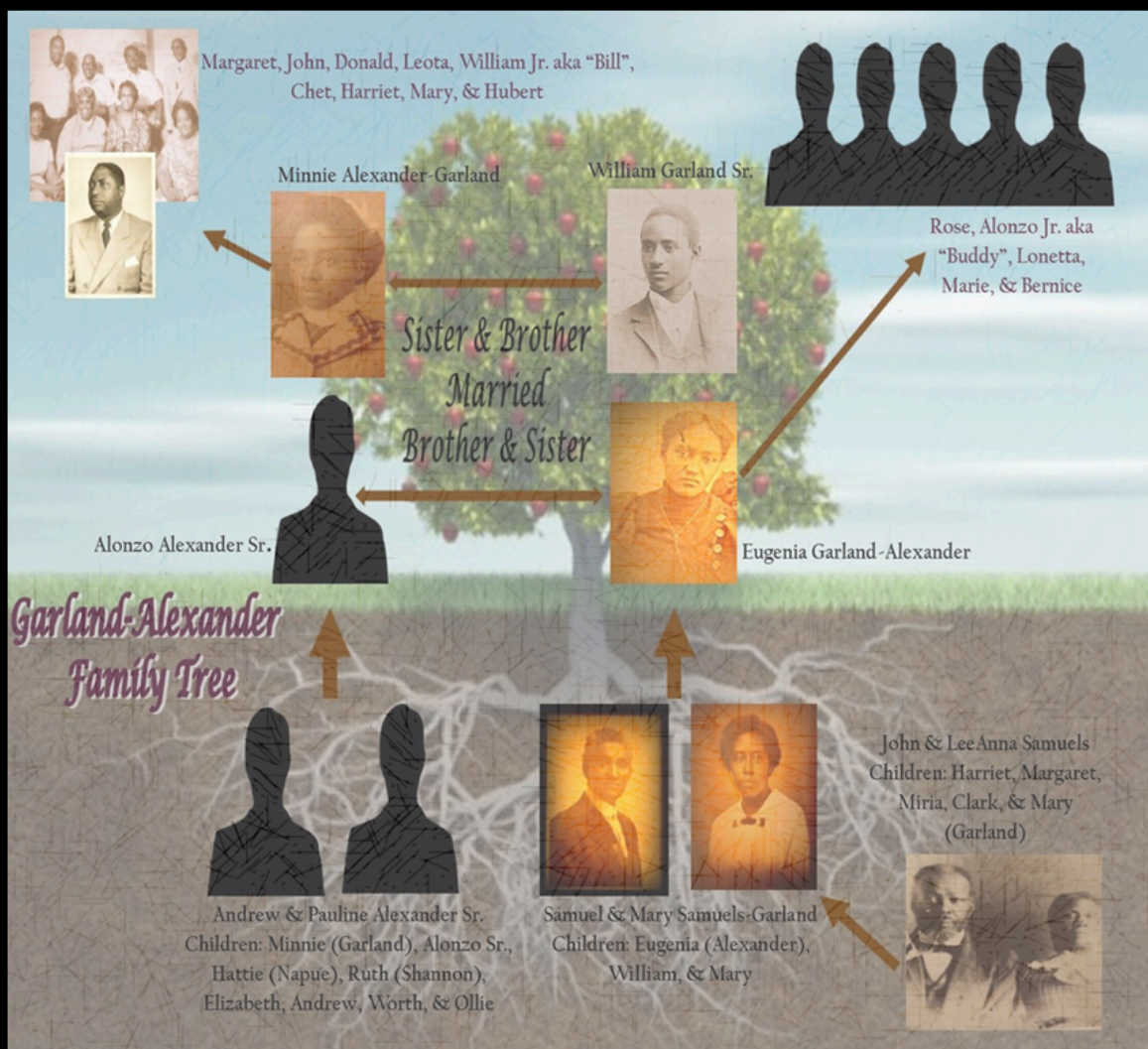




# Advancing Descendant Engagement in Nicodemus, Kansas

*A Reparative Approach to Preservation and Stewardship*



*Ashley C. Adams*

# A Note from the Author

When I was a little girl, I remember taking road trips to the historic Black town, Nicodemus, Kansas during annual Homecoming celebrations. There would be so many cousins gathered together—so much fun and laughter out in the country sun. It felt like a secret, sacred place full of love and Black joy, but also a uniquely diverse and welcoming place. I remember it vividly. At some point during my pre-teen years, I took photos of the graves of my Nicodemus ancestors who were early settlers of the town—though I did not fully understand why then. Now, I see that as my first act of preservation: an early attempt to honor the memory of Nicodemus and those who came before me.

Over time, I learned more about my great-great-great-grandparents, John and Lee Anna Samuels. Their story of survival and perseverance continues to guide me. During slavery, they were owned by separate enslavers of the same extended family and only allowed to visit one another on Sundays and Wednesdays. In the spring of 1878, they migrated to Nicodemus during the town's third settlement wave, along with their adult children, finally seeking a place of promise altogether.

Grandpa John's story is a constant source of motivation. He spent most of his enslaved life laboring in a hemp factory in Kentucky, where raw material was processed for cloth. It was there that he met a runaway enslaved man named Tenn (short for Tennessee), who was hiding in the woods near the factory before continuing his journey north towards freedom. Tenn befriended the enslaved community there and secretly taught those who were willing to learn the alphabet, using the dirt on the ground as a chalkboard. He taught my Grandpa John how to read. Years later, Grandpa John shared this story with his granddaughter Lula Craig, who became the first Nicodemus town historian. He told her that, when Tenn first offered to teach them, he and the others thought: "Why would anybody imagine that we could read?" This starking question marked the beginning of his legendary and courageous journey toward literacy. Enslaved individuals who attempted to educate themselves, if caught, suffered physical and psychological consequences by enslavers. Nonetheless, even under the strict limitations of slavery, many still developed ingenious strategies to become literate. Grandpa John was no exception—he later discovered a Bible near a water spring and quietly taught himself to read, secretly sneaking away to a nearby abandoned cabin in the woods at night, sometimes with a friend, to study its pages. This quiet act of resistance became a defining moment in his life and planted a legacy of resilience and reverence for education that would carry forward through generations.

My genealogical connection to Nicodemus begins with my mother, Leota Marie, and her mother, Leota Buford. My grandmother Leota Buford was the daughter of Minnie and William Garland; William was the son of Mary and Sam Garland; and Mary was the daughter of John and Lee Anna Samuels. Grandpa Sam was also a Buffalo Soldier. As a young boy, he was separated from his mother, who was Cherokee, and escaped slavery by running away and later joining the Union Army. Cousin Lula Craig, the town's first historian, compiled the earliest known stories of Nicodemus settlers, such as these. Her unpublished manuscript is preserved at the University of Kansas in the Spencer Research Library.

My grandmother Leota was a business owner and entrepreneur. With limited resources, she and my grandfather, George Buford, Sr. started her clothing business, Leota's Fashion's, selling women's clothing and accessories in the Kansas City area and beyond for over 50 years. She was a true pillar in her community and deeply cared for the legacy of our Nicodemus ancestors.

I am a fourth-generation descendant of formerly enslaved Black people who were among the early settlers of the historic Black town of Nicodemus, Kansas. On my father's side, my great-grandfather George Dennie and his family were survivors of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. He survived the massacre when he was just a teenager—his body burned over a large percentage—but he lived to share his story.

I do this work for my ancestors—so their stories will never be forgotten.

I am fortunate to know these ancestral stories, not because they are easy to carry, but because generations before me preserved them and in the face of deep pain and hardship they found faith,

resilience, joy, and love. This project reflects that legacy. As a descendant, scholar, and President of the Nicodemus Historical Society Board, I am honored to carry both personal and professional responsibility to carry this legacy forward towards future generations. The Nicodemus Genealogy Engagement Project grew out of years of research and lived experience addressing preservation challenges in Nicodemus. The main goals of the project are 1) to deepen descendant involvement and 2) create a genealogy website to help safeguard and share our history.

By digitizing historical records, the project aims to make Nicodemus' history more accessible to descendants across the country while serving as a model for other historic Black settlements. Inspired by the 2018 Montpelier Descendant Engagement Rubric, this initiative uses innovative, community-centered strategies to strengthen preservation efforts. It is part of a broader movement to affirm cultural identity and historical truth—especially in historically Black towns like Nicodemus.

This paper shares the background, findings, and framework that emerged from the project, including the **Nicodemus Rubric for Descendant Engagement**, a new evaluative tool rooted in sustainable equity principles. Developed to support descendant communities, public historians, preservation professionals, and institutional partners, this guide offers a model for reparative, descendant-led preservation rooted in healing and wellness. It also provides practical evaluation tools and engagement strategies to help historic African American communities strengthen descendant collaboration efforts, grounded in equity, access, and collective memory.

