

SAME WATER COMIN', ROUND

QUINDARO AS A VISION FOR KANSAS

CONTENTS

QUINDARO: THE VISION	1
DESTINATION: FREEDOM	5
<i>Compromises, 1820 and 1850</i>	5
<i>The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850</i>	5
<i>The Kansas-Nebraska Act</i>	6
<i>A Boom Town</i>	6
<i>Prolonged Troubles</i>	8
FAULT LINES IN OUR STARS	11
<i>John Brown</i>	13
<i>Our ‘Noble Narrative’</i>	14
VOTING RIGHTS	15
<i>Inclusive Beginnings</i>	16
<i>Dodge City</i>	17
<i>Johnson County</i>	17
<i>The Voter Fraud Myth</i>	18
<i>Why Wyandotte?</i>	19
<i>Voting is Belonging</i>	21
QUINDARO’S QUEENS: KANSAS & WOMEN’S RIGHTS	23
CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM	28
<i>Juvenile Fines and Fees</i>	29
<i>Bail Reform</i>	30
A FREE STATE?	32
<i>Vivisection: Federal and State Governments Send I-635 Through Quindaro’s Heart</i>	33
<i>‘Open Roads’ and Closed Doors</i>	34
<i>Urban Renewal Equals ‘Negro Removal’</i>	35
<i>‘Highways Should Connect’</i>	36
HEALTH INEQUITY	38
<i>Life Expectancy, Wyco vs. Joco</i>	38
<i>Good Health Means Good Choices</i>	40
QUINDARO’S FUTURE: THE PAST IS PROLOGUE	42
<i>Ghost of Future’s Past</i>	44
<i>Triumph in Old Wounds</i>	45
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND WORKS CITED	48

*it is the great circulation
of the earth's body, like the blood
of the gods, this river in which the past
is always flowing. every water
is the same water coming round.*

LUCILLE CLIFTON

QUINDARO: THE VISION

On a quiet bend of the Kansas River, up a lush tree- and rock-covered slope, a Kansas that should have been, slumbers.

Enslaved people fleeing bondage in Missouri waded across the river into the Quindaro settlement, into freedom, nearly 170 years ago.

An unlikely though distinctly American group of multiracial people founded the settlement – white Massachusetts abolitionists, Black freedmen and freedwomen, and Indigenous people established this town, named literally, “a bundle of sticks,” but figuratively, “strength in unity.” It remains today as one of the most diverse areas of Kansas. The town, which became a neighborhood and home to America’s western-most historically Black university, once embodied our state’s identity.

Quindaro helped birth Kansas as well as the noble narrative of the “Free State.” Enslaved people fleeing brutal bondage in Missouri and the rest of the Confederate South followed the western Underground Railroad, which passed through Quindaro, cutting a

winding path through northeastern Kansas. The town, organized five years before Kansas statehood, mushroomed into a busy frontier outpost.

Quindaro represents our greatest aspirations as a state but also the fragility of our democracy. Democracy must work for everyone or it is not a democracy, and Quindaro began as what the nation at least imagines it could be – a multiracial democracy. Quindaro began as a haven for enslaved people escaping bondage but even today, it remains a place where immigrants have sought refuge, freedom and a new life.

“It was one of the first gatherings of people in what we now know as Kansas,” said Dr. Shawn Leigh Alexander, the chair of the African and African American Studies Department at the University of Kansas. “We need to understand that it was a multi-racial, multi-ethnic burgeoning of a people.”

There may not be a better example of a multi-racial democracy anywhere, Alexander said.

But this story isn’t about Quindaro the

But this story isn't about Quindaro the place as much as it is about **Quindaro the idea. Quindaro, the vision. Quindaro, the aspiration.**

place as much as it is about Quindaro the **idea**. Quindaro, the **vision**. Quindaro, the **aspiration**. Our study of the year 1619 isn't necessarily about Jamestown, Virginia, or about the first Africans to move down the gangplank into lifetimes of brutal servitude. It provides a frame for understanding America, as Quindaro does for Kansas. We can understand not only who we are through this prism, but also who we are supposed to be.

But dark forces beset and besieged Quindaro from the beginning and in the centuries since. Riverboat captains encouraged passengers to bypass the town, and slave catchers lurked along the river's edges hunting human property. Others blocked the river, preventing the arrival of supplies in an attempt to smother the town in its infancy.

In the 20th century, as a part of Kansas City, Kansas, segregation made the residents there easy targets of police harassment and victims of low property values. Because of that, many people fled the area. Then the federal government drove Interstate 635 right through its heart, a near-death blow. Roughly 20 years later, it narrowly escaped an attempt to turn it into a landfill, a literal dump.

As recently as the spring of 2022, legislators intent on strangling Black voting power, redrew voting district

maps that did just that, and the state Supreme Court blessed it by doing virtually nothing to protect Black voters in the newly drawn areas.

Today, Quindaro remains largely undeveloped. There's virtually no investment. The high levels of poverty, if mapped out, align perfectly with bank redlining maps from previous eras.

The arc of this local history embodies the systemic racism ailing Kansas and the nation yet today. In the same way that Kansas serves as America's social fault line (from the Civil War to Prohibition to the Civil Rights Movement to the Summer of Mercy abortion protests), Quindaro's rise and fall reflects the state's aspirations and where it still falls short.

***The New York Times'* 1619 Project** has helped lay bare just how slavery and anti-Blackness shaped the nation's culture — its politics, citizenship, economy, even its music. The Pulitzer Prize-winning project also details how white America's preference for nostalgia over history has helped plunge their nation into vague and outdated notions of the nation's history.

This kind of pushback, Alexander said, offers a "tell" about the centrality of race in our culture.

"American never wants to talk about

race,” Alexander said. “For many Americans, to talk about our racial history is to talk against them. But race was used to create inequality in education, economics, politics, and our social conditions. If we’re going to tackle this, we have to understand the past.”

The “tell,” is that there are people perfectly fine celebrating Confederate history but recoil at the notion of celebrating Juneteenth and the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday. He said when our Constitution was written, there were more Black and indigenous people here than white Europeans which meant that a white minority wrote the Constitution.

“We never talk about this,” Alexander said.

Our narrow and shallow understanding of our own history is problematic, historians have said.

“We are committing ‘educational malpractice,’” said Ohio State University professor Hasan Kwame Jeffries, the author of the “Teaching Hard History” report from the Southern Poverty Law Center.

This historical ignorance, Jeffries said, leaves many, if not most, Americans ill-equipped to understand inequality today and in turn, leads to intolerance and an opposition to efforts to address racial injustice. Still worse, this ignorance and the fear of losing white racial status, causes the public to

double-down on laws and policies that are detrimental to Black communities and that widen inequality and inflame divisions.

Essentially, he said, we all suffer because of the poor history we’ve been taught.

We hope that Quindaro will do for Kansas what *The New York Times’* 1619 Project did for the nation – “Force a confrontation with our past,” and help propel Kansas toward its noble narrative.

Along the way, we can begin to understand the causes of our state’s deep economic inequality, the mass incarceration that makes us the most punitive nation in the world, the shocking and frequent spasms of violence, the cruel and immoral segregation, the bitter political divisions and our stingy social safety net.

Consider these issues and more through this lens: To many, our democracy is only as old as the 1965 National Voting Rights Act that allowed Black Americans the right to vote nearly 100 years after the passage of the 15th Amendment (1869) which also purported to grant African Americans suffrage.

Despite decades of struggle in Quindaro, a warm glow has settled on the horizon.

We aren’t flyover country. Kansas has historically served as the nation’s

Essentially, we all suffer because of the poor history we’ve been taught.

social petri dish, where experiments with populism and temperance played out famously with people such as Mary Elizabeth Lease and Carry Nation. Despite our current projection of conservatism, Kansans have long been willing to experiment and to explore.

This frontier town of Quindaro can lead itself and the state into a new frontier, one true to its multiracial, egalitarian ideals and democratic origins. What Kansas does to restore the vision of Quindaro could change the state and quite possibly, the nation.



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DESTINATION: FREEDOM

Quindaro's story is arguably as old and painful, and as hopeful, as the nation's because of slavery.

Consequently, any untangling of its origins begins with an exploration of three historic federal statutes: the Fugitive Slave Act, the Missouri Compromise, and the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and how each helped touch off the Civil War.

The mixture of popular sovereignty, the simultaneous collapse of the Whig Party and the birth of the Republican party, as well as Black personhood fueled an explosion that reverberated nationwide.

Compromises, 1820 and 1850

As the young United States grew state by state, each new addition to the union was another point of contention that could upset the ever-precarious balance between free and slave states, the see-sawing divide between North and South. It was clear to Congress that, when the Missouri Territory applied for statehood in 1818, a preponderance of the people there would vote to allow slavery. Proponents wanted the state to become the first slave state west of the Mississippi River.

As tensions rose, Congress made numerous attempts at evading an encroaching war. One of those was the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which admitted Missouri to the Union as a slave state, but also admitted Maine as a free state. However, after this compromise, as part of the agreement, no territory above the 36-30 line was

to enter the Union as a slave state again. This would add yet another complicating layer to the next few decades and their "negotiations" – rendering Bleeding Kansas nearly inevitable and giving Oklahoma its panhandle, which only exists from slicing off a piece of Texas to ensure the latter's entry as a slave state.

Despite this agreement, pro-slavery forces still wanted to expand slavery not only out west in California, where gold had been discovered, but into the Plains, the Rocky Mountains, and the Great Northwest. Anti-slavery forces in the north fought to stop this expansion, and the Compromise of 1850 ensured California would enter the union as a free state.

Not to be outflanked, pro-slavery Southerners pushed for each newly admitted state to use popular sovereignty, in which settlers would decide whether a new territory would consent to slavery within its borders.

The 1850 measure, which also abolished the domestic slave trade in the District of Columbia, worked for a while, but failed to address the central question about slavery, and neither side was a fan of the arrangement resulting from each Compromise.

Slavers feared the precedent of Congress — not the states — passing laws concerning slavery, and abolitionists feared the compromise could lead to an expansion of slavery in new territories. All were increasingly angry.

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850

Amidst the tensions that each compromise brought, a "new" Fugitive

Slave Act essentially lit the fuse of a war before the war, as one author has described it.

A first version of a fugitive slave law was written into the Constitution, Article 4, Section 2, where respect for property and return of property is discussed. Six years later runaways and the reluctance of some northerners or non-slaveholders to capture or return ‘fugitives’ led the nation to pass the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 which supported the clause and made it a duty of northern lawmakers to aid in returning slaves.

In 1850, alongside of the Compromise of 1850 Congress passed a third Fugitive Slave Act. The new Fugitive Slave Act attempted to appease an increasingly indignant South, by requiring federal marshals to capture and return enslaved people to Southern enslavers. The law biased heavily toward property rights over freedom: officials would receive \$10 for a runaway returned to the claimant and \$5 for a runaway set free. Northerners were most angered by the fact that federal marshals could require citizen bystanders to aid in the capture of fugitives and, if a bystander refused to help, they could be fined \$1,000 and sent to jail for six months.

The law angered Northerners who had not previously felt strongly about humans owning other humans, but who now found it intolerable that the federal government could be encroaching on states’ rights. What should have stood as a high-minded discussion was reduced to an argument over property rights and federalism.

This, in essence, forced people who disagreed or even abhorred slavery

to participate in the furtherance of the “peculiar institution,” further fraying nerves and elevating sectional tensions. Meanwhile, many Northern states enacted new personal-liberty laws, and the number of abolitionists increased, coinciding with a more efficiently implemented Underground Railroad.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act

The Missouri Compromise held the nation together for about three decades before the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 rescinded it.

