

The Educational Value of Quindaro Townsite in the 21st Century

There are few sites and structures from 19th-century Kansas City that remain as well known throughout the nation today as the townsite and ruins of Quindaro. Indeed, many elegant homes, massive warehouses, and other commercial buildings from the 1800s can still be found in Kansas City, but such structures are common in other places and they really don't distinguish the metropolitan area. With the exception of the site once occupied by the stockyards, there is arguably no place within the Kansas City area that is as unique, as well known, and as directly linked to early settlement here as the old town of Quindaro.

Just as the image of the Kansas City stockyards reminds us of a time when the country's expanding network of railways opened up new agricultural areas that sustained booming gateway cities, the Quindaro ruins symbolize a slightly earlier period when river towns were being carved out of the towering bluffs along the Missouri and groups of settlers were pouring into this region, intent on either establishing slavery in Kansas Territory or keeping the horrible institution out. As a Free State port on the Missouri, Quindaro stood as the first point of resistance in the battle to halt the western spread of slavery.

Today, the ruins at the site serve as a monument to racial harmony, to rationality, and to freedom. They have cultural and historical value for the descendants of native Americans who once owned and occupied the site, for African Americans whose ancestors once looked to Quindaro as a gateway to freedom, and for the descendants of Euro-Americans who saw the need to found a Free State port and fight slavery. In a sense then, the ruins and the surrounding overgrown townsite have great political value, not just as an important local historical site, but as a national monument. This hidden and neglected spot, hemmed in today by interstate highways, rail lines and pipe lines, is where 19th-century abolitionists decided to stand their ground.

The ruins, townsite, and surrounding Quindaro community also have tremendous educational value, not just for the majority of Kansas Citians who know little, if anything, about this nationally-significant settlement, but for people throughout the United States and the rest of the world who want to understand how the United

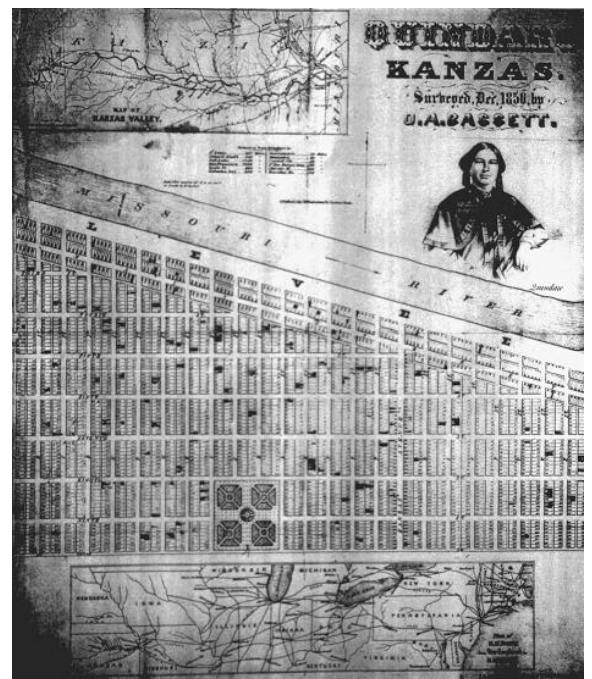
States ended slavery and occupied the American West in the 19th century.

First, and most obvious, Quindaro has significance as a place that can be visited, studied, and interpreted. Second, the institutions, communities and people that have emerged around and in the vicinity of Quindaro have much to say about the history of this region and of family life on the urban frontier. As an educational focus, they also tell the story of race relations and city growth, of the migration of peoples and the ebb and flow of opportunities in different places. And, third, the accounts and memoirs, photographs and newspapers, and perceptions and images of Quindaro that survive today in libraries and archives and in family albums and attic trunks constitute another educational focus that grows out of the establishment of the Free State port. All of these resources can and should be studied and linked, not just for the history they can reveal, but for the valuable lessons they hold about the ability of people to get along in the past.