This work was made possible by several sponsors and collaborators, including the Nicodemus Historical Society, the Community-to-Community: Policy Equity for All Faculty Policy Fellow Program, the Black Reparations Project at Mills College at Northeastern University, and others whose support is deeply appreciated. I would also like to give a special thanks to Angela Bates, Founding Executive Director of the Nicodemus Historical Society; Caitlin Pollock, Associate Director of Northeastern's Digital Scholarship Group; Shirl Marks and Jerry Bedford of the African American Genealogy Group of Kentucky; Regina Thomas, Nicodemus Historical Society Board Member and descendant, Dr. Mark Henderson, School of Public Policy & Urban Affairs, Northeastern University, and Dr. Brittany Cooper, Director of Counseling, Health, and Wellness, Northeastern University Oakland.

Thank you all for your dedication to this work. Your efforts honor the memory of our ancestors—and for that, I am truly grateful.

In Community,

*Dr. Ashley C. Adams*

Figure 1 (cover). Garland-Alexander family tree.

# Executive Summary

This report introduces a new descendant engagement plan for Nicodemus, Kansas—a historic Black settlement founded in 1877 by formerly enslaved African Americans seeking freedom and self-determination. As one of the last remaining historic Black towns west of the Mississippi River, Nicodemus stands as a powerful symbol of Black resilience and community vision. Despite its national significance, the town faces persistent challenges, including underrepresentation in preservation systems, preservation inequities, and limited descendant involvement at the Nicodemus National Historic Site.

To address these concerns, the Nicodemus Historical Society partnered with Dr. Ashley Adams, a Nicodemus descendant and the Society’s Board President, to lead the Nicodemus Genealogy Engagement Project. Through a comprehensive descendant survey and focus group study, the project gathered critical data on descendant priorities, challenges, and visions for the future of Nicodemus preservation.

Findings revealed a strong desire among descendants for increased participation in historical preservation efforts, greater access to genealogical and historical data, and long-term investment in infrastructure, education, and digital tools. In response, the project introduced the Nicodemus Rubric for Descendant Engagement, a new evaluative framework grounded in principles of cultural healing, sustainable equity, and community governance.

## **Recommendations emphasize:**

- Expanding access to digital genealogy tools and historical archives;
- Strengthening descendant-led preservation efforts;
- Building institutional partnerships grounded in trust, transparency, and shared authority;
- Investing in infrastructure that supports long-term community use and legacy preservation;
- Prioritizing intergenerational education and Indigenous partnership efforts that promote healing, memory, and solidarity across communities.

This report not only supports the future of Nicodemus but also offers a scalable model for other historic African American communities navigating similar challenges. By capturing descendant voices and recognizing the role of public memory in reparative justice, the Nicodemus Rubric offers opportunities for sustainable, community-rooted preservation.

*"It is extremely important that this chapter in American history is not forgotten. It's always been there...it is American history and it represents...for the nation..what's really important to remember about our ancestors, they had tenacity, they had vision, and they had determination... attributes we need to encourage and nourish within ourselves, within our families, and the next generations. We are unique and we are representative of people that had these skills and these attributes because they endured slavery."*

*— Angela Bates, Nicodemus Descendant and  
Founding Executive Director, Nicodemus  
Historical Society*

16

**All Colored People**  
THAT WANT TO  
**GO TO KANSAS,**  
**On September 5th, 1877,**  
**Can do so for \$5.00**

---

**IMMIGRATION.**

WHEREAS, We, the colored people of Lexington, Ky., knowing that there is an abundance of choice lands now belonging to the Government, have assembled ourselves together for the purpose of locating on said lands. Therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED, That we do now organize ourselves into a Colony, as follows:— Any person wishing to become a member of this Colony can do so by paying the sum of one dollar (\$1.00), and this money is to be paid by the first of September, 1877, in instalments of twenty-five cents at a time, or otherwise as may be desired.

RESOLVED, That this Colony has agreed to consolidate itself with the Nicodemus Towns, Solomon Valley, Graham County, Kansas, and can only do so by entering the vacant lands now in their midst, which costs \$5.00.

RESOLVED, That this Colony shall consist of seven officers—President, Vice-President, Secretary, Treasurer, and three Trustees. President—M. M. Bell; Vice-President—Isaac Talbott; Secretary—W. J. Niles; Treasurer—Daniel Clarke; Trustees—Jerry Lee, William Jones, and Abner Webster.

RESOLVED, That this Colony shall have from one to two hundred militia, more or less, as the case may require, to keep peace and order, and any member failing to pay in his dues, as aforesaid, or failing to comply with the above rules in any particular, will not be recognized or protected by the Colony.

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



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# Chapter 1. Learning from Nicodemus: A Living Archive of Resilience

## *Nicodemus Origins and Reparative Preservation*

In 1862, the Homestead Act passed, allowing U.S. citizens and immigrants who intended to become citizens to claim 160 acres of public land for a nominal fee (National Archives, 2022). The only supposed condition was that they had to develop the land by constructing a dwelling and cultivating crops. Communities like Nicodemus, Kansas, were established by Black settlers who utilized the act to claim land and seek economic opportunity (Edwards & Friefeld, 2023). However, the number of Black homesteaders was relatively small compared to white homesteaders, and they often faced enormous challenges ranging from discriminatory lending practices to racial violence (Ray & Perry, 2020). In short, while the Homestead Act was theoretically open to Black Americans following the end of the Civil War and the ratification of the 13th and 14th Amendments, various systemic barriers continued to limit their ability to fully participate.

Founded in 1877, Nicodemus, Kansas became a beacon of opportunity for formerly enslaved African Americans who sought to leverage the benefits of the Homestead Act of 1862 (Edwards & Friefeld, 2023). They aspired to accumulate wealth and promote community well-being through land ownership. At its peak, the town's population exceeded 600 residents. However, the community later faced a decline, largely attributed to the railroad bypassing the town. In 1996, Congress recognized the significance of Nicodemus by designating five of its historic buildings as the Nicodemus National Historic Site (Adams & Edges, 2021; National Park Service, 2025). The Nicodemus National Historic Site (NHS) includes the St. Francis Hotel Fletcher-Switzer Residence), AME Church, Nicodemus Township Hall, Historic First Baptist Church, and District Number 1 School (See Figure 2). The town serves as a national symbol of African American contributions to the expansion and settlement of the West.



**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.**



Black history preservation is underrepresented and under-resourced in local, state, and national preservation systems (Adams & Edges, 2021; African American Redress Network, 2023; Equal Justice Initiative, 2020; Minner, 2016; Wells, et. al. 2021). Historic Black communities that are still inhabited today, including Nicodemus, Kansas and Allensworth, California, Texas Freedom Colonies, Boley, Oklahoma, and the Tulsa, Oklahoma Greenwood District face substantial social, economic, and environmental challenges despite their official federal and state government preservation designation statuses (Adams & Edges, 2021 & 2023; Justice for Greenwood, 2025; Nelson, 2025; Roberts, 2025; ).

While some measures have been implemented to address these concerns in recent years, there remains a pressing need to improve preservation policies, planning, and interpretive programs to better promote inclusivity, equity, and cultural sensitivity for Black descendant communities. This urgency is heightened by recent efforts to undermine historical truth, including the March 27, 2025, “Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History” Executive Order (Trump, 2025). The order falsely accused the National Museum of African American History and Culture of promoting racism against white people and misrepresenting the legacy of slavery in the United States. Notably, the museum’s exhibit on Nicodemus, Kansas, developed prior to its opening in collaboration with Angela Bates, founding Executive Director of the Nicodemus Historical Society and a descendant of the town’s early settlers, is rooted in lived expertise and rigorous historical documentation. The exhibit accurately reflects Nicodemus’s historical significance in American history. Efforts to discredit this work are both harmful and unfounded. In addition to these legislative attacks, the current administration has proposed downsizing the National Park Service, with plans to transfer “less popular national parks” to state preservation systems (Richards, 2025).

“Just to write it off because of economics, it needs to be looked at again,” said Bates, whose great-grandmother’s family was enslaved on the plantation of a former vice president (Richard M. Johnson) before gaining freedom, moving to Kansas and helping found Nicodemus. “This is what makes this country great. ... We’re committed to making sure that our country and our history here are not forgotten”(Richards, 2025).

National and state preservation systems have historically allocated resources based on visitor data, a competitive practice that disadvantages rural historic sites like the Nicodemus NHS (Adams & Edges, 2021 & 2023). The Nicodemus NHS, along with hundreds of other African American historic locations, remains severely under-resourced and in critical need of preservation investment (Adams, 2016). Historic Black towns such as Nicodemus are not only landmarks within the American historical landscape, but also central to recontextualizing public memory of the African American experience. They stand as powerful symbols of resilience and cultural richness—especially within the broader Black reparations movement in the United States (Grandinetti et al., 2024). These communities provide a distinct lens into the intersections of race, economics, and politics, underscoring the need to understand Black history and its continued relevance to contemporary struggles. The Nicodemus NHS, in particular, stands as a living testament to the African American journey. Any effort to undermine the stories of the ancestors who built this “promised land” fails to genuinely advance the goal of making America great.