Sen. Stephen Douglas, an Illinois Democrat, introduced a measure that would organize the Nebraska Territory, a sprawling and geographically diverse area that included what is now Montana and the Dakotas. The measure moved the country closer to what abolitionists feared — the prospect of slavery expanding into those areas.

As California joined the union and as the United States wrested the territories of Utah, New Mexico, Nevada and Arizona away from Mexico in the Mexican-American war, those latter four states were asked to decide for themselves whether they would permit slavery under the principle of popular sovereignty.

But the Compromise of 1850 and the newly passed Fugitive Slave Act deepened the resolve of abolitionists and aggravated the discord that had tormented the nation since before its birth.

Worse, because Douglas needed Southern votes to pass his bill, he attached an amendment that rescinded the Missouri Compromise and created

the states of Kansas and Nebraska. Settlers in each, under the principle of popular sovereignty, would vote on whether to permit slavery.

The showdown was at hand.

Pro-slavery settlers poured into Kansas attempting to drag it down into slavery while so-called Free Soilers fought those efforts. The battle grew gruesome and bloody, earning our state the moniker Bleeding Kansas.

The Whig Party collapsed under the weight of the debate over the law, and it split the Democratic party roughly between the North and South. During a particularly heated debate, Rep. Preston Brooks of South Carolina beat anti-slavery firebrand Sen. Charles Sumner of Massachusetts with a cane on the floor of the Senate.

The Republican Party formed in opposition to the Act and became the nation's leading anti-slavery political party.

As these tensions rose, abolitionists needed a new, western route for the Underground Railroad to help people escape bondage in Missouri. So they established a town on the Kansas bank of the Missouri River.

Quindaro.

A Boom Town

Quindaro, the township, blossomed, standing as a lighthouse for the tempest-tossed enslaved people across the river. Freedom and the idea of a multiracial democracy formed the town's foundation.

According to the Kansas Historical Society, Wyandot Indians had initially purchased that plot of land but when the tribe disbanded, tribal members

who wanted to become U.S. citizens divided it among themselves. Among those was Abelard Guthrie and his wife, Nancy Quindaro Brown Guthrie, for whom the town was named.

Wyandots were sympathetic to abolitionism and were active in the Underground Railroad in their native Ohio. The government forced them to move west "on the heels of the Trail of Tears."

Abelard Guthrie, who'd been adopted into the tribe after he married Nancy, served as vice president of the Quindaro Township Co. and advocated fervently for the town. At its height, its population soared to more than 1,000 according to historical sources.

The town featured homes and several businesses, including the territory's largest sawmill. Quindaro's so-called lower townsite, near the river, formed its commercial center. Most homes stood higher on a bluff.

One hundred buildings were completed in the town's first year, "including hotels, dry goods, hardware and grocery stores," as well as two churches and a schoolhouse.

The town offered a safe landing for free state settlers as well as those fleeing slavery's terrors. Charles Robinson, who'd eventually become the state's first governor, wanted to pave the way for settlers to get to the territory.

Robinson, along with Abelard Guthrie, urged the purchase of the land that became Quindaro, and Nancy proved instrumental in convincing her tribe to sell.

The town flourished, according to the website, because it stood as the

most well-known destination for free soil settlers bound for the Kansas territory. According to Robinson, “The whole free-state world seemed bound for Quindaro.”

A drooping national economy and the township’s inability to secure a rail line, however, damaged the fledgling town’s fortunes, particularly as many of the young men there left to join the Union forces in the Civil War.

Some of Quindaro’s early residents became members of the First Kansas Colored Regiment of the Civil War.

After the war, however, freedmen and freedwomen moved to Quindaro and as the population grew, residents established Freedman’s University (later chartered as Western University) on the bluff where the old township had once stood. Douglass Hospital would follow.

The first classes at Freedman’s University took place in 1862 in the home of Eben Blachley, who taught the children of freedmen and freedwomen.

According to family legend, the white Presbyterian minister from Wisconsin was once nearly hanged as a spy by the Confederate Army. He’d ventured into harm’s way looking for his son, who’d been captured by the Confederates.

But with a noose around his neck, the Confederates allowed him some last words, and after praying out loud for the Confederates’ souls because they were about to hang an innocent man, they “took the noose off his neck and sent him home to Wisconsin.”

That experience reportedly caused Blachley to dedicate his life to helping

the formerly enslaved at the school.

In 1872, the state increased the school’s funding to establish a four-year curriculum to train teachers and by the 1880s, Exodusters, the mass movement of African Americans from the South, boosted the population in the state and at the school.

Also about that time, the African Methodist Episcopal Conference began providing financial support to the school, which added a theological course and built Ward Hall to accommodate it.

By 1911, students, faculty and churches raised \$2,000 to erect a statue of abolitionist John Brown, which is the last vestige of the school, the community or the town still standing.

The second institution of note there, Douglass Hospital, was the first Black-community-owned hospital west of the Mississippi to treat any and all patients regardless of their race, according to Deborah Dandridge, associate librarian at the Kenneth Spencer Research Library at the University of Kansas.

Until the 1960s, Black doctors and nurses in the U.S. were denied access to most hospitals, and most Black patients were either not accepted or relegated to inferior, segregated areas in hospitals, such as hallways and basements. (Even today, access to quality health care remains out of reach to many African Americans.)

Again, Quindaro proved ahead of its time.

Dandridge said Black doctors and community leaders organized the

hospital, named for the renowned abolitionist and journalist Frederick Douglass, in December 1898. It provided 10 patient beds on its first floor, and nurses quarters on the second floor.

But integration giveth and also taketh away. As the old saying goes, people got the integration they wanted, but in the process, lost the community cohesion and independent businesses they once had. In explicit and implicit ways, integration disintegrated Black communities.

Patient admissions plummeted in the 1930s. The school had graduated 43 nurses during the previous three decades, but the Douglass Hospital Training School closed in 1937.

In 1945, with the support of the greater Kansas City community and federal funding, Douglass renovated a three-story building on the former Western University campus to accommodate a 50-bed hospital that included a blood bank, lab and an obstetrics unit.

By 1954 however, desegregation practices in area hospitals were eroding admissions, eventually leading to Douglass' closure in 1977. The building was then torn down and its records lost, Dandridge said.

Prolonged Troubles

With its proud history and a university and hospital in its midst, Quindaro experienced a kind of golden age. It became a community beloved by the people who lived and worshipped there. Its progeny remain fiercely loyal and deeply proud of Quindaro and its heritage.

But forces like those that gathered

What remains is commonly referred to as “the ruins.”

upstream to prevent it from getting supplies and patrolled the banks to claw freedmen and freedwomen back into bondage assumed different forms to continue that same, terrible work.

Segregation, for example, kept Quindaro socially and more importantly, economically isolated. Black residents in neighborhoods like Quindaro found it difficult or even dangerous to venture too far beyond those boundaries outside of school and work.

Police reinforced those societal norms, and the Kansas City metro area's economy conveniently left Quindaro and segregated areas behind, more by design than by accident. As society offered narrow routes of escape, people fled the community and, as an unintended consequence, weakened it.

The period of perceived racial progress of the 1960s helped inflict a near fatal wound to Quindaro – the building of Interstate 635 was completed in 1975, which the state and federal governments rammed right through its heart.

As was the case in many cities, including Wichita and St. Louis, and many others, planners devastated Black communities under the guise of “urban renewal” and wiping out blight. Residents in those areas grew to derisively refer to these efforts as “negro removal.”

The community, current residents have said, was never the same.

In the mid-1980s, the community would endure another attempt on its well-being, when a landfill was proposed for the site. It seemed a particularly odd place for a landfill, the historical significance of the land there notwithstanding. The natural beauty there, with the tall bluffs overlooking the river, is undeniable.

Nevertheless, the plan moved ahead until it collided with an obscure law.

Under the Kansas Antiquities Commission Act, and because Kansas City owned part of the landfill site and held permitting authority, an investigation of the site had to be conducted.

Over a two-year period, archeologists discovered a cistern, three wells, and the foundations of 22 residential and commercial buildings. That, and a public outcry, caused the landfill company to abandon the project.

What remains is commonly referred to as “the ruins.”

When the company pulled out, that left no funding for the analysis or storage of the nearly 200 cubic feet of excavated artifacts. An agreement passed ownership of the collection to the Kansas Historical Society, which now uses the items for exhibitions and archeological education.

Quindaro escaped an ignominious fate, but that has not deterred the illegal dumping that still goes on. It remains isolated socially and economically while still clinging to life. The suggestion of the area as a dumping ground seemed to implant the idea that it was in the


minds of many illegal dumpers.

As a neighborhood, it benefits from a deeply loyal base of residents, former residents and Quindaro offspring who still believe that for all the abuse it's endured, it could still achieve the beautiful future it deserves. Its pulse comes from the people who still love it and want to see it prosper.

People still believe in its story and in its power to finally create the multiracial democracy it promised all these decades ago.

It's said that people can be segregated and abused and killed, but an idea knows no death.

Quindaro is a testament to the durability of a core idea.



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FAULT LINES IN OUR STARS

The New Madrid Fault, also known as the New Madrid seismic zone, is a series of faults, or fractures in the Earth's crust. It cannot be seen from the surface and runs roughly 150 miles from Arkansas into Missouri and Illinois.

Geologists and seismologists have warned about the New Madrid Fault for decades, and perhaps for good reason. As subterranean plates shift, they trigger events commonly known as earthquakes, when everything above ground and below topples and fractures. The landscape literally changes. The 1911-1912 New Madrid earthquakes were the most powerful ever to strike the U.S. east of the Rockies.

In a figurative sense, Kansas represents our nation's social fault line.

As tremors of an approaching Civil War shook the nation more violently, Quindaro and Kansas formed a critical stress point for the nation. While Quindaro strove to pull a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic group of people together, pro-slavery forces pulled the nation apart.

Despite its image of wholesome homogeneity, where coastal trends take 10 years to arrive, Kansas has deep, largely overlooked historical roots as a trendsetter. The Sunflower State has contributed much to populism, to Prohibition, to abortion rights, gay rights and civil rights. As

opposed to quietly resting on society's far outer perimeter, Kansas has often been the epicenter of seismic American social shifts, providing the definition of how various social issues tend to shift under our feet.

Kansas was the first state to pass temperance laws and enter Prohibition, and a tiny, rage-filled woman named Carry Nation won national fame and regional infamy by taking a hatchet to saloons in support of the measure.

Wichita, in the late 1970s, was one of the first American cities to pass a gay rights ordinance (though it was quickly reversed). Entertainer Anita Bryant, under the hysterical banner of the Save Our Children Campaign, attacked and successfully vanquished the ordinance.

Thronges of abortion rights opponents descended on Wichita in 1991 for what they termed the Summer of Mercy. More than 25,000 people were arrested as they encircled an abortion clinic. They screamed at women entering the Women's Health Care Services Clinic, knelt, prayed, and blocked parking lot entrances to stop cars from entering.

Wichita also served as the site of the murder of Dr. George Tiller, at one time one of only three doctors in the nation performing late-term abortions. An anti-abortion activist entered Tiller's church one Sunday morning and summarily executed him.

But perhaps more than in any other

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area, Kansas has distinguished itself in the African American narrative of struggle and freedom and civil rights.

The Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington D.C., dedicated to Black history — created a decade ago through the initiative of several Kansans in key roles — contains multiple exhibits documenting the significant contributions of Kansans.

In Barack Obama's exhibit, you'll see his mother, Ann Dunham, who was born in Wichita.

