

THE POMPEII OF KANSAS
RACE, ENVIRONMENT, AND MEMORY IN QUINDARO, 1982-1991

A THESIS IN
History

Presented to the Faculty of the University
of Missouri-Kansas City in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

by
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B.A., University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2020

Kansas City, Missouri
2022

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ABSTRACT

In January 1981, Browning-Ferris Industries entered into a lease agreement with the Kansas City Commission of Kansas City, Kansas to construct a landfill in the historic neighborhood of Quindaro. This agreement resulted in significant protests by the Black community of Quindaro, which challenged the municipal government in court and built a coalition of activists who protested the landfill. The township of Quindaro has a complex history of interracial cooperation between the Wyandot people, white Free Staters, and Black freedmen. The landfill threatened to destroy the physical remains of this history. The contest over the Quindaro landfill should be understood beyond the limitations of a localized phenomenon. Prior scholarship in the field of environmental justice (EJ) demonstrates that African American communities throughout the United States are exposed to disproportionate levels of toxic exposure, whether it be in the form of PCBs, lead, particulate matter from coal-fired power plants, or other forms of toxins. EJ scholars have examined the social power dynamics that led to discriminatory exposure, finding that it is a phenomenon rooted in colonialism, racism, and capitalism. This article utilizes government documents, newspaper articles, letters of correspondence among protesters, and oral histories of residents to demonstrate that government officials in Kansas City purposefully neglected the health and well-being of the

predominantly Black population in the Northeast, while simultaneously dismissing the historical value of the archaeological site. This article ultimately seeks to demonstrate that the siting of the Quindaro landfill fits into broader patterns of behavior by the government officials to exploit communities of color.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the Humanities and Social Sciences have examined a thesis titled “The Pompeii of Kansas: Race, Environment, and Memory in Quindaro, 1982-1991,” presented by Michael R. Sprague, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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INTRODUCTION

In January 1983, Wesley Buford looked over a wooded valley from his porch at 3517 N. 27th St. in Kansas City, Kansas (KCK). Mr. Buford's home was in the neighborhood of Quindaro, where he lived for most of his life. In an interview with Marquis Shepherd from the *Kansas City Times*, Mr. Buford recalled playing in the area as a child and pointed to the cemetery on the opposite side where he buried his parents and wife.¹ To Mr. Buford, who was seventy-four at the time of the interview, the valley held both personal and symbolic meaning, a sentiment echoed by many neighborhood residents. This community was home to the Old Quindaro townsite, an abolitionist stronghold during the Bleeding Kansas period. It was also the site of Western University, the first Black university in the state, operating from 1891 to 1943. Despite its historical and cultural significance to Black residents of Kansas City, Old Quindaro was under threat. Just three months before Mr. Buford's interview, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, which owned the property where Old Quindaro and the university had been, signed an agreement to lease the land to Browning-Ferris Industries (BFI), a waste management company.

Opponents of the landfill believed that it would pose health concerns to residents of the Kansas City metropolitan area. The site is a natural valley that declines north into the Missouri River, and the landfill would have been less than two miles upstream from the primary intake valve for the public water supply for Kansas City, Kansas. Many residents of Quindaro were also concerned by the implications of burying an important cultural site with waste. "A lot of people don't know about this place," Mr. Buford said, and if BFI succeeded

¹ Marquis Shepherd, "KCK group to fight against using valley as sanitary landfill," *The Kansas City Times*, January 28, 1983.

in their bid to construct a landfill there, he feared they never would.² Community members organized and formed the Concerned Citizens for Old Quindaro (CCOQ) and the Quindaro Town Preservation Society (QTPS) to defend their neighborhood. Nearly a decade of legal challenges, public outcry, and underhanded deals between the KCK City Council, BFI, and the African Methodist-Episcopal Church followed. All parties involved in this dramatic history pursued their own self-interest. Resident protesters sought to protect the health of their families and community and to preserve the memory of a historic place; BFI sought to dominate the KCK waste industry through vertical integration; the municipal government, under state pressure, sought a permanent solution to a mounting waste crisis; and the financially struggling AME Church sought to capitalize on the undeveloped ruins of a historically significant site.

The story of the Quindaro landfill plays into a broader structure of hegemonic racism that has put communities of color at disproportionate risk of environmental hazards. Despite a long history of these communities shouldering the burden of environmental waste, it was not until the United Church of Christ's 1987 report titled *Toxic Waste and Race in the United States* that environmental activists began to articulate the relationship between environmental injustice and race directly. The report's authors found that "race proved to be the most significant among variables tested in association with the location of commercial hazardous waste facilities" across a national sample.³ This report introduced the concept of "environmental racism" into scholarly discourse. Since the release of this foundational report, geographers, sociologists, historians, and economists have contributed to the

² Ibid.

³ "Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites" (United Church of Christ, Commission for Racial Justice, 1987), 7.

scholarship on environmental racism and injustice. They have applied the concept to interpret cases of discriminatory toxic exposure throughout North America in places like Anniston, Georgia,⁴ maquiladoras in Ciudad Juárez,⁵ and Cancer Alley in Louisiana.⁶ This article will contribute to scholarship on environmental justice by establishing Quindaro's history as a case study of environmental racism in the United States, connected to the national trends of white flight from urban spaces and consequent municipal disinvestment.

Geographers such as Laura Pulido have problematized the field by challenging scholars to think more critically about the structures of racism, arguing that scholars have put too much emphasis on the individualized racist motivations of decision-makers. Pulido urges the field to investigate the underlying hegemonic structures of racist control, which involve community disinvestment, the history of white flight, and the role of capitalism.⁷ Applying this framework to the Flint water crisis, Pulido argues that the decision to switch the city's source of public drinking water showed "how utterly devalued and disposable Flint residents were in the eyes" of emergency financial managers but also revealed "the power and logic of a larger set of social relations which prioritize fiscal solvency above all else."⁸ Pulido stresses the use of the word "poisoned" rather than "contaminated," as the tragedy was the outcome of deliberate, conscious choices made by the state government and the emergency financial managers. Policymakers saw Flint as a testing ground, and its population as test subjects, for

⁴ Ellen Griffith Spears, *Baptized in PCBs: Race, Pollution, and Justice in an All-American Town*, Illustrated edition (The University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

⁵ Xavier Carlos Vasquez, "North American Free Trade Agreement and Environmental Racism, The," *Harvard International Law Journal* 34 (1993): 357.

⁶ Steve Lerner and Robert D. Bullard, *Diamond: A Struggle for Environmental Justice in Louisiana's Chemical Corridor* (MIT Press, 2006).

⁷ Laura Pulido, "Flint, Environmental Racism, and Racial Capitalism," *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism* 27, no. 3 (September 2016): 1–16.

⁸Ibid, 4.

neoliberal practices of economic austerity.⁹ The history of the Quindaro landfill resembles the deliberate choices made in Flint, Michigan. The historical evidence reveals routine disregard for the health of residents by the municipal government of Kansas City, Kansas and the Kansas state government, which supported an international, multi-billion-dollar waste management company's claim over the site. The main contention of this project is that the policymakers involved in this history deemed corporate interests more important than the health concerns of Black residents in Northeast KCK, treating them as disposable and exploitable surpluses. After all, this story is one among thousands of cases of unjust, racially-motivated toxic exposure in the United States – an institutional behavior that the nation is still reckoning with in places like Flint, Michigan and Jackson, Mississippi.

This project will contribute to the historiography of environmental injustice in the United States by relating the history of the Quindaro landfill in Kansas City, Kansas to national historical trends. The history of the Quindaro landfill serves as a microcosm for environmental racism in the United States, involving elements of housing segregation, municipal abandonment, and a dismissal of the health of Black residents by government officials – essentially, the systemic devaluation of Black spaces and lives. Although the story of Quindaro mirrors that of prior scholarship, there is an additional element to this history that makes it unique. The landfill siting would not only have threatened the lives of Quindaro residents but would have permanently destroyed the ruins of a Black heritage site. Quindaro residents such as NedRa Bonds, Marvin Robinson, and Jesse Hope III fought back against BFI's bulldozers and the municipal government. Unlike most other instances of landfill siting, such as in the siting of a hazardous waste landfill in Warren County North Carolina in

⁹ Ibid, 2.

1982, the community ultimately succeeded in defending their neighborhood. Through coalition building, legal challenges, and appeals to public health, residents successfully challenged the political and economic influence wielded by the world's second-largest waste management company.

Despite the conflict to preserve the site, Quindaro remains shrouded in mystery. The Quindaro Townsite received more scholarly attention when the National Park Service recognized the site on the National Register of Historic Places in 2002. The boomtown during the Bleeding Kansas period is now well documented, as is the history of Western University, the first Black university in the state of Kansas, which closed in 1943. The historical record essentially stops there. Quindaro is described historically and contemporaneously as a “ghost town” and the victim of “economic decline.” Historian James N. Leiker argued that “Quindaro’s story has struggled to resonate with the larger narrative of American history and even for that of the greater Kansas City area.”¹⁰ According to Leiker, the public overlooks the relevancy of Quindaro because historians and storytellers have both failed to make relations to broader historical movements and because they imply that the last significant event in Quindaro happened more than a century and a half ago. While some local historians have examined the fight against the Browning-Ferris Industries landfill in the 1980s and 1990s, none have related the fight against the landfill to a broader historical process of racism, resistance, and liberation. This article strives to contextualize the fight against the Browning-Ferris Industries landfill as a continuation of a fight towards Black liberation.

¹⁰ James N. Leiker, “Five Lessons We Can Learn From Quindaro,” *Kansas History* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 141.