### *Nicodemus Descendant Engagement Project*

Adams & Edges (2021 & 2023) analyzed the impacts of the National Historic Site designation, revealing a deep need for preservation improvements and a strengthened Nicodemus preservation network. The Nicodemus Descendant Engagement Project (NGEP) aims to address the deficiency in preserving Nicodemus’ history by increasing descendant engagement and feedback, with a goal to further strengthen the Nicodemus descendant network. Nicodemus descendants in the context of this report and project are defined as individuals who have ancestral connections to early Nicodemus settlers, who arrived with one of the first three settlements, starting in 1877, when the town was founded. This research not only serves to increase descendant engagement but also gather feedback on visitor experiences and preservation work. This data will also contribute to a

future Nicodemus genealogy database, providing historical and genealogical information for descendants. Spearheaded by descendant leaders and board members of the Nicodemus Historical Society, the project aims to create a new African American descendant engagement model to track ancestral roots for reparative policymaking and that is applicable for other historic Black settlements and descendant communities.

Nicodemus descendants embody a strong tradition of community connections in keeping the legacy of Nicodemus alive. The Nicodemus Historical Society has engaged and collected genealogy of early settlers and their descendants since its inception in 1988, with current files including over 600 individuals and their families. These files include birth and death notices, obituaries, anniversaries, graduations, photos, articles, stories, and notes. They are maintained at the Nicodemus Historical Society Museum, and utilized by descendants, authors, students, film producers, etc. The genealogy files are not digitized nor accessible online, availability is further limited by museum hours and staffing, and the isolated location of Nicodemus. Most descendants live out of the local area or state, making it more difficult to access these genealogy files. It is predicted there are thousands of Nicodemus descendants across the nation and beyond, and the historical society has clear goals to improve access to the genealogy files for these reasons.

In response to longstanding access challenges, through the NGEF, the Nicodemus Historical Society sought to update and digitize its genealogical collection. This archive is particularly significant, spanning from slavery to the present day and including oral histories, documents, and photographs. Expanding this collection into a digital genealogy database is envisioned as a strategy to improve access, enhance representation, and strengthen engagement among Nicodemus descendants. These efforts are also intended to spark renewed enthusiasm for preserving the legacy of Nicodemus through deeper community involvement.

The sections to follow present an analysis of the 2023 Nicodemus descendant survey and focus group findings (See Figure 3). These findings highlight persistent challenges, including inequities in national preservation efforts and limited descendant participation at the Nicodemus National Historic Site. In addition to reporting key themes from the survey, the Nicodemus Rubric for Descendant Engagement, a descendant-centered tool for advancing sustainable, equitable, and reparative historic preservation is introduced in this paper. This framework is presented in the sections that follow and offers a flexible model that may inform preservation efforts in other historic Black communities across the country.



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

## *Survey Methods & Results*

This study engaged self-identified Nicodemus descendants aged 18 and older, with a focus on “Descendant Leaders” involved in historic preservation, local organizations, and Homecoming events. Using a recruitment list provided by Angela Bates, Executive Director of the Nicodemus Historical Society, surveys were distributed via Google Forms, U.S. mail, and in-person during the 2023 Annual Homecoming (July 27–30). In total, 35 verified descendant responses were collected from across 13 states (California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Kansas, Maryland, Michigan, Montana, Nebraska, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Texas). Two Zoom focus groups followed in August 2023, with a total of six participants. Incentives were provided for survey and focus group participation.

Survey data was analyzed using Excel, video and transcript review. Ai tools were also used to identify evidence-based themes. Several limitations were encountered during the study, including difficulties with verifying descendant identity, survey scaling issues, and extreme heat during Homecoming that affected participation. Additionally, a number of online survey responses were compromised by bot activity, which required a careful data review process to ensure the integrity of the final sample. Early-stage trust-building and limited resources also shaped the scope of outreach.

### **Positive Themes from Respondents**

1. Respondents expressed strong interest in learning about their ancestors and expanding genealogical research.
2. Family connections, ancestral pride, and the opportunity to meet other descendants were frequently cited as meaningful.
3. Many were satisfied with recent park improvements, including the 2021 AME Church restoration and Tiny Homes project.
4. The hospitality of the local community and the overall Homecoming experience were described as sources of joy and togetherness.
5. Participants appreciated efforts toward documentation, historical preservation, and programming at the Township Hall and Historical Society.

*“Yes, I think [a Nicodemus descendant genealogy database] would be beneficial because I would be able to connect with family members I haven't met yet. My great grandparents had 14 children one of those kids had 14 children so my family is huge, and I would like to connect with them.”*

*– Nicodemus Descendant*

### **Areas of Concern and Dissatisfaction**

1. Respondents reported oppressive heat and a lack of accommodations as major deterrents during Homecoming.
2. Many cited a lack of services, such as food vendors, general stores, and shaded areas.
3. Several noted disrepair of historic buildings, limited interpretive materials, and infrequent public access to historic sites.
4. Frustrations included lack of coordination among local groups, and limited unification across the descendant network, and youth engagement.
5. Broader concerns were raised about neglected properties, racism, and the absence of a cohesive strategy for growth in Nicodemus.

*“The site is amazing, but the township needs a general store or something to encourage growth. Right now, there are no services in Nicodemus and Hill City is the closest place to buy goods. Having small homes in Nicodemus is great, but having resources locally would make it even more enticing.”*

*– Nicodemus Descendant*

#### **Summary of Core Issue Findings**

1. Limited descendant leadership visibility in preservation efforts and formal roles.
2. Communication across Nicodemus organizations and the broader network is inconsistent and uncoordinated.
3. There is an absence of centralized digital infrastructure to share historical records, updates, and opportunities.
4. Physical infrastructure and archival space are insufficient to support sustainable preservation or meaningful visitor experiences.
5. Youth and future generations are minimally involved in current programming or decision-making processes.

Regarding their enthusiasm for establishing a new Nicodemus descendant genealogy database, many participants underscored the significance of uncovering their familial past and strengthening family bonds. There is also a pronounced eagerness to impart knowledge of Nicodemus's history to the younger generation, which is considered essential for educating them about their African American cultural heritage and Nicodemus ancestral legacy. Participants also highlighted the fundamental importance of understanding one's history and truth in sustaining the African American cultural identity. Given the scarcity of genealogy resources for African American communities, there's a collective sentiment about the importance of safeguarding, enhancing, and disseminating available information on these matters. This is deemed particularly critical due to the long rooted challenges in preserving African American genealogy records.

*“I think as much information that can be put out there, the better. Thankfully [a relative] has been collecting considerable data for [our family] on Ancestry.com. That is how I reconnected with [my family] after almost 30 years. That alone shows the benefit of having databases available—reconnecting with family.”*

*– Nicodemus Descendant*

## Chapter 2. Advancing Reparative Preservation: Building the Nicodemus Rubric for Descendant Engagement

As previously noted, to strengthen this study, supplemental tools, including the Nicodemus Rubric for Descendant Engagement (hereafter referred to as the Nicodemus Rubric), were incorporated to contextualize findings and guide future descendant engagement and preservation planning. The Nicodemus Rubric offers a descendant-centered framework for evaluating and advancing sustainable, equitable, and reparative historic preservation. The sections that follow outline the development of the rubric and its application to the survey findings and previous Nicodemus preservation research (Adams & Edges, 2021 & 2023).

### *Declarations of Racism as Public Health Crisis*

The findings of this research are particularly important given the American Public Health Association's (APHA) declaration of racism as a public health crisis, emphasizing the urgency for actionable measures to mitigate systemic racism (American Public Health Association, 2025). A public health crisis is characterized by its widespread impact on many people, posing long-term health threats that necessitate large-scale solutions. As of late 2024, 268 jurisdictions across the United States, including 24 state governments, 95 counties, 149 cities, and 58 health entities, have issued formal declarations naming racism a public health crisis. These declarations highlight how racism is still prevalent across the nation. While the declaration of racism as a public health crisis is a significant action, there must be more actionable measures to have a meaningful impact (American Public Health Association, 2025; Stone, 2012).

