Tintype, Nancy Quindaro Brown, a Wyandot woman for whom the town was named.
Date unknown. Courtesy of Kansas Room Special Collections,
Kansas City, Kansas, Public Library.
The story of the Wyandots is like that of many Native Americans or First Nations in the central United States. Before there were artificially imposed international boundaries, they lived much farther east and north in an area that they called Wendake, the homeland, which was located roughly between Georgian Bay in the north and Lake Simcoe in the east. From these Canadian roots, the Wyandots would eventually relocate to Kansas, where they played an interesting and often forgotten role in the history of the organization of Kansas and one of its largest cities. The town of Quindaro was paired with Wyandotte and became Kansas City, Kansas.

Without Wyandot cooperation and land, Quindaro would never have existed. Quindaro was developed in cooperation with Wyandot Nation members who provided the land, initial leadership, and even the name of the community. As a townsite dating to the 1850s, Quindaro provided the only free-state port in the recently opened Kansas Territory. It took its name from Nancy Quindaro Brown, a Wyandot woman who married Abelard Guthrie. A former land agent from Ohio, Guthrie was adopted into the Wyandot Nation after his marriage. He would become one of the founding members of the Quindaro Town Company along with fellow Wyandot Joel Walker and two whites, Charles Robinson and S. N. Simpson, who both had strong ties with the New England Emigrant Aid Company (NEEAC).

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The Wyandots, or Wendats, as they called themselves, were a confederacy of five separate autonomous tribes: the Bear People (Attignawantan), the Rock People (Arendaeronnon), the People of the Cord (Attigneenongnahac), the Deer People (Tahontaenrat), and, reportedly, the People of the Marsh (Ataronchronon).2 The members of this confederacy were well known as traders and agricultural producers by the time they were approached by the French. Villages were typically composed of longhouses enclosed by a palisade. Traditionally, the Wyandots were matriarchal and matrilineal, with a women’s council to help select the war and peace chiefs. It was not uncommon for townsites to be paired and for the settlements to move roughly every ten to twenty years to gain fresh soil for the crops.

By the 1600s, the Iroquois and Wyandots were involved in a near-constant struggle for supremacy in trade. In addition to warfare, the Wyandots were hit hard by disease, with some estimates placing the loss as high as half of the members of the confederacy. By the mid-1640s, the better-armed Iroquois had destroyed several communities, further demoralizing the Wyandots.

Faced with these circumstances, the Wyandots began to retreat in order to survive. Kathryn Magee Labelle provides an excellent overview of the circumstances marking the beginning of the Wyandot diaspora in her book Dispersed but Not Destroyed: A History of the Seventeenth Century Wendat People.3 Eventually the Wyandots would split into several groups with settlements near Michilimackinac, Detroit, Quebec, and numerous other far-flung sites east and west, north and south of their original homes. The majority of the Wyandots who remained stayed loyal to the French due to their trade connections as well as intermarriage. Christians and traditionalists remained together even as frictions mounted. To replace family members lost in the fighting or through disease, prisoners who proved to be valuable members of society would be adopted.

By the time of the French and Indian Wars, raids increasingly occurred on British-American settlements, with new captives becoming adoptees who often clung to their traditional ways. Eventually this would cause another schism. Captives from Virginia (including the Walker family) were acquainted with the use of African slaves for manual and skilled labor. Eventually several adopted families would become slave owners in their own right. Other families would denounce this activity as “un-Wyandot behavior” and recall that those living with the tribe were entitled to the same rights and freedoms as any other member of the tribe.4 With the retreat of the French and the forced relocation of some French colonists at the end of the French and Indian Wars, a new split took shape. Part of the tribe favored a link with the English as a way of protecting themselves, while others rejected the

idea—in part because of the British support of and trade with the Iroquois, the reason the Wyandots had been forced to leave their homeland.