Few observers today would recognize the power of place when standing at the site between North 27th Street and the Missouri Pacific Railroad, but it is powerful indeed. Quindaro signifies four elements of Black liberation in the United States: the abolition of slavery during the Bleeding Kansas period and the border conflict during the American Civil War; the pursuit of Black economic freedom through higher education; and the ongoing fight for environmental justice for people of color. The latest contest, however, is over commemoration and memory of the site. When Wesley Buford described Quindaro as the place where he played as a child and the place where he buried his parents and wife, he was describing a physical space rich with memory. Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan wrote that “place is a center of meaning constructed by experience,” which is driven both by biological responses and by cultural memory.¹¹ In this sense, Quindaro had personal meaning to residents like Mr. Buford, whose conception of place was informed by lived experiences of family and community, but it also has a complex, layered historical meaning as a place where many of their ancestors fought for, secured, and preserved freedom for themselves and their families. The fight against the landfill, therefore, was not only about economic and environmental injustice, but about the preservation of personal and communal memory of a vulnerable place. Preservation efforts today are still a contested terrain, even after the Quindaro Townsite was registered on the National Register of Historic Places in 2002 and recognized as a National Commemorative Site in 2019. Commemoration of Quindaro is complicated over disagreements about who has claims to the property, who should be in charge of its preservation and how it would impact the community economically, and finally how Quindaro should be remembered publicly. The final section of this article will focus on

¹¹ Yi-Fu Tuan, “Place: An Experiential Perspective,” *Geographical Review* 65, no. 2 (1975): 152.

recent efforts and the challenges of preserving historical spaces within economically underdeveloped communities.

CHAPTER 1

A HISTORY OF RESISTANCE

There was little remembrance of the Old Quindaro townsite in Kansas City in the early 1980s, but its importance to the region could not be overstated. Quindaro represents a remarkable case of interracial cooperation between white settlers, Indigenous people, and freed Black people, united in their opposition to human bondage. Some sporadic articles in Kansas newspapers regarded the site as a “historic ghost town,” lost to the annals of history.¹² The site was unexcavated in the early 1980s, and soil and vegetation covered the foundations of structures that had long since burned down or naturally decayed over time. Generational residents, however, generally knew of its history. Before the formation of Quindaro, the area had been settled by the Wyandot Tribe since 1844, who had been forcibly displaced from Ohio by the U.S. federal government. Upon arriving, the Wyandot people instituted the first anti-slavery laws in the Kansas Territory.¹³ Abelard Guthrie, a white abolitionist who married a Wyandot woman named Nancy Quindaro Brown, bought land from the Tribe, and established the town of Quindaro on the banks of the Missouri River in 1856. The town served as an entry port on the Missouri River for Free State settlers and supplies into the Kansas territory during the Bleeding Kansas period. It competed against pro-slavery settlements along the river, such as Atchison, Leavenworth, and Wyandotte City. As many as six hundred people lived in the town, with more than one hundred buildings at its height in 1857.¹⁴ The success of the settlement was short-lived, as the Panic of 1857 halted

¹² Kittie Dale, “Lost Towns of Kansas,” *The Hays Daily News*, May 2, 1965.

¹³ Steven Collins, “Quindaro, Kansas Territory (1857-1862),” August 6, 2012, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/quindaro-kansas-territory-1857-1862/>.

¹⁴ “The Story of a Boom Town: The Ruins of Quindaro on the Missouri Above Wyandotte,” *The Kansas City Star*, July 16, 1899.

speculative investment into the town. Quindaro's political relevance diminished when Kansas officially secured statehood as a free state in January 1861. The American Civil War also hampered Quindaro's agricultural and industrial pursuits, as many men enlisted in the U.S. Army to fight secessionist insurgents in Missouri. Quindaro officially ceased to exist as a legal settlement in 1862, when the newly elected Kansas State legislature withdrew its town charter.¹⁵

Although the town was largely forgotten by the public, its role in the Underground Railroad was preserved by a rich oral tradition of the Black community that remained in the area since. Orrin M. Murray frequently told the stories of his own family, whose grandfather taught him at a young age the history of slavery, John Brown, Quantrill, and the Underground Railroad. Murray recounted his grandfather's escape from slavery in Platte County for *The Kansas City Star* in 1968: "Grandpa went down to the river and put his family in a skiff... He got to Quindaro, and some white people in the underground railway took him in."¹⁶ Quindaro served not only as an entry port for Free State and abolitionist forces to enter the Kansas Territory, but as a route for enslaved Missourians to escape their enslavers. Murray was among many residents of the Northeast that were descendants of enslaved people from Missouri. Many others came from families who settled the region during the Exodus of 1879 when tens of thousands of Black people migrated from the South. This trend ultimately led to the creation of a thriving Black community in the Northeast, bound by a common past. For many of these residents, Quindaro held profoundly personal and symbolic meanings, and was indeed a place worth rebuilding.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Charles Hammer, "There Were Good Times," *The Kansas City Star*, September 29, 1968, 14.

In 1865, a group of abolitionists including Eben Blachley founded the Quindaro Freedman's School, which would later be known as Western University when the African Methodist-Episcopal Church received the deed to the property when Blachley died in 1877.¹⁷ Western University was the first Black school in the state of Kansas and arguably the first Black university west of the Mississippi River. Western University operated both a music school and industrial school until its closure in 1943. Its most notable president was William Tecumseh Vernon, who was selected for the position by the AME Church in 1896. Vernon was a contemporary of Booker T. Washington and found inspiration in the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Vernon ultimately modeled the industrial school at Western University on the Institute.¹⁸ As an accommodationist, Vernon believed that if Black workers learned skilled trades they would be accepted by white society and therefore allowed to access social, political, and economic freedom. His goal, ultimately, was the creation of a successful Black middle class. Vernon was a controversial figure in his time, as he found many allies within Republican circles, but was criticized by several Black newspapers for his accommodationist sentiments.¹⁹ The music school was also nationally recognized, as alumni from the music school were found throughout the United States and Europe. The best-known Black musicians emerging from the school were the Jackson Jubilee Singers, Nora Douglas Holt, Etta Moten Barnett, and Eva Jessye.²⁰ The school received support from several Republican governors in the early 20th century, but ultimately closed in 1943.

¹⁷ "For a Western Tuskegee: The Hopes in an Industrial School for Negroes at Quindaro" (The Kansas City Star, 1902).

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ "William T. Vernon, Registrar of the Treasury," *The Broad Ax*, (Chicago, IL), May 22, 1909.

²⁰ Helen Walker-Hill, *Western University at Quindaro, Kansas (1865-1943) and its Legacy of Pioneering Musical Women* (University of Illinois Press, 2006).

Western University declined for various reasons, but chiefly because of dwindling support from the state of Kansas during the Great Depression and because larger, historically segregated universities such as the University of Kansas began to enroll Black students.²¹ None of its buildings remain. The only physical reminder of the place is a statue of John Brown, erected in 1911 by the university. It still stands on the corner of 27th Street and Sewell Avenue in Kansas City, Kansas, on the edge of where the campus once was. The African Methodist-Episcopal Church retained control of the deed to the property where Western University was located through the Western University Association of the AME Church, Inc. Despite their instrumental role in the success of Western University, the AME Church entered into an agreement with BFI in late 1982 permitting the waste management company to develop a landfill at the 180-acre site – a decision that confused many residents of the Northeast and setting into motion a decades-long conflict.

²¹ Orrin M. Murray, “Western University: A Ghost College in Kansas” (Pittsburg, Kansas, Pittsburg State University, 1966).

CHAPTER 2

THE BEGINNINGS OF A CRISIS

The neighborhood of Quindaro in the early 1980s was a quiet, declining neighborhood in the historic Northeast of Kansas City, Kansas. George Koppe, writing for *The Kansas City Times* in May 1980, described the Northeast as an “aging area with [a] reputation for high crime.”²² Residents of the Northeast disputed this reputation, including Chester Owens, then president of H.W. Sewing Insurance Agency and later the first Black man elected to the Kansas City City Council. Owens went on record in the *Times*, stating that “the vast majority of people in the Northeast area are good, hard-working people, contrary to what the media and people who are not familiar with our area believe.”²³ The Northeast, by this time, was a predominantly Black community within the city. While it suffered from high unemployment rates, school closures, home vacancies, and limited municipal services, residents had not “lost their strong community pride.” Residents of the Northeast formed neighborhood organizations to clean up their streets, promote local businesses, and provide employment training. One such organization was the Northeast Coordinating Council, which purchased a building at 7th Street and Quindaro Boulevard to serve as a community center and employment training center. Ed Smith, the director of the council, stated that the development could not have been possible without residents “putting in some equity themselves” and that it was “one of the most significant things that [had] happened” in Kansas City.²⁴ The Northeast was also remarkable for its high level of Black

²² George Koppe, “Faith, Proud Tradition Fuel Area’s Hope for Future,” *The Kansas City Times*, May 13, 1980, B1.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

homeownership, significantly outpacing Black homeownership nationally.²⁵ Many residents, such as Orrin M. Murray, a local historian, attributed the community's sense of belonging and pride to the history of liberation at Old Quindaro. By the end of 1982, however, the community found itself at the center of a fight to preserve the site.

There had long been a waste management crisis in KCK. In 1982, the city shipped more than 500,000 tons of trash to a landfill near Parkville, Missouri, due to a lack of permanent waste treatment facility, which strained the city's resources.²⁶ The *Kansas City Times* reported in October 1982 that the Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE) obligated the city government to find a solution to their mounting waste problem. The proposed landfill site at the Quindaro ruins needed to be rezoned for industrial use, requiring an additional lease agreement between BFI and the Kansas City Commission. Meanwhile, the voters of KCK approved a reorganization of the city government where the city would transition from a commission form of government to a city council. The voters, at this time, had not yet elected representatives on the council. Tom Rehorn, the finance commissioner for Kansas City, stated that "a decision on the landfill by the lame-duck City Commission would be inappropriate" and that approval should be delayed until April when the government completed the transition.²⁷ Despite this fact, BFI continued to pressure the Commission to approve the lease. Residents of Kansas City quickly organized, and in January 1983, more than five hundred protesters packed a town hall meeting with the Planning Commission of Kansas City.²⁸ The Planning Commission declared its opposition to

²⁵ Susan D. Greenbaum, *The Afro-American Community in Kansas City, Kansas: A History* (Kansas City, Kansas, 1980).

