African American soldiers and civilians at a Works Progress Administration recreation center in Kansas City, Kansas.
I have not devoted the same kind of research attention to Quindaro’s past as other historians included in this collection. In some ways, that detachment, that ability to approach the topic as an outsider with no horse in the race, proves beneficial for my task, which is to offer a set of suggestions about take-aways: what can we as scholars, preservationists, and community-builders learn from the story of this place?

The first lesson which seems most apparent is that the efforts of the last 30-odd years at commemoration represent a desperate attempt to remember what was almost forgotten. How many times have we heard or read “I was never taught this?” Quindaro’s history has never been far from the minds of the people who live there. In fact, it has been residents’ oral traditions and word-of-mouth that kept its cultural memory alive. What Tip O’Neill once said about politics holds true as well for history; everything is local. But for an event or a place to be considered significant, it must offer something that resonates with outsiders. When words like “ghost town” and “economic decline” appear so frequently in descriptions, clearly Quindaro’s story has struggled to resonate with the larger narrative of American history and even for that of the greater Kansas City area. Why?

We should consider how to go about making people care and consider particularly the definition of a story because historians are essentially story-tellers. We are limited by primary sources and we do not enjoy the privilege of writing fiction, but we are story-tellers nonetheless obliged to present reality in narrative form. Historians have the power to decide which stories are worth telling and where those stories should begin and end. Likewise, audiences hold the power to decide—through the books they buy, the museums they visit, and the roadside attractions at which they stop—which stories are worth hearing. Ultimately, those decisions say more about us as tellers and listeners than they do about the site itself. Stories at heart are political, and they are driven by values. What we choose to remember, and perhaps more importantly, what we choose to forget, reveals who we are.

What does it reveal about us then when a site like Quindaro can be so easily forgotten, and when even the most informed among us claim that the last development of significance happened there more than 150 years ago? In reviewing the literature on the archaeological dig from the 1980s, I came across a description by a Browning-Ferris attorney as “just foundations under the ground, a few walls 3 to 4 feet high, nothing good to look at unless you’re a pretty good dreamer.”

Author note: The following is based on Professor Leiker’s closing remarks at the “Strength through Numbers” symposium on April 19, 2018. The presentation has been revised and edited for inclusion in this issue.
That unfortunately is an apt summation of how most Americans view the past: as something to see rather than ponder, affirming preconceived values rather than challenging them. Quindaro offers an opportunity for self-reflection, to ask why we value some parts of our past more than others. After current efforts to restore the site have succeeded, will we approach our historical consciousness differently? Will we do so in the same, mostly failed ways that allow the site to fall back into obscurity, in need of rescuing by archaeologists in the year 3100? Or are we receptive to telling and hearing Quindaro’s story framed somewhat differently?

The second lesson relates to the conception of Quindaro as a story of the mid-nineteenth century, intimately connected to Kansas’s Free State narrative. State and local history is largely booster-driven, resting on the need to distinguish one’s community from the neighbors, to say “we are unique, we are different from those folks on the other side of the river.” Kansans have been trying to distinguish themselves from Missourians for a long time, but maybe not as long as we think. The leading consensus among scholars is that Kansas Territory in the 1850s was more fixated on issues of real estate and acquisition of Indian land than it was on black slavery, as addressed by Nicole Etcheson. As dramatic and headline-grabbing as the activities of John Brown and William Quantrill were, the violence of so-called “Bleeding Kansas” was not representative of the typical settlers’ experience. Nor does the rhetoric of Free State Republicans halting slavery in its tracks appear in politicians’ speeches or even the state’s earliest histories until the end of the nineteenth century.

What changed in the 1890s that caused state leaders to reach back almost a half century to locate a story highlighting their progressivism, their concern for freedom? Remembering that all stories serve someone’s agenda, I submit that the Populist challenge to the Republican Party provided that motivation. As editor William Allen White identified so clearly, Kansas Republicans—the party of big business, industrial expansion, and hyper-capitalism—came under attack by reformers demanding regulation of railroads, recognition of labor unions, an eight-hour work day, and other causes that would give farmers and workers a fair chance in the face of growing economic inequality. No surprise that Republicans seized the moment to distinguish their party from Democratic and Populist challengers by maintaining theirs was the original party of freedom. Nor is it coincidental that in the late 1800s, as state officials across the Midwest tried to establish public historical societies, they faced taxpayers’ inevitable questions of “why?” Why the need for government-run historical associations in states that were less than forty or fifty years old? History serves community interests or it dies. In this case, if it could find no interests to serve, it would never have been born in the first place. In the Free State narrative, Kansas leaders found a story that served several interests at once, flattering their constituents by praising the state’s victorious role in ending human bondage, and defending the dominant party’s rule.
against those who questioned its definition of “freedom” as limited and outdated.

