

LAWRENCE BUSINESS MAGAZINE

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**ECONOMIC
GROWTH & OPPORTUNITY**

NON [PROFIT]

Eudora Area Historical Society director, Ben Terwilliger, leads a program for upcoming 6th-graders from the Eudora School District's Summer Academy Program at the Eudora Community Museum

CELEBRATING
150 YEARS

Happy Birthday Watkins Museum of History!

Watkins Museum of History will celebrate its 50 anniversary and remains committed to preserving and sharing the cultural heritage of Douglas County, sharing stories of its history and providing the public access to historic sites, artifacts and records.

by Steve Nowak, Executive Director, Douglas County Historical Society,
photos provided by Douglas County Historical Society

In 1970, when City Hall moved from the Watkins Building, its home since 1930, a concern for the preservation of the 1888 building and a desire to preserve its public use created an opportunity for the Douglas County Historical Society (DCHS). The Society was formed in 1933 with a mission to preserve records and artifacts of Lawrence's early history but did not have a permanent museum. Thanks to the efforts of dozens of community members who raised the funds necessary to renovate the 82-year-old building and those of lawyer Raymond F. Rice, who negotiated with the estate of Elizabeth Miller Watkins to secure ownership for the Society, that permanent home became a reality. Only one issue remained: Operating a museum required financial resources the Society did not have. A unique and enduring partnership with Douglas County overcame this last hurdle, and the Elizabeth Miller

Watkins Community Museum, now the Watkins Museum of History, opened to the public in April 1975.

As the Watkins Museum prepares to celebrate its 50th anniversary (the birthday party is April 26, and there will be cake), I would like to express the DCHS's appreciation to Douglas County Government and the people of Douglas County for the support that has made our local history museum one of the most respected museums in Kansas. I would also like to share more about the partnerships that have made success possible. In the 50 years that followed the opening of the Watkins Museum, Douglas County established partnerships with other private historical societies to preserve heritage across Douglas County. Historic sites and history museums in all parts of the county are preserved by the Eudora Area Historical Society, the Lecompton Historical Society, the Santa Fe Trail Historical Society of Douglas County and the Clinton Lake Historical Society, with the help of Douglas County, in a partnership now administered by the County's heritage coordinator.

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left: Students from the Ballard Center in Lawrence explore an exhibition at the Watkins Museum of History guided by Will Haynes, the museum's Deputy Director for Engagement and Learning.



right: The bell tower at the Clearfield School, maintained by the Santa Fe Trail Historical Society of Douglas County, Kansas, was recently restored with federal funding distributed through a Douglas County grant program

This public-private partnership is remarkably successful at preserving Douglas County's heritage, sharing stories of its history and providing public access to historic sites, artifacts and records. Working together, the five Heritage Partners annually engage an audience roughly equal to 30 percent of the county's population and activate hundreds of volunteers countywide. Their annual economic impact is more than \$1.3 million. Their operational activities and the money spent by visitors generates more than \$170,000 in revenue for state and local governments. This partnership also leverages the County's investment in heritage preservation and access. In 2024, Douglas County provided about 40 percent of the funding needed to operate the Watkins Museum. The remaining 60 percent comes from membership dues and donations, earned revenue like program and research fees, and grants from private foundations and the federal government. Securing federal grants brings new money into the community and boosts the local economy. Over the past five years, Douglas County's Heritage Partner Organizations have collaborated on grant projects that mediated health risks during the pandemic, developed field trip curriculum for county historic sites, created online learning resources about the Underground Railroad for teachers and students, and completed capital improvements and historic preservation projects at eight historic sites, expending almost \$900,000 in federal funding locally.

Successful for 50 years, the partnership between Douglas County and the Heritage Partners continues to evolve. In 2025, Douglas County asked the Douglas County Historical Society to enter into a service agreement to provide funding for Watkins Museum operations. This agreement officially defines and measures the services the Watkins Museum provides to the people of Douglas County and to visitors on the

County's behalf through the funding it provides. It might seem like a museum or historic site does not provide a great variety of public service, but that range is broader than you might think. The services the County's Heritage Partners provide fall into four categories: preservation, access, engagement and collaboration. Museums and historic sites preserve the structures, artifacts, photographs and records that are the physical reminders of our history. They also ensure that historic collections evolve and grow to represent our ever-changing communities. Museums and historic sites guarantee public access to this heritage, not just through open hours at their sites but by providing access to archival materials, in person and online, and research assistance to all who seek information about the County's past. The Heritage Partners also provide exhibitions, programs, events, tours and resources that educate the public, encourage people to experience historic places and build understanding of our shared past. And finally, these organizations collaborate with each other and dozens of other cultural organizations, businesses and nonprofits to share information, stretch limited resources and engage new audiences.

Excited to mark our 50th anniversary, the Watkins Museum is also considering the future. Like our partnerships, the DCHS's mission has evolved over the past 50 years as we focus now on preserving and sharing Douglas County's cultural heritage to inspire civic engagement and a commitment to shaping a better future. How can we increase our public service, expand our accessibility and help our communities navigate potentially uncertain times? What activities will engage new audiences? Where will we secure sufficient operational funding? If the past is an indicator, only by working together will we find success. ▲

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