²⁶ W. Stevens Ricks, "KCK Leaves Landfill Issue for Council," *The Kansas City Times*, October 30, 1982, sec. B.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Ian S. Simpson, "Nobody Loves a Landfill," *Wyandotte County Star*, January 19, 1983, Wednesday Extra edition, sec. A, 1.

the landfill later that year, but the Commission was not the ultimate authority. Jim Grohusky, an administrator in the Wyandotte County Health Department, stated that the city “needed to approve a landfill despite opposition from a future siter’s neighbors.”²⁹ Shortly afterwards, and seemingly with little warning, the City Commission approved the proposal and entered into a lease agreement with BFI, believing it had taken the first step in resolving the city’s waste problem.

Of the three commissioners who ruled on the landfill, two were appointed, with only one being an elected official held accountable by their constituency. The Commission made this decision despite the KDHE’s deferment of punitive measures until the newly elected government could rule on the matter. In response, Jesse Hope III, the president of the Concerned Citizens of Old Quindaro (CCOQ), stated, “We thought the City Commission had greater regard for the citizens of Kansas City. We see they didn’t.”³⁰ The Commission’s decision to ignore the will of its constituents shares similarities with the undemocratic governance of Flint and other Black dominant cities in Michigan like Benton Harbor, where the elected government was rendered powerless to the decision-making of the non-elected officials. In both cases, government officials refused to allow the community to participate in decision-making by electing its own representatives in local government.

Following the Commission’s decision, the CCOQ pooled resources and brought the city government to court. The CCOQ accused the Commission of taking actions that were “premature, politically motivated without consideration of residents’ welfare or the historical

²⁹ Ian S. Simpson, “If Commission Rejects Landfill, What’s Next?,” *Wyandotte County Star*, January 26, 1983, Wednesday Extra edition. Pg. 1.

³⁰ Ian S. Simpson and Barbara Cornell, “KCK Officials OK Landfill Despite Advice Against It,” *The Kansas City Star*, January 27, 1983, Main Edition edition, sec. A, pg. 1.

value of the area, and illegal under city, state, and federal laws.”³¹ The judge in the case, John William Mahoney, ultimately ruled in February 1983 that the Commission acted within its power to approve the permit and that it was reasonable to assume that BFI would establish safety measures against toxic exposure and damage to the site’s historical value.

Furthermore, while Judge Mahoney acknowledged the “landfill could damage property values,” he also stated that when the “site is filled and reopened as a park, it could be a boon to nearby neighborhoods.”³² The CCOQ was unsure if they had the resources to appeal the case, as they had primarily depended upon community fundraising. The disparity of resources between the city government, BFI, and protesters was apparent. In this case, the CCOQ’s ability to advocate for itself depended on financial resources that it did not have.

Residents did find some allies within the local government. The Planning Commission and the Board of Public Utilities (BPU), which managed the city’s public water supply, both opposed the landfill. The Planning Commission opposed the proposal because the site could have historical significance. The Commission believed that a survey should be conducted before constructing the landfill. The BPU argued that the site's proximity to the Missouri River posed a significant health risk to residents because BPU’s main intake valve for public water was a mile downstream. Furthermore, the BPU testified at a public hearing that “toxic materials could be placed in the Kansas City, Kan. landfill without [BFI’s] knowledge.”³³ Nevertheless, a plurality of city, government, and state agencies involved in the dispute sided with the Commission’s decision to approve the permit. In addition to the

³¹ Marquis Shepard, “Residents Sue KCK Commission Over Landfill,” *The Kansas City Times*, February 26, 1983, Metropolitan Edition edition, sec. B., pg. 1.

³² Barbara Cornell, “Judge Rules in Favor of KCK Landfill,” *The Kansas City Star*, January 9, 1984, Main Edition edition, sec. A, 4.

³³ Marquis Shepard, “Church Corporation Wants to Break KCK Landfill Lease,” *The Kansas City Times*, February 2, 1983, Metropolitan Edition edition, sec. A, 4.

engineers and geologists employed by BFI who testified to the safety of the landfill, “health officials from both Wyandotte County and the state of Kansas said in public hearings that they did not think the landfill would threaten the area’s water supply.”³⁴

At the outset of this conflict, city officials showed a blatant disregard for the risk of toxic exposure at the proposed Quindaro landfill. Their behavior fits into broader national patterns of environmentally racist municipal policymaking. Black communities suffered disproportionately from environmental externalities throughout the nation, including exposure to polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), lead, dioxins, and many other toxic chemical substances. PCBs are recognized by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) as a cause of various forms of cancer, and like all carcinogens, are most harmful to children. Lead poisoning is linked to kidney and liver failure and neurological disorders in children. Dioxins cause reproductive and developmental problems, interfere with the immune system and hormones, and are also linked to several types of cancers. Though the EPA issued stringent regulations on these substances, it never equitably enforced them. In 1982, the same year that the KCK City Commission entered into an agreement with BFI, residents of Afton in Warren County, North Carolina protested the construction of a landfill for the disposal of PCBs. Organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the United Church of Christ claimed that the siting was racially motivated. The community filed a lawsuit against the landfill claiming “that officials of the Federal Environmental Protection Agency and the State of North Carolina practiced racial discrimination against the citizens of Warren County in disregarding more suitable alternatives.”³⁵ The plaintiffs also claimed that more than 64% of the population of Warren County were people of color. On

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ “Carolinians Angry Over PCB Landfill,” *The New York Times*, August 11, 1982, sec. D, pg. 17.

September 27, 1982 more than five hundred activists protested the site, with hundreds blocking a dump truck from offloading toxic waste in the site. More than one hundred protesters were arrested, including US Representative Walter E. Fauntroy and civil rights activist Benjamin Chavis.³⁶ Despite continuous resistance against the waste company and the state government, protesters ultimately failed to stop the landfill. Protests in Warren County did, however, inspire the environmental justice movement for decades. The Commission for Racial Justice, formed by members of the United Church of Christ including Chavis, published a report titled *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States* which claimed that race was the “most significant among variables tested in association with the location of commercial hazardous waste facilities,” and that three out of five of the largest facilities were located in majority Black or Latinx communities.³⁷ Today, the Warren County PCB protest is among the most cited cases within environmental justice scholarship. Activists in Kansas City learned from the Warren County case that they would need to find allies outside of the immediate community to succeed, because the combined influence of a major waste management company, local and state governments, and the media was a powerful obstacle.

Local news media was often complicit in supporting BFI’s claim on the historic site. In a 1984 *Kansan* article, journalist Warren Liston questioned the importance of Quindaro’s history. Liston wrote that the “stone and brick buildings of the once-thriving river town had all but disappeared by World War II to be replaced by jungle-like overgrowth and – ironically enough – trash dumped illegally by more practical, if somewhat insensitive folk.”³⁸

³⁶ “Walter Fauntroy Arrested in Protest at PCB Landfill,” *Durham Morning Herald*, September 28, 1982, sec. B, pg. 17.

³⁷ “Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites” (New York, New York: Commission for Racial Justice, United Church of Christ, 1987), 13.

³⁸ Warren Liston, “Old Quindaro in Focus Again,” *Kansas City Kansan*, May 6, 1984, Kansas Room, Kansas City Kansas Public Library.

Browning-Ferris Industries, the media, and government officials frequently argued that residents had dumped waste on the site to cast aspersions on the effort to preserve the site. Additionally, they argued that, despite prior interest in the site, the community had not yet demonstrated that the site was a place worthy of preserving. They claimed, in effect, that the community did not value Old Quindaro as some residents already used the site as a dump.³⁹ Yet this argument reduced the aspirations of an entire group to the bad-faith actions of a few. These arguments also reveal the hypocritical logic of government officials. They used their influence to support the landfill despite calls by the Kansas State Historical Society, the Landmarks Commission, regional universities, and protesters themselves that the site was worthy of preservation.

It was rare that government officials addressed the bad-faith business practices of BFI, despite the ubiquity of its evidence. In a July 1983 article in the *Kansas City Kansan*, an attorney representing Browning-Ferris Industries claimed that, even if the site were designated as a local historic site, it would not stop the company from constructing the landfill. Interviewed by Scott Farina, the attorney stated that the designation “doesn’t change what was already approved, and we don’t intend to deviate from the proposal we made with the city.”⁴⁰ In the same article, the attorney representing the Western University Association, which leased the land to BFI, stated that the landfill would be sanitary, citing the absence of incinerators, anti-rodent measures, and a clay lining that would protect against waste runoff. Marvin Robinson, an activist with the Quindaro Town Preservation Society refuted this argument in an op-ed in *The Call*, a Black owned and run newspaper, presenting multiple

³⁹ “Old Quindaro Issue Now Appears Dead,” *Kansas City Kansan*, May 16, 1988.

⁴⁰ Scott Farina, “No Challenge Seen for Historical Designation,” *Kansas City Kansan*, July 11, 1983, Kansas Room, Kansas City Kansas Public Library.

instances of mismanagement at other BFI waste facilities. Robinson wrote of contamination at Lake Charles and Livingston in Louisiana, where protesters won a case in the US Federal Court, leading to a two-million-dollar fine that BFI refused to pay.⁴¹ BFI used predatory business practices throughout the nation, including non-compliance with environmental regulations, predatory pricing, and violation of antitrust laws, among others. BFI's unscrupulous behavior was documented locally in the Plattco Sanitary Landfill near Parkville, Missouri. Platte County officials sued the company in the early 1980s for illegally storing toxic industrial materials.⁴² Residents of the Northeast, reasonably, were doubtful that BFI would follow environmental protection laws, considering that it was actively breaking on the other side of the Missouri River.

⁴¹ Marvin Robinson, "Writer Says, 'Look at the U.S., All Over, People's Health Being Destroyed,'" *The Call*, August 5, 1988, Kansas Room, Kansas City Kansas Public Library.

⁴² Leslie A. Shad, "County to Seek Injunction on Dumping Near Parkville," *The Kansas City Star*, March 4, 1981, 4A.