There are the obligatory Bleeding Kansas and *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* exhibits, as well as one about Nicodemus, an all-Black settlement situated high on western Kansas' plains.

A Stearman airplane hanging from the rafters and flown by Tuskegee airmen was built in Wichita.

The Kansas African American Museum provided photos and some text for the display of the nation's first successful, student-led lunch-counter sit-in in Wichita back in 1958.

You'll find a display of World War II's Double V Campaign — the fight for victory at home as well as abroad — which began with a letter from a cafeteria worker in Wichita.

You'll also find art from Topekan Aaron Douglas and poetry from fellow Topekan Gwendolyn Brooks. Images of Langston Hughes and Gordon Parks, Hattie McDaniel and Oscar Micheaux, all of whom lived in Kansas, were born in Kansas or found their final resting place here.

Beyond the museum, though, many

other Kansans have shaped our culture.

Arthur Fletcher, a trailblazing Black Republican who went to high school in Junction City and graduated from Washburn University in Topeka, advised four U.S. presidents. He served under Lt. Gen. George S. Patton in World War II, earning a Purple Heart. He was a 6-foot-4 defensive end for the Los Angeles Rams and the Baltimore Colts' first Black player. He also coined the famous phrase, "A mind is a terrible thing to waste," for the United Negro College Fund. Still, Fletcher might best be known as the father of Affirmative Action, a program oft-criticized for its reliance on counting and numbers. Fletcher said: "We have no problem counting who is on welfare, we have no problem counting who is in jail, we have no problem counting who's on AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children). What's wrong with counting success?"

President Dwight Eisenhower, who wasn't born in Kansas but nonetheless wanted his presidential library built in Abilene where he grew up, won progressive battles, skillfully achieving success like the military tactician he was.

The late, great historian and Ike biographer David Nichols taught us that Eisenhower integrated the armed forces following President Harry Truman's order. He also integrated federal military bases, even those in the racially hostile American South. Ike also appointed key justices who later handed down *Brown*. He then sent federal troops into the South for the first time in a generation to enforce the *Brown* decision.

Just as textbooks treat slavery without racism,
they treat **abolitionism** without idealism.

Consider the most radical white abolitionist of
them all, John Brown.

John Brown

Few people, however, are more closely identified with Kansas than another Brown – John Brown. A weird duality lingers here about him. We’ve committed this mythical Brown to actual artwork in our state capital.

John Steuart Curry’s iconic mural of Brown, 10-feet-tall, wild-eyed, arms outstretched with a rifle in one hand and a Bible in the other is mostly myth, a perpetuation of a troubling narrative of him as some sort of madman.

Did John Brown kill? Yes. Was he a zealot? Almost certainly. Was he insane? No.

James Lowen, in his book, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, wrote that “Just as textbooks treat slavery without racism, they treat abolitionism without idealism. Consider the most radical white abolitionist of them all, John Brown.”

Textbooks, Lowen said, perpetuated this insanity myth.

“John Brown was almost certainly insane,” opines *American History*. The *American Way* tells a whopper: “Later Brown was proved to be mentally ill.” The *American Pageant* characterizes Brown as “deranged,” “gaunt,” “grim,” “terrible,” and “crackbrained,” “probably of unsound mind.”

But, Lowen adds, “no one who knew

Brown, thought him crazy.” He references people who spoke to him after his capture following his attack on Harper’s Ferry.

Lowen quotes Gov. Henry A. Wise of Virginia, who said, “They are themselves mistaken who take him to be a madman. Brown showed, “quick and clear perception,” “rational premises and consecutive reasoning.”

There are echoes of current concerns about inequality in Brown’s court statement, Lowen wrote: “Had I so interfered in behalf of the rich, the powerful, it would have been alright.” Brown said his Bible taught him that “all things whatsoever I would that men should do to me, I should do even so to them. It teaches me further, ‘to remember them that are in bonds as bound with them.’ I endeavored to act up to that instruction.”

Mourning Brown, said Lowen, were Louisa May Alcott, William Dean Howells, Herman Melville, John Greenleaf Whittier, Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman.

Wrote Victor Hugo from France: The gaze of Europe is fixed at this moment on America.” Hanging Brown, he said, “will open a latent fissure that will finally split the Union asunder. The punishment of John Brown may consolidate slavery in Virginia, but it will certainly shatter the American

Democracy. You preserve your shame but you kill your glory.”

Resisting injustice somehow makes you insane in some corners of America, whether you're John Brown or Martin Luther King Jr., or anywhere in between on the freedom-fighting continuum.

Our 'Noble Narrative'

It was on this fault line that freedom-loving Kansans built Quindaro and envisioned a state that, at least in its aspirations, could not countenance inequality.

There long has been a “noble narrative” of how we Kansans perceive ourselves that crashes into reality. It is a myth not unlike Currey's mural, carefully drawn and colored to extol virtues we haven't earned, while hiding warts we most certainly have.

We claim the mantle of the Free State, because of John Brown, yet we portray him as a madman. We were anti-slavery but exercised extensive and continued terror campaigns against Black people who moved here fleeing Southern violence. We wrap ourselves in a state flag that hides our shame.

In short, Brown saw humanity in Black people that not even textbook authors decades later could see, so he must be crazy. But no Black person who'd ever met Brown, Lowen said, thought him crazy. Black leaders from that era, including Douglass, Martin Delaney, Henry Highland Garnet, Harriet Tubman and others, knew and respected Brown. Only illness kept Tubman away from his

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ill-fated Harper's Ferry raid.

Perhaps that is why a statue of Brown still stands in Quindaro, not far from where Western University once stood. Union Civil War soldiers sang the song, “John Brown's Body” to the tune of the “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” with its refrain of “glory, glory Hallelujah!”

Kansas history is like a crown held far above us, in the hope that we might rise enough in meeting our challenges that it might someday rest on our heads.

We will find our state's truth not in progressive or conservative politics, not in empty sloganeering or in myth-making or in some noble narrative. We'll find our truth as a state, in Quindaro's suffering and our response to its truths.

Despite more than a century of devastating social and political assaults, Quindaro still breathes, so its dreams still live. It can yet move this state as it did before and possibly inspire the nation.

VOTING RIGHTS

Quindaro neighborhood native Luther Smith turned 18 in 1956, and stepped into adulthood as the nation wrestled with its democratic conscience. Would America live up to its soaring ideals, or would it acquiesce to its quasi-democratic and apartheid roots?

In the 1960s, Smith saw horrible news images from places like Birmingham and Selma where law enforcement blasted children with water cannons. The pressure from those hoses could strip bark off trees and rip hair from the scalp. Police brought in dogs that would bite the young protesters. The whole thing horrified Smith.

“They caught hell just so I can vote,” Smith said, now 85. “So ever since I was able to vote, I voted. The election could be for dog catcher, but I’m going to vote. It’s important to me. I think about all the problems people went through to vote. I saw all of that. I took all that in.”

Those problems — though no longer rooted in intimidating violence — remain.

Smith worked closely, for example, with Rep. Sharice Davids, then his U.S. representative, but could not find her name on the ballot on his most recent visit to the voting booth.

That’s because extremist politicians took a scalpel to Davids’ district with the expressed goal of defeating her. They succeeded in submerging Wyandotte’s patch of blue voters in a sea of western Kansas’ red voters. They rammed their redistricting map through the Legislature — but failed in their bid to defeat Davids.

Still, Smith said of the attempt, “I think that was just rotten. I never thought this country would be like this.”

“This,” was just about targeting a group of people and cheating them out of their voting power because of their party affiliation and race. Quindaro is part of Wyandotte County. Republicans viewed the county as a Democratic stronghold that needed cracking. Susan Wagle, the president of the state Senate said as much at a public meeting in 2020, then her successor went out and shamelessly did it two years later.

This redistricting process, required every 10 years to accommodate population growth or loss, marked a real departure from Quindaro’s earnest and inclusive beginnings.

In the years before Quindaro’s founding, as the Wyandot Tribe disbanded, tribal members wanting to become U.S. citizens received parcels of land. Abelard Guthrie was among those members.

Guthrie had served as registrar of a U.S. Land Office in Ohio when the government moved the Wyandots to the Kansas territory in 1843 and decided to follow Nancy Quindaro Brown Guthrie and her tribe to Kansas. As her husband, the Wyandots accepted Abelard into the tribe.

Quindaro’s location — at a point six miles upstream from the Missouri River’s confluence with the Kansas River, on Wyandot Indian land — beckoned to slaves in Missouri who sought freedom. Clarina Nichols, a

women's rights advocate and associate editor of the abolitionist newspaper the Quindaro Chindowan (Chindowan means leader), actively helped Black people escape slavery. She once hid a woman in her brick cistern as 14 slave hunters closed in.

These sentiments – freedom, acceptance and belonging – formed the foundation of what would become the state of Kansas. Quindaro was a true democracy where everyone mattered, where everyone was included, and the community shared benefits and burdens.

Today's Kansas scarcely resembles its proud founding. A powerful minority continues to mount multipronged attacks on democratic ideals. Nowhere are these efforts more crystal clear than in the relentless shredding of voting rights.

In an exercise of raw political power, Kansas extremists brazenly announced their plan to gerrymander the state's four congressional districts because one district had the temerity to elect someone other than a Republican.

"We can do that, I guarantee it," Wagle said in her 2020 speech to Wichita's Pachyderm Club.

A sped-up and secretive process designed to make public engagement difficult followed Wagle's declaration. The state's Supreme Court blessed the manifestly unfair plan to rob minority voters in Wyandotte County – including Quindaro – of their rightful

electoral influence. People like Smith.

This is precisely the kind of tyranny of the majority that has marked the past 14 or so years nationally, and virtually the whole of Quindaro's existence. But these developments clearly run counter to the foundational spirit of Quindaro and the state of Kansas.

Inclusive Beginnings

The things we call "Kansas values" can be traced to Quindaro's founding. Women enjoyed limited voting rights in the state's constitution and the state explicitly chose to stand against the myriad terrors of slavery, creating an identity that was the very antithesis of America's peculiar institution.

Well into the 20th century, the brutal culture that had perfected America's brand of slavery was still employing violence to maintain a rigid and intimidating racial caste system.

Gretchen Eick, a retired Friends University history professor wrote in her 2007 book "Dissent in Wichita: The Civil Rights Movement in the Midwest, 1954-1972", about Chester I. Lewis, the head of the Wichita Branch NAACP, visiting Mississippi in the 1960s.

Eick said the constant threat of violence that Lewis and the NAACP delegation saw in Mississippi so frightened Lewis that he barely came out of his bedroom for a week once he returned from the trip.

The nation may not have had the

The things we call "Kansas values"
can be traced to Quindaro's founding.

1965 Voting Rights Act but for the martyrdom of a native Kansan, the Rev. James Reeb. He, as did much of the nation, watched the bloody response to the peaceful attempt to march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama.

Reeb then answered the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s call for national clergy to travel to Selma on the next attempt to complete the voting rights march. But segregationists attacked him after an evening meeting, bashing his skull with a club. He died days later. King gave his eulogy.

President Lyndon Johnson, leveraging the Reeb tragedy, managed to push through the landmark law, a measure many call the most effective and transformative legislation ever written. Some point to 1965 as the actual year of our democratic founding, because it marked the first time that everyone in the country could vote.

There are monuments and murals of Reeb in Selma today, marking his contributions to voting rights, a far cry from today's voter suppression and gerrymandering.

Dodge City

Consider, for example, what happened in 2018 in Dodge City, where 60% of the population is Latino.