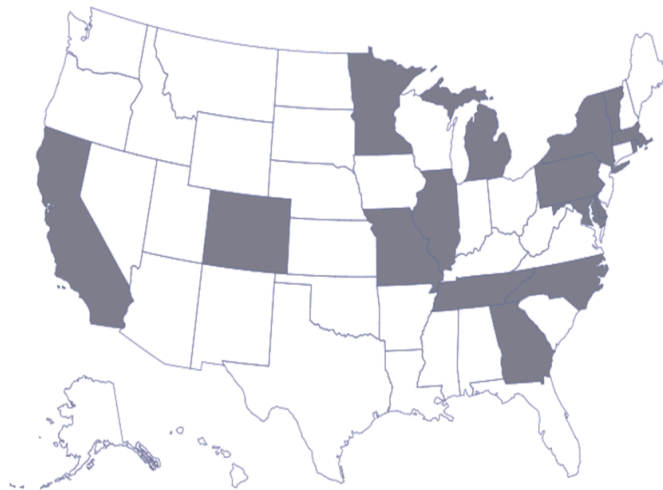
The APHA and its policy partners call for a comprehensive approach to addressing this crisis, emphasizing the need to reimagine public spaces through redesign and intentional consideration of equitable public memory. This recommendation is a core component of the *Healing Through Policy* framework, which advocates for systemic strategies that promote racial equity and community healing (APHA, 2025). Additional actions include narrative change initiatives, racial impact assessments, accountability frameworks, and multiracial, multiethnic dialogues aimed at producing shared understanding. These proposed collective measures seek not only to address the ongoing impacts of systemic racism but also to build the structural and cultural foundations necessary for long-term equity and justice. This framing directly influenced the development of the Nicodemus Rubric by reinforcing the need to achieve cultural healing through thoughtful public memory interventions—alongside policy and infrastructure development—in any long-term historic preservation effort. The rubric treats reparative preservation not only as a historical responsibility but also as a community wellness strategy.

### *U.S. Reparations Movement and UN Reparations Framework*

To confront anti-Black racism, the modern movement for Black reparations aims to achieve justice and compensation for the historical and ongoing impacts of slavery and systemic racism on Black Americans (Ray & Perry, 2020). Reparations proposals include public apologies, direct payments, educational programs, cultural preservation, and structural reforms. Since the murder of George Floyd in 2020, a horrific event that galvanized global attention to racial injustice, the momentum for reparations has intensified. Over the past several years, many state and local governments have established reparations task forces and other official bodies to confront systemic racism and propose reparative policies for Black Americans (Black Reparations Project, 2025; First Repair & Decolonizing Wealth Project, 2025; See Figure 4; Taylor, 2024).



### Back Reparations Commissions, Committees, and Task Forces Across the United States



@blackreparationsproject  
<https://reparations.sites.northeastern.edu/>

- Alameda County, California Reparations Commission
- Amherst, Massachusetts African Heritage Reparation Assembly
- Asheville, North Carolina Community Reparations Commission
- Atlanta, Georgia Reparations Study Commission
- Berkeley, California Unified School District Reparations Task Force
- Boston, Massachusetts Task Force on Reparations
- Burlington, Vermont Reparations Task Force
- California Reparations Task Force
- Cambridge, Massachusetts American Freedman Commission
- Chicago, Illinois Black Reparations Task Force
- Colorado Black Coloradan Racial Equity Commission
- Detroit, Michigan Reparations Task Force
- Evanston, Illinois Reparations Committee
- Fulton County, Georgia Reparations Task Force
- Greenbelt, Maryland Commission to Study and Develop Local Reparations Proposals
- Hayward, California – Russell City Reporative Justice Project
- Highpoint, North Carolina Commission to Explore Community Reparations
- Illinois African Descent-Citizens Reparations Commission
- Kansas City, Missouri Mayors Commission on Reparations
- Los Angeles, California Reparations Advisory Commission
- New York State Community Commission on Reparations Remedies
- Northampton, Massachusetts Reparations Study Commission
- Palm Springs, California Section 14 Reparations
- Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Reparations Task Force
- Providence, Rhode Island Municipal Reparations Commission
- Saint Paul, Minnesota Recovery Act Community Reparations Commission
- San Francisco, California African American Reparations Advisory Committee
- Santa Monica, California Landback & Reparations Task Force
- Shelby County, Tennessee Board of Commissioners Feasibility of Reparations Study
- St. Louis, Missouri Reparations Commission
- Wilmington, Delaware Reparations Task Force

**Figure 5. Black Reparations Commissions, Committees, and Task Forces Across the United States**

One key influence guiding these efforts is United Nations General Assembly Resolution 60/147, which outlines five key principles for reparations: 1) Restitution, 2) compensation, 3) rehabilitation, 4) satisfaction, and 5) guarantees of non-repetition (UNGA, 2005). Of these, the principle of *satisfaction*—which includes public apologies, truth-telling, commemorations, and education—is especially relevant for addressing erasure in historic preservation and promoting racial healing (Adams & Edges, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2021; Wells et al., 2021).

In the U.S. context, satisfaction involves acknowledging the truth about historical injustices and ensuring that institutions responsible for harm accept accountability. This includes accurate public interpretation, commemorative practices, and public education that names and centers the experiences of African Americans. The omission of Black history in public education contributes to a distorted public memory and reinforces racial inequality, while also undermining empathy, identity, and community well-being (Bradley, 2023). *Public memory*, how society collectively remembers and values its history, shapes cultural understanding, and its distortion has far-reaching effects. African American historical sites remain underrepresented on national registers and with local, state, and federal designations. Also, Black professionals are significantly underrepresented in preservation fields (Equal Justice Initiative, 2020). These disparities reveal how the preservation system has historically centered whiteness, contributing to structural erasure and the failure to protect hundreds of significant Black sites (Adams, 2021 & 2023; Jones, 2014; Wells, 2021).

These realities directly informed the development of the Nicodemus Rubric, particularly its emphasis on cultural continuity, narrative justice, and descendant governance. The rubric builds on the UN framework and public health scholarship naming racism as a public health crisis by embedding truth-telling and intergenerational memory into its evaluation criteria. By drawing from the satisfaction principle, the rubric aims to support reparative interventions, such as inclusive interpretation, equitable policy design, and sustained community stewardship, at historic African American sites like Nicodemus. It affirms that reparative preservation is not simply about protecting buildings, but about restoring visibility, voice, and dignity to communities whose histories have been long marginalized.

## *On the Tails of Racism: African American Historic Preservation Failures*

African American historic preservation failures, their impacts on public memory, and the larger challenges facing Nicodemus mirror broader systemic failures in African American historic preservation (See Table 1). From underrepresentation in national registries to the appropriation of interpretive narratives and lack of funding, African American historic sites face chronic neglect. These conditions are compounded by a scarcity of Black professionals in preservation and discriminatory policies that limit site investment and access. Acknowledging and seeking to address these interconnected challenges, as they relate to the Nicodemus preservation and descendant engagement goals, is imperative for achieving inclusivity and fair representation in Nicodemus and in serving as a local model for other African American historical locations across the nation.

**Table 1. African American Historic Preservation Failures**

Issue	Description
Racism and Poor Representation	Racial inequities in preservation have led to under-representation and under-resourced historic African American locations. These preservation conditions perpetuate the erasure of African American stories and Black people.
Discriminatory Policies and Practices	Tax dollars and cultural narratives are controlled through discriminatory preservation practices. Through policies, codes, regulations, practices, and procedures designated African American historic locations can embody racism and restrict access and benefits.
Outdated Visitor Facilities	New or updated visitor facilities are needed at designated African American locations in order to improve public memory of the Black experience, accessibility, and promote tourism and technology.
Interpretation Appropriation	Interpretation appropriation of African American culture is a problem in historic preservation and the tourism industry. This issue involves the misrepresentation or misuse of African American culture and history, which can lead to the exclusion of authentic African American stories and experiences.
Limited Black Preservation Workers	There is a need for more African American preservation workers. Preservation hiring is vulnerable to competitiveness and barriers exist for studying and working in preservation. These issues can lead to a lack of diversity in the field and omission of Black stories and experiences from historic preservation.
Investment Inequities and Challenges	There is a need for investment in African American history, local economies, and tourism. Historic site resource allocations are rooted in capitalism, which does not favor tourism for designated Black towns and historic locations. Extremely high costs and prolonged deferred maintenance are also major issues in preservation and resource distribution is inconsistent.
Limited Descendant Engagement	Preservation networks include under engaged African American descendants and Black identifying communities. There is also a need for increased genealogy education and research in Black communities.
Social Disparities	Racism, environmental injustice, segregation, gentrification, and economic bias are all relevant social issues that are present in African American preservation and further contributing systemic inequalities and harms towards Black people.
Predominately White Land Ownership	U.S. landowners are predominantly white, leading to lost land and poor representation in historic preservation, also in the farming industry. Land ownership is important for preserving traditional African American farming practices and knowledge while also promoting economic and self-sufficiency for future generations.

*Note:* These African American historic preservation failures are based on findings from Adams & Edges (2021 & 2023), Equal Justice Initiative (2020), Wells, et. al. (2021), and White & Draycott (2020).

The Nicodemus Rubric was developed in direct response to these national trends. Its criteria are designed to identify and address preservation gaps, including inequitable resource distribution, descendant exclusion, and biased storytelling, making it a diagnostic and strategic tool for reforming historic preservation practices.