CHAPTER 2

CONSOLIDATION, IMPUGNITY, AND ABUSE

BFI operated in Kansas City under a favorable political climate, when federal regulators routinely failed to protect Americans – particularly people of color – from toxic exposure. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was founded in 1970 through an executive order by Richard Nixon, but it came under threat in the following decade during the Reagan administration. The new Republican administration of the 1980s stripped spending on domestic programs in favor of national security spending. The Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981 “reduced federal grants to cities by \$14 billion, and cut welfare payments to individuals by \$11 billion between 1982 and 1984.”⁴³ State governments were unable to fill the gap in funding, and according to Martin V. Melosi, an urban and environmental historian, this trend led to the “deterioration of the existing infrastructure and uneven investment in new infrastructure” in urban spaces throughout the nation.⁴⁴ Funding shortages were felt acutely in midwestern cities, which struggled to remain fiscally solvent while delivering on expected social programs. New Federalism, which began with Nixon and radicalized during the Reagan administration, played a consequential role in the disinvestment of American urban spaces. The impacts were felt most acutely in impoverished communities of color, like Northeast KCK. Bureau of Labor Statistics records show that ten percent of Wyandotte County residents were unemployed in January 1990, a rate that was more than double the 4.1% unemployment rate in the state of Kansas.⁴⁵ The figures were likely substantially higher in the Northeast District of Kansas City, Kansas.

⁴³ Martin V. Melosi, *Garbage In The Cities: Refuse Reform and the Environment* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt5vkf00>, 193.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Unemployment Rate in Wyandotte County, KS,” January 1990.

The EPA shifted its priorities in the 1980s, too. Under the leadership of Anne M. Gorsuch, the EPA rolled back many of its regulatory powers, allowing oil, industrial, and waste management companies to act with impunity. Under these circumstances, BFI was able to expand to one of the largest waste management companies in the world. By 1982, it had acquired many of its competitors in the regions it operated within. Locally, BFI bought out Kuhn Enterprises, Inc., the sole contractor for Kansas City's residential waste.⁴⁶ At the same time, BFI was embroiled in controversy and lawsuits across the nation, as one exposé on the company attests. The Citizen's Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste (CCHW), an organization founded by the environmental activist Lois Gibbs in 1981 to provide resources to communities fighting polluters, released a corporate profile on BFI in 1987. "Browning Ferris Industries is a big business and is aggressively competitive," the authors wrote, and it "built its empire on the model that Standard Oil used."⁴⁷ Through consolidation, BFI operated collection services in more than 180 locations throughout North America, including more than eighty landfills. According to the report, only one service in Toronto promoted recycling services.⁴⁸ By all accounts, Kansas City residents were facing a corporate juggernaut unrestrained by federal regulation, when they challenged the corporation in Wyandotte County courtrooms.

CCHW also criticized BFI for illegal disposal and improper use of toxic chemicals, arguing that their landfills degraded environmental conditions, served as vectors of disease, and in some cases, led to death. In its home state of Texas, an employed chemist blew the

⁴⁶ W. Stevens Ricks, "KCK Leaves Landfill Issue for Council," *The Kansas City Times*, October 30, 1982, sec. B, 1.

⁴⁷ "Browning Ferris Industries: A Corporate Profile" (Citizen's Clearinghouse for Hazardous Wastes, Inc., July 1987), Quindaro Collection; Series 2A; i. Legal Documentation, Kansas City Kansas Public Library - Kansas Room, 6.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 8.

whistle when he “refused to mix nitrobenzene and cyanide with waste oil for road application.”⁴⁹ BFI poisoned the water supply of Nederland, Texas with cadmium, lead, and zinc, which are all classified as neurotoxins by the EPA. In July 1978, Louisiana state legislators scrutinized BFI for the death of a nineteen-year-old employee named Kirtley Jackson in Bayou Sorrel, Louisiana. Jackson dumped acid wastes into an alkaline-rich lagoon, creating hydrogen sulfide gas, killing him before he could enter his truck. According to the report, BFI regularly ordered its employees to dump wastes into the bayou with little consideration for the environmental consequences or risk to the well-being of its employees.⁵⁰ Residents of Bayou Sorrel complained of illness after eating locally-sourced fish, waking from choking fits, and the disappearance of local fauna.⁵¹ CCHW listed dozens more incidents of mismanagement and outright illegal practices by the company. The report demonstrated that BFI was widely engaged in unlawful operations throughout North America.

There was no shortage of evidence of BFI’s regional malpractice either. In the Kansas City area, BFI was a defendant in at least one major lawsuit in 1981 regarding illegal industrial waste dumping at the Plattco Sanitary Landfill four miles west of Parkville, Missouri, just across the river from Kansas City, Kansas. The government of KCK relocated most of its waste to the Plattco Sanitary Landfill in the early 1980s. Platte County officials filed the suit in response to allegations of illegally dumped chemicals resulting in “residents complaining of sore throats, dead and dying trees, and dead pets.”⁵² KCK government

⁴⁹ Ibid, 4.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 25.

⁵¹ Frances Frank Marcus, “Rural Abuse,” *The New York Times*, April 22, 1979.

⁵² Leslie A. Shad, “County to Seek Injunction on Dumping Near Parkville,” *The Kansas City Star*, March 4, 1981, 4A.

officials actively misrepresented BFI as an upstanding, legally abiding company by local and state health officials despite all of the evidence to the contrary.

CCHW also described the corporation as the “industry leader in the number of legal cases it’s involved in.”⁵³ BFI was the defendant in dozens of federal cases of antitrust violations, workers’ or victims’ compensation, employment contract disputes, and legal challenges to landfill zoning permits across the nation. Notably, federal investigators also investigated BFI under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO), a federal law used to prosecute individuals engaged in organized crime. In a December 1980 US House Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce hearing, Harold Kaufman, a former mobster turned state witness, testified that BFI “sat with organized crime figures in New Jersey, Johnny Pinto, the Giantello family, Ducks Morante, and never did their conscience bother them enough not to take the profits.”⁵⁴ According to Kaufman, BFI engaged in price fixing through its dealings with New York trade waste associations, which he claimed were organized crime operations. BFI was also listed as a defendant in a court case in Baton Rouge, Louisiana for a “pattern of political contributions and payoffs to enhance and preserve its dominant position.”⁵⁵ BFI operated in five continents, with more than 26,000 employees and more than \$3.25 billion in annual revenue by the end of the 1980s.⁵⁶ BFI’s dominance within the industry afforded it both political and economic clout, which it used to influence the behaviors of regulating agencies, competing businesses, and municipal governments.

⁵³ Ibid, 17.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 7.

⁵⁵ “Browning Ferris Industries,” 25.

⁵⁶ Texas State Historical Association, “Browning-Ferris Industries,” November 1, 1994.

There was significant evidence that BFI engaged in predatory and underhanded practices in Kansas City. Many opponents to the Quindaro landfill believed that campaign contributions were a factor in city and state officials supporting the proposal. In May 1988, when Governor Mike Hayden issued a midnight veto on an unanimously supported Kansas State Senate bill to stop the BFI landfill, many residents claimed that Hayden had received a call from BFI.⁵⁷ Activists were not surprised by Governor Hayden's veto, however. Jesse Hope III of the Concerned Citizens of Old Quindaro concluded that "we haven't gotten any cooperation from any political influence. We've just been grasping at straws."⁵⁸ Hope called into question the Kansas Department of Health and Environment's (KDHE) continued support of the landfill. The behavior of the Hayden and the KDHE indicates that government officials were more concerned with the financial interests of a major multinational conglomerate than the general health and well-being of residents or the preservation of a demonstrably important historical site.

⁵⁷ Sherri Fickel, "Hayden Vetoes Quindaro Bill," *The Kansas City Times*, May 11, 1988, B1.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER 3

COMMUNITY ACTIVISM

The structural remains of the Old Quindaro townsite ultimately threatened BFI's claim on the site. In the spring of 1987, Larry Schmits of Environmental Systems Analysis (ESA), completed an initial mandated archaeological dig required of Browning-Ferris Industries. ESA was hired by BFI to excavate the site. The excavators found "foundations of many of the old buildings and remnants of dishes and other artifacts."⁵⁹ One of the archaeologists on the team dubbed the site the "Pompeii of Kansas" due to the findings. Chester C. Owens, Jr., the first African American elected to the city council of Kansas City, was overwhelmed by what the dig uncovered. In an interview with Marquis Shepherd, Owens stated that Quindaro was of "tremendous importance and value, not only to the community, and in particular the black community, but to the region and nation."⁶⁰ Owens also hoped that city representatives, BFI, and state and federal agencies would acknowledge the site's significance before burying it under a landfill. The findings of the archaeological dig validated the insistence by activists that Old Quindaro was a site of historical importance.

City officials apparently disagreed. Despite touring the site himself, city administrator David T. Isabell stated that "he did not anticipate any city action in light of the discoveries."⁶¹ Kansas governor Mike Hayden must have agreed, as he vetoed a bill unanimously supported by the Kansas State Senate that would have protected the ruins. Hayden cited the risks of setting a "dangerous precedent" for vetoing the bill, claiming that

⁵⁹ Roger Dick, "Dig at Abandoned River Town Nearly Complete," *Kansas City Star*, May 12, 1987, Kansas Room, Kansas City Kansas Public Library.

⁶⁰ Marquis Shepherd, "'Pompeii of Kansas' Yields Some Secrets," *Kansas City Times*, July 16, 1987, 1A. Kansas Room, Kansas City Kansas Public Library.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

state law required a study from the State Historic Sites Board of Review to initiate historic designation.⁶² The governor incensed activists who believed he was pressured by lobbyists within Browning-Ferris Industries to protect their claim to the site. In an op-ed published in *The Wichita Eagle-Beacon*, Kansas Democratic state senators Eugene Anderson of Wichita and Bill Mulich of KCK argued against the veto, writing that it “could prove to be the death penalty for the efforts of the many citizens of Wyandotte County to preserve the ruins.”⁶³ Additionally, the senators argued the veto was particularly unjust, given that Hayden appropriated hundreds of thousands of dollars to the renovation of Constitution Hall in Lecompton, Kansas, the historical site of the signing of the pro-slavery Lecompton Constitution during the Bleeding Kansas period. By failing to preserve Quindaro, the senators argued, the state was “conjuring up visions of Lecompton once again.”⁶⁴

Shortly afterwards, the statue of John Brown, located on the edge of the proposed landfill site, was vandalized with orange paint. In response to this, Marvin Robinson wrote that ‘they will never be able to deface, destroy the tenacious, electromagnetic force in the Sacred Quindaro Ruins, not ever. Not a bomb or anything could destroy the deep infinite affection millions of black, underclass citizens have for people like Harriet Tubman and cooperatives of their time.’⁶⁵ Government officials routinely failed to recognize the relevancy that Quindaro had to the lives of Black residents in Kansas City. To Robinson and other activists, Quindaro represented Black emancipation in a nation that would deny them

⁶² Sherri Fickel, “Hayden Vetoes Quindaro Bill,” *Kansas City Times*, May 11, 1988, Kansas Room, Kansas City Kansas Public Library.