Ford County Clerk Debbie Cox closed the city's lone polling station where most Latinx people lived – which served some 13,000 people – and moved it outside the city limits near a country club and beyond the bus route. As residents complained about a lack of voter access, Cox claimed that the county could not afford the four voting

sites requested within the city limits.

The ACLU of Kansas sued, representing a high school student seeking to vote for the first time, and LULAC, the League of United Latin American Citizens, a Latino advocacy group.

Things quickly shifted when a newspaper's open-records request revealed that Cox had spent \$70,000 on legal fees fighting residents' demands for greater voting access. She'd eventually tally more than \$100,000 in lawyers' bills.

Setting up a polling place would have cost no more than \$5,000 to \$7,000.

Once news media revealed her legal expenditures, she agreed to open two voting stations inside the city limits.

She remains the Ford County clerk.

Johnson County

Also in 2018, the ACLU of Kansas petitioned the Johnson County District court for lists of county voters who'd cast provisional ballots in the August primary and for lists of voters whose mail ballots had been rejected over alleged signature mismatches.

Johnson County Elections Commissioner Ronnie Metsker had tossed out hundreds of ballots, an act that cast a shadow over a GOP gubernatorial primary decided by about 300 votes statewide.

When Loud Light, a civic engagement nonprofit sought the records as a step toward alerting voters that they'd voted provisionally and urging them to check their registration and signatures so that it wouldn't happen

again, Metsker refused.

In its lawsuit, the ACLU of Kansas argued that people should know whether their vote counted or if people faced unnecessary barriers to voting. The closing of the list conflicted with the National Voter Registration Act that required states to maintain and make available for public inspection the names of registered voters and whether they voted in the two most recent federal presidential elections.

Metsker's stance also seemed to contradict the Secretary of State's own practices. That office discloses an individual voter's history online, including whether a voter cast a provisional ballot.

These Dodge City and Johnson County cases span the voting continuum, one involving a majority of less-well-off nonwhites and the other a diversifying but clearly wealthier and whiter population.

An anti-democratic current swirls between these two cases. A democracy must include everyone, or it's not a democracy.

The Voter Fraud Myth

The most diverse voting bloc of Americans ever elected Barack Obama as its president in 2008. In fact, those voters represented a new American voting majority made up of women, people of color and young people. (It's worth noting that Obama failed to win a single category of white voters.)

After his reelection, no fewer than 17 states launched attacks on voter access.

Proponents of these measures

began talking about voting as a privilege rather than as a right. They began purging voting rolls and demanding burdensome identification requirements for registration all the way up to "documentary proof of citizenship."

They began closing precincts in minority areas, shortening early voting periods and scrutinizing the signatures of individual voters as a means of disqualification. Then Kansas Secretary of State – and current attorney general – Kris Kobach, expanded and utilized the Interstate Crosscheck Program, a voter identification system that wrongfully accused people of illegally voting in multiple states more than 90% of the time, while recklessly exposing the private information of thousands of voters.

And, in a tone-deaf move, election officials set up one Wyandotte County polling place at a police station.

Today, Kansans vote provisionally – casting ballots in situations where it's unclear their votes will be counted – at one of the highest rates in the nation.

In fact, the ability to vote in Kansas depends largely on the county in which one resides.

There's a patchwork of electoral provisions. Some counties provide the maximum number of days of early voting, others just the minimum. Some counties offer more voting sites, and others, one large one. Some counties make sure disabled voters have access while others remain lax on that front.

The paradox here is that 66 of the 77 of election officials polled for an ACLU of

Kansas report in 2018, *All Democracy is Local: The Impact of County Election Officials on Citizen Participation in Kansas Elections*, said voter fraud, “was not a problem at all.”

Why Wyandotte?

What does seem to be worrisome for the anti-democracy crowd are areas where Black and brown voters either predominate or have significant influence.

In most of our state’s 105 counties, residents choose their election officials, but in the four largest counties, the secretary of state appoints the local election official, leaving decisions to raise or lower barriers to voting to political whim.

Wyandotte County, Quindaro’s home county, has one of the state’s youngest and most diverse populations, according to the ACLU of Kansas which has put out reports on voting (2018) and on elections (2023). The average age is 33. People of color make up 60% of the population.

The county’s number of registered voters is similar to Shawnee and Douglas counties’, but it underperformed relative to those counties by double digits, the report said. Wyandotte County also has about half the number of polling sites as Douglas County, which has a few thousand fewer registered voters.

A coincidence? Maybe.

But then, what’s the explanation for the redistricting attack on Wyandotte County and by extension, on Luther Smith and Quindaro?

A lawsuit brought by the ACLU of

Kansas and other entities argued that the gerrymandered map for Wyandotte cracked the most racially diverse county in Kansas in half in an attempt to dilute the voices of minority voters. A lower court agreed.

“This map is the product of a rushed legislative process that ignored the expressed concerns of hundreds of Kansans who spoke out at town halls and during hearings,” said Sharon Brett, legal director of the ACLU of Kansas. “It is a brazen attempt to drown the political voices of Black, urban voters in a sea of white, rural voters for partisan gain.”

Brett said the maps not only would cause irreparable harm to minority voters, but the rushed, irregular process raised questions regarding the map’s partisan and discriminatory aims.

The state Supreme Court, however, reversed the lower court ruling. Apparently, racial gerrymandering is lawful in Kansas.

The economic situation in Quindaro is as explicit as the GOP’s undermining of the voting rights of Black residents in Wyandotte County, and another example of the tyranny of the majority.

Economic development professionals have said that not only has there been no investment in the area, but that the lack of investment was purposeful and intentional.

That dereliction has deepened the sense of isolation there. A once-bustling business district withered. Residents forced out by highway construction — a highway they couldn’t stop because they simply didn’t have the standing

white communities had — left behind lots that are now overgrown.

As the number of residents and businesses decline, a community loses the ability to defend itself or oppose powerful corporate and government interests. No residents. No businesses. No voting power. No power to even affirm its existence.

Only an obscure state mineral rights law saved the area from burial beneath a landfill in the 1980s. The developer eventually abandoned the project.

These areas become food deserts as grocery stores close. Pollution from the interstate fouls the air and leads to greater incidents of asthma and other respiratory illnesses. It's a death spiral.

Consider what it would take to undo the decades of unjust policies that harmed Quindaro. The flight of homeowners and the crumbling tax base. Fewer businesses and services. No new development to shore up the values of the remaining homes.

This is what anti-democracy looks like, the predictable upshot of policies that not only gerrymander voting districts but also strangle opportunity. Communities that aren't allowed to share in the collective wealth, wither. That Quindaro still exists at all is a

Consider what it
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modern miracle.

We know how to counter oppression. Voters have continually shown that, absent arbitrary obstacles, they will participate.

We need only take our appeals directly to county elected officials, who can set parameters on voting by taking steps like:

- Offering the full 20 days of in-person early voting permitted by state statute.
- Offering at least one weekend of in-person early voting.
- Offering after-hours opportunities for in-person early voting.
- Expanding in-person early voting to multiple locations.
- Increasing the number of polling locations in a jurisdiction so that the average number of voters per site is equal to or less than the current state average of 1,609.
- Ensuring that polling locations are evenly distributed across the jurisdiction and in locations that are safe and welcoming for all voters.
- Publicizing the availability of curbside voting for voters with disabilities, to include signage and call button systems.
- Beginning or expanding outreach efforts to groups that are under-represented in the electorate, especially younger Kansans, Black Kansans and Hispanic Kansans.
- Prioritizing the identification of strategies for reducing the number of provisional ballots cast and

rejected, and converting those provisional ballots to “regular” ballots.

High voter participation reflects a healthy democracy. We should measure the success of a given county election official by that standard, not by how many barriers can be placed in front of voters on or before Election Day.

In the original Quindaro, everyone belonged. Everyone mattered.

Voting is Belonging

Democracy is more than voting. At its essence, it is about belonging, it is about everyone mattering, it is about drawing people in, rather than casting people out.

That’s precisely the opposite of what Smith saw after the misuse of the redistricting process in Wyandotte County. The lines the extremists drew sliced apart the Argentine community along an east-west line that roughly follows Interstate 70. Quindaro ended up slightly north of the split.

Smith wanted to see those new maps. He used to work for the Corps of Engineers. He wanted to see what the legislature had done and why they did it. But then he realized why they did what they did.

Politics and politicians have really changed, he said. It almost seems like they want to kill the people’s votes. Mapmakers could have moved a portion of southern Johnson County into another voting district. A virtual out-patient procedure.

But they opted for major surgery to undermine Black voting power.

“We have to vote.
Every single time.”

Much of Smith’s life has revolved around civic engagement. He volunteered at the polls for 10 years and loved it. Why?

Because beneath the debates over ballot measures, deeper than the disagreements over bond issues, beyond the policy differences, he saw a cozy community mosaic. He saw people with sometimes stark differences managing community, county, state and national issues together.

“It was really nice,” Smith said. “I enjoy people, and I’d see people I used to work with, people I’d known for years. It was just a nice thing to do. It was a patriotic thing to do.”

He said he always tried to make sure his family got out and voted, and that he’d even stopped strangers on the street and encouraged them to vote. He said one of the highlights of his life was also a highlight in his mother’s life.

“My mother was 100 years old, and she went and voted until the end,” he said. “She was so glad to see the first Black president get elected. She said, ‘I thought I’d never see the day.’”

But he’s seen worse, namely the violence in the 1960s aimed at peaceful people petitioning for the right to vote in the South.

“That was terrible,” Smith said. “I wouldn’t do that to an animal. What kind of people are we? Why do we do that to each other?”


This is why voting remains so important, he said.

“We have to vote. Every single time.”

Quindaro’s founders would have seen Smith’s volunteering at the polls as the embodiment of their dreams for their multiracial town, state and nation.

Voting remains one of the few things we do together where our social status or economic station may determine the convenience of casting a ballot but has no bearing on the power of the vote itself. One person, one vote. A wealthy white man’s vote counts the same as a working-class Black woman’s vote.

We live together, we vote together, we govern together.



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QUINDARO'S QUEENS: KANSAS & WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Charise Alexander didn't realize this at the time, but the protective home she grew up in powerfully shaped the life she owns today.

"I came up with a lot of educated Black women," Alexander said.

Blackness swirled in her home. When the bookshelves beckoned, James Baldwin, Langston Hughes and others greeted her there with "Blues for Mr. Charlie" and "Jump Back Honey: the Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar." Everything had to be Black focused in her great-aunt's home because to her, segregation had meant you couldn't go anywhere else. Black was all she once had access to, so she endeavored to make it shine.

The women around her had a towering Black dignity, ensuring that the cultural Blackness in their lives held a deeply polished gleam where they saw themselves and their community.

Politeness dominated. If her aunt sat on the porch as neighbors passed by, they said "Hi Miss Washington," or "Hi, Miss Louise."

There was just that respect, she said. You were going to be proper in everything you did.

Her aunt drilled her on etiquette and properly setting a table for an eight-course meal, as well as the importance of supporting Black institutions.

"I remember her saying, 'Everyone thinks the white man's ice was colder,'" Alexander said of her aunt, who entrusted her money to the Black-owned Douglass State Bank for her

entire adult life.

Her home stood not far from the John Brown statue that once guarded the gate of Western University, where her great aunt went to school, creating the presumption that one day she too would go to college.

"I was raised by a woman two generations older than me," Alexander said. "I grew up in a house where you talked about going to college. They would tell me about Western University. It was just kind of what you did."

And she did.