*Genealogy Research as a Key Tool for Reparative Justice*

In response to the noted failures and as part of a broader strategy to deepen descendant engagement and promote genealogy as a form of reparative justice, the Black Reparations Project (BRP) at Mills College at Northeastern University partnered with the Nicodemus Historical Society (NHS) to launch a virtual Genealogy Workshop Series in Fall 2024 (Black Reparations Project, 2025). This effort was made possible through a collaboration between BRP, NHS, and co-sponsors including the UC Berkeley Goldman School of Public Policy, Northeastern Law’s Center for Law, Equity, and Race, and the Descendants of Enslaved Communities at University of Virginia, with technical support from Emend The Mass Media Group.

The series was led by Nicka Smith, a nationally respected genealogist, documentarian, and educator with more than 20 years of experience researching African American lineage and preserving descendant histories. Smith brought deep expertise in interpreting records related to slavery, land, and migration, as well as lived insight into the power of genealogy for healing generational trauma. Her leadership created an accessible and empowering space for community members to explore personal history as part of a broader movement for truth-telling and repair.

Over the course of three workshops, more than 180 participants joined live, including self-identified Nicodemus descendants and descendants from communities such as the Freshwater Geechee of Georgia; Gay Hill Freedom Colony in Washington County, Texas; Post Oak Grove Freedom Colony in Washington County, Texas; Tulsa, Oklahoma; and descendant communities in Kentucky. An additional 4,500+ viewers engaged with the series recordings on YouTube, highlighting widespread interest in accessible genealogy education and descendant empowerment.

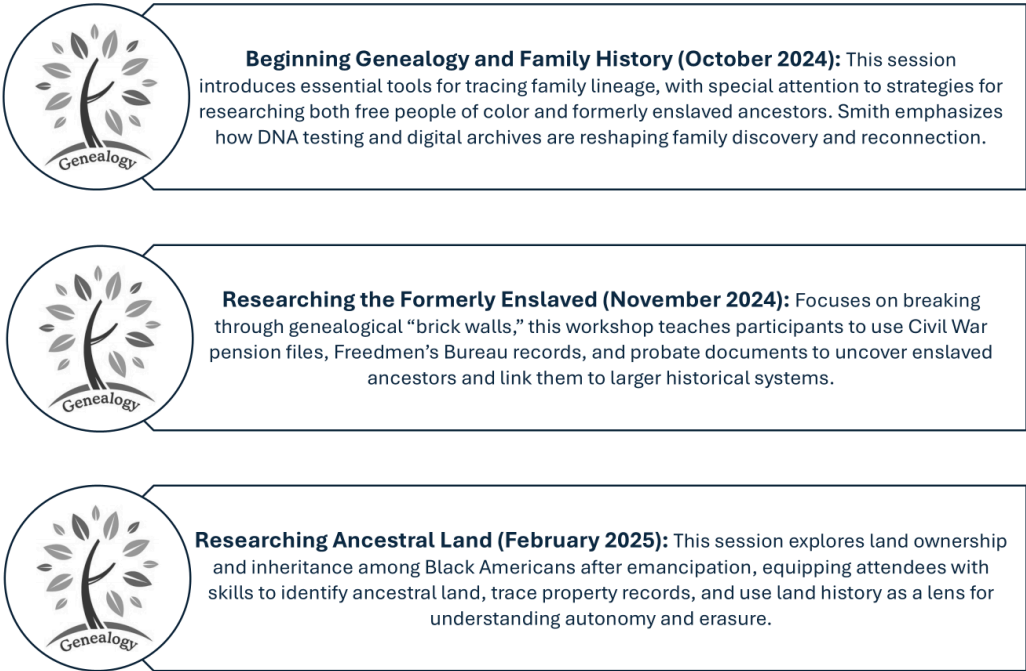


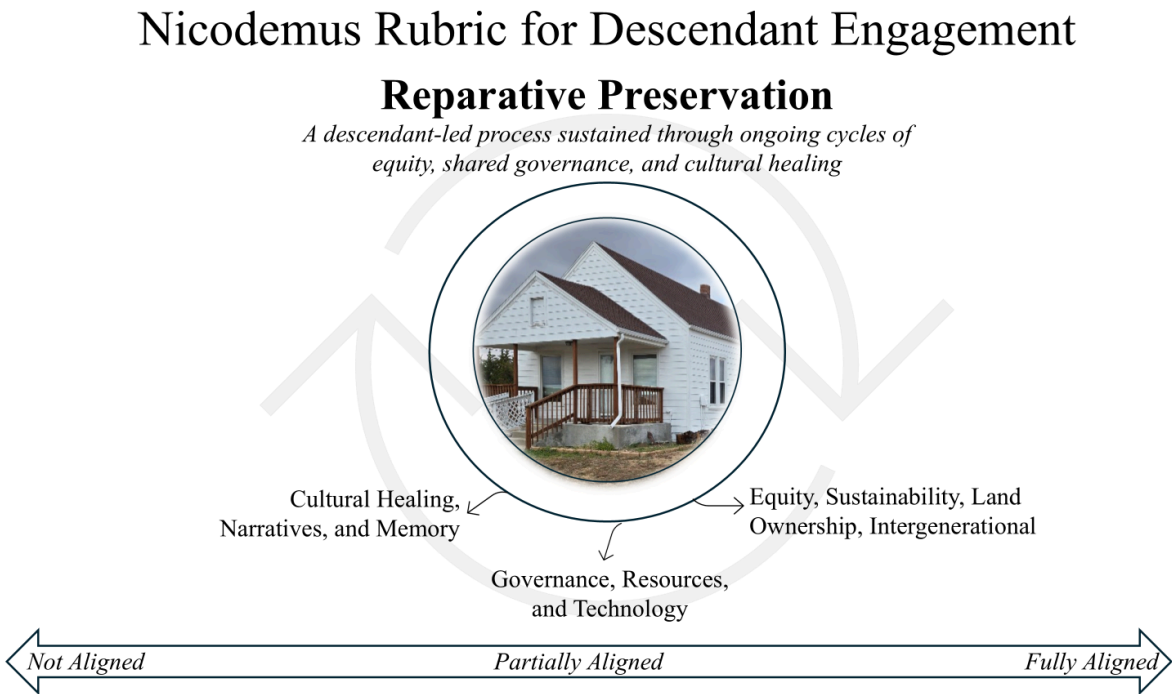
Figure 6. Genealogy Workshop Series Overview (viewable on [YouTube](#)).

The success of the genealogy series has affirmed the value of investing in community-based education, genealogy research access, and descendant-led preservation initiatives. The insights and community feedback from this series directly shaped the Nicodemus Rubric criteria around genealogy, descendant access. The series affirmed genealogy as a reparative tool for healing and reinforcing cultural memory, principles that are reflected throughout the Nicodemus Rubric’s evaluative framework.

*Introducing the Nicodemus Rubric for Descendant Engagement*

Lessons learned from Nicodemus provide a blueprint for engaging descendants in the recovery and stewardship of African American heritage (Adams & Edges 2021 & 2023). The Nicodemus Rubric for Descendant Engagement, serves as a practical framework for addressing historical harms and shaping sustainable preservation practices at historic African American locations.

It is designed for use by descendant communities, public historians, preservation professionals, museum staff, educators, public health practitioners, nonprofit and industry leaders, and institutional or governmental partners. The Rubric presents three integrated and cyclical domains—1) Equity and Sustainability, 2) Governance, Resources, and Technology, and 3) Cultural Healing, Narratives, and Memory, that must be continuously revisited and aligned. It functions as both a diagnostic and generative tool, supporting more inclusive, accountable, and community-rooted preservation practices, particularly at historic African American locations and within descendant communities.



**Figure 7. Nicodemus Rubric for Descendant Engagement (Visual).** This visual illustrates the three integrated and cyclical domains of the Nicodemus Rubric: Equity and Sustainability; Governance, Resources, and Technology; and Cultural Healing, Narratives, and Memory. Together, these domains form a dynamic and evolving framework that guides descendant-led, reparative historic preservation. At the center is Reparative Preservation, not as a fixed endpoint, but as an ongoing process grounded in justice and cultural stewardship.

In applying the Nicodemus Rubric, the following sections analyze survey findings and prior noted research through the lens of its three domains. The analysis is organized by domain and detailed in Tables 2–4, with key findings highlighted in yellow where applicable.

**Table 2. The Nicodemus Rubric – Domain 1: Equity, Sustainability, Land Ownership, and Intergenerational Engagement**

Criteria	Score: Not Aligned	Score: Partially Aligned	Score: Fully Aligned
Equity	Equity concerns are not addressed nor acknowledged; preservation efforts reinforce or ignore existing disparities and perpetuate systemic racism.	One or two equity dimensions (distributional, procedural, representational, intergenerational) are addressed, but others are inconsistently applied or missing and are disconnected from broader anti-racism goals.	Major equity dimensions are clearly addressed and embedded through an intentional anti-racism and reparative approach that actively works to redress systemic historical inequities, centers marginalized voices and ensures long-term accountability in preservation planning.
Integrated Sustainability and Land Ownership	No clear sustainability nor descendant land ownership planning. Efforts are short-term, reactive, and disconnected.	Some sustainability and descendant land ownership strategies are present, but they are not fully integrated or actively maintained across social, economic, and environmental dimensions.	Social, economic, and environmental sustainability are interwoven into all aspects of planning and operations through a reparative lens, ensuring future-focused stewardship that responds to systemic harm and supports community resilience, including descendant land ownership.
Intergenerational Engagement	No evidence of intergenerational engagement in preservation efforts; youth and future generations are not considered.	Youth involvement exists but is limited to occasional or symbolic activities without meaningful leadership roles.	Youth and future generations are meaningfully engaged through leadership, education, and cultural stewardship programming that cultivates continuity, healing, and reparative justice across generations.

