

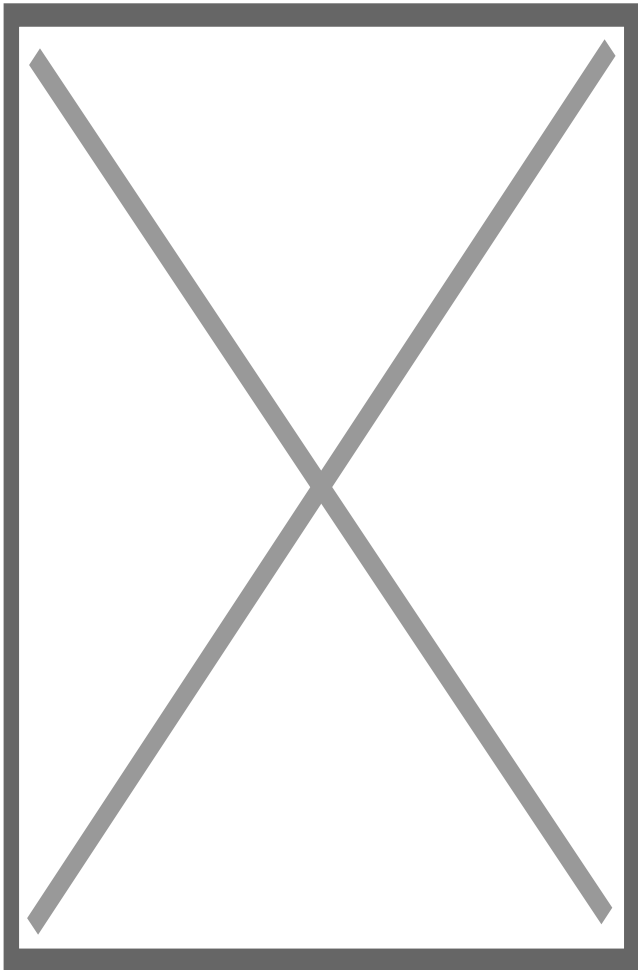
The quest for a Black frontier world

Caleb Gayle tells the story of Edward McCabe, who sought to establish a Black state in the American West.

by [Lisa Barnett](#) in the [February 2026](#) issue

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In Review



Black Moses

A Sage of Ambition and the Fight for a Black State

By Caleb Gayle

Riverhead Books

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Just as the biblical Moses sought a way of liberation for the Hebrew people, historical figures in the United States sought a path of liberation for Black people during the antebellum and Reconstruction eras. Journalist and oral historian Caleb Gayle focuses on one such individual: Edward P. McCabe. A Black man who came into the world “without the scourge of being born into slavery,” McCabe believed in the possibility during the post–Civil War era of a majority-Black state in the Union that would recognize the sovereignty of Black people to lead and make political decisions. More than just land ownership in a place, McCabe sought for himself and others a place to call home and to build a future of abundant living and self-determination. This new world for free Black people would be a promised land, a new Eden, and it would be found in the American West. Or so McCabe and his supporters thought—even as their plans were continually thwarted by politics, conflicting business interests, and racism.

More than just a biography, *Black Moses* presents McCabe’s life story within a chronological progression of the historical events that impacted Black people in the United States from the pre–Civil War period through the Progressive Era, particularly focusing on the post-Reconstruction period. The end of federal policy around Reconstruction fueled McCabe’s dream of reconstructing a place in the American West for Black settlers. Beginning in Kansas with an emerging Black community in Nicodemus, McCabe and others began to fashion a power base and their own Black nationalism to shape a Black frontier world. As an emerging political official in the state of Kansas after his election as state auditor, McCabe soon became embroiled in controversy around his connection to the political machine operating in the state’s leadership. In reality, the party bosses decided that the “Black man holding state office has overstayed his welcome.”

With his political defeat and the isolation of Nicodemus from the market centers that would allow for economic self-sufficiency and abundance, McCabe turned his sights for creating a Black state to a landscape recently opened by the federal government in Indian territory. This portion of land, now claimed as Oklahoma Territory, had “Unassigned Lands” open to settlers. McCabe and his supporters saw another promised land with the opening of this territory, and they envisioned McCabe taking the helm as Moses to lead Black settlers in his dream of a Black state. In a personal meeting with President Benjamin Harrison, McCabe petitioned for the opportunity to populate Oklahoma as a separate place to demonstrate that Black men and women are capable of self-government.

An affirmative answer did not come as Oklahoma Territory and Indian Territory moved toward merger in statehood that elevated White settler colonial politics and culture. Like McCabe’s dream of a Black state in the Union, Native American leadership in Indian Territory envisioned a separate state of Sequoyah for Native peoples. Wealthy White settlers in Oklahoma denied both Indigenous and Black people their claims to sovereignty. The new state constitution even reinforced the Jim Crow policies of the South in what McCabe had hoped would be a western promised land for Black people. Yet, Gayle’s book reminds readers that McCabe’s dream of self-determination in Oklahoma did become evident in local communities, including all-Black towns like Langston, Redbird, and Boley and commerce centers like Tulsa’s Greenwood District (also known as Black Wall Street).

Black Moses sets forth a solid critique of democracy and politics linked to White power. Gayle does not shy away from offering a realistic (rather than hagiographical) assessment of political leaders such as Abraham Lincoln, who favored colonization and then in the wake of emancipation continued to foster a “take care of yourselves” government policy and practice. Neither does Gayle hold back from his critique of the dispossession of Native American lands through violent acts of federal Indian policy. However, he does not offer this same level of critique against McCabe and others who sought their promised land in a Black state on stolen Indigenous lands. As historians continue to expand their lens on settler colonialism, they will need to address the complex intersections between the harms perpetrated by White supremacy on various groups of people.

Gayle offers insights into the many layers of Black freedom that complicate the narrative spun during the post-Reconstruction era in the United States. As a representative of the promise of Black liberation, McCabe serves as a model for those involved in sustained civil rights struggles. There is a photograph of McCabe in the Greenwood Cultural Center in Tulsa, Oklahoma, which visitors see when they visit to learn about the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. The framed newspaper photo accompanies the headline “Working for a Black State: A Movement to Bring Oklahoma into the Union as a Black State.” *Black Moses* paints a textured picture of this man and his vision of what Oklahoma might have been.