She ended up at a historically Black university. She became a Florida A&M Rattler and minored in African American Studies. Her major was mathematics, in preparation for a career in actuarial science.

"I really hadn't thought about it until now," she said. "A big sense of my Blackness, going to an HBCU and becoming an African studies minor. I would attribute all of that to the home I grew up in and women who raised me."

Alexander's experiences, and her great aunt's devotion to her and to the Quindaro community are apt, given women's roles in the settlement of the township. The woman for whom Abelard Guthrie named the settlement of Quindaro – Nancy Quindaro Brown Guthrie – believed in liberty, especially her own.

She protested as the government declared her a citizen or absentee

Wyandot. The 1867 Wyandot tribal rolls show she wanted to retain her tribal status for herself and for her children.

She and other women figured prominently in early Quindaro, and in early Kansas, but the struggle for gender equality has continued.

Right up to this year.

Kansas Gov. Laura Kelly, for example, likely dried up a couple of her veto pens striking down extremist incursions on bodily autonomy during the 2023 legislative session.

According to an ABC News report, Kelly vetoed a measure that would have sent up to \$10 million a year in new state income tax credits to donors to the more than 50 centers across the state providing counseling, classes, clothing and more to pregnant women and new parents to discourage abortions.

She also vetoed a proposal requiring medical personnel to take the same steps in saving a newborn's life as a "reasonably diligent and conscientious" provider would with other live births. Had it become law, it would have applied to any "complete expulsion or extraction" of a fetus including labor and delivery abortions during which a doctor induces labor.

Extremists drove these measures despite a resounding, statewide defeat the previous summer affirming abortion rights.

These attacks on bodily autonomy and by extension, gender equality, have their roots in 1991's Summer of Mercy campaign that brought thousands of abortion foes to Kansas to surround an

abortion clinic, block entrances, and pray in front of the building. Police arrested thousands of protestors, who quickly made bail and returned to the protest.

Counter-protestors argued that certain rights – bodily autonomy among them – should not fall subject to a vote. Such rights stand as inalienable and should be held above any trivial referendums.

Women also faced undue difficulty registering to vote following Kobach's move as secretary of state to set citizenship barriers for people registering to vote. Kobach's measure made it particularly difficult for women – married or divorced – to register because they needed a birth certificate to register and if there was not an exact name match, the registration effort would fail.

The specific hurdles were new, but not the struggle.

Before moving to Quindaro, newspaper editor Clarina Nichols, a Vermonter and abolitionist, fought in the temperance and suffrage movements of the 19th century.

According to the Kansas Historical Society, the final version of the Wyandotte Constitution reflects Nichols' influence: women's rights in child custody, married women's property rights, and equality in matters pertaining to public schools.

"Kansas was a vital battleground for women's rights, and events here were important to the national movement,"

The specific hurdles were new, but not the struggle.

the society states. “Thus, when the Kansas campaign for equal suffrage was launched in 1867, Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone, Olympia Brown and Elizabeth Cady Stanton joined Clarina Nichols in a valiant but futile effort.”

Finally, in 1912, Kansas women prevailed in amending the state constitution to earn the right to vote.

A portion of that progress was initiated by the Moneka Women’s Rights Association, whom Nichols represented at the constitutional convention.

Women from the town of Moneka in the Kansas Territory fought for equal rights. Abolitionists and idealists founded the town, whose name means, “morning star.” The women elected an organizational president and drafted a constitution, a full slate of officers as well as a preamble and seven constitutional articles.

Susanna M. Salter found fame not just as a Kansas original but an American trailblazer. In 1877, she was elected mayor of Argonia, the first woman to serve as the mayor of a U.S. town and one of the first women to serve in any elective office in the nation.

Salter was a member of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union and had gotten under the skin of the local “wets,” a group that was all men. They drew up a slate of local candidates with Salter’s name at the top, unbeknownst to her. They assumed that while women might vote for her, no man would cast his ballot for a woman, and she would be publicly humiliated. The cruel prank backfired.

She assumed the office and by all accounts conducted city business fairly and without rancor. Newspaper reporters from as far away as New York did take notice, traveling to Argonia to record the historic first and gather reactions. She served her term and did not seek re-election.

Few women in the nation have had the culture-warrior status of Carry A. Nation, a jailhouse evangelist and temperance advocate tossed out of several church denominations for her work with the downtrodden and destitute.

According to the Historical Society, “Justice, love and benevolence were not things to be talked about on Sunday and forgotten the rest of the week. At her upscale hotel (in Medicine Lodge), she fed, clothed, and lodged the downtrodden and destitute – both white folks and Black – in some cases for years at a time.”

But while Nation was an irritant to the pious Christians in Barber County, it was the temperance movement where she made her mark.

One night in June 1900, she entered an unlicensed bar in Kiowa and began throwing bricks and stones at the whiskey bottles, glass mugs and the giant mirror behind the bar, eventually picking up billiard balls and cues to finish the job.

Then, she did the same across the street and across the nation. Authorities were flummoxed.

Nation extended the Kansas tradition of women taking strong stands.

Hattie McDaniel, born in Wichita in 1893 as the youngest of 13 children, did

that, often under withering criticism from her own people. McDaniel climbed to fame as the first Black person to win an Oscar for her role in “Gone With The Wind,” but her climb was fraught with discord and heartbreak.

McDaniel appeared in numerous films and enjoyed success during her career. She has two stars on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, one for her radio contributions and another for her work in film. In 1975, the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame inducted her posthumously.

Still, she wasn’t allowed into the whites-only theater for the film’s premiere in Atlanta (A young Martin Luther King sang in a children’s choir outside the venue.), and when she appeared at the ceremony to receive her Best Supporting Actress Oscar, she sat at a segregated table on the side of the room. When she died of breast cancer in 1952, her dying wish to be interred in the Hollywood Cemetery was denied because the cemetery was segregated.

Worse, criticism from Black civil rights organizations for her “mammy” character wounded her deeply.

McDaniel pushed back, arguing that these charges were based on class differences and a bias against domestics.

She’d famously say, “Why should I complain about making \$700 a week playing a maid? If I didn’t, I’d be making \$7 a week being one.”

Despite such criticism, she’d later win a huge civil rights victory as she battled a homeowners association that tried to oust her from her home because of her

race. Lawyer and fellow Kansan Loren Miller helped her prevail in the case.

Decades later, similar grit and determination would lead the Wichita Branch NAACP Youth Group to stage protests at a lunch counter in the downtown Dockum Drugstore, famous for not allowing Black patrons to sit at tables. Black visitors had to order from a back-alley window and ate outside standing up.

Though sit-ins would eventually come to define the Civil Rights Movement, in the early summer of 1958, the NAACP had not developed the tolerance for young people — teens in many cases — placing themselves in such jeopardy. In fact, the young people at the Wichita Branch had been ordered not to stage a sit-in.

Youth leaders Ronald Walters and Carole Parks Hahn (who died this year) decided to move ahead anyway.

Peggy Hatcher, the youngest or among the youngest to participate, showed up at the lunch counter one day that summer and sat down. Because she was so fair-skinned, the waitress didn’t realize that she was Black, and served her.

When other protesters showed up and sat with her, the waitress returned.

“Are you colored?” the waitress asked, to which Hatcher responded, “Yes.”

The waitress took her food and drink.

After about 18 days of protests, the manager relented, saying essentially, “Serve them. I’m losing too much money.”

It was the first successful student-led sit-in anywhere in the country.

Battles against change are never actually won. New generations of women and their allies must continue the fight.

The only photo of the protest, captured on the front of the Black newspaper *The Elightener*, features a tiny Arlene Ruffin, perched at the lunch counter, staring calmly into the camera. Chester Lewis, seizing on the victory, pressed the Rexall Drug chain to halt its discriminatory practices statewide, and the company agreed.

Different challenges awaited Xavia Hightower, a business owner who was told by a bank that she needed a husband to help her run her funeral homes in two cities; as well as Jo Brown, the first Black woman to lead the Wichita School Board and who guided the school district into the era of integration; and community activist Shukura Jamila, who fought police terror.

Our state has made strides regarding equality for women in line with its history from Quindaro, to Nichols, to McDaniel and beyond. The state has had a woman serve as the head of the state Senate. Three women have served as governor. A Black woman served as chancellor at KU.

Charise Alexander's aunt is now in her 90s. There's a pew named in her honor at Allen Chapel AME Church in Quindaro, though she now takes communion at home during once-a-month visits.

Alexander's great aunt's mother was born just a few years after slavery

ended and that woman's mother was an enslaved person who fled for Quindaro in a nearly straight line from Odessa, Missouri.

But battles against change are never actually won. New generations of women and their allies must continue the fight.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM

Keith Smith described the Quindaro of his 1970s youth as a kind of B-roll from HBO's iconic drama "The Sopranos." Smith isn't talking about organized crime or the mob, though Kansas City has a history with La Costa Nostra, but the placid images of a street-corner grocery, door ajar, children chasing one another and old men in sweaters and paperboy hats playing checkers and chess.

"That is what our community looked like in the 1970s," said Smith, a lawyer and a former Marine, "except all of the people outside the store looked like us."

He doesn't remember any crime or any tension with the police in the community, at least back then.

The white beat officer in his neighborhood carried Kansas City Chiefs football trading cards that he gave to the kids who got to him first.

"I remember running to the police to try to get a card," Smith said. "We would almost knock him over."

By the 1980s, however, the community had begun to slide. Businesses closed. People moved away. Crack cocaine surfaced, and any interface with the police was something to avoid. At times, he said he couldn't avoid the police. An officer pulled Smith over for what he called, "nonsense."

"If you saw a white cop (then), you were concerned," Smith said. "It would put fear in your heart just with them pulling up behind you on the road."

His uncle, Luther Smith, shared

similar memories but said police harassed Black motorists when they strayed beyond Quindaro's community boundaries. Police enforced the societal norms and boundaries by making sure Black people didn't venture into white communities.

American policing, particularly in Kansas, has a way of not just enforcing physical and social boundaries between communities, but also of punishing poverty. ACLU of Kansas campaigns to eliminate juvenile fines and fees, to enact bail reform and to legalize medical marijuana, light a pathway to a more just society and — with hope and determination — rebirth and renewal for communities terrorized by law enforcement.

Quindaro arose from a noble act of civil disobedience during a time when a government edict criminalized wide swaths of the citizenry who opted to follow their conscience. It demanded that any and every American had a duty to return any person fleeing slavery.

Abolitionists of that era called it the "Bloodhound bill," a reference to the

"If you saw a white cop (then), you were concerned. It would put fear in your heart just with them pulling up behind you on the road."

hounds used to hunt down people fleeing slavery.

Such resistance to unfair, unjust and unrelenting government edicts accompanies any and all efforts to defend our democracy. Today's issues of conscience in Kansas include two important criminal justice reform issues: eliminating bail in many if not most nonviolent cases and ending juvenile fines and fees.

Juvenile Fines and Fees

Kansas, with its rich history of civil disobedience in the name of freedom, still has a long way to go. It entered the Union as a free state in 1861, but a century and a half later people can lose their freedom because they're poor. This feature of Kansas criminal law falls disproportionately on Black and brown residents and harsher still on juveniles.

The state can assess a host of fees, including booking fees, lawyer fees, program fees, probation fees, diversion fees and ongoing drug testing that can cost \$50 per instance and can be administered several times a week.

The legal system inexplicably burdens youth. Inexplicable, because people too young to work don't have the means to pay these fines and fees, which inevitably fall on families already too economically stressed to absorb a \$300 or \$400 tab for a brush with the law. Those who cannot pay, serve time. And children who serve time are billed for the cost of being imprisoned.