*Note:* This domain focuses on how equity and sustainability are continuously embedded and revisited within preservation efforts. It emphasizes intentional anti-racism, long-term planning, descendant land ownership, structural change, and intergenerational justice as part of an evolving, descendant-led process grounded in community resilience.

## Domain 1 Findings and Recommendations

**Findings:** While equity and sustainability are acknowledged in principle, efforts in Nicodemus remain inconsistent, under-resourced, and lacking the long-term planning necessary to support meaningful, reparative outcomes, which in turn perpetuate systemic racism. Equity considerations are present but unevenly applied across dimensions, distributional, procedural, representational, and intergenerational, highlighting the need for a formalized, long-term equity framework. Sustainability strategies are also present but underdeveloped, with limited opportunities for advancing descendant land ownership and most planning remaining short-term and siloed rather than integrated across social, economic, and environmental domains. Additionally, intergenerational engagement is limited; youth involvement tends to be symbolic or event-based, with few sustained opportunities for leadership, education, or cultural stewardship.

**Recommendation:** Develop a comprehensive equity framework that fully incorporates all four equity dimensions and establishes mechanisms for achieving reparative justice through accountability, evaluation, and descendant-led policy alignment and land ownership



opportunities. Advance long-term sustainability planning that integrates environmental, economic, and social objectives, supported by infrastructure that strengthens descendant leadership and land stewardship. Create intentional intergenerational pathways, such as youth heritage fellowships, storytelling apprenticeships, and genealogy educational initiatives, to cultivate youth leadership and ensure the continuity of preservation efforts across generations.

**Table 3. The Nicodemus Rubric – Domain 2: Governance, Resources, and Technology**

Criteria	Score: Not Aligned	Score: Partially Aligned	Score: Fully Aligned
Governance, Policy, and Power Sharing	Policies lack equity focus; descendant voices are excluded from governance and decision-making. Power remains concentrated in external institutions.	Some equity considerations are present in policies, and descendants are consulted, but governance structures are inconsistent and lack formal power-sharing.	Governance structures and policies are explicitly equitable and co-developed with descendants. Descendants hold meaningful roles in shaping, implementing, and evaluating preservation decisions, advancing sustainable reparative justice and accountability.
Resource Allocation	Resource distribution lacks transparency and fairness; funding and support are insufficient or misaligned with descendant priorities and preservation goals.	Some resources are directed toward descendant work, but the allocation process is unclear, uneven, or lacks sustainability. Equity considerations are inconsistently applied.	Resources are fairly and transparently distributed through a reparative process that centers descendant priorities, addresses historical underinvestment, and includes sustainable funding and staffing plans co-developed with and for the descendant community.
Technology and Digital Ethics	Technology use is inequitable or extractive. Digitization is absent or inaccessible. There are no ethical guidelines for AI or digital representation of descendant communities.	Some technology tools or digitization efforts exist, but access is uneven and ethical frameworks are informal or underdeveloped. Descendant input on tech decisions is limited.	Technology is used as a reparative tool. Digitization expands access, and ethical frameworks for AI and digital representation are co-created with descendants to ensure transparency, consent, and community control.

*Note:* This domain addresses how governance structures, resource distribution, and digital tools are designed and shared in preservation efforts. It highlights descendant participation in shaping policies and co-creating technological tools that reflect community priorities.

## Domain 2 Findings and Recommendations

**Findings:** Despite the inclusion of equity language in some planning and policy documents, descendant participation in governance remains largely informal and consultative. Formal power-sharing mechanisms are limited. Resource allocation processes lack transparency and long-term alignment with descendant priorities. While some funding supports descendant-related work, it is not consistently directed by community input, and sustainable investment strategies are lacking. Additionally, the use of technology, particularly digitization and artificial intelligence, remains underdeveloped. Access to digital resources is uneven, and there are no clear ethical guidelines for digital representation. Descendant input in tech-related decisions, including archival priorities and platform governance, is minimal or informal.

**Recommendation:** Establish formal, descendant-led governance structures such as advisory councils or shared authority agreements that embed community voices in all phases of preservation planning and implementation. Design transparent, equity-based resource allocation processes that prioritize long-term sustainability, co-developed with descendants to ensure alignment with community-identified needs. Create ethical technology and digitization guidelines in partnership with descendants, addressing data access, AI use, consent, and cultural representation in digital preservation practices.

**Table 4. The Nicodemus Rubric – Domain 3: Cultural Healing, Narratives, and Memory**

Criteria	Score: Not Aligned	Score: Partially Aligned	Score: Fully Aligned
Cultural Continuity	Traditions, rituals, or cultural practices are ignored, discouraged, or disconnected from preservation efforts; community traditions are not valued.	Some traditions are recognized or celebrated, but support is informal, intermittent, or lacks institutional commitment.	Community traditions, commemorations, and rituals are actively supported and institutionally resourced through a reparative commitment to cultural healing, continuity, and collective memory.
Genealogy and Inclusive Storytelling	Genealogy and descendant histories are absent from interpretive efforts; dominant narratives remain unchallenged.	Some diverse stories or family histories are included, but genealogy research is limited or disconnected from preservation goals.	Genealogy is used as a reparative storytelling practice. Descendant family histories are prioritized in interpretation, with support for genealogical research, archival access, and identity recovery rooted in historical truth-telling and narrative justice.
Indigenous Land and Shared Histories	Indigenous histories, presence, or land connections are unacknowledged or erased; there is no recognition of shared geographies or interrelated experiences.	Some reference is made to Indigenous land and histories, but it is surface-level, performative, or disconnected from descendant community narratives.	Indigenous land connections and histories are meaningfully integrated through a reparative approach that acknowledges shared geographies, colonial histories, and Black-Indigenous interrelations, in partnership with local Indigenous communities.

*Note:* This domain promotes a cyclical practice of truth-telling, cultural healing, and narrative justice that strengthens community identity, wellness, and belonging. It also includes attention to Indigenous connections and shared land histories.

### Domain 3: Narratives, Memory, and Representation

**Findings:** Descendant cultural practices, including rituals, commemorations, and other community traditions, are recognized but underfunded. Some descendant narratives are reflected in interpretive effort. Genealogical research is not yet widely supported as a reparative practice; it lacks integration into public programming, interpretation, or educational efforts. Additionally, Indigenous land histories and shared geographies are acknowledged, but relationships with Indigenous communities are not supported through formal partnerships or co-created interpretive work.

**Recommendation:** Institutionalize funding support for descendant cultural traditions, commemorations, and rituals. Expand interpretive strategies to fully integrate genealogy as a tool for truth-telling, identity affirmation, and community healing. Strengthen partnerships with Indigenous communities by co-developing educational and interpretive content that reflects shared geographies, histories of dispossession, and the interconnected experiences of Black and Indigenous peoples.

The rubric findings clarify core challenges facing historic preservation in Nicodemus, including gaps in equity planning, informal or limited descendant governance, underutilized technology, and the need for stronger integration of cultural and intergenerational practices. These insights point to clear pathways for action, from formalizing power-sharing structures to embedding genealogy and digital ethics into preservation strategies. Though rooted in the local context of Nicodemus, the NRP Rubric offers a flexible, scalable framework that can be adapted by other descendant-led preservation efforts facing exclusion, underinvestment, or narrative erasure. Its cyclical and integrated domains provide a pathway not only for evaluation, but for sustained, community-driven preservation practices that honor the past while shaping a more just and inclusive future.

In the words of Brent Leggs, Executive Director of the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund:

*“With urgency and intention, the public must discuss these issues—ways in which preservation can strengthen its potential to fight for social justice—and investigate the full consequential impacts these complex issues have on the present. Every preservationist and social impact leader must join forces to develop a preservation-based vision and plan... Preserving this tapestry of our shared legacy is an act of social justice and should be viewed as a civil right.”*

*—Preservation Priorities Task Force, 2023*

## Chapter 3. Healing Through History: Exploring Descendant Engagement Initiatives

Historic preservation can serve as a powerful pathway to healing, justice, and revitalization, especially when shaped by the voices of descendant communities. Across the country, a growing number of initiatives are connecting genealogy, cultural memory, and community participation to reparative outcomes. These examples offer promising models that align with the core principles of the Nicodemus Rubric, including descendant leadership, truth-telling, equity, and long-term stewardship.

