

CULTURAL HERITAGE

## Intangible Cultural Heritage and Living Communities

Antoinette T Jackson

*To sustain a legacy of stones, those who dwell among them also need stewardship.*

—David Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past* (1996)



Bertha Moore Carter (l) and Florence Howard with Antoinette Jackson (r) at Moore Homestead in Nicodemus Kansas, US. May 2011. Photo courtesy USF Heritage Research Lab

We had driven past this spot along US Highway 24 in a remote section of Graham County, Kansas (between Hill City and Stockton) many times without noticing the crumbling stone structure. But today, we stood in front of it listening to Florence and her sister Bertha Moore Carter tell us about their family's homestead. Florence and her sister told stories of family life on the 160-acre homestead in the 1930s and 40s. They remembered the laughter that drifted from a neighbor's parties, filling the air between homesteads, and told stories of hunting, farming and making a living on the Kansas plain. They recalled long walks to school, and summers spent with grandparents fishing and sewing. The sound of Bertha's infectious laughter was compelling. My students from the University of South Florida Heritage Research Lab strained to hear her every word and encouraged her to share more about her father's childhood home. We were in Nicodemus, Kansas in May 2011 as part of a National Park Service grant (J6068090024-H5000085095) to be a resource to the community and the park in heritage preservation efforts.

▶ [Ms Bertha and Ms Florence](#)  
(sound recording)

Cultural heritage professionals are called upon to preserve, conserve, protect, document, inventory, catalog, store, salvage, repair, date, count, organize, retrieve and assess authenticity with respect to resources considered of cultural or historical significance. Yet, distilling sites, places and events of significance into itemized lists and fixed themes for public branding of a visitor experience has definite impacts and implications on a community level. These cultural resource management processes are often predicated on identification and evaluation of tangible resources and being able to associate an object or artifact with a place. The static representation of dynamic processes is an issue of particular concern for living communities who are connected to them.

One way to expand management and preservation policies is to consider supporting cultural heritage that values the intimacy of associations through the active renewal of community and family connections such as rituals and tradition making. Many of these associations are not grounded primarily in the preservation of tangible or physical resources (ie, old buildings, monuments, or battlefield) or driven solely by profit motives. This discussion defines cultural heritage as a continuum of possibilities that includes tangible resources but also other acts of identity-making that are about process, discourse, and performance. UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) has recognized the importance of this kind of heritage as well, and in 2003, proposed Conventions for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. This article argues that cultural heritage can be seen as a form of agency and a way to help people and communities make links between the past and the present in dynamic and nuanced ways.

The story of Nicodemus helps us appreciate the way that intangible cultural heritage can hold a community together far beyond the existence of a physical structure. The unincorporated town of Nicodemus is located in Graham County in northwestern part of the state, about 304 miles west of Kansas City, Kansas and 306 miles east of Denver, Colorado. It was founded in 1877 by African American settlers during the Reconstruction period (between the end of the Civil War and 1880s). at its height, the town had 2 newspapers, a baseball team, a post office, three general stores, a small hotel, and the oldest school in the county. Descendants of the original settlers such as Angela Bates, executive director and founder of the Nicodemus Historical Society, and others, understood the importance of their community, and intensely lobbied to have the National Park Service recognize its national significance as an African American western migration story. In 1996, the Nicodemus National Historic Site was established under a joint stewardship arrangement between the Park Service and the

community. It consists of five historic structures (the Old First Baptist Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Nicodemus District No 1 School, the St Francis Hotel/Fletcher-Switzer Residence, and Township Hall). NPS owns one structure, the AME Church, leases Township Hall from the Township Board, for use as a visitor center, and seeks to acquire additional land and buildings. Most of the Nicodemus town site and associated structures remain under private ownership and control by descendants of the original settlers, which serves as a mark of pride and community identity. The joint stewardship relationship with NPS underscores the active role the community plays in seeking to tell its own stories by recognizing, valuing, and managing its tangible and intangible assets.



