

Wyandotte West, August 28, 1994
by Mary Flanagan Rupert

Quindaro ruins history traced

Photograph Caption: A cemetery is on top of high bluffs overlooking the Missouri River in old Quindaro. A proposed landfill would be located at the bottom of this steep hill, according to Orrin Murray Sr., a black historian.



Quindaro Cemetery
Courtesy Wyandotte West

Transcriptions are presented without changes except to improve readability.

Quindaro ruins has historic value.

Orrin Murray Sr. believes the area of Quindaro proposed for a landfill is of historic value.

Murray, 83, a black historian, is a retired school teacher and farmer.

The proposed landfill near the Missouri river has attracted opposition from nearby homeowners.

According to Murray, Quindaro is a historic part of Kansas City, Kansas.

It was part of the underground railroad for slaves escaping to free territory.

Murray said whites from the North and East parts of the country settled in Quindaro after the Kansas-Nebraska bill was passed in 1854. That bill said residents of the state would decide whether it would be a free or a slave state.

Because it was basically a free settlement, Quindaro also attracted slaves who were escaping from Parkville and other parts of the country.

"My grandfather and his family escaped in a skiff from Parkville," Murray said. "My father was born free, the only one of his family."

Murray's grandfather took his wife, who was expecting, along with their five children, and escaped to Quindaro with not a penny in his pockets, he said.

Murray said the "underground railroad" merely describes the way escaped slaves had to hide and find shelter with friendly persons. "Underground depot" would have described it better, he said. Murray said the Sortor family residence was the biggest depot there was, because whenever anyone in need came by, the family would give him something to eat and a place to sleep.

Once they were in Kansas, the escaped slaves still had to hide because bounty hunters could receive \$300 for capturing and returning them, he said.

The usual path escaped slaves took followed through the bushes and woods of Quindaro, Murray said. When they came to a road with a hill on each side, they were happy because they knew they were in Kansas, he said. He said this is the origin of the name, Happy Hollow Road.

Instead of walking on the road, however, the escaped slaves would go through the bushes and brush, tying knots in them to show the direction they had gone, he said.

The landfill area is bounded on the west side by a cemetery on a steep slope, which Murray calls one of the earliest "Boot Hills" in this area.

He said some escaped slaves would stand on this hill and pick off their masters with long-barreled rifles as they were coming across the river to get them. If they missed and the master didn't fall into the river, they would ambush him on land and bury him in this cemetery, Murray said.

Many early-day settlers lived in Quindaro. The bend of the Missouri River formed a kind of harbor and hotels were built nearby. There were houses and streets, but the town began to decline during the Civil War, according to Murray.

Men left Quindaro to join the Union Army during the Civil War. Their wives and families were afraid of being attacked by rebels, so many left their homes and moved elsewhere, he said.

Quindaro itself was named after an Indian woman, Nancy Quindaro Guthrie. She married Abelard Guthrie in the first wedding to take place after the town was founded, Murray said.

After the Civil War, some of the "exodusters," the freedmen from Southern states, went North and settled in or near Quindaro.

Quindaro was the site of Western University, which Murray attended until 1923. This school had 14 buildings.

In 1911, a statue of John Brown was placed in front of one of the buildings of Western University. Brown himself was never in Quindaro, according to Murray.

The Brown statue was moved to Primrose Villa. It is now on a plaza at 27th and Sewell with a marker which explains the history of Western University. The statue is inscribed, "Erected to the memory of John Brown by a grateful people."

During World War I, the area now proposed for a landfill was used as a training ground for the Pioneer Infantry, which received training in felling trees.

There are currently no buildings on the site of the proposed landfill. The offices of the proposed landfill are planned for the site of the old Douglass Hospital. The Hospital, which no longer operates, was razed several years ago.

Recently, some neighborhoods not far from the proposed landfill have been built up and improved, Murray said.