⁶³ Eugene Anderson and Bill Mulich, “Gov. Hayden Wrong to Veto Bill to Preserve Quindaro,” *The Wichita Eagle-Beacon*, May 27, 1988, 3D.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Marvin Robinson, “Environmental Sabbath Prayer Friday in Front of John Brown Statue, Defaced,” *The Call*, May 3, 1988, Kansas Room, Kansas City Kansas Public Library.

freedom. There is symbolic meaning in the connections activists made between their struggle against the government to a broader movement of Black liberation.

As an activist and resident of the Northeast, Robinson believed the fight for preserving Quindaro was a matter of civil rights. In August 1988, protesters pursued a US Congressional field hearing which requires a notarized petition by eligible voters. The Wyandotte County Election Commissioner, Elizabeth Malloy, reportedly refused to verify the petition's signatures in her office, stating that it was not a "binding issue." In response, Robinson wrote in *The Call* that white American citizens "can ask for a US Congressional Hearing whereas the Underclass is still perceived as mostly beast and only proportionally human, as the US Constitution was originally written."⁶⁶ Robinson believed that the federal government would not prioritize the concerns of Black residents over the financial interests of BFI. This sentiment would later affect residents' perception of future endeavors by the federal government to preserve Quindaro.

By 1987, opposition to the landfill had become increasingly organized. The movement had previously consisted of disparate community activist groups such as the Concerned Citizens of Old Quindaro and the Quindaro Town Preservation Society. Still, it evolved into a coalition of preservationists, healthcare providers, and environmental activists. In the profile of Browning-Ferris Industries, the Citizen's Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste argued that confronting the corporation was akin to fighting a behemoth. It warns against challenging BFI in the courts, noting that it is "quite prepared to do battle with you in this forum" due to its armies of corporate lawyers.⁶⁷ The report also notes that elected

⁶⁶ Marvin Robinson, "Writer Says, 'Look at the U.S., All Over, People's Health Being Destroyed,'" *The Call*, August 5, 1988, Kansas Room, Kansas City Kansas Public Library.

⁶⁷ "Browning Ferris Industries," 29.

officials may not be helpful in the fight against BFI's corporate interests, as it understands and exercises the power of campaign contributions. "When you fight a company like BFI," the authors wrote, "you are automatically in a 'David against Goliath' role... in this country, there are only two main sources of power: People and Money. Which do you have?"⁶⁸

Marvin Robinson, who co-founded the Quindaro Town Preservation Society, documented the alliances between several groups to oppose the landfill. These groups included the Coalition for the Environment, Legal Defense Fund for Leonard Peltier, Kansas City Greens, KC Arts Institute, NAACP-KCK Branch, the John Brown Historical Association, Inc., and many regional churches.⁶⁹ Protesters did not have the financial resources to compete against the corporation. Still, they demonstrated their resourcefulness in drawing interest in the history of Old Quindaro and presenting the landfill as an environmental threat. Through coalition building, many residents of the Northeast found platforms to speak.

One such resident was an eleven-year-old Quindaro native who spoke at a Landmarks Commission hearing. She stated, "everybody's always saying 'the children are the future.' Why are they always destroying our future?"⁷⁰ Quindaro, to this young Black girl, and many other residents in Kansas City had a deep symbolic meaning, connected not only to the past but also to the future aspirations of the Black community. Nedra Bonds, an artist who created the celebrated Quindaro Quilt, wrote a letter to the Kansas State Senate Ways and Means Committee in 1988 calling on representatives to preserve the memory of Old Quindaro. "There is a story about a small area of Kansas City, Kansas that has been ignored for over one hundred years," Bonds wrote, "it represents a time in the history of our State and country

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Marvin Robinson, "Landmarks Commission Votes Against BFI's Requested 'Bulldozing' Permit," *The Call*, May 10, 1988, pg. 18. Kansas Room, Kansas City Kansas Public Library.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 18.

when people saw other people as property and treated them as such.”⁷¹ In closing, she wrote that she created the Quindaro Quilt to visualize the town's history for “500 plus children who attend present-day Quindaro elementary school in the hope that they will hear the story and someday apply its significance for their lives.” To this young girl and Bonds, Quindaro represented a promise for the region's future success – aspirations that the landfill would have inalterably destroyed.

Many other activists appealed to government officials to halt the landfill. Gerald Lee, a practicing physician in Kansas City, wrote a letter addressed to Mayor Joe Steineger in November 1987, urging him to exercise his power to halt the construction of the landfill. “Work is scheduled to begin soon on a landfill dump, approximately 200 feet from the Missouri River,” Dr. Lee wrote, “if this project is allowed to proceed, it will seriously threaten that water supply.”⁷² Dr. Lee also cited a 1984 EPA report on the threat of leachates at solid waste landfills – particularly manufacturing wastes, which may contain cyanide, cadmium, chromium, and chlorinated hydrocarbons. Leachate is a form of waste runoff created when liquids pass through toxic solid matter. They are a common occurrence in landfills, and despite preventative techniques by waste management companies, the EPA considered them an unmanageable risk associated with landfills. Lee further argued that the base of the site, based on U.S. Army Corps of Engineers projections, could be threatened by rising floodwaters. Lee’s letter was a broad appeal to the health and safety of Kansas Citians on either side of the state line. It cast doubt on BFI’s claims that it could control the

⁷¹ Nedra Bonds, “Letter from Nedra Bonds to the Kansas State Senate Ways and Means Committee,” March 15, 1988, Quindaro Collection; Series 2A; i. Legal Documentation, Kansas City Kansas Public Library - Kansas Room.

⁷² Gerald Lee, “Dr. Gerald Lee’s Letter to Mayor Steineger and Others,” Letter, November 22, 1987, Quindaro Collection; Series 2A; i. Legal Documentation, Kansas City Kansas Public Library - Kansas Room.

externalities related to solid waste landfills. Lee sent copies of the letter to Kansas Governor Mike Hayden, Missouri Governor John Ashcroft, KCMO Mayor Richard Berkley, the attorney generals of both states, Charles Linn with the KDHE, and many others. Lee and other healthcare professionals believed that the scope of a potential environmental disaster was too great to proceed with the landfill. By appealing to politicians on the other side of the state line, Lee made the implicit argument that any threat to the Missouri River was a threat to the entire region. This letter shows that a coalition was building against the landfill. The protests began as a localized initiative within the Quindaro neighborhood, primarily concerned with destroying a historic site. By 1987, it had turned into a matter of environment and public safety with a much broader scope.

CHAPTER 4

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT & GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION

Under significant pressure from a growing coalition of activists to intervene, the KDHE had no choice but to release a statement. The KDHE previously approved the lease agreement between the Commission of Kansas City and Browning-Ferris Industries, an issue that incensed protesters. Stanley C. Grant, the secretary of the KDHE, released a statement in May 1988, reiterating its continued approval of the landfill. Grant wrote that due to the design of the BFI facility, as agreed to as a condition of KDHE's approval, "the potential for adverse impact upon the Kansas City water supply is extremely low."⁷³ Grant did admit that the risk of "catastrophic failure" could occur due to an earthquake or other natural disaster but that the odds of significant contamination would be low due to the landfill only accepting limited amounts of household toxicants. Astoundingly, Grant called concerns that the landfill would pollute the Missouri River "asinine," citing the amount of "industrial waste and tons of animal waste that now pollute it."⁷⁴ In their assessment, the KDHE did not address the destruction of the Quindaro townsite, despite its historical significance being well-established by 1988. The statement concludes that if contamination of the Missouri River did occur, the "operator of the public water supply system would be obligated to provide adequate treatment of such contaminated water or obtain water from an alternative source for its customers." According to census records, there were 161,067 residents living in Kansas City, Kansas in 1980. As of the time that the KDHE released this statement, there was no emergency water source to rely upon if a catastrophic event did occur. Grant also did not

⁷³Stanley C. Grant, "Letter from Stanley C Grant, PhD. on Behalf of the Kansas Department of Health and Environment," May 31, 1988, Quindaro Collection; Series 2A; i. Legal Documentation, Kansas City Kansas Public Library - Kansas Room, 2.

⁷⁴"Save Old Quindaro," *The Wichita Eagle-Beacon*, October 15, 1988.

address the risk of flooding to the region, which had been a problem historically. Quindaro flooded at least twice in the 20th century: once in 1901 and again to a much greater degree in the Great Flood of 1951. Given that the KDHE was responsible for the health of the state's residents, it is shocking that they used this argument to defend its approval of the landfill. The KDHE did not want to take responsibility for the issue or admit that their earlier ruling was made in haste.

By October 1988, the prospects for halting the landfill were narrowing. The city council issued two votes early that month related to the crisis in Quindaro. The first was a motion to declare the Quindaro ruins as a city historic district, which failed 4-3, with Mayor Joe Steineger, and councilmen Chester Owens and Richard Ruiz voting in favor.⁷⁵ Secondly, the city council voted 5-2 to delay construction at the landfill, but that it could resume no later than the June 1, 1989. Increasingly frustrated with delays, BFI pulled funding for the excavation of the site, despite agreements to see it through completion. Larry J. Schmits, the lead archaeologist contracted by BFI, was concerned that some of the artifacts still remaining on the site might deteriorate. When interviewed by the *Wyandotte County Star*, Schmits stated, "If our study is held up for many months, there's going to be a loss of information."⁷⁶ Unfortunately, Schmits's concern was well-founded, as BFI never resumed the project. Preservation would have required one of the following: intervention by the state government, termination of a lease agreement between the AME Church and BFI, or a lawsuit filed by the municipal government. State senator Jack Steineger, who represented the district, stated that "in all honestly it's rather doubtful," that the city would be able to preserve the ruins, because

⁷⁵ Phillip O'Connor, "Hopes for Saving Quindaro Town Ruins Dim," *The Wyandotte County Star*, October 19, 1988.

