



The Legacy of Nicodemus

By Angela Bates, Executive Director of the Nicodemus Historical Society

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Hello, I'm Angela Bates descendent and historian of historic Nicodemus, Kansas, the oldest and only remaining all black town west of the Mississippi that was established at the end of the Reconstruction.

Nicodemus, a national African American icon of the West, was established in the fall of 1877. Nearly 350 brave and visionary souls became homesteader and first-time landowners. They created a new life of freedom and self-government in a place they could call home. They left the racially volatile and unforgiving Jim Crow south and participated in the settling of the West. They created for themselves a town that weathered the storms of environmental and economic devastation the wreaked havoc in many rural towns in the West. Among that first group of settlers were my great great-grandparents. My great grandmother was 8 months pregnant at the time, and I'm sure the trip must have been hard on her. But she was determined to have her first child born on the free soils of Kansas. She was with her two siblings and parent, and as a family they made the move together.

As a descendent of these early settlers, I have always known the importance of what they did. Making such a brave move to a place unknown and so far from the borders of Kentucky must have taken pure courage, vision, and a strong faith in God. But they were true African American pioneers settling the West.

Over 140 years later the little placed that they called home, has become home for me. Although I live just four miles to the west, I manage our 40-acre farm that my two sisters and I inherited, just one mile north of Nicodemus. I take pride in maintaining our historic farmstead and guest house. The historic barn, the only original one left in the township is registered with Kansas Historic Barns and displays a large red and white barn quilt block, facing the road for all to see. I've been told I'm a farmer, however, we lease our pasture and farm ground. But I'm trying my green thumb with lavender. I planted 90 plants the first year and had a good crop of flowers. But this spring, they failed after two unexpected below freezing nights. But I'm not a quitter, I'll try again next year, or the year after, until I get it right. That's the determination I inherited from my forefathers.

Nicodemus exists today because of determination, fortitude, and vision from a legacy of those settlers that had endured, yet survived slavery. They used their skills to organize schools, churches, businesses, social and political organizations, forming a solid foundation for a well thought out town. With social and political savvy, they established the first township in Graham county which in turn gave rise to the first and second county attorneys, G.W. Jones and W.L. Sayers both black. They and many others left their political and social marks in the annals of Kansas history during the late 1800s.

As a noted Kansas trail blazer, Nicodemus historian, and Historical Society & Museum founder and executive director, I singlehandedly spearheaded efforts to get Nicodemus designated a unit of the National Park Service. Nicodemus National Historic Site stands as an icon and a place where African Americans experienced true freedom in the West. Nicodemus is my inherited legacy.

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