Historical marker in Old Quindaro Cemetery dedicated to “seekers of freedom.” Courtesy of Tai S. Edwards.
The More Things Change...

by Rev. Stacy R. Evans

The first thing you notice when visiting Quindaro today is just how old everything still feels. First, let’s establish that the portion we are talking about preserving is inside a larger area that many consider Quindaro. Quindaro Boulevard, which turns into Brown Street for a few blocks and then into Leavenworth Road all the way to Leavenworth, is a mile or two from the designated historical area. If you know anything about the final land agreement between the Delaware and Wyandot Nations, you know that Quindaro was once about 300 acres of land on the eastern end of what eventually became Kansas City, Kansas. It stretched from the Kansas River to at least Parallel Parkway, going north to south, and from the Missouri River near Fifth Street to at least the cemetery near Thirty-Eighth Street, going east to west. To some degree, much of Wyandotte County feels left behind. Even GPS systems direct visitors through this winding backcountry by the river where sheep and pigs still graze, and it is not uncommon to see people riding horses to the corner store. The 103 or so acres of the historical designated area still bend around the original heart of the town’s business district. The area also encompasses Happy Hollow, to which it is believed that the slaves were “happy” to make it, the cemetery, and the once-upon-a-time campus of Western University, the first and only black college to ever exist in the state of Kansas. It still feels like an old freeport town.

Up on the bluffs, the land is dotted with more houses and neighborhoods than an unfamiliarized eye will ever see. People still live in this area, which only very recently gained access to cable or Internet. Though mostly poor people live in the surrounding area, senior citizens still reside here who were once among the elite of Kansas City, Kansas, socialites

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who are former schoolteachers, politicians, railroad and automobile workers, doctors, lawyers, musicians, engineers, carpenters, and artisans. Indeed, when I first came to pastor at Allen Chapel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church just ten years ago, I found members who had graduated from Western University and had lived and served in the area. The last living Western University graduate from our church passed away in December 2018. Today, Allen Chapel has fifty members, most of whom travel from suburban Missouri and Kansas homes to this church of their mothers and fathers, their grandmothers and grandfathers, who raised them in Quindaro. There is a die-hard commitment to keep this church going, so they come to serve the community that served them and to work for growth and change. We don’t see many newcomers to the area or the church, although there is an apartment complex up the hill that keeps a steady flow of transients—here today, gone tomorrow. But for the most part, this little corner is fairly quiet. The violent crimes that people hear about are out beyond the 635 overpass that cut off this once prominent African American community. What little commerce exists is also beyond the overpass on Quindaro Boulevard, about a mile up the road. No grocery stores or recreation centers, only liquor stores, dollar stores, and auto mechanic garages. If lucky, people still work for the railroad or have plant jobs; many are retired, retired veterans, or unemployed.

Our church service and outreach look like those of any other church—worship, choirs, youth activities, a food pantry for those in need—except that we as a congregation feel a great responsibility to hold on to and preserve the history and ruins of both Old Quindaro township and
Western University because many can remember playing in their family homes down in the Old Town and hearing about the glory days of Western University. I believe a couple of the main things that have hindered the preservation efforts involve the situation of revolving leaders. Certainly, in the AME church, a system that is itinerant, preachers are moved very often. Similarly, mayors and city officials come and go. There are other stakeholders, such as the Wyandot Nation of Kansas and the Old Quindaro Museum, but as major landowners, the AME Church and the Unified Government of Wyandotte County hold the power and the burden of seeing it through.

Freedom's Frontier, a federal national heritage area, has been instrumental in pulling all of the parties together. In the past, there have been some undeniable tensions. Today we have held enough civil meetings to identify some common goals, the first of which was to hold a symposium. Freedom’s Frontier then led the planning and put on an open-to-the-public forum with a level of professionalism and education concerning Quindaro that was overwhelming. This event facilitated a historical clarity that brought together even more partnerships that will be instrumental in moving us toward our goal of completing signs and trails through the ruins of our recently designated National Commemorative Site and hopefully securing National Landmark status, which is currently under consideration. [KH]