⁷⁶ Lisa Currin, "Halt in Quindaro Excavation Could Be Costly for Archeologists," *The Wyandotte County Star*, June 7, 1989, pg. 6.

any action by the AME Church or the City Council to breach their contracts with BFI would require immense payouts to the corporation.⁷⁷ State intervention was expected to cost more than two million dollars in payouts to BFI. The AME Church stated that they could not do anything, short of seeing if the state would purchase the property from BFI. An attorney for the church, Elmer C. Jackson, Jr., stated that “as far as the lease was concerned, any discussion will be put on hold until the Legislature decides what it wants to do.”⁷⁸

Increasingly, activists turned to the state legislators to act, understanding that neither the city nor the AME Church had the resources to break their obligations to BFI.

By the end of the year, the controversy over the landfill had become so intense that it caught the attention of national newspapers, including *The Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, and *The Atlanta Constitution*.⁷⁹ In the following month, officials from the Kansas City, Missouri government urged KCK to “find another site for the landfill after a city consultant forecast a 90 percent chance of contaminants from the landfill entering the river within 30 years,” corroborating Gerald Lee’s and other environmentalists’ claims of the landfill posing a regional threat.⁸⁰ Contamination of the Missouri River would have had a downstream effect for much of the Kansas City metropolitan area. Johnson County, at the time, received some of its public water from the Board of Public Utilities in KCK, and Kansas City, Missouri sourced its public water supply from the river further downstream. State legislators increasingly recognized that they needed to become involved, and in January

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Phillip O’Connor, “Church Awaits Decision on Quindaro Landfill,” *The Kansas City Star*, December 13, 1988, sec. 4.

⁷⁹ Respectively: Eric Harrison, “Ruins of Village Symbolize Slaves’ Flight to Freedom,” *The Los Angeles Times*, December 28, 1988; William Robbins, “Abolitionist Port Focus of Dig on the Missouri,” *The New York Times*, August 20, 1987, sec. A; “Kansas Town Divided Over Future of Slave-Era Ruins,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, January 22, 1989.

⁸⁰ Rick Alm, “Firm Halts Preservation at Quindaro Town Ruins,” *The Kansas City Star*, November 20, 1988.

1989, two lawmakers from KCK prepared bills to stop the landfill. Representative Bill Wisdom sought to “nullify a permit issued by the Kansas Department of Health and Environment,” which was necessary for BFI to continue construction at the site.⁸¹ Additionally, the bill prohibited the construction of landfills within a mile of public water intakes. Wisdom cited the risk of contamination as the primary justification for the bill. Representative Sherman Jones introduced a bill for the state to purchase the site for around two million dollars but stated that the money was not currently in the governor’s proposed budget.⁸² Ultimately, Wisdom’s bill was advanced onto the Kansas House floor in April 1989 where it passed overwhelmingly but was quickly tabled until January 1990 by the Kansas Senate after an attorney for BFI addressed the Energy and Natural Resources Committee for half an hour.⁸³

Quindaro, many protesters believed, was not going to be saved. Less than a month before BFI could begin construction, Fred Whitehead, secretary of the Quindaro Town Preservation Society (QTPS), claimed that the community was “at a crisis situation,” and that the community “is resolved not to let this happen.”⁸⁴ Marvin Robinson, Fred Whitehead, and other activists with the QTPS began to prepare activists to physically block BFI’s bulldozers at the beginning of the following month. Resident John Giltner wrote a letter to *The Kansas Star*, stating that the city council of KCK “refused to stand up to Browning-Ferris and the Kansas Legislature did no better... Browning-Ferris is only interested in taking our money, it is not interested in the health and safety of our people. Public officials are paid to protect us,

⁸¹ Jim Sullinger, “Legislators Hope to Save Quindaro,” *The Kansas City Star*, January 25, 1989.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Lynn Byczynski, “Here’s How Effort to Block Quindaro Landfill Fell Short,” *The Kansas City Times*, May 4, 1989, sec. A.

⁸⁴ Phillip O’Connor, “Landfill Foes Wage 11th-Hour Battle in KCK,” *The Kansas City Star*, May 12, 1989, sec. A.

and it looks like they are not doing a very good job.”⁸⁵ Facing the June 1st deadline, mounting outrage by their constituents, and a potential circular firing squad of lawsuits, the city council members convened again in May to delay the construction date, asking for 120 days for consultants to determine whether the landfill was likely to pollute the Missouri River.

The city council contracted two environmental consultancy firms to determine the safety of the landfill. The first was Shannon & Wilson, Inc. (S&W), who conducted a technical evaluation of BFI’s proposal. In the report, S&W stated that the “landfill can be constructed and operated safely” based on the specifications of BFI’s preventative measures.⁸⁶ S&W admitted that residential landfills could develop significant accumulations of toxic substances, such as biocides, which could threaten the environment if not properly contained. Nevertheless, S&W believed that BFI could minimize contamination risks through source control and visual inspection of waste at the time of collection and policing at the time of disposal. Since the Plattco Sanitary Landfill, which BFI operated, was found guilty of unlawfully collecting toxic industrial waste at the site, S&W had plenty of reason to doubt the safety of BFI’s operating procedures. It was, therefore, an optimistic conclusion by S&W that BFI would follow the regulatory guidelines that it agreed to for the Quindaro siting. S&W also addressed the potential of slope failure at the site, stating that while it was a concern for any landfill, “both the stability and the environmental effects of slope failure can be controlled.”⁸⁷ The site was a sloped valley that empties into the Missouri River. It is a 300-foot slope from the top of the bluff to the riverbank, making it topographically challenging to contain a landfill. A handwritten note in the margin of the S&W report by

⁸⁵ John Giltner, “Letters to the Editor: Planning New Hazard,” *The Kansas City Star*, May 14, 1989, sec. D.

⁸⁶ William L. Shannon, “Proposed Landfill Permit Application Evaluation” (Shannon & Wilson, Inc., September 28, 1989), i.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

Betty Roberts, co-founder of the Quindaro Town Preservation Society, stated that the “land is so soft the town has been covered 130 years by dirt, then shrubs and large trees.”⁸⁸ Very few knew about Old Quindaro precisely because the land had eroded and covered the site in soil and fallen trees. S&W endangered the community through its assumptions of good faith by an offending corporation and by downplaying the consequences of a failure at the landfill. In truth, the outcomes would be catastrophic, impacting the lives of hundreds of thousands of Kansas Citians. Members of the city council, for their part, were outraged by the report. Upon meeting with its author, Chester Owens responded that it was “the most ridiculous report I have seen since I’ve been on the City Council.”⁸⁹ Emanuel Cleaver, then city councilman in Kansas City, Missouri, stated “our technicians are still convinced that building a dump on the banks of the Missouri River is dangerous and that it threatens our water supply.”⁹⁰ Cleaver suggested that if KCK proceeded with allowing the landfill that KCMO would have no choice but to bring the matter to court.

In early December 1989, BFI stated that they were going to proceed with bulldozing the site. In response, the city council responded by filing an injunction against the corporation in the Wyandotte County District Court. It also filed a suit against BFI, charging that they violated the terms of the special-use permit from the 1984 lease agreement.⁹¹ The city’s legal department sought the services of another environmental consultancy firm from Virginia, Versar, Inc., to provide technical expertise on the threat of landfill pollution at the Quindaro site. Versar, Inc., found several faults in S&W’s report. The author, Wesley L.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Mark Bocchetti, “Quindaro Landfill Seen as No Danger to Water,” *The Kansas City Times*, September 29, 1989, sec. B.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Phillip O’Connor, “KCK Sues to Stop Landfill at Quindaro,” *The Kansas City Star*, January 25, 1990, sec. 4.

Bradford, wrote that “by the location alone, this landfill poses some potential risk of contamination to the river from surface runoff and from groundwater leaching” and that the site was, therefore, a poor location for a landfill.⁹² He also indicated that the Missouri River was the sole source of drinking water for Kansas City on both sides of the state line and that contamination of the river could impact the lives of more than a half-million residents. Moreover, despite S&W arguing that interventions could mitigate residential toxic waste by collection companies and intake control by employees at the landfill, Bradford argued that BFI could not reasonably enforce preventative measures due to the sheer volume of waste expected at the site. Bradford agreed with an earlier 1983 environmental impact report by Black and Veatch, which “noted that areas along the Missouri River were likely to be unsuitable due to potential flooding and groundwater problems” and that there were “many more suitable locations within convenient access of the city.”⁹³ Due to the inherent risks posed by the physical realities of the proposed Quindaro landfill, Bradford concluded that the chance of catastrophic failure could not “be engineered into non-existence” and that BFI should not proceed with completing the landfill.⁹⁴ While Versar did corroborate many of the concerns of residents of environmental activists, the report still warrants critique for its omissions. The KDHE, S&W, and Versar all failed to include the historical value of Quindaro and the tremendous importance it had to the lives of Black communities living in Kansas City. The environmental impact reports described the proposed landfill as incorporating “state-of-the-art” technologies to prevent groundwater contamination and runoff, but they actively ignored BFI’s broader business practices throughout the country.

⁹² Wesley L. Bradford, “Letter to KCK Mayor Joseph Steineger from Versar, Inc.,” March 16, 1990, Quindaro Collection; Series 2A; i. Legal Documentation, Kansas City Kansas Public Library - Kansas Room. Pg. 1.

⁹³ Ibid, 2.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 5.