Families receive bills from juvenile correction institutions. States bill families for transporting and/or drug testing. Serving time does not erase

the debt for these fines and fees. Sometimes, these fees extend beyond a young person's stint in a correctional facility, preventing them from moving on with their lives.

A youth charged with a low-level juvenile offense and who receives probation or community service can rack up hundreds or even thousands of dollars' worth of court fees that are simply beyond their means. All this does, as ACLU of Kansas Legal Director Sharon Brett says, is trap families in a cycle of debt, punishment and poverty.

Consider this case reported on by *The Wichita Beacon*:

NyKia Watkins said she paid over \$1,500 in court fines and restitution while incarcerated at the Juvenile Correctional Complex in Topeka. She was 15.

Both of her parents died while she was incarcerated. Still a minor, she was eligible to receive Social Security survivor's benefits.

The Kansas Department of Corrections took that money to pay for Watkins' incarceration.

Virtually every state dumps fines and fees on children, adding to the financial instability in homes, but every state – including Kansas – must find better rehabilitative alternatives.

In the same article, Dante Bristow, 22, said he paid a private company \$42 a week for his ankle monitor because the court deemed him a flight risk.

From the article: "The authorities felt like I was gonna run back to Ohio," he said. He lived in that state for about

Democracies should pull people in, but the system in Kansas and across the nation, seems obsessed with **casting people out.**

a year and a half but now lives in Wichita. “They sent Kansas sheriffs to get me. Flew me on a private jet that I had to pay for. It was scary — I was in shackles and everything.”

We are literally helping to finance juvenile justice in Kansas on the narrow shoulders and bird legs of kids.

As youths advocating for themselves have said, they don’t learn anything from paying a fine with money they don’t have.

Courts need to consider alternatives such as paying off debt through community service, diversion programs or other forms of restorative justice. Diversion programs should include mentorship, peer leadership and insight into the juvenile justice system.

Democracies should pull people in, but the system in Kansas and across the nation, seems obsessed with casting people out.

Bail Reform

America is adept at punishing poverty, and so is Kansas.

Right now, 5,000 to 6,000 people, many of whom haven’t been convicted of a crime, sit in county jails across Kansas simply because they don’t have enough money for bail.

While people languish in jail, they likely haven’t engaged a lawyer and the longer they remain jailed, the steeper the odds that they can prevail in court.

Pretrial confinement correlates with conviction.

People lose jobs while jailed. After losing a job, they lose their cars, their apartments and perhaps both. Mothers have lost custody of their children while jailed.

A person simply in the wrong place at the wrong time can experience these post-arrest repercussions and walk out of jail days or weeks later with their lives turned upside down.

After an arrest — wrongful or not — a person’s ability to leave jail and fight the charges typically depends on access to money. Theoretically, bail exists to ensure that people return to court to face the charges against them. But in most cases, a reminder text from the court would suffice.

Locked up without bail money, defendants face a litany of Hobson’s choices: remain in jail as the case lurches through the system; pay a nonrefundable fee to a for-profit bail bondsman; or worse, plead guilty to a crime they may not have committed to expedite a sentence because they have jobs and families to support.


Cash bail supercharges mass incarceration.

According to a report by the Vera Institute for Justice: Over the past three decades, the number of annual jail admissions doubled to 12 million, and the average length of stay increased from 14 days to 23.

Our wealth-based carceral system has mushroomed into a powerful industry that lobbies legislatures to tighten its corporate grip on the system and the unfortunate people who have no alternative but to depend on this for-profit business that preys on them.

Illinois became the first state to abolish cash bail and invest in alternatives to promote pretrial release and success. Kansas should be next.

Eliminating America's inclination to punish poverty and ending cash bail lines up perfectly with our Free State origins.



A FREE STATE?

In 2018, vandals defaced the statue of John Brown at the Quindaro ruins. Scalawags scrawled racial slurs on it and even drew a small Swastika on his forehead.

But it'll take more than graffiti to supplant Brown's legacy.

After the vandalism, the Kansas City Star editorial board wrote that the statue itself represented an act of defiance when dedicated back in 1911. At the time, according to The Star, Kansas City, Kansas, had elected a segregationist mayor.

Washer women — Black women who did laundry — had played a significant role in raising money for the tribute. The role of the washer women feels fitting. Brown fought for the least and for the lost. He met the fanaticism of the slavers with even greater zeal in opposing slavery.

Crime remains a huge political issue for many Americans, even though most of those Americans most concerned about it can count themselves among the absolute safest people on earth. It's really the same old song played in a slightly different key — crime as a proxy for race.

Consequently, "tough on crime" measures bubble up from safe areas but fall most harshly on the people who not only deal with the issue daily, but who are punished more severely, as well as living with its out-of-proportion presence in their communities.

Then and now, our society seems to have an insatiable thirst for keeping people in bondage.

A strange symmetry links the slave hunters who once lurked on the banks of the Missouri River and those who preside over the criminal justice system of today. The over-policing of Black communities, the bail bondsmen and the ankle monitoring companies that gorge themselves on misery and poverty.

We don't need Brown's terrible swift sword, but we do need a focused and purposeful resistance to the unfair, unjust and unrelenting criminal justice system and many of its adherents. We need his empathy for the suffering and the vulnerable. We need his resolve.

The continued expansion of our carceral state threatens our democracy.

Keith Smith said he traversed the community as a child, on foot and on his BMX bike. He walked to Quindaro Elementary. His babysitter, who also ran a nursery, was also close by. There was a park nearby as well, he said.

At the time, there was also a friendly police officer.

Maybe, he said, neighbors who were older had a different perception of the officer. Maybe as a teen and a young adult, police officers believed they had more to fear from him than they did when he was a child, smiling and jumping up and down for a Chiefs trading card.

Maybe Quindaro's future resides at least in part in its past. And not even its distant past.

The past he remembers had an intact business district where the Milk House, Pete's Barbershop and McCall's Gas

Station propped up the community and sewed it together. Stronger, more prosperous communities fare better in interactions with the police. The opposite of poverty, said author and activist Bryan Stevenson, is not wealth, but justice.

“Back then,” Smith said, “I felt there was a much better relationship between the community and the police.”

Vivisection: Federal and State Governments Send I-635 through Quindaro’s Heart

Smith has never known the Quindaro neighborhood without Interstate 635 barreling through its center.

Smith walked to school every day using a bridge that spanned the interstate highway. It was the same bridge he used to get to baseball practice, to Quindaro Park and to the wading pool.

Smith, who’ll turn 53 later this year, allowed however, that someone older might view the highway’s presence differently.

His 80-year-old Uncle Luther, currently the caretaker of the historic old Vernon School in Quindaro, does see things differently. His is a decades-long vantage point, from the soaring neighborhood his younger cousin saw only briefly, to the faltering neighborhood it has become.

They’ve both seen a slow unraveling. As the 1970s gave way to the 1980s, crack cocaine emerged with street gangs. Though an effort to establish a landfill in the area failed, Keith said people had used the community as a dump for years, dropping mattresses,

trash and remnants of old cars.

But it was Luther, with the benefit of years and years of historical context, who saw the highway literally dissect the community, who saw homes disappear and who watched the neighborhood stumble under the weight of the traffic now zooming over what used to be homes and lives.

“It just about killed us,” Luther said flatly.

Once upon a time, Quindaro offered a kind of highway to freedom. The escape route provided by the interstate system was for whites headed to the suburbs.

This came after decades of segregation.

Here, we can think of segregation as theft, something more than control. It’s not just, “You stay over there, and I’ll stay over here.” It was so much more.

Though everyone supposedly paid taxes and was due equal protection under the law, segregation reserved every social or political advantage for the white population. It also reserved special humiliations for Black people, limiting where you could live, what you could say, even whom you could love.

If you paid taxes but segregation wouldn’t allow you to enjoy the municipal swimming pool — as happened in Lawrence, Newton and other cities — that was robbery.

If you paid taxes but segregation limited where you could go to school — as happened in Wichita, Topeka and other cities — that was robbery.

If you paid taxes and segregation

limited where you could live — as happened across Kansas — that was robbery.

If you paid taxes but did not receive protection from the government for the violation of your rights, that was robbery.

Consider how Jim Crow nourished a government-sanctioned transfer of wealth through the development of suburbs, while explicitly excluding Black home buyers.

Reflect a moment on the staggering impact. Ever-increasing home equity fueled decades of wealth-building for white home buyers even as the wealth of Black families plunged because they were explicitly excluded by the government from participation in suburban home buying.

Today, Black households have about 10% of the wealth of white households.

Black taxes helped build modern, suburban schools that their children could not attend. They paid taxes to support police departments that harassed, intimidated and sometimes killed them with impunity. For Black people, the police officer was also the tax man, taxing you for traffic violations that power everything in the city, county and state from policing to the courts.

All of these things happened in Quindaro — and then, the federal government rammed Interstate 635 right down the center of it, uprooting and bulldozing community dreams of an eventual rebound.

'Open Roads' and Closed Dreams

Highways connected the sleepy suburbs to urban centers and the

Interstate Highway system connected those urban centers. The creation of the Interstate Highway system launched the open-road era of travel and freedom for some Americans.

But those same highways also disconnected Black communities, and in many cases, destroyed them, in yet another example of Black plunder financing an American dream that explicitly excluded them. In Wichita, I-135 ran right through Black neighborhoods, even slicing through Emerson McAdams Park.

It proved worse for Quindaro.

One of Kansas' favorite sons, President Dwight Eisenhower, is credited with the development of the interstate highway system, initially under the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1952. Subsequent legislation—and tens of billions in spending— would give the U.S. the system it has today, just shy of 50,000 miles of divided highways.

It literally paved the way for increased car travel and also contained a national-defense component, providing routes for the quick evacuation of a city in the event of a nuclear attack.

It ushered in a new era of American automobiling and fused the romance of the open road with the love of the automobile. And televisions, selling at a frenzied pace, delivered the message. At the end of each of actress and singer Dinah Shore's variety shows in the 1950s, she would launch into the jingle, "See the USA in your Chevrolet." Unsurprisingly, Ford sponsored Tennessee Ernie Ford. Viewers of the Ed Sullivan and Jackie Gleason shows saw ads from Mercury and Buick, respectively. Drivers fed

their wanderlust with Interstate car trips across vast regions of the country, now getting their kicks on Interstate 40, because Route 66, among other highways, had been bypassed.

But the open road meant something different for Black motorists and Black communities.

For some, it meant drivers and their passengers could stay on the highway and avoid the terrifying fiefdoms and kleptocracies of white, small-town police departments, but it might also mean eating and sleeping in your car because so much of the country remained racially hostile and hotels and motels could deny you lodging.

Thus, the popularity of the Green Book.

The Negro Motorist Green Book covered 1937, 1945, 1956, and 1961. Published by Victor H. Green and Co., it listed places Black travelers could find friendly restaurants, fuel stops and hotel accommodations.

A *Washington Post* columnist wrote about the dire need for the Green Books for African Americans driving long distances in unairconditioned cars in the harsh climes of the South. There was a huge demand for the book among salesmen and conventioners.

The reason?

“So many Black travelers were just not

making it to their destinations,” *Post* columnist Courtland Milloy wrote in 1987.

But it wasn’t solely in Dixie.

There was widespread *de jure* and *de facto* segregation, and without a Green Book, the hostility had a jack-in-the-box quality. You couldn’t immediately know who might serve you and who might humiliate you.

There were several Kansas listings.