Recent Educational Activities

During the 1990s, groups of students and faculty from area colleges and universities have visited the Quindaro ruins at the northern terminus of 27th Street in Kansas City, Kansas, with the

Plat of Quindaro, Kansas by O.A. Bassett, December, 1856. Illustration courtesy Kansas State Historical Society.





The Lane Trail from Topeka, Kansas, into Nebraska with connecting roads to the Missouri River towns.

hope of learning something about our cultural heritage—about the way a town was settled in the 1850s, about the way African Americans fled into Kansas Territory to escape slavery, and about the ways in which multi-ethnic communities developed after the Civil War. As all educators know, there is no substitute for experience in the field, on the very site where history took place. To stand in the center of the Quindaro ruins and imagine the bustle and industry that characterized this free port town in the 1850s is an experience that cannot be replaced by a classroom lecture or a “virtual visit” on the

computer. Many students have benefitted from getting to know Quindaro in recent years.

Park Design and Planning

Perhaps one of the most organized and structured educational projects that has focused on the Quindaro townsite was a design studio project carried out in fall, 1993. The Mayor’s Underground Railroad Advisory Commission, chaired by Marvin Robinson, together with the Quindaro Town Preservation Society, engaged two classes of graduate students from Kansas State University to create sets of Quindaro archeological/historical park design proposals for the citizens of Kansas City, Kansas to consider. The idea was to produce rough and preliminary visual or graphic depictions of the kinds of development that might be possible at the site.

Four months after they started their research, the students returned to Kansas City with 13 different proposals for a Quindaro Park. They presented their plans at a public meeting, sponsored by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and hosted by the Mayor’s Office. Residents of Kansas City, Kansas had an opportunity to view the various design proposals and tell the many politicians in attendance (as well as the students) exactly what they liked or didn’t like in each proposal. The meeting was much more than an ordinary public presentation and community commentary; it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for students to see how public opinion is formed and how community consensus is built.

The park proposals have enjoyed a long and controversial life since that initial public meeting. They were exhibited in the rotunda of the Kansas State Capitol. They have been displayed at numerous libraries, schools, community centers, and public spaces throughout the metropolitan area. They have been shown at many key events and activities scheduled during Black History month. And they have been presented in slide format to numerous civic and business groups throughout the Kansas City metropolitan area. This was clearly an educational activity that had as many benefits for the community as for the students.

Site Visits and Local History

The most common educational use of the site in recent years has been as a focus for tours that want to explore the character of Kansas City on the eve of the Civil War. Many groups, from elementary schools to universities and from local book clubs and businessmen’s groups to congressional staffs want to know more about Kansas City’s heritage and what makes us special. The Quindaro site is the best place to imagine and describe life near the confluence of the Kaw and the Missouri in the 1850s, for it’s here that one sees the contrast between a swift-flowing, wide river and the thickly wooded bluffs that towered above it and offered a tenuous but secure foothold for settlers wishing to disembark.

Many local classes have visited the Quindaro ruins in recent years. The normal procedure is for a teacher to bring a group of students to the northern terminus of 27th Street, where they are then led down the slopes, through the thick vegetation cover and on to the old center of the town. Side tours to the river banks, the old town cemetery atop the ridge, or up Happy Hollow to the ruins of the Quindaro brewery usually follow. Students walk away from the site with a far greater respect for life on the frontier and the plight of fugitive slaves than they’ll ever develop by watching a PBS special on television or reading a dull and uninspired history textbook.

Archeological and Historical Field Research

Archeological field research is probably the most obvious and promising educational use of the Quindaro site, but so far excavation and reconnaissance at the site have been limited to professional archeologists under contract. Student groups have not participated in, nor have they observed, the recent clearing and stabilization of ruins at the site.