As a quick perusal of local history sections in bookstores or a scan of the articles published in Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains would illustrate, Kansans today have not deviated from that 1890s conception of themselves. Especially for northeast Kansas, the Free State narrative, the saga of brave abolitionists making their idealistic stand against slavery’s expansion, is Kansas’s founding creation story. And like most creation stories, it is a myth. In the first place, Free Staters were not Yankee abolitionists but Midwestern capitalists disposed to dislike slavery and African Americans with equal fervor. More significantly, Kansas’s reputation as a progressive haven, a racial sanctuary, is supported neither by record nor memory. The cold shoulder that white voters showed African Americans in debates over the Fifteenth Amendment, the weak sanction, is supported neither by record nor memory. The cold shoulder that white voters showed African Americans in debates over the Fifteenth Amendment, the weak assistance provided to exodusters in the late 1870s, and the passage of segregation laws that would last until the Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka case in 1954 refute Kansans’ conception of themselves as racially liberal. It is not so much that the Republican Party changed its core values; it is that it learned to write its past with great efficiency.

Quindaro’s historiography has traditionally been framed as a sub-set of that Free State myth. Its port of entry for the Free Soil movement was short-lived, declining as early as 1857 when the battle against pro-slavery forces started to be won. Though oral traditions are not and should never be discounted, written sources of the time, including the newspaper Chindowan, show little evidence that Quindaro served as a major focal point for the underground railroad. Clarina Nichols did not mention the possibility privately until the 1880s, and the earliest newspaper accounts that link the site to extensive fugitive activity do not appear until—not surprisingly—the 1890s. The story of Kansas and by extension of Quindaro as a land of freedom was cemented a few years later in a speech by Progressive Republican Teddy Roosevelt, his 1910 New Nationalism address in Osawatomie, close to John Brown’s hideout, and by the dedication of the Brown statue around the same time in Quindaro itself—a spot which, based on all we can determine, Brown never actually visited.

If history were nothing more than a cold archive of past events, then we would be most accurate in describing Quindaro not as a pillar of abolitionism but as a failed real estate development scheme. Yet we all know it is more than that. We need stories that bind us to place and to each other, and help guide us into uncertain futures. The question is: How much longer can a story of a temporary town enterprise from the 1850s continue to do that? As I joke with my colleagues who specialize in the period, how much longer will the Civil War continue to hijack the nineteenth century? Clearly that conflict deserves its due, but has our selective focus on that part of our nation’s past led us to overlook other stories, other ways to interpret Quindaro, which may prove useful for the road ahead?

Consider the third lesson, that our understanding of Quindaro would be improved by extending the beginning of its story to an earlier period. What do we know of the French explorers who first viewed the site with European eyes? What do we know of indigenous people like the Kansa who predate the Delawares and Wyandots, and would certainly have utilized the spot to observe activity on the river below? Europeans sneer at Americans’ habit of calling ruins from the 1800s “historical.” Similarly, an Egyptian who grows up in the shadow of five-thousand-year-old-pyramids finds laughable Europeans’ idea of history as a seventeenth-century monarchical palace. Every part of the earth is as old as every part. Our North American history as old as the pyramids, yet we do not know it. Native genocide not only meant the loss of people; it meant the loss of those oral stories that might have linked us, the newcomers, to this place in a lineage dating back millennia. Our current historical consciousness is not well-served when we enable the delusion that the only useable past begins with the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854.

Yet we need not start in 3000 BCE either. Quindaro’s immigration story begins in the early nineteenth century with the arrival of multiple Indian groups—people like the Shawnees and the Wyandots, who were removed from Ohio and played an instrumental role in establishing the original site before dissolving their tribal status in 1855. How did questions of U.S. Indian policy, settler colonialism, Manifest Destiny, white-native intermarriage, assimilation vs. resistance, evolving definitions of proper land use and land ownership, the role of the Methodist Church and other churches that served as agents of the Second Great Awakening, not to mention conflicts between nomadic people and agricultural ones, factor into the founding of Quindaro? We do not know, because Native American scholars have not been invited seriously into the conversation. By pursuing these questions, we will find Quindaro’s becomes more complicated: as a meeting ground, a nexus between indigenous and immigrant peoples—white, black and native—who have been actors in the drama. These questions will disturb us, because one person’s freedom is inevitably another’s tragedy. But it will become more interesting too, for rather than a tale about territorial Kansas and the black freedom struggle which we already think we understand, we will discover Quindaro.
as a collision ground between East and West, North and South, colonial and indigenous, free and slave, frontier and settlement—in other words, one that encompasses most of the major threads of the early American past.