After America passed the 1964 Public Accommodations law, trailblazing Black journalist Sam Adams, then reporting for The St. Petersburg Times and later a journalism professor at KU, drove through the Confederate South to see if the passage of the law would trump decades of Southern custom and culture.

But nothing compared to the carnage that building an interstate highway system would leave behind.

Urban Renewal Equals ‘Negro Removal’

For poor, Black communities nationwide such as Quindaro, the Interstate system carved not just fast and safe ways to travel, it laid waste to Black businesses and Black neighborhoods. Some municipalities made certain the new highways avoided wealthy white areas and

There was widespread *de jure* and *de facto* segregation, and without a Green Book, the hostility had a jack-in-the-box quality. You couldn’t immediately know who might serve you and who might humiliate you.

ripped through poor Black areas under the guise of “urban renewal.”

The so-called clearance of “the slums” was a ploy. The destruction of Black communities wasn’t a bug in the measure, but often a feature.

Coincidentally, that highway plan began rolling out at nearly the same time that some judges around the nation began striking down “traditional tools of racial segregation.”

According to a Washington Post article, courts were outlawing the use of racial zoning to separate Black communities and white communities. So, with highway development on the horizon, some cities intentionally planned for highways to run on top of old, formal boundary lines used during racial zoning. Sometimes, white communities insisted that highway builders construct barriers that would halt any encroachment from Black communities.

Much of this happened to Quindaro, residents said.

“It destroyed homes; other people moved away. Businesses disappeared. The community was never the same,” Luther Smith said.

It happened that way in Wichita. In St. Louis. In Minneapolis. In Atlanta. And beyond.

Across the country, people put up a fight and, in some cases, even delayed the construction of the highways but virtually all of them were built as planned. The tangle of highways now exists in every state, including Alaska, Hawaii and even Puerto Rico, although they’re not called “interstates” there.

‘Highways Should Connect’

All these years later, however, Biden administration has introduced an effort to address these injustices. As a part of the president’s infrastructure plan, the federal government has invited affected communities to apply for funding.

“If a road was built in such a way that it removed, destroyed or divided a community of color, then that’s something we’ve got to deal with,” said Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg during an appearance on CBS’ “60 Minutes.” “If federal dollars were used to divide a neighborhood or city, federal dollars should be used to reconnect it. Now, that doesn’t always mean the highway has to go completely. Maybe you get a bridge over it or around it or introduce transit with different options. But the point is: Transportation should always connect, never divide.”

But divide they did, leaving deep, psychological scars on neighborhoods that lost homes, churches, and schools, said Deborah Archer, a former professor at the New York University School of Law and national board president of the American Civil Liberties Union.

Archer has written for the Iowa Law Review about how transportation policy affected the development of Black communities and that the president will face serious hurdles in trying to address these monuments to inequality.

“What is not clear is whether and how that money will be distributed in a way that will address the racial inequalities that are built into our transportation system and our


infrastructure,” she said in a radio interview.” I think it’s also important for us to think about how we will shift culture within the relevant agencies so that white middle class and affluent neighborhoods will not continue to be favored at the expense of communities of color, producing lopsided and skewed patterns of infrastructure development.”

Could this happen again? Certainly. The vulnerability of the people in the communities in the path of the interstate highway system wasn’t coincidental. Those routes were chosen in large part for the inability of the people being run over to stop the projects.

Whether we call it systemic inequality, or a cultural shift or skewed patterns of development, it’s still theft, and it will remain a theft until the account is balanced.

Balancing that account, as the transportation secretary suggests or as the folks with deep historical and familial ties say, remains a journey worth taking, both Smiths from the Quindaro neighborhood said.

Said Keith: “The way they preserve Bunker Hill and Gettysburg and other places, I think Quindaro should be held in the same esteem. It was an important stop on the Underground Railroad where people found not just safe harbor, but it was a community that nurtured the ambitions of men and women who’ve gone on to do great things.”



Whether we call it systemic inequality, or a cultural shift or skewed patterns of development, it’s still theft, and it will remain a theft until the account is balanced.

HEALTH INEQUITY

Dawn Rattan remembers growing up in Quindaro during an era when parents could send little kids to the corner gas station to buy cigarettes.

“It was another driver for me,” said Rattan, who grew up near what used to be the gateway to Western University. “You know, my parents smoked and eventually, I was like, ‘I’m not going to buy you cigarettes anymore.’”

Black America’s most common ailments presented starkly in her family. Her parents had high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, cancer, Alzheimer’s.

“That actually inspired me to go into fitness,” said Rattan, who in addition to running a fitness business, maintains a ubiquitous presence in Kansas City media coverage from appearances in commercials to her presence on the Johnson County Community College board of trustees.

There was no grocery store within blocks of where she grew up. The family had to travel miles to get to a well-stocked Hy-Vee or Price Chopper.

Quindaro had what most other predominantly Black, urban areas had – lots of restaurants that served high-fat food.

“There was a KFC,” she said. “There was a Chinese food place. No healthy restaurants. There definitely was no gym close by that I could think of. A lot of people were overweight. There was a lot of that. Not a lot of resources around.”

This was not always so.

In line with its multiracial, democratic founding, Quindaro boasted not just the first Black hospital west of the Mississippi River, but also the region’s first modern hospital that welcomed all patients regardless of their race.

Dr. Solomon H. Thompson, helped establish Frederick Douglass Hospital and served as its head until his retirement in 1946. Thompson earned his medical degree from Howard University Medical School and after an internship in surgery at Freedman’s Hospital in Washington, D.C., he moved to Kansas City, Kansas.

During the Great Depression, the hospital saw a steep drop in patients, staff and income, but funding from the greater Kansas City community and from the federal government kept the operation afloat. In 1945, Douglass actually renovated its three-story building, expanding accommodations to 50 beds and adding a blood bank, a lab and an obstetrics unit.

But by 1954, KC’s white hospitals began to desegregate. Douglass closed its doors in 1977. Not long after, the building was razed and its records lost.

Health here in Kansas isn’t just about who you are racially, but also, to borrow a real estate axiom, it’s “location, location, location.” Where you live in Kansas can very much determine how long you live and can shape health outcomes more profoundly than genetics or health care.

Life Expectancy, WyCo vs. JoCo

Average life expectancy in one zip code

in Wyandotte County, where which Quindaro is located, is the lowest in the state at 62.5 years. The people there, on average, barely live long enough to begin collecting the Social Security benefit they earned over their working lives.

Median household income in Wyandotte County is \$12,500. More than half of the people there live below the poverty line. Just 41% have no more than a high school diploma. The unemployment rate there is a whopping 25.5%.

Compare those numbers with Johnson County just to the south, where life expectancy is the highest in the state — 27 years higher than the lowest life expectancy.

The median household income in Johnson County is \$96,600. Nearly 70% of residents have a bachelor's or professional degree and only 6% of people there live below the poverty line. The unemployment rate there is a mere 6.6%.

Similar maps in Wichita, Topeka, and their respective counties (Sedgwick and Shawnee) reveal the same pattern, linking decades of explicitly racist policy with indefensible health and economic outcomes.

These figures, as unsettling as they are, should shock no one. They represent the predictable result of decades and decades of explicit government policy and intentional economic exclusion and exploitation.

Between 1935 and 1940, the Home Owner's Loan Corp. created neighborhood "risk assessment" maps, with local appraisers and real

estate developers, assigning grades to neighborhoods. The grades indicated where it was safe to insure mortgages and where such efforts proved risky.

An "A" rating meant minimal risks for lenders, and a "D" meant hazardous. A Grade "D" area was considered by the agency to be "infiltrated" with "undesirable" populations such as Jewish, Asian, Mexican and Black families.

The process came to be called redlining.

Overlay old maps detailing redlined neighborhoods and you will find they are nearly indistinguishable from modern maps detailing census tracts with low life expectancy rates.

Our society is beginning to understand that racial inequality was a design feature of our society, not a quirk and it has led to serious, sometimes deadly disparities in life expectancy in some communities. We need to recognize that improving outcomes in these areas will take decades, if not generations.

According to estimates from the U.S. Department of Transportation, the government displaced more than 475,000 households and more than a million people nationwide because of federal highway construction. The lingering smog lowered property values. Communities lost parks and green space.

Hardly a major city with a significant Black population escaped the bulldozers, from New York to Miami to Chicago to Minneapolis to Pittsburgh to Oakland and to Kansas City and Wichita and elsewhere in Kansas. The projects also accelerated white flight, deepening housing segregation

patterns, as well as leaving in their wake profound and lasting health impacts.

Black residents living closest to the interstate highways typically bore the brunt of traffic-related air pollution, which has been linked to higher rates of asthma and impaired lung function. Black children and Hispanic children yet today have higher indices of these issues.

Good Health Means Good Choices

Good health begins with good choices. The same is true for our democracy. Its health must begin with intention and purpose.

If you follow Rattan on her social media platforms, you see a relentlessly driven person. In an online document about her path to her professional life, she wrote about the role of education in her life.

“I studied hard in school to earn a full scholarship to college to get a degree in chemical engineering,” she wrote. “This changed my life and the lives of my family. I’ve seen firsthand how a college education can positively impact lives and future generations.”

She is, she said, committed to excellence.

“I’m humbled to make history as the first Black Trustee in the history of JCCC!” she wrote in a statement about that victory. “This is the cultural center of our county and I intend to honor it and make it the best it can be.”

Kansans too should make intentional and purposeful decisions about their state’s civic health in general and about Quindaro’s health.

In the same way that people do not change their health and habits overnight, we cannot quickly change Quindaro’s health and habits. We should begin with the end in mind — what kind of strides would we like at set intervals and at the end of our journey? What’s the plan for the community? Will we build a walkable community there, one built for people rather than for cars?

Our solutions must accommodate people, not abandon them.

Prof. Alexander said when the nation passed Social Security, for example, it left out farmers and agriculture workers.

“At the time, most white Americans believed the only farmers and agricultural workers were Black,” Alexander said, “and white Americans rejected the idea of giving Black people free money.”

It took 30 years, he said, for the nation to alter that policy to include farmers and agriculture workers.

Will there be healthy grocery and restaurant food? Will there be a YMCA or some sort of health club? How will we manage the pollution from the traffic running through the center of the community? Will there be a health clinic with dental services? Safe places for children to play?

And lastly, how will the community develop leadership for the present and for the future? Communities with strong leadership tend to have better health outcomes because they are better positioned to advocate for what they need. How will the community transfer its powerful history to future

generations?

That last point is one Rattan has considered intently.

She said she wasn't aware of Quindaro's illustrious history until she was an adult. So, much of her image of her childhood neighborhood stood as something to shun or hide.

So much negativity surrounded her neighborhood that it fueled her drive for success: She was going to make healthy decisions for herself. She was going to be successful at whatever she did. Her future was going to shine.

She wants that now for Quindaro, which needs a healthy sense of self before it can get healthy again.

"There was a time when I was ashamed of where I came from," she said. "I didn't know about the history there. But there's so much history there to be proud of. We've got to make sure our kids know about this history and that all kids know about Quindaro's contributions."



QUINDARO'S FUTURE: THE PAST IS PROLOGUE

Ideas for reviving the Quindaro neighborhood and its historic ruins abound among Black Kansas City Kansans.

They say Quindaro deserves a museum and interpretive center. Replicas of its buildings – or at minimum, some building facades – should be built at the site. The area damaged by decades of intentional disinvestment should receive the investment stolen from it for much if not all its existence. On this much, most everyone agrees.

But venture there, and you'll see the flip side of our free state narrative, the countervailing image of our brand of democracy, the depths of the below that helps define the heights of the above. And it becomes clear that we can't move forward without looking back. Therein lies a chore. Sadly, looking back presents so many perils to so many people in Kansas and America.