The site does have tremendous potential for historical field research. During the fall semester, 1996, a class of students from the University of Kansas School of Architecture and Urban Design toured the site, paced off buildings and street intersections, examined extant foundations, cisterns and

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Quindaro—A Free-State River Town in the UGRR

On the eve of the Civil War, more than a dozen small towns hugged the western bank of the Missouri River, serving as potential gateways between the slave state of Missouri on the eastern banks of the river and the free territory of Kansas on the west. Quindaro stood out from the rest because of its connection to the slavery question. Unlike the others, it was created to serve as a port-of-entry for the abolitionist forces of Kansas, linking it to the fight against slavery. It thrived as a key point in the abolitionist trade and transport network only as long as the free-state status of Kansas was in question.

In its first year Quindaro boomed. The key to growth was the development of trade. Overland stage links were made immediately with Lawrence and other towns in the Kansas River valley and a free ferry ran across the river to Parkville, Missouri. Quindaro rivaled Leavenworth and Wyandot as the premier river town.

Quindaro was a typical frontier river port displaying all the bustle and boom of a town strategically positioned to control trade in the region. It was also part of the western branch of the underground railroad that emerged once the Kansas-Nebraska Act was passed. Prior to 1854, fugitive Missouri slaves had to flee north or east into Iowa or Illinois, and then on to Canada. After 1854, free-state settlers in Kansas opened new routes of escape for slaves.

The most important of these underground routes was the Lane Trail, which was opened in 1856 after the Missouri River was closed to free-state emigration. This overland trail ran north out of Topeka, Kansas, into Nebraska and Iowa and it provided a safe route for supplies and settlers into Kansas Territory and a passageway for fugitive Missouri slaves north through Kansas. John Brown, James Lane, and other abolitionists used this route to lead slaves to freedom.

According to one source, only one slave is said to have been caught at Quindaro while escaping to freedom. Those who passed through the town reportedly stayed in a nearby cabin before moving farther into Kansas Territory.

Once statehood was achieved and the Civil War was well underway, the number of contraband slaves fleeing their Missouri owners for freedom in Kansas increased dramatically. Many slaves entered Kansas under the protection of Union troops. An even greater number,

however, came on their own. Some traveled by land across the state border south of the Missouri River's great eastward bend. Many others, however, crossed the Missouri River. They even walked across the Missouri River when the ice was thick enough to support their weight.

Quindaro's economic fortunes began to change in 1858. The financial panic of 1857 drained some of the speculative capital away from the western states and the rising probability of free-statehood for Kansas removed Quindaro's political edge. After the Civil War, the buildings of Quindaro crumbled and were quickly covered over by the eroding river bluffs and the regrowth of the natural vegetation cover. The ruins of the abandoned settlement remained a landmark for the African-American community of Happy Hollow which emerged on the fringes of the abolitionist town. Today, the partially excavated Quindaro stands out not just as an unaltered example of an 1850s town, but as a legendary entry point for fugitive slaves and Civil War contrabands who made their way to Kansas and to freedom.

Quindaro's rapid demise, its isolated location, and its quick and almost complete burial under the eroding river bluffs that surround it have kept it out of the traditional and popular writings on the underground railroad. For most of the 20th century, the ruins have been known only by the residents of Happy Hollow and the surrounding African-American community. It was not until the 1980s that this important site, situated only a few miles from the center of a major metropolitan area, became known to a much wider population.

In 1984, the City of Kansas City, Kansas, issued a permit to Browning-Ferris Industries to build a landfill on the site of the ruins. A condition of the permit was the execution of a preliminary archeological excavation of the site. As digging on the site and in the local archives continued into the mid- and late-1980s, Quindaro suddenly became known to many people outside of Happy Hollow. The old town of Quindaro, with its artifacts and foundations preserved so well under the mud of the Missouri bluffs, was a true landmark that recalled the abolitionist spirit that gave rise to a free state in Kansas and that protected the western branch of the underground railroad.