### *Genealogy Research, Cultural Memory, and Healing Practices*

Engaging descendants in preservation and genealogical research supports emotional wellness, identity development, and historical trauma recovery. These initiatives treat cultural memory as a protective factor and use storytelling, education, and research to support intergenerational healing and restorative justice, especially in cases where the same ancestors connect descendants of both enslavers and the enslaved.

- **Coming to the Table – Linked Descendants Working Group:** A national initiative bringing together descendants of enslaved people and slaveholders to engage in truth-telling, relationship building, and racial healing. Website: [comingtothetable.org/linked-descendants-working-group](http://comingtothetable.org/linked-descendants-working-group)
- **Descendants of Enslaved Communities at UVA (DEC-UVA):** Engages in restorative justice through research, education, and descendant partnerships to honor enslaved and free Black communities tied to the university. Website: [descendantsuva.org](http://descendantsuva.org)
- **Justice for Greenwood Genealogy Project (Tulsa, OK):** Identifies descendants of those directly impacted by the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre to support reparative legal and historical efforts. Website: [justiceforgreenwood.org/genealogy](http://justiceforgreenwood.org/genealogy)
- **Speaking Truth: Columbia Center for Oral History Research:** A storytelling initiative where descendants of slaveholders share personal reflections to confront and reckon with their families' histories of slavery. Website: [speakingtruth.org/stories](http://speakingtruth.org/stories)

### *Reclamation through Participation*

Descendant empowerment depends on reclaiming historical narratives through active participation. These models center community voice in shaping preservation priorities and public storytelling.

- **Texas Freedom Colonies Project – Atlas 2.1:** A digital mapping tool that invites community members to share information about unrecorded settlements, family land, and Freedom Colonies in Texas. Website: [texasfreedomcoloniesproject.com/atlas](http://texasfreedomcoloniesproject.com/atlas)
- **Montpelier's Descendant Engagement Rubric (2018):** A widely adopted best practices rubric for museums and sites interpreting slavery to meaningfully involve descendant communities. Website: <https://montpelierdescendants.org/rubric/>
- **Outsider's Preservation Initiative (OPI):** A national effort that uplifts descendant-led preservation of historic Black settlements by supporting cultural memory, storytelling, and heritage as tools for protecting and revitalizing freedmen's communities. Website: [https://outsiderpreservation.com/](http://outsiderpreservation.com/)

## *Economic development*

Equitable preservation must include economic development strategies that advance land reclamation, cultural enterprise, and wealth-building for descendant communities. These models offer pathways for restoring economic sovereignty through tourism, land justice, and community-led investment.

- **Boley Rodeo:** Hosted in the historic Black town of Boley, Oklahoma, the Boley Rodeo is a longstanding cultural event that celebrates Black heritage, promotes tourism, and generates local investment in revitalization efforts. Website: <https://www.thetownofboley.org/>
- **H.O.P.E. (Hands of the People Empowered) – The Descendants Project:** A Black women-led organization in Louisiana advocating for land justice, economic sovereignty, and reparative investment. Website: [thedescendantsproject.org/hope](http://thedescendantsproject.org/hope)
- **Where Is My Land:** An initiative dedicated to assisting Black families in reclaiming land that was unjustly taken from them, utilizing technology, research, and advocacy to secure restitution and raise public awareness about historical land theft. Website: <https://whereismyland.org/>

## *Indigenous Partnerships*

Many descendant engagement efforts are recognizing the need to build solidarity and shared memory with Indigenous communities. This initiative focuses on land acknowledgment and the lost inheritance of farming skills, truth-telling, and healing across historical divides.

- **Soul Fire Farm:** A community farming and training center led by Afro-Indigenous organizers in Petersburg, New York, dedicated to dismantling racism and promoting food sovereignty through land-based education and agriculture. Website: <https://www.soulfirefarm.org/>



# Chapter 4. Strategies for Engaging Descendant Communities: Lessons from Nicodemus and Beyond

Grounded in the Nicodemus Rubric, this chapter offers a set of actionable strategies aligned with the Rubric's highest criteria for descendant-led preservation. These strategies reflect best practices observed in Nicodemus and similar initiatives across the country. When implemented together, they form a roadmap for building sustainable, reparative, and community-centered historic preservation initiatives.

## *Community-Centered Engagement Strategies*

To be fully aligned with equitable and reparative engagement, descendant communities must be centered from the start, not simply consulted. This means building partnerships rooted in healing, wellness, and co-creation.

Key Approaches:

- Host descendant-led workshops, storytelling circles, and oral history gatherings
- Conduct descendant-focused surveys and focus groups
- Support rituals and memorials tied to community traditions and cultural healing
- Co-create land acknowledgments and partner with Indigenous communities for shared historical interpretation

These practices emphasize procedural and representational equity while contributing long-term trust and mutual respect. Continuous community feedback is also key for ensuring successful engagement strategies.

## *Trauma-Informed and Reflective Practices*

Effective descendant engagement must recognize the emotional labor of confronting histories of racism, erasure, and violence. A fully aligned approach centers cultural humility and creates space for healing.

Key Approaches:

- Design emotionally safe engagement environments using trauma-informed principles
- Integrate spiritual inclusion and culturally resonant practices
- Encourage facilitators, staff, and institutions to engage in ongoing reflection and anti-racist learning
- Build internal structures to acknowledge and compensate emotional labor

These reflective practices contribute to the sustainability and emotional integrity of descendant partnerships.

## *Building Trust and Visibility: Outreach and Relationship Tools*

Trust-building is central to equitable engagement. Projects must invest in visible, consistent communication and prioritize relationships over transactions.

Key Approaches:

- Utilize social media and digital platforms for descendant updates, storytelling, and visibility
- Create co-branded campaigns that reflect community language, values, and healing narratives
- Develop outreach strategies with descendant guidance and accountability

- Plan long-term rather than one-off events, and share power in all stages of collaboration

Fully aligned strategies focus on shared authority, transparency, and lasting connections are key for sustaining trust over time.

### *Reparative Tools for Preservation: Technology, Archives, and Access*

To meet reparative goals, digitization and archival work must be descendant-led and culturally aware. Technology should expand access, not reproduce historical exclusion. Digital tools that are developed in partnership with descendant communities can enhance access, support genealogical recovery, advance narrative justice, and cultivate intergenerational learning. The following platforms and resources offer models for African American digital preservation strategies.

#### **Featured Tools & Resources:**

- **Ancestry's African American Research Tools**  
Offers databases and guides for researching African American family history  
Website: [ancestry.com/c/african-american](https://ancestry.com/c/african-american)
- **Black Past: The Genealogy Page**  
Categorized lists of African American genealogy research websites.  
Website: <https://www.blackpast.org/genealogy-resources/>
- **International African American Museum Digital Archives**  
Includes marriage records, obituaries, U.S. Colored Troops pension files, and more  
Website: [iaamuseum.org/center-for-family-history/digital-archives](https://iaamuseum.org/center-for-family-history/digital-archives)
- **10 Million Names Project (American Ancestors)**  
A national effort to document and connect descendants of the enslaved  
Website: [10millionnames.org](https://10millionnames.org)
- **UNC Greensboro Digital Library on American Slavery**  
Comprehensive digital collections on race and slavery in the American South  
Website: [dilas.uncg.edu](https://dilas.uncg.edu)
- **Slave Voyages Database**  
Public digital records on the transatlantic slave trade  
Website: [slavevoyages.org](https://slavevoyages.org)
- **Enslaved: Peoples of the Historical Slave Trade**  
Collaborative research hub for documenting individual enslaved people  
Website: [enslaved.org](https://enslaved.org)
- **National Archives Genealogy Fair: Resources for Tracing Enslaved Ancestors**  
Website: [Download federal records guide \(PDF\)](#)

The lessons from Nicodemus and these national models illustrate what is possible when descendant communities lead the work of remembrance and repair. When engagement strategies align with the values of equity, sustainability, shared power, and cultural representation, they not only preserve the past, they actively shape a more just and inclusive future.

### *In Conclusion—Nicodemus is a Vital Chapter in the American Story*

Nicodemus, Kansas stands as a powerful testament to the resilience and vision of formerly enslaved African Americans who sought a better life after slavery. Though their vision faced immense challenges, their descendants remain committed to preserving that legacy. The story of Nicodemus is not just a local one, it is a vital chapter in the American story and deeply relevant to

today's Black reparations movement. Public memory plays a critical role in this movement; it shapes cultural understanding, fuels healing, and challenges the systemic racism that continues to impact African American communities. The introduction of the Nicodemus Rubric reflects a strategic, community-rooted response to these challenges. Grounded in principles of equity, shared governance, cultural healing, and sustainability, the rubric offers a practical tool for strengthening descendant engagement and transforming how preservation work is done. The findings of this project affirm that reparative historic preservation is both a justice issue and a public health necessity. As communities across the country continue to confront historical erasure, there is a powerful movement, led by descendants, educators, and preservationists, committed to remembering, reclaiming, and restoring Black history. This work will not be forgotten. It is ongoing. And it is essential.