White Americans have fashioned images of modern life here not from the "majestic ideals" related to our founding, but from "grave hypocrisy," said 1619 Project founder Nikole Hannah-Jones in the book. She then quotes historian David Blight: "Our nation's glorious remembrance is all but overwhelmed by an even more glorious forgetting."

Hannah Jones then reminded readers that Black people have had to bear the brunt of the forgetting to maintain some semblance of order. The people being asked to stay quiet have the most to gain from a proper framing of

our history. The people with the most to lose from that framing continue to purposefully misunderstand. Their continued elevated status depends on it.

Some white Americans have played out these historical discussions to their logical conclusion and determined that the nation cannot embrace such discussions without also having to embrace a new social order and revamped racial caste system. They cannot engage in these discussions and expect to maintain a superior status in the culture.

As Hannah-Jones points out in the book, what liberates one group need not imprison others.

"White Americans desire to be free of a past they don't want to remember, while Black Americans remain bound by a past they can never forget.

"We (African Americans)" are stark reminders of some of (America's) most damning truths."

That central truth?

That slavery should be presented "not as a blemish the founders grudgingly tolerated, not as a regrettable chapter of the distant past, but as a living, breathing pattern upon which all American social life is based."

This acknowledgement stands as the crucial precondition for any substantive progress. History is the language of civics, author and historian Taylor Branch has said. But here is where opponents of change marshal all their troops and all their efforts in

But the point is not that America and Kansas remain irredeemably racist. We argue the opposite, with the caveat that historical truth offers the only precondition under which real redemption is achievable.

resistance to the fundamental truth that anti-Blackness functioned as an organizing principle for this nation.

Hannah-Jones quotes Ohio State University History Professor Hasan Kwame Jeffries, who said America's preference for nostalgia over history has real, everyday consequences.

"Although we teach students that slavery happened, in some cases we minimize slavery's impact so much that we render its impact on people and on the nation inconsequential," Jeffries said. "This is profoundly troubling because it leaves Americans ill-equipped to understand racial inequality today and that in turn leads to intolerance, opposition to efforts to address racial injustice and the enacting of laws and policies detrimental to Black communities and to America writ large. Our narrow understanding of the institution prevents us from seeing this long legacy and leads policymakers to try to fix people instead of addressing the historically rooted causes of their problems."

When some white Americans shout about wanting their country back or about making the country great again, they're offering an interpretation of

American history as one that was interpersonal (not systemic) and racially neutral. This reflects their profound ignorance or denial about what happened.

In sum, we all suffer from the poor history we've been taught, and our lack of understanding leaves us ill-equipped to fairly judge efforts at expanding democracy.

Consider the Kansas Legislature's flirtations with banning historical racial discussions that might make white children uncomfortable; attacks on books and classes exploring the subject as "woke"; as well as national efforts to discredit the entire 1619 Project as an ahistorical attack on American innocence.

But the point of the 1619 Project and this report, which was inspired by the former, is not that America and Kansas remain irredeemably racist. We argue the opposite, with the caveat that historical truth offers the only precondition under which real redemption is achievable.

For example, state and federal investment in the Quindaro neighborhood and in the ruins becomes viable once most everyone understands the cruel and intentional divestment

that occurred there from the era of its founding through segregation, through the forcing of Interstate 635 through its heart, through attempts to turn it into a landfill, to 2022's efforts to undermine Black voting rights in Wyandotte County.

Maybe we can better understand the need to do kind things in areas where terrible things have been done.

Once we understand what happened to Quindaro, we also understand how we should respond. Pushing for a confrontation with our past becomes paramount. It sets the social and political path forward. We strengthen our democracy by addressing the existence of people who've been intentionally excluded from full participation.

Quindaro developed as a necessity to help enslaved people escape bondage in Missouri. It offered pathways to freedom and toward democracy. In fact, it still does. The era that birthed Quindaro, the 1850s, bears a striking resemblance to this current moment in American history.

Bitter, philosophical differences and a drift toward social and political conflict mark both eras.

Then and now, the nation wrestled with the incongruity between its stated moral values and its deeply immoral stand not just on race, but on democracy itself. Our future resides in our old beginnings.

Can we re-create the radically inclusive democracy marked by Quindaro's early and earnest example? In just this sort of milieu, a quintessentially American group of progressive social

architects — Eastern abolitionists, Black freedmen and freedwomen, and Wyandot Indians — brought forth a moment of egalitarian promise for perhaps the first and only time in our state's history.

That rich promise remains, if only if we decide to do more than pay lip service to it. We can rebuild that community and our state, and in the process, recommit ourselves to the aspirational democratic principles we so often claim but also fail to live up to. We can restore Quindaro, figuratively and literally, through its foundational identity. We also can use the highway that nearly destroyed it to revive it, and we can revitalize the area in concentric circles of development.

Ghost of Future's Past

Despite those difficulties and the currently neglected landscape, a fiery, almost defiant sentiment lingers in Quindaro. A deep reservoir of good and hope for the future runs underneath it and its proud history.

Residents host an annual community picnic. People occasionally appear in the neighborhood saying they are writing a book about the area or plan to film a documentary about this hidden gem. Politicians from both parties, on both sides of the state line, have toured the area and talked about its future.

The efforts there, however, remain scattered and vague and distracted. Resident and activist ideas for the area lack a unified theme.

There are concrete steps to take, but Quindaro's past could serve as a template for its rebirth, with a museum, interpretive center, a

Quindaro is poised for a renaissance. It could begin anew with its proud, historical past leading the way.

walking trail connecting Quindaro to Lawrence and other Underground Railroad sites.

Biden's Build Back Better infrastructure plan could help here as well.

Communities destroyed or separated by highways could receive Department of Transportation funds to help make them whole again.

Quindaro is poised for a renaissance. It could begin anew with its proud, historical past leading the way.

The Vernon School building in Quindaro received a grant that funded a new roof for the building Luther Smith manages.

Luther's younger cousin Keith, a lawyer, continues to dream about a new reality for Quindaro with close friends who understand the law, economics, entrepreneurship and more.

Alexander and Rattan, successful Black professionals with deep Quindaro roots, also hope to contribute to some sort of a Quindaro Rising project that establishes a museum and a residential and retail development for the area commensurate with its history as well as its promise.

They all want to see Quindaro and

Kansas become what they've both long claimed to be.

Triumph in Old Wounds

We misunderstand history if we view it as a recitation of facts, people, dates, and events — as something neutral. Though history deals almost exclusively with facts, history requires interpretation. History is really a study of power — and of the powerless.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot, the late Haitian-American anthropologist, described history as “the fruit of power,” adding that “the ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility. The ultimate challenge of power may be the exposition of its roots.”

View Quindaro through this prism, and stories of power surface from its both triumphant and tragic ruins.

There, from its natural, undeveloped heights overlooking the river, we see the power of freedom-seeking people shaping their destiny; the power of those who helped them, people committed to a more just society. We also see the power of people who drove a stake — in this case, an Interstate highway — through Quindaro's heart over the objections of residents rendered powerless via unjust systems.

It is in fact, the same water, coming round.

People trekked to Quindaro looking for freedom.

Indeed, history isn't just yesterday, it's also today, and as such, history wields great power.

That may be why so many people, from Virginia to Florida to the Kansas

Legislature, want to narrow the scope of history we share as a society, so that history isn't just yesterday and today, but also a tomorrow that they control. They want to define everyone's reality.

That's historical erasure, the language of the morally insecure.

Conversely, we want to contest those bids for control. History should empower, not impose.

We want to accomplish for Kansas what Hannah-Jones' 1619 Project has done for the nation in general, and for education in particular. She referenced Kansas and Kansans in her work, including opening with a poem from Langston Hughes, who lived in Lawrence and in Kansas City:

*I am the American Heartbreak—
The rock on which Freedom
Stubbed its toe –
The great mistake
That Jamestown made
Long ago.*

The 1619 Project referenced abolitionist John Brown of Osawatimie and "Bleeding Kansas" fame among a litany of other freedom fighters.

The project also referenced World War II's "Double V" campaign which began with a Wichita cafeteria worker writing a letter to the Pittsburgh Courier, a Black newspaper that circulated nationally, that if Black Americans were to fight for freedom abroad, they should fight for freedom here at home, as well.

Like Hannah-Jones, we surface some ugly truths over the objections of the morally and racially fragile.

But abolitionist Frederick Douglass wisely said, "If we are truly a great nation, the truth cannot destroy us."

Hannah-Jones said, "Facing the truth liberates us to build the society we wish to be."

We believe the past — specifically Quindaro's past — illuminates the way forward.

Black Kansas City Kansans love Quindaro and remain fiercely proud of its unrealized potential. This intense love for Quindaro's powerful past and unrequited future has led to an intense protectiveness of the area and birthed myriad ideas from a host of groups and individuals determined to see the area grow and prosper.

This is a positive development because, as historian John Henrik Clarke once famously said, "It is impossible to continue to oppress a consciously historical people. Once a people know who they are, they will always know what to do about their condition."

All the ingredients exist in Quindaro.

What isn't currently evident in the ruins or in the neighborhood, we still can see in the glaring absences. In the lack of investment, in the overgrown lots, in the decline and the lack of retail businesses and residential housing, in the lack of public investment we can see the history of the area. There can be no above, without a valley beneath.

So, filling the valleys and lowering the "above" remains something we must do for the preservation and expansion of our democracy.

As James Baldwin said, "There is scarcely any hope for the American

For the state to become whole, the state must make
Quindaro's founding ideas whole.
Our survival as a multiracial democracy depends on it.

dream because people who are denied participation in it, by their very presence, will wreck it.”

The disparities between the Quindaro area and say, Johnson County, defy description, but indicate that America reigns as the most unequal of the Western democracies. We incarcerate our own at alarming rates. We punish poverty. We actively and reflexively resist efforts to relax those disparities.

Despite the gauzy rhetoric about equality and freedom here in Kansas, inequality and anti-Blackness predate the state's formation. Inequality and anti-Blackness predate the formation of America on this continent too. But the nation has fought these propensities across the centuries, never quite succumbing to these darker forces, but never fully exorcizing them either.

That's likely because the thinking in society remains so bitter, so clannish, so tribal.

But the state's liberation remains tied to Quindaro's liberation, and vice versa.

Said Baldwin: “You cannot lynch me and keep me in ghettos without becoming something monstrous yourselves.”

So ... for the state to become whole, the state must make Quindaro's founding ideas whole.

Our survival as a multiracial

democracy depends on it.

Prof. Alexander shared a story about a chance meeting he'd had during his visit to the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture which at the time had only recently opened.

As he stood in the museum's lowest level, where the story it tells begins with the slavery's horrors, he noticed an elderly white man who seemed to be struggling to stand. They ended up seated on one of the benches and Alexander asked the man if he was ok.

The man nodded and said it was his second day there visiting from Mississippi.

“I really need to understand this history,” Alexander said the man told him.

Alexander said that sent his mind plunging.

“Race is central to our American project,” Alexander said. “Race is at the center of all of our watershed events.”

And here was this elderly man, struggling to move from exhibit to exhibit, peering at all the text at each.

“If only there were more people like this man,” Alexander said. “People willing to learn and understand. Maybe then, we'd be able to make some changes.”

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- *Dr. Shawn Leigh Alexander, the chair of the African and African American Studies Department at the University of Kansas*
- *Dawn Rattan, former Quindaro resident*
- *Keith Smith, Quindaro resident*
- *Luther Smith, Quindaro resident*

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