In February 1991, members of the Kansas House of Representatives reintroduced a bill to outlaw any landfill operations “within a half-mile of either a navigable stream or any intake pipe leading to a public water supply.”⁹⁵ The sponsor, Representative Sherman Jones, claimed that the rationale for the bill was to protect the health and economy of the greater metropolitan area. Kansas Governor Joan Finney sent administrators to meet with the QTPS and to tour the historic site. Martha Walker, Finney’s secretary stated that the governor’s interest “simply is not to lose something if there are artifacts or remains that are a significant part of Kansas history.”⁹⁶ The bill was, again, unanimously supported by both the Kansas House and the Kansas State Senate. In May of the same year, Governor Finney signed the bill at 27th and Sewell Ave. in front of the John Brown statue, permanently ending BFI’s claim to the site. BFI eventually sued the city government of Kansas City, seeking 52 million dollars in damages, which was settled in late 1991 for \$900,000 instead.⁹⁷ After nearly a decade of struggle, protesters triumphed over Browning-Ferris Industries, but the victory was somewhat bittersweet. The governments of KCK, Wyandotte County, and the state of Kansas never appropriated funds for finishing the dig. The Kansas City Kansas Community College led efforts in the early 2000s to continue the dig and restore the site, but these efforts did not go far enough due to a lack of funding.

Activists captured the attention of the lawmakers and the general public by focusing on the landfill as a matter of public health. In 1989, candidates for the city council in KCK nearly unanimously opposed the BFI landfill, but they stated that “Quindaro’s historical

⁹⁵ Scott Canon, “Lawmakers Offer Bill to Stop Quindaro Landfill,” *The Kansas City Star*, February 14, 1991. Pg. C-6.

⁹⁶ Regina Akers, “Quindaro Landfill Dispute Captures Finney’s Attention,” *The Kansas City Star*, February 28, 1991.

⁹⁷ Phillip O’Connor, “Ruins Owner to Sue City Over Landfill Action,” *The Kansas City Star*, April 15, 1993. Pg. 2.

significance was not their primary concern.”⁹⁸ To oppose Browning Ferris Industries, the second largest waste management corporation in the world, residents of the Northeast had to develop strong coalitions outside of their immediate community. They achieved this by making the politics of the landfill relevant to the Kansas City area as a whole by arguing that it threatened the entire region. According to a *Chicago Tribune* article in April 1989, Marvin Robinson understood that the site could not be preserved by appeals to Quindaro’s past alone. The critical mass of opposition against the landfill did not form until 1989.

Community activists succeeded because they transformed an issue that was fundamentally about race into one about public health. After all, while Black residents of the Northeast would have borne most of the toxic cost of the landfill, white residents of greater Kansas City would have been affected indirectly through deteriorating water quality. In a way, activists appealed to NIMBYism by expanding the boundaries of the backyard.

⁹⁸ Sherri Fickel, “KCK Candidates Criticize Plans for Landfill at Old Quindaro Site,” *The Kansas City Times*, March 27, 1989, sec. B.

CHAPTER 5

MEMORY

Quindaro's role in the Underground Railroad network was once a divisive subject, as the Kansas Historical Society (KSHS) doubted Quindaro's "validity as a point on the Underground Railroad because of scant evidence."⁹⁹ Historians, including Dan Pankratz from the KSHS working for the state of Kansas maintained, even after the archaeological dig, that the narratives of escaped enslaved people fleeing across the frozen Missouri River resided within the realm of folklore rather than historical fact. Larry Schmits, the archaeologist hired by BFI to conduct the archaeological survey went on record to say that the "folklore of the area has overshadowed the facts," and that the real value of the excavation "lies in the artifacts that reveal how people lived 125 years ago, not in the ruins."¹⁰⁰ Later, when asked about claims that Quindaro was part of the Underground Railroad network, he responded "It's a legend, pure and simple."¹⁰¹ Orrin M. Murray, a Black lifelong resident of Quindaro, could not have disagreed more. Murray, who was 87 at the height of the controversy in 1988, believed that his family was among the evidence of Quindaro's profound legacy. Murray's father Sanford was born in the boomtown, and his grandfather Philip was born into slavery, but escaped with his family to Quindaro. In a remarkable article in *The Wichita Eagle-Beacon*, Murray recounted attending the unveiling of the statue of John Brown at Western University in 1911, at an institution that he would later attend and teach in. According to the article, he grieved the loss of the school, and he then grieved the imminent destruction of

⁹⁹ Regina Akers, "Quindaro Is a Ruin, but Its Spirit Lives," *The Kansas City Star*, February 28, 1993, sec. B.

¹⁰⁰ Jean Hays, "Freedom Road Is New Battleground," *The Wichita Eagle-Beacon*, February 1, 1988, sec. A.

¹⁰¹ Michael Tackett, "Landfill May Bury History - Or Just a Legend," *Chicago Tribune*, April 12, 1989.

Quindaro. Murray did not give names, “but it was his pastor and the bishop of his church” that leased the land to BFI. “They sold Murray’s past,” the article concludes.¹⁰²

Black oral traditions related to Quindaro were frequently overlooked or repudiated by historians and government officials. The absence of physical evidence of the site enabled them to believe that Quindaro, while perhaps a real place in the past, held little to no real historical value. Certainly, mythmaking was an element of public remembrance of Quindaro. In 1984, for instance, a generational resident of the area Jesse Hope III claimed that enslaved people fled through a tunnel underneath the Missouri River.¹⁰³ There were also several stories told about John Brown living in a cave in the Quindaro bluffs, which could not be corroborated with historical evidence. Government officials, historians, and the journalists involved in the struggle over the landfill used exaggerated claims and myths as evidence against the validity of preserving the site. Even after the landfill crisis was over and the archaeological dig preserved hundreds of artifacts, government officials cast doubt on Quindaro’s role in the Underground Railroad. In 1993, Barbara Tagger, a historian within the National Park Service (NPS) cast doubt on Quindaro being included in an upcoming commemoration of an Underground Railroad commemoration hosted by the NPS. Tagger claimed that “the oral tradition has been a significant part of the African American tradition and culture,” but that “oral history is not traditionally used in the National Park Service.”¹⁰⁴

Nevertheless, many of the stories passed through the generations of Black residents of the area were ultimately substantiated by records, journals, and artifacts uncovered through the archaeological dig in the 1980s and research conducted in the succeeding decades.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Joe Lambe, “Groups Hope to Locate Freedom Tunnel,” *Wyandotte County Star*, March 7, 1984.

¹⁰⁴ “Lack of Documents Blocks Preservation of Slave Escape Route,” *St. Joseph News-Press*, March 1, 1993, sec. C.

Researchers discovered a letter from geologist Benjamin Franklin Mudge, who was a resident of Quindaro. “About two weeks ago eight contrabands came over from Missouri one night and we took a woman and three children to keep till they could get a better place,” Mudge wrote, “The blacks are frequently coming over on the ice and very often go back to get others away.”¹⁰⁵ Clarina Nichols, a noteworthy suffragist, advocate for temperance, and abolitionist also acknowledged Quindaro’s role in the Underground Railroad. While her newspaper, *The Chindowan*, denied that escaped enslaved people regularly traveled through Quindaro, she later admitted that she and many others in Quindaro were involved in guiding them to freedom.¹⁰⁶ Today, there is consensus among historians that Quindaro was a pathway to freedom for enslaved Missourians and that it linked to the Lane Trail north into Nebraska. Quindaro provides many lessons, but among them is a reminder to historians to take seriously the oral traditions of historically marginalized groups of people.

The contest over memory persists into the present day. Nearly 30 years later, in April 2018, Freedom’s Frontier hosted a symposium for Quindaro titled *Strength Through Numbers*. The purpose of the event was to commemorate Quindaro and to promote scholarship on the site to a broader public audience. In preparation for the symposium, Freedom’s Frontier, the Wyandotte County Library, and the Wyandot Nation of Kansas City conducted interviews with residents of the Northeast. Among those interviewed were Herbert Harris, Sylvia Daniels, and Joe Strickland, all Black residents of the city. These interviews reflect the wide range of aspirations for securing Quindaro as a place of historical relevancy – to residents as a whole, but Black residents particularly – and as an integral part of the

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Diane Eickhoff, *Revolutionary Heart: The Life of Clarina Nichols and the Pioneering Crusade for Women’s Rights* (Quindaro Press, 2021), 10; Tim Janicke, “The Quindaro Question,” *The Kansas City Star*, June 6, 1999.

region's public memory. Their narratives reflect the many ways that the public remembers Quindaro.

Herbert Harris was the descendant of enslaved people who fled from Independence, crossing over the Missouri River to arrive in Quindaro and an educator at Northwest Middle School. When asked whether his students were familiar with the history, he responded, "they're disenfranchised of their own history... a lot of our kids don't have anything to be proud of."¹⁰⁷ Scholars of American slavery have, over time, offered new interpretations challenging the view that enslaved Black people passively endured their condition. Instead, they stress a narrative of resistance, self-determination, and agency. Harris demonstrates that the overarching narrative of passivity still impacts the self-esteem of young Black men and women in negative ways. In Quindaro, Harris sees an opportunity to connect to a painful past where his ancestors were treated as property but where they did not behave as if they were property. Later in the interview, he emphasized that Quindaro's past is connected to the community's future, stressing the many lessons of the townsite. Harris described Quindaro as "a union of people struggling against, it sprang up from adversity and inhumanity."¹⁰⁸ Many of the settlers to the region forged partnerships with the Wyandot people who existed in the area, but whites largely abandoned it following the Civil War. It turned into a predominantly Black settlement afterwards, becoming the site of Western University, arguably the first Black university west of the Mississippi River. Quindaro, according to Harris, is the site of resistance and resilience of Black folks living in the region. Still, he lamented the current state of the ruins, which he described as overgrown and uncared for. "I understand that

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Herbert Harris, interview by Elizabeth Hobson, February 4, 2017, Quindaro Oral History Project, Kansas City Kansas Public Library - Kansas Room. 6:22.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 37:22.

everything takes money,” Harris said, but “who would do that, and how would they do that?”¹⁰⁹ The site's future is still unclear three years after the 2019 designation as a National Commemorative Site by the National Parks Service.