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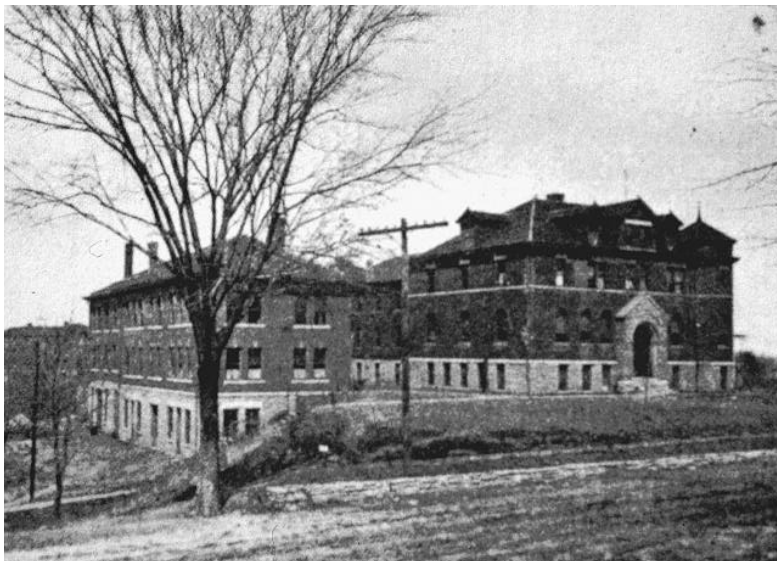
building walls, and used these observations to construct renderings of individual buildings, sketches of likely street scenes, and 3-dimensional bird's-eye views of what the town might have looked like in 1857 and what it could have evolved into by 1900. Contact with the ruins and with the site forced the students to reconstruct building patterns and arrangements from incomplete evidence, requiring a good understanding of how early river towns were laid out.

These kinds of field exercises that combine the study of history, the examination and recording of objects in the landscape, and the ability to use one's imagination to reconstruct something from incomplete historical evidence are especially valuable educational activities. They require just about every type of reasoning and communication skill that students will need in their careers.

Oral History

As in the tales of most other significant historical sites that have undergone a long period of neglect before they are recognized and restored, Quindaro's history exists to a large extent in oral tradition—in the form of knowledge that is passed from one generation to the next by word of mouth. Several scholarly articles have been written about the townsite's early history and there are numerous short pieces that have appeared in local newspapers retelling the Quindaro story on a regular basis, however, the day-to-day history of the town, its residents, their descendants, and the current Quindaro community has not been written. It exists mainly in the minds of Kansas City's older African-American residents who grew up near the old townsite, in their memories and in the stories they tell their friends, their children and grandchildren, and in the old photographs and clippings they have stored away in a long-forgotten shoebox or bureau drawer.

One of the buildings of Western (Freedmans) University overlooking Quindaro, 1920s. Photo courtesy Kansas State Historical Society.



These memories and mementos have great value for the community and, in recognition of this fact and of the national significance of Quindaro, more than a dozen faculty members from prominent black colleges and universities throughout the United States spent a part of the summer, 1996, interviewing Quindaro residents about their memories of the place and the stories and legends that their own parents and grandparents told them earlier in the century. This same group of college instructors was selected by the National Endowment for the Humanities to attend a two-month seminar held at the University of Kansas in June and July, 1996. Working under the sponsorship of the Hall Center for the Humanities, these scholars initiated what could become one of the most significant oral history projects ever carried out in this region. Several of the seminar's participants plan to return to Kansas City to continue their work and to add to the archive of Quindaro history that they've started to build.