Figure 2: Oral History Workshop at Nicodemus Historical Society, May 2010. Photo courtesy USF Heritage Research Lab

*Stakeholder Management and Community Participation*



The African Methodist Episcopal Church. Photo courtesy of Antoinette T Jackson

In the heritage industry, there is a distinction between heritage viewed as an asset for conservation or preservation, and heritage constructed as a commodity to be sold or consumed. Often these objectives overlap. In large-scale public works and development projects, cultural heritage professionals must balance the varying objectives that different stakeholders bring to the table, as well as manage relationships between groups. Success is dependent on a conscious recognition of the role that power plays in issues of representation with respect to cultural heritage preservation and management. In many cases, local communities, selected populations, and variably funded stakeholders may interpret the costs and benefits of a project differently. The USF Heritage Research team’s role in Nicodemus was to serve as a link between the park and the community. The community had asked for support in expanding ongoing efforts to collect oral histories from descendant families, increase archival resources, systematically manage collected data, and engage a broader segment of the community in publicly sharing their knowledge and information about Nicodemus. Our interview with Bertha and Florence, as well as activities such as conducting oral history workshops, cemetery mapping workshops, and technology workshops on the use of multi-media

technologies such as podcasting, are examples of our efforts to work with the community as they told their story.



Nicodemus District No. 1 School. Photo courtesy Antoinette T Jackson

Knowledge of the past was not only embedded in the history of the stonewalls and natural landscape surrounding the old Moore homestead, but maintained in the hearts and memories of the two storytellers—descendants of the early black settler families. In 1877, when nearly 350 formerly enslaved Africans arrived in Nicodemus, Kansas primarily from Kentucky, they had hopes of acquiring land under the US Homestead Act of 1862 which spurred migration west of the Mississippi amongst whites, free blacks, and formerly enslaved Africans. The Act guaranteed 160 acres of government land with the stipulation that settlers occupy it and make improvements for five years. After this time, they paid a registration fee and obtained title. Florence and Bertha’s story reflect pride and identity with this history and the wish to pass this knowledge to the next generation.

*Cultural Heritage as Process*

Intangible cultural heritage resources play a critical role in defining Nicodemus as a town site, a township, and an extended community in multiple and dynamic ways. The Nicodemus Historical Society asserts that the town was founded on the pillars of church, self-government, education, home and business. Although the number of people who live in the town of Nicodemus today is small, kinship ties stretch across township boundaries and extend throughout the US. The most vivid example is the annual Homecoming and Emancipation celebration when Nicodemus descendants come home to participate in old traditions (a vintage baseball game; church and fellowship activities) and create new ones; and engage in rituals of honoring ancestors (Buffalo Soldier re-enactments) and renewing

old bonds (concerts and dances). The weekend of July 25-28, 2013, marked the 135th annual celebration and Nicodemus once again welcomed hundreds of descendants and their families home.

Homecoming itself is an active act of cultural heritage preservation. In 2010, I witnessed the Nicodemus community's affirmation of its identity as parade, as festival, and as sharing of oral histories. The act of homecoming is an important cultural resource and marker of identity for many communities.

Intangible cultural heritage is dynamic vs static; experienced vs curated; and moments vs monuments. It is Bertha Moore Carter's laughter as she remembers the past that fills the wide-open spaces and landscape of wheat fields and grain agriculture in the township of Nicodemus now dotted with small oil pumps and crumbling remains of pioneer homesteads. Connections to the past that are very much grounded in the present are made visible through events like the annual Nicodemus Homecoming and Emancipation celebration, community organizations like the Nicodemus Historical Society advancing the key pillars of community passed down from the early settlers, and stories shared like Bertha's of visits with grandparents now long gone and stories of survival and making a living on the great plains.

Our focus as scholars and researchers at the Nicodemus National Historic Site in Kansas was documenting the relationship between national heritage designation, local community engagement, and professional support and being a resource to the community and the National Park in ongoing heritage preservation efforts. We negotiated the needs and expectations of multiple stakeholders and hosted events and workshops in Nicodemus and in surrounding communities. However, what became increasingly evident during our time in Nicodemus was the dominant role that the living community plays in cultural heritage preservation through active recognition and demonstration of kinship ties to the original settlers such as through storytelling, oral history, and maintenance of kinship connections through land ownership from one generation to the next—a key cultural resource and an invaluable link to the past.

*Antoinette T Jackson is an associate professor of anthropology at the University of South Florida. She is interested in issues of identity and representation at National Heritage sites. Jackson directs the USF Heritage Research Lab and is also chief ethnographer for the National Park Service for the Southeast Region.*

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