Likewise, my fourth lesson involves a forward move, expanding Quindaro’s story to the twentieth century when industrialization and urbanization forever changed the African-American experience. It has always intrigued me why History is defined as occurring long ago. The work of Abelard Guthrie and Clarina Nichols over the course of a few years deserves commemoration, but how helpful is that for understanding the plight of Quindaro today? For more than seven decades until its closure in 1943, Western University, the Tuskegee of the West, the first historically black college west of the Mississippi, symbolized the rise and fall of opportunities for young black people, as explained by Paul Wenske. The university, the AME church that sponsored it, and the adjacent hospital provided valuable services for Kansas City, Kansas during the height of the Jim Crow era. Just as Quindaro’s nineteenth-century history cannot be separated from the native presence that preceded and helped create it, Quindaro’s more recent story is inseparable from that of Black Kansas City, with its iconic foundations in music, meatpacking, the Great Black Migration, and civil rights.

This is the past that makes us uncomfortable. If scholars turn their attention to the site since the 1960s, they will catch a disturbing glimpse of the disparity between myth and history, between Kansans’ self-image of progressivism based on events that may or may not have happened 160 years ago, and its more recent tolerance of poverty, community devastation, and the legacy of segregation that has occurred within living peoples’ memory. Some of this appears in this issue’s oral transcripts, collected by Anna Jacobson, and is still ongoing with the KCK public library. That work needs to continue, for herein lies an abundance of oral sources that could keep a small platoon of social scientists and urban planners busy for years, researching projects that would enhance our understanding of this community, if they ask the right questions.

Those questions include the role of infrastructure. Transportation may be the most consistent thread we can find in this two-hundred-year story. The community was born out of access to a major river. As railroads replaced steam technology, Quindaro’s fortunes declined. If lack of access to a railroad killed the settlement once before, was it...
killed all over again after automobiles replaced trains, and after a federal highway called 635 was built? Marvin Robinson has a term for this—U.S. Negro removal policy, referencing the way federal infrastructure was designed to divide and forcibly relocate black communities. The uncomfortable questions include the phenomenon of middle-class flight, for as money, energy and talent flee farther and farther from urban cores, they leave behind shrinking tax bases for people less equipped to deal with problems than before. And they include a hard examination of Americans’ prejudices, of media perceptions about inner cities as dangerous and crime-filled, uninviting to prospective tourists and therefore undeserving of the honorary title “historical.” These questions are not new. Twentieth-century historians ask and answer them all the time. But again, they must be invited into the conversation.

Clearly, Quindaro’s story will be made richer and more relevant by taking a bird’s eye view approach that widens it over two hundred years. That requires greater inclusiveness, which brings me finally to my fifth and last take away: How inclusive should we be? Or put another way, who owns Quindaro’s past, and who reserves the right to tell its story? As anyone who specializes in American Indian Studies can attest, native people are not always warmly receptive to non-natives flocking to their reservations and tribal centers every summer intent on writing the definitive history of their experience. As a white professor myself who teaches African American Studies at a suburban college, I try to be sensitive to the fact that there are aspects of my subject matter which I can never know and have no business representing. But the future of Quindaro’s past will depend on the answers to these and other questions: All history is local, but how local does it have to be? Can history be owned, like land? (For that matter, Quindaro’s original residents, pre-Wyandots, did not necessarily believe land could be owned either.)

If the struggle to develop a meaningful site over the past thirty-five years has taught anything, it is that we lack consensus on the purpose of history. For some, it is a discipline, an academic enterprise worthy in and of itself for the knowledge and insight it creates. But scholars should acknowledge that that definition comes from a place of privilege, a place where historic preservation is a luxury. For others, history is a form of economic development, a means of attracting jobs and tourism, to assert community identity, and alleviate the desperation that comes with impoverished material conditions. As hotel and restaurant owners across the South have discovered with glee, history is big business, and nothing boosts sales more than an adjacent Civil War battlefield.

The words “cultural property” have been used to describe the care with which Quindaro’s story has been nurtured by its local community. Communities are born, they mature, they die, and new ones take their place. If Quindaro is going to be preserved for future generations and spared the archaeologist’s shovel—or whatever they will use in the year 3100—it will require alliance-building. Alliances are messy. They mean sacrificing control, watching private property become communal, and run the risk that the story will change, maybe even be corrupted, and impart values not in accordance with those of the original caretakers. No one really has the power to say what all the choices should be, but we can and should acknowledge that difficult ones lie ahead.

The issues and stories that have been shared at this symposium, and published in this special issue of Kansas History, go beyond Quindaro, and beyond even Kansas and Missouri, by cutting to the heart of History itself. Thank you to everyone for sharing their stories and their research, and for giving us much to ponder.