Support the Nicodemus Historical Society:

<https://www.nicodemushistoricalsociety.org/nicodemus-kansas-historical-society-fundraising>

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# Appendix A. Definitions

**Descendant Community:** A community of individuals who share ancestral ties to a specific group, event, or place; such as those connected to enslaved African Americans, historic Black towns, or institutions that benefited from slavery. Descendant communities are central to truth-telling, reparative justice, and inclusive preservation.

**Descendant Governance:** A preservation model in which decision-making authority is shared with or led by descendant communities. It ensures that descendants have a formal role in shaping preservation policy, interpretation, and resource allocation.

**Equity in Preservation:** Ensuring fair access, representation, and participation in historic preservation. Equity includes addressing disparities in resources, influence, recognition, representation, and outcomes, especially for African American communities historically excluded from preservation efforts.

**Genealogy as Reparative Practice:** The use of family history research to affirm identity, recover historical truth, and strengthen intergenerational connection. In African American communities, genealogy is a critical tool for repairing the harm caused by slavery, displacement, and record loss.

**Narrative Justice:** The practice of restoring historically marginalized or excluded perspectives into public storytelling, education, and policy. Narrative justice challenges dominant narratives and affirms the lived experiences of communities historically silenced.

**Nicodemus Descendant:** In the context of this report and project, Nicodemus descendants are defined as individuals who have ancestral connections to early Nicodemus settlers, who arrived with one of the first three settlements, starting in 1877, when the town was founded.

**Public Memory:** The shared understanding and commemoration of history by a society. Public memory is shaped by what stories are told, preserved, and honored in public spaces; and what stories are erased or ignored.

**Reparations:** A process of acknowledging, addressing, and repairing historical and ongoing harms caused by systemic injustices, such as slavery, segregation, and structural racism. Reparations can include public apology, financial compensation, policy reform, cultural restoration, and truth-telling.

**Reparative Historic Preservation:** A practice of preserving historic sites that centers sustainable equity, accountability, and healing. It addresses historical harm and systemic exclusion by ensuring descendant voices lead decisions, narratives are inclusive, and preservation resources and benefits are equitably shared.

**Sustainability in Preservation:** An integrated approach to historic preservation that addresses social, economic, and environmental needs over time. It ensures that equitable preservation efforts are not only impactful in the present but also resilient, inclusive, and just for future generations.

**Trauma-Informed Engagement:** An approach to community engagement that acknowledges historical and intergenerational trauma. It prioritizes emotional safety, respect, cultural humility, and healing in all interactions and program design.



## Appendix B. Nicodemus Descendant Survey Questions

1. What are your parents' names (Father's name, Mother's name including maiden name)?
2. What Nicodemus settler families are you related to?
3. Add the same information for other descendant members of your household and your relationship to them (Ex. spouse and children) (include their names, age, contact information)
4. Are you engaged with any Nicodemus programs or organizations? (Or have engaged with in the past)? If so, describe the nature of your engagement (Ex. Homecoming committee member, township board member, historical society member, volunteer, or reenactor, etc.).
5. How satisfied were you with your last visit to Nicodemus National Historic Site?
6. What was the most enjoyable or positive aspect of your last visit to the Nicodemus National Historic Site?
7. What was the least enjoyable or most dissatisfying aspect of your last visit to the
8. Nicodemus National Historic Site?
9. What professional or other skills would you be willing to contribute to the historic preservation in Nicodemus? If yes, please explain further (Ex. Legal, office, social media, telephoning, accounting, grant-writing, graphic artist, etc.)
10. Would you like to stay informed about Nicodemus preservation news? If so, what are the best ways to inform and stay connected with you and other descendants in your network?
11. Are you interested in the creation of a new descendant genealogy database to educate about Nicodemus settler ancestral history and connect Nicodemus descendants worldwide? If so, explain why you think it would be beneficial.

# Appendix C. Nicodemus Rubric for Descendant Engagement

## Domain 1: Equity, Sustainability, Land Ownership, and Intergenerational Engagement

Criteria	Score: Not Aligned	Score: Partially Aligned	Score: Fully Aligned
Equity	Equity concerns are not addressed nor acknowledged; preservation efforts reinforce or ignore existing disparities and perpetuate systemic racism.	One or two equity dimensions (distributional, procedural, representational, intergenerational) are addressed, but others are inconsistently applied or missing and are disconnected from broader anti-racism goals.	Major equity dimensions are clearly addressed and embedded through an intentional anti-racism and reparative approach that actively works to redress systemic historical inequities, centers marginalized voices and ensures long-term accountability in preservation planning.
Integrated Sustainability and Land Ownership	No clear sustainability nor descendant land ownership planning. Efforts are short-term, reactive, and disconnected.	Some sustainability and descendant land ownership strategies are present, but they are not fully integrated or actively maintained across social, economic, and environmental dimensions.	Social, economic, and environmental sustainability are interwoven into all aspects of planning and operations through a reparative lens, ensuring future-focused stewardship that responds to systemic harm and supports community resilience, including descendant land ownership.
Intergenerational Engagement	No evidence of intergenerational engagement in preservation efforts; youth and future generations are not considered.	Youth involvement exists but is limited to occasional or symbolic activities without meaningful leadership roles.	Youth and future generations are meaningfully engaged through leadership, education, and cultural stewardship programming that cultivates continuity, healing, and reparative justice across generations.

*Note:* This domain focuses on how equity and sustainability are continuously embedded and revisited within preservation efforts. It emphasizes long-term planning, descendant land ownership, structural change, and intergenerational justice as part of an evolving, descendant-led process grounded in community resilience.

## Domain 2: Governance, Resources, and Technology

Criteria	Score: Not Aligned	Score: Partially Aligned	Score: Fully Aligned
Governance, Policy, and Power Sharing	Policies lack equity focus; descendant voices are excluded from governance and decision-making. Power remains concentrated in external institutions.	Some equity considerations are present in policies, and descendants are consulted, but governance structures are inconsistent and lack formal power-sharing.	Governance structures and policies are explicitly equitable and co-developed with descendants. Descendants hold meaningful roles in shaping, implementing, and evaluating preservation decisions, advancing sustainable reparative justice and accountability.
Resource Allocation	Resource distribution lacks transparency and fairness; funding and support are insufficient or misaligned with descendant priorities and preservation goals.	Some resources are directed toward descendant work, but the allocation process is unclear, uneven, or lacks sustainability. Equity considerations are inconsistently applied.	Resources are fairly and transparently distributed through a reparative process that centers descendant priorities, addresses historical underinvestment, and includes sustainable funding and staffing plans co-developed with and for the descendant community.
Technology and Digital Ethics	Technology use is inequitable or extractive. Digitization is absent or inaccessible. There are no ethical guidelines for AI or digital representation of descendant communities.	Some technology tools or digitization efforts exist, but access is uneven and ethical frameworks are informal or underdeveloped. Descendant input on tech decisions is limited.	Technology is used as a reparative tool. Digitization expands access, and ethical frameworks for AI and digital representation are co-created with descendants to ensure transparency, consent, and community control.

*Note:* This domain addresses how governance structures, resource distribution, and digital tools are designed and shared in preservation efforts. It highlights descendant participation in shaping policies and co-creating technological tools that reflect community priorities.

## Domain 3: Cultural Healing, Narratives, and Memory

Criteria	Score: Not Aligned	Score: Partially Aligned	Score: Fully Aligned
Cultural Continuity	Traditions, rituals, or cultural practices are ignored, discouraged, or disconnected from preservation efforts; community traditions are not valued.	Some traditions are recognized or celebrated, but support is informal, intermittent, or lacks institutional commitment.	Community traditions, commemorations, and rituals are actively supported and institutionally resourced through a reparative commitment to cultural healing, continuity, and collective memory.
Genealogy and Inclusive Storytelling	Genealogy and descendant histories are absent from interpretive efforts; dominant narratives remain unchallenged.	Some diverse stories or family histories are included, but genealogy research is limited or disconnected from preservation goals.	Genealogy is used as a reparative storytelling practice. Descendant family histories are prioritized in interpretation, with support for genealogical research, archival access, and identity recovery rooted in historical truth-telling and narrative justice.
Indigenous Land and Shared Histories	Indigenous histories, presence, or land connections are unacknowledged or erased; there is no recognition of shared geographies or interrelated experiences.	Some reference is made to Indigenous land and histories, but it is surface-level, performative, or disconnected from descendant community narratives.	Indigenous land connections and histories are meaningfully integrated through a reparative approach that acknowledges shared geographies, colonial histories, and Black-Indigenous interrelations, in partnership with local Indigenous communities.

*Note:* This domain promotes a cyclical practice of truth-telling, cultural healing, and narrative justice that strengthens community identity, wellness, and belonging. It also includes attention to Indigenous connections and shared land histories.