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Reclaiming a Legacy

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Hallowed, Sacred Grounds, There She Stands With Them on Mother Earth, "Ghost of the Plains"
Doug Barrett

RECLAIMING A LEGACY AS STEWARDS OF THE LAND

Early in the spring of 1998, an auspicious gathering took place among several Black farmers in northwestern Kansas.

This assembly was held at Gil Alexander's farm situated three miles north of Nicodemus. This tiny Kansas town had recently achieved the distinction of being designated a National Historic Site. During this meeting, Bernard Bates shared with his fellow farmers that he'd been approached by farmers from South Carolina asking for collaborative support.

The South Carolina endeavor would come to be known as *Pigford v. Glickman*, a federal class action lawsuit brought by South Carolina farmers against the U.S. Department of Agriculture and its Secretary, Dan Glickman, in 1997, alleging racial discrimination against Black farmers regarding farm loan and assistance allocations. The Kansas farmers present at the meeting that day in 1998 unanimously expressed their desire to actively help establish a united voice in protest against the systemic marginalization of Black farmers. The 1999 settlement, which provided monetary awards and financial relief for thousands of African American farmers, coincided with that group of Nicodemus farmers' official founding of the Kansas Black Farmers Association (KBFA).

Nicodemus holds the distinction of being the oldest African American town west of the Mississippi River and the longest-lasting Black homesteader colony in America. Nicodemus traces its origins to the Reconstruction period in the aftermath of the Civil War. In 1877, six Black entrepreneurs working with a white land developer in Topeka, Kansas, established the Nicodemus Town Company.

Their brave vision was to create an all-Black community in free-state Kansas under the provisions of the Town Site Preemption Act of 1844 and the Homestead Act of 1862. They selected a site in the Solomon River Valley of northwest Kansas where Nicodemus still stands, with a current population of 22.

The Nicodemus Town Company recruited approximately 300 former slaves and freemen who hailed primarily from Kentucky. Settlers arrived in waves, taking the train to Ellis, Kansas, then walking the last 35 miles to Nicodemus. Within two years, the town saw an influx of nearly 700 hopeful Black pioneers, although the migration ebbed and flowed. In its heyday, the town boasted a population of nearly 600 people. The babies born to those early settlers were the first children born into freedom for the Nicodemus farming community.

Angela Bates, the town historian and historical society director, collaborated with Senators Robert Dole and John Kerry to draft legislation that resulted in the town of Nicodemus being designated a National Historic Site. Signed into law by President Clinton in 1996, the legislation ensured the preservation of the town's historic legacy and its five landmark buildings.

Nicodemus has always been synonymous with farming, and the 1999 establishment of the KBFA served as a

testament to the enduring commitment of generations of Black farmers in their struggle to preserve their land and provide for their families. Gil Alexander and the KBFA board of directors deliberately chose to look away from the continuing contentious litigation, focusing instead on initiatives to enhance the productivity of Black farmers. *Pigford v. Glickman* was the largest civil rights settlement in the history of the United States, surpassed only recently by a case brought by Native American farmers in the wake of the *Pigford* suits. KBFA steadfastly emphasized research, the adoption of sustainable practices, including no-till agriculture, and a partnership with the Kansas State University College of Agriculture.

Under the leadership of Gil Alexander, Sharyn Alexander Dowdell and Edgar Hicks, the KBFA charted a course that involved research into areas like cover cropping, cultivation of novel crops and grains like the Ethiopian teff, niche product development and engagement of young individuals in the field of agriculture. KBFA farmers were implementing climate-smart and regenerative ag practices by the early 2000s.

Nicodemus farmers and the KBFA continue an intertwined existence as stewards of the land through a combination of traditional agricultural

practices, sustainable farming techniques and community engagement. Farmers continue to adopt cover cropping, crop rotation and minimal- and no-tillage to enhance soil health and fertility. The goal of KBFA farmers is to participate in conservation programs and initiatives that focus on preserving natural resources, preventing soil erosion and maintaining biodiversity.

Ever mindful of the long-running drought in western Kansas, KBFA farmers strive to be responsible water managers, using efficient irrigation and water conservation techniques to promote responsible water use and protect water quality.

Just twenty short years after the landmark *Pigford* settlement, the KBFA is partnering with the USDA and NRCS to enhance farmer education and the development of practical, boots-on-the-ground practices. The continuing mission of providing educational outreach to KBFA communities emphasizes knowledge-sharing about sustainable farming, environmental conservation and the importance of preserving agricultural traditions. KBFA farmers are incentivized

to participate in seed-saving initiatives that preserve and promote heirloom and locally adapted crop varieties, contributing to biodiversity and resilience against climate change.

A groundbreaking grant award holds transformative potential for beginning and reclamation farmers in the KBFA network. Administered by the KBFA as part of its Land Ownership Advocacy initiative, grant funds will provide financial support and additional resources to facilitate land acquisition. Available in 2024, four million dollars in funding will be awarded directly to farmers upon their successful completion of educational seminars and certification. This initiative heralds an era of anticipated positive changes and developmental strides for historic Nicodemus and the broader Kansas agricultural landscape.

Black farmers play a vital role in maintaining and enhancing the health of the land through an ever-evolving holistic approach that combines sustainable farming practices, community engagement and a commitment to preserving both the environment and a unique cultural heritage.

JohnElla Holmes, Ph.D., a fifth-generation descendant from historic Nicodemus, Kansas, leads the Kansas Black Farmers Association, established in 1999. As CEO and President, JohnElla has steered Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) farmers toward regenerative and climate-smart practices. Committed to the family's historic legacy, JohnElla's children have reclaimed a 40-acre farm north of Nicodemus.