Sylvia Daniels stressed the importance of ongoing community activism in Kansas City, explaining her involvement in a march to remember Quindaro in 1998. After reminiscing about Marvin Robinson’s leadership in the fight against the landfill and his efforts to promote the site with the NPS, she said, “people have spent their lives and fortunes to secure this site who are not wealthy. They’re grassroots human beings that should be honored.”¹¹⁰ The fight against the landfill and to commemorate Quindaro was indeed started by residents of the Northeast, which is a historically impoverished district of the city. This story is significant for many reasons, but it is remarkable that despite access to financial resources, the community succeeded in a contest with a multinational corporate conglomerate. When asked how the site should be preserved, Daniels responded, “what I’d like to have happen is for people to realize we have political enemies and governmental enemies who have fought featuring this site. It’s going to be the people that are going to have to bring this about. They won’t help. They have stifled everything for thirty years from moving forward.”¹¹¹ To Daniels, the fight over commemoration was not over, but it was something that the community needed to continue to mobilize over. The distrust that Daniels and other residents have over government action at the site stems from historical legacies of discrimination and neglect, certainly concerning the landfill initiative in the 1980s, but also to more general trends of disinvestment in the Northeast by the local government. This

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 8:43.

¹¹⁰ Interview with Sylvia Daniels, interview by Toure Kathryn, February 4, 2017, Quindaro Oral History Project, Kansas City Kansas Public Library - Kansas Room. 4:45.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 15:36.

interview and the articles written by Marvin Robinson showed a desire to connect Quindaro to a broader movement for Black civil rights in the nation. Like Mr. Harris, Ms. Daniels believed that Quindaro represented a movement toward freedom for Black folks in the region.

Like the other narrators, Joe Strickland argued that there was still much work to do for Quindaro. In response to a question about his interest in Quindaro, Strickland responded that he would “like to see people continue to pick up the baton and push it forward in the 21st century.”¹¹² He also spoke about the shifting meaning of the site, saying, “what that space means to a generation, or its interpretation is different from time to time.”¹¹³ He believed that Quindaro should be transformed into a space of both historical commemoration and as an economic center for the Black community in the Northeast. To Strickland, this meant commercializing the site with gift shops, skywalks, outdoor theaters, and corporate developments, similar to what the AME Church desired to do in the early 1990s, to the chagrin of Quindaro natives. One of the lessons of Quindaro is the importance of place. Place derives meaning from culture and identity – in many cases, these places do not simply represent the past but also the aspirations of communities’ futures. To Strickland, these aspirations for the future meant the neighborhood's economic revitalization and transforming the community into both a commercially and culturally rich location in Kansas City. While this notion may be troubling to preservationists, it should also be understood against the historical disinvestment in Black urban spaces by the Kansas City, Kansas government.

¹¹² Joe Strickland, Interview with Joe Strickland, interview by Paul Wenske, February 4, 2017, Quindaro Oral History Project, Kansas City Kansas Public Library - Kansas Room.

¹¹³ Ibid.

CONCLUSION

In his interview, Mr. Harris reminisced about the times when Quindaro thrived as a community, and its residents had access to public services when Black businesses thrived in the region, and a shared sense of purpose bound its residents. Now, Harris refers to the neighborhood as belonging to the “ghetto.” If Harris’s assessment is correct, Quindaro was “ghettoized” through deliberate neglect by the KCK government. Residents of the Northeast noted the gradual decline in municipal services in the 1980s. One Black business owner in the area named Eli Horn stated to the *Kansan* in 1986 that “we still have the buildings and exactly what it takes to make this a viable community again, despite the fact the city has abandoned us.”¹¹⁴ Another white resident also reported that when he called the city about problems in Quindaro, he was asked, “why in the hell don’t you move out from down there?”¹¹⁵ Very basically, this question demonstrates that the area was both imagined as a Black space by this city official and, consequently, less deserving of municipal services. As in other spaces throughout the United States, the city government disinvested resources from the community as white residents left. The underlying logic to this behavior, conscious or not, is the preservation of white supremacy through economic means. This logic was unmistakable in many of the actions by KCK and Kansas state officials throughout the history of the landfill, and it should be understood as part of a broader phenomenon of structural violence against Black communities.

Certainly, BFI had been criticized for discriminatory behavior before. BFI was listed as a defendant along with the city of Houston and the state of Texas in *Bean v. Southwestern*

¹¹⁴ Robert L. Walker, “Area Undergoes Changes Throughout the Years,” *Kansas City Kansan*, March 14, 1986, Kansas Room, Kansas City Kansas Public Library.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Waste Management Corp. in the US District Court of Southern Texas in 1979. The plaintiffs in this class action suit were the residents of Northwood Manor, which was 82% Black.¹¹⁶ They charged that BFI and government agencies engaged in discriminatory targeting of their community. The court ruled that the siting “decision was ‘insensitive and illogical’ but that the plaintiffs had not demonstrated ‘discriminatory intent’ on the basis of race, making cases of this type difficult for plaintiffs to win.”¹¹⁷ Discriminatory intent is difficult to definitely prove in cases of institutional racism. Kwame Ture and Charles V. Hamilton wrote in *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* that racism takes both overt and covert forms. “When white terrorists bomb a black church and kill five black children, that is an act of individual racism,” and widely deplored, the authors wrote, but when “five hundred black babies die each year because of the lack of proper food, shelter, and medical facilities... that is a function of institutional racism,” and does not cause moral panic.¹¹⁸ Ture and Hamilton go on to describe institutional racism by another name: colonialism. In most cases of environmental racism, intent is not directly discernible. Intent can only be found in the disproportionate exposure of communities of color to PCBs, lead, particulates, and other types of toxins and pollutants. For these reasons, it is difficult to find conclusive overt evidence of corporate or governmental racism in the history of the Quindaro landfill. Indeed, many of the businessmen, lawmakers, and other historical actors must have believed that their actions were devoid of racist intent. We must instead examine the evidence, and the potential

¹¹⁶ *Bean v. Southwestern Waste Management Corp.*, 482 D. Supp. 673, No. H-79-2215 (US District Court for the Southern District of Texas, December 21, 1979).

¹¹⁷ Martin V. Melosi, *Garbage In The Cities: Refuse Reform and the Environment* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt5vkf00>, 212.

¹¹⁸ Kwame Ture and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 4.

outcomes of their actions, and determine whether they would fit into a broader pattern of discriminatory targeting of communities of color.

This history reveals the power imbalances between the state and the residents of Quindaro. The sources speak to a dismissal of Black residents' health and their symbolic attachment to the region.¹¹⁹ The Quindaro landfill fight should be more broadly examined as a case study, as there is substantial evidence linking the actions of BFI and government officials to a broad, underlying pattern of environmental racism. In Quindaro, like in Flint three decades later, officials prioritized economic expediency before the health and well-being of Black residents. Denial of a safe environment, clean air, and clean water is a form of social injustice and structural violence. In the case of Quindaro, this violence involves dimensions of socioeconomics and race. Government officials, however, imagined Quindaro as "Black space," both in that the area's history was connected to a Black past and in the fact that residents of the community were overwhelmingly Black by the 1980s. City managers viewed Quindaro as a location where value could be extracted through the destruction of a historical landscape and, in the process, disproportionately expose Black residents to toxic wastes.

The Quindaro landfill did not emerge from a vacuum. Similar incidents of racist toxic exposure occurred throughout the United States, from the rural deep south in places like Anniston, Georgia, and Cancer Alley in Louisiana, to the urban north in Flint, Michigan, and the Asthma Alley in the Bronx. A 2016 report by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality showed that Black children, on average, are nearly five times more likely to be

¹¹⁹ Joe Lambe, "Groups Hope to Locate 'Freedom Tunnel,'" *Wyandotte County Star*, March 7, 1984, Wednesday Extra edition; Marquis Shepard, "KCK Landfill Foes Trying Historical Argument," *The Kansas City Times*, April 22, 1983, Metropolitan Edition, sec. B.

admitted to the hospital for asthma than white children.¹²⁰ These realities are the product of a deeply rooted racist colonial structure interacting with the logic of neoliberal capitalism. Historian Lisa Lowe wrote that racial capitalism “exploits through culturally and socially constructed differences such as race, gender, region and nationality and is lived through those uneven formations.”¹²¹ Municipal governments throughout the United States target communities of color as exploitable populations who ought to bear the externalities of polluting corporations by merit of race and caste. The Kansas City municipal government and the state of Kansas exploited multiple measures of value in the Black community of Quindaro. The Browning-Ferris landfill would have put thousands of Black lives at risk, not only of exposure to toxic chemicals through the water supply but also of a lower quality of life due to the proximity to the landfill, lower property values, and the destruction of a symbolic heritage site.

Officials from BFI, local journalists, and city officials claimed that Quindaro was largely an imagined community or that its historical significance was grossly exaggerated. Some of the claims made by members of the community, such as the contentious story of John Brown living in a tunnel in Quindaro, are not supported by any historical evidence. Nevertheless, the story of Quindaro was preserved through the rich oral traditions of residents of the Northeast. The presence of these stories and the persistence of the community led to an archaeological dig, bringing to the surface a town widely assumed to exist in the realm of folklore. Because of these activists and storytellers, the history of

¹²⁰ Frida Garza, “America’s Dirty Divide: How Environmental Racism Leaves the Vulnerable Behind,” *The Guardian*, February 11, 2021, sec. US news, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/feb/11/environmental-racism-americas-dirty-divide>.

¹²¹ Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, Illustrated edition (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2015), 149.

Quindaro has survived. In 2019, the National Park Service designated Quindaro as a National Commemorative Site, but the community is still fighting for national recognition and investment in the development of the archaeological site. Urban historian Dolores Hayden wrote that public space can help create a “more profound, subtle, and inclusive sense of what it means to be an American.”¹²² In Quindaro, there are three eras of liberation that public audiences can connect to and find inspiration in – the boomtown and the fight to end slavery, Western University and the struggle for economic and educational parity, and the successful defense of a deeply meaningful heritage site by residents and environmental justice activists. Preservation efforts are a contested terrain as residents disagree over the means of commemorating Quindaro. The efforts are further complicated by the realities of property ownership, as the AME Church owns more than 100 acres of the ruins. Many residents remember the role of the church in leasing the site to BFI, and there remains bitter distrust over their curation of the site. Nevertheless, there is a sense of agreement about the intrinsic value of Quindaro. The deep meaning of the place was neither imagined nor exaggerated – it is instead a story that never received the attention it deserved.

¹²² Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1997), 9.

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