Archival and Library Research

The dearth of published research and scholarly writing on Quindaro makes it an especially attractive and exciting focus for students and scholars who want to conduct library and archival research. Almost every class that has visited the site or carried out a history project related to the site has come into contact with the archeological reports and journal articles produced by Larry Schmits. These resulted from his archeological work at the site which stretches back more than a decade. A few other relevant secondary works have been published in regional journals such as the *Kansas Historical Quarterly* and there have been enough publicity pieces printed in local newspapers in recent years to fill a good-sized clipping file. Beyond these sources, the microfilmed issues of the *Chindowan*, Quindaro's mid-19th-century newspaper, and a few other letters and documents housed at the Kansas Collection at the University of Kansas, there is little Quindaro documentation that has been mined from local libraries, archives, and private collections.

During the spring, 1992, several architecture students from the University of Kansas and Kansas State University launched an initial sweep of local libraries and archives to locate documents related to the early history of Quindaro. After a couple of months of work, a number of published and unpublished sources that dealt with life at Quindaro in the 1850s were uncovered in several regional collections. Although these materials did not add substantially to the historical record, their existence did underscore the need to search some of the major collections of Western Americana at other places (Newberry Library, Chicago; Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; John Carter Brown



Aerial view of the partially excavated ruins in the center of Quindaro, 1987. Photo courtesy Larry J. Schmits.

Library, Providence, RI; Beneke Library, Yale University) and archives and museums that carry records of the 19th-century settlement companies and trans-Missouri shippers. In other words, the best way to augment our knowledge of Quindaro is to pursue local oral histories with great vigor and to systematically search the major repositories that contain important records and documents describing towns on the western frontier.

Computer Modeling

Faculty and students at the University of Kansas have devoted some time to computer modeling the townsite and the existing ruins. During the spring, 1994, Professor Brent Anderson of the School of Architecture and Urban Design at the University of Kansas started work on a 3-dimensional model of the town that would include the slopes and bluffs at the end of 27th Street, the striking local relief of the Happy Hollow area, and the broad, flat river terraces and banks north of the railbed. Professor Anderson's work was continued by a graduate student in the Architecture Program who, that same semester, added the central ruins to the model so that what can be seen of the old town of Quindaro could be inspected from different distances, angles and perspectives, without setting foot on the site.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the Quindaro site has great educational value. Here, students of all ages can learn about the physical barriers that the early settlers

faced and about the harsh environments that the indigenous peoples had mastered. At Quindaro, students learn about life, culture, and settlement on the frontier by examining the ruins and imagining what once stood on the site. The stone foundations become proof that people of different cultures and races were willing to travel across continents to help each other.

Quindaro tells us, in no uncertain terms, that settlement on the margins of the plains is fragile, that the cities we have built and the governments we have created are but tiny assemblages and events in the larger scene of humankind. And, more important, when students look at the city that has grown up around old Quindaro, they grasp the ongoing sequence of arrival, settlement, community formation, economic change, migration and rebirth that characterizes American society.

Suggested Readings

- Farley, Alan W. "Annals of Quindaro: A Kansas Ghost Town." *The Kansas Historical Quarterly*, 22 (1956), 305-320.
- Magnuson, Carl. "The Town of Quindaro: From Community Narrative to Public Debate." *Mid-America Folklore*, 2 (1990), 91-107.
- Schmits, Larry. "Quindaro: Kansas Territorial Free-State Port on the Missouri River." *The Missouri Archaeologist*, 49 (1988), 89-145.

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African Americans from Slavery to Contemporary Times

A combined public conference and NPS training (March 22-27, 1998) provided an overview of the African-American experience, starting with slavery and concluding with diverse African-American cultures now associated with national parks.

Sessions addressed slavery as socio-cultural, political, and economic expressions of world and regional conditions, as evidenced in local features including landscapes, family, and class relations. Presentations also covered resistance movements such as the underground railroad. Maroon and freedmen communities and emancipation, with its urban and rural aftermath, were considered in addition to current ethnographic research strategies, research findings, National Park Service models of park and African-American relations, planning, and interpretive challenges and responses.

For information, contact NPS Chief Ethnographer Miki Crespi.