

Kansas City Kansan, March 19, 1999
by Carmen Cardinal

Monument to the fallen and the free



Marvin Robinson and students at Quindaro Ruins
Courtesy Kansas City Kansan

Photograph Caption: Marvin Robinson talks about the history of the Quindaro Ruins with a group of Quindaro Elementary School fourth-graders... Students join their classmates in a moment of silence for slaves who died trying to reach the safety of Quindaro in the mid-1800s.

Transcriptions are presented without changes except to improve readability.

A new generation visits Quindaro Ruins

Children from Quindaro paused for a moment on Thursday to pay tribute to a group of slaves. The slaves were mostly women and young children who perished in August 1859, while trying to cross the Missouri River at the Quindaro Bend. The children, all fourth-graders from Quindaro Elementary School, stood on the banks of the Missouri River and heard a story about how slavers and border ruffians fired upon the escaping ferry, sinking it before it could reach the free state of Kansas and the township of Quindaro. The incident has been documented as historical.

"Are the people still down there?" one small child asked.

According to Marvin Robinson, facilitator of the Quindaro Ruins/Underground Railroad Exercise 1999, there has never been any effort to excavate the site of the ferry. The river at that bend is treacherous and the currents are strong. Anyone who survived the sinking of the vessel would likely have drowned.

Robinson considers the area "sacred" because of the huge sacrifices that people who traveled through there made. Ironically, the Quindaro site was chosen by the abolitionists because it was dangerous and hostile. It discouraged slavers from Missouri from following runaway slaves into Kansas, recapturing them and returning them to their original owners. Just because the slaves made it to a free port, it did not guarantee their safety. Many of the male slaves joined the Union armies to escape the border ruffians.

Robinson, who has been fighting for the preservation of Quindaro's 206 acres for more than a decade, is hoping to instill an interest in the children who will be the ones to carry the cause in the future.

"You are responsible for protecting and restoring this area for the future," he said. On the tour, the children stopped for a photo session in front of a memorial to John Brown, an avid abolitionist who was eventually hanged. The statue was erected in Quindaro in 1911.

"His last words were, that if he had to do it again, he said 'yes' with 'deliberate and swift speed,'" Robinson said.

Robinson was a key figure in the battle to save the site from becoming a landfill project a few years ago.

According to Robinson, the site is one of the largest archeological studies of the underground railroad.

As part of the KC 150 Legacy celebration, the Sojourner Truth Observational Study Homotel Ltd., program has received funds to educate children about the history of the Quindaro Ruins and the Underground Railroad experience.

Fourth-grade students from Quindaro Elementary will participate in the educational project. Students from Washington High School will be mentors for the elementary students through the program.

On Thursday, students from Quindaro Elementary toured the ruins.

Quindaro is derived from the French word for a bundle of sticks. The Wyandottes who first occupied the land spoke French.

"What they meant by that was, one stick can be easily snapped, but when you have a bundle of sticks, together they are much harder to break," Robinson told the children. "In unity there is strength."

Robinson took the children to the remains of the Quindaro House Hotel which, in the 1850s, was operated by the New England Immigrant Aid Society. They were a group of Euro-American abolitionists who established the Quindaro free port.

"The hotel had two stories and rooms for 40 guests, including soldiers from the Union Army," Robinson said. Robinson said there is much evidence of pre-existing civilizations, including artifacts such as silverware, beads and parts of soldiers' uniforms.

"In 1988, it was said it would cost \$250,000 to preserve it," Robinson said. "We have just begun to scratch the surface."

Quindaro was a temperance town but that did not stop the establishment of a brewery which also served as a planning room for John Brown. Parts of the building are still standing.

It was also a make-shift classroom for children to learn to read and do math. It is the only building that historians have four dimensional pictures of. Exiting the back of the brewery is a man-made tunnel.

"It was against the law to educate slaves," Robinson said. The publisher of the *Chindowan* newspaper office said freedom was not total if the children could not read, write and count. She encouraged the formation of classes to educate the children. Parts of the newspaper office are still visible on the site.

The Quindaro students toured an ice house, which was a stone-lined structure cut into the side of a hill.

Petroglyphs [a drawing or stone drawing on rocks] are found throughout the area.

There are places that are thought to be Indian burial mounds. Besides the Wyandottes, there were Delawares in the area.

[Lillian] Bittaye credited the success of the program to the cooperation of Linnie McCluney, principal of Quindaro Elementary School.

McCluney is a lifelong resident of the area and has family members buried in the Quindaro Cemetery, which the students also visited.

The students were impressed by what they saw on the tour.

Jeffery Rosenberg, son of Quindaro teacher Kathy Rosenberg and a student in Olathe, visited Quindaro with the Quindaro students. His district is on spring break. He said the tour taught him the history of slavery in our area.

"Slavery was not right," he said.

Keylesha McDaniel and Shanea Austin were impressed that they were able to walk in the footsteps of slaves and visit building sites where the slaves stopped to rest on their way north to freedom.

Terrence Todd and Melvin Gatson expressed great interest in the tour while Derrick Simms was disturbed by bullet holes in area signs, apparently caused by vandals who were doing some target practice. Eric Calhoun was sad to see that the area was "messed up" and not preserved well.

Daron Moore was impressed by the beauty of the wooded area.

"I liked the forest, the graves and all of it," he said.

The students will write an essay entitled "Revitalization - Ruins vs. Roots, through the eyes of a child."

The winner of the essay contest will win a \$50 Savings Bond and will engage in the designing of a mural of what they think should be included at the site when it is rennovated.

The tours are open to the public. Visitors should be prepared for an extensive walking tour along some rugged wooded paths.

In November 1998, President Bill Clinton signed a bill to restore the site as a historical site, said Robinson. The preservation work is stuck in a quagmire of local politics.

"There is a lot of resistance and chaos among the local powers," Robinson said. Robinson was recently the recipient of a National Business Executives Award, nominated by Dunn and Bradstreet for his research into Quindaro history.