With the coming of the American Revolution, those favoring stronger ties with the English sought an active alliance for protection and future benefits. Those who had remained pro-French looked much more favorably on either neutrality or an active alliance with the rebels. In both instances, adoptees expressed their opinions by both word and deed. Part of the tribe would eventually stay near Detroit, where it (officially or unofficially) supported the English crown. John R. Swanton in *The Indian Tribes of North America* referred to these members as Hurons rather than Wyandots. Others would attempt to remove themselves from the hostilities. Some of these Wyandots settled in Ohio, and in a sense, that is where the story of Quindaro begins. With the end of crown control of American territory, their fortunes turned again. The Ohio Wyandots found themselves dealing with American settlers moving into the area, British agents urging tribes to support England by attacking the Americans in hopes of regaining crown control, and a new league under Tecumseh attempting to unite the tribes into a concerted force to attack the Americans in hopes of eventually driving out all whites. Wyandots residing near Detroit tended to support the crown. The Ohio branch still largely favored neutrality or support of the Americans in hopes of securing their right to remain in Ohio. Oral tradition indicates that it was during this time that the Wyandots took a more active role in supporting what we refer to today as the Underground Railroad. Information gathered by the historian Wilbur Siebert and his map tracing the Underground Railroad clearly indicate that one of the main routes passed through several Wyandot communities. Although dated, Siebert’s study is still considered one of the earliest and most directly connected resources on the Underground Railroad. Another indicator was the presence of families with mixed African and Wyandot ancestry.

The situation finally began to settle down as an increasing number of treaties provided hope that the Wyandots and other First Nation groups would be allowed to stay in what they had come to think of as their new homes. Around 1814, the first Methodist mission in North America was established by John Stewart, a missionary of mixed-race ancestry who converted approximately one-third of the tribe to Methodism before the Wyandot removal to Kansas. There are indications within the

Wyandot oral tradition that the presence of Stewart encouraged other African Americans to settle with the Wyandots, leading to a combined effort to establish Negro Town. The division between the traditional and “progressive” Wyandots—who favored acculturation—became more pronounced in 1832 when a traditional band under Roe Nu Nas signed a treaty to remove further from white settlement. In 1836, progressive Wyandots, led by William Walker, signed a treaty that had the effect of shrinking the reserve to provide more cash to the tribe and showed a willingness to work with the government to allow more white expansion. Pressure from expansion increased; “Christian Party” Wyandots who favored acculturation were murdered and their white killers released. The Wyandots again decided that retreat was the best way to save the tribe. To that end, an agreement was drawn up for the Wyandots to purchase land from the Shawnees, who had already removed to Kansas. When the Wyandot Nation, the last Native nation in the area, left Ohio, the tribe members thought a new home awaited them. Instead, they discovered that the Senate had recommended against the sale and had succeeded in blocking it. They found themselves dumped onto government land between the junction of the Kansas and Missouri Rivers. A Methodist missionary, Reverend James Wheeler, accompanied the Wyandots and reported on the journey and conditions upon arrival. Some families were able to rent shelter in Westport, but most were left to their own devices. Within a short time, disease took its toll, and approximately 60 of the 660 who had relocated died. Seeking a more permanent solution, the Wyandots reminded the Lenapes (Delawares) of a time when they had needed a place to stay. The Lenapes agreed to sell the Wyandots a portion of their land and donate more land to be used as a cemetery. This sale would eventually allow the development of both Wyandotte City and Quindaro.

Westward expansion and the concept of Manifest Destiny drove another wedge into the Wyandots. The 1830 Indian Removal Act had already made it clear that Native Americans residing east of the Mississippi River would be removed by force if necessary. Attempts by the government to induce the Wyandots to remove led to several exploratory missions that showed why the proposed lands were not acceptable to the Wyandots. A visit to the Missouri secretary of state’s website shows a fascinating and frightening picture of a frontier state. Between 1804 and 1855, there was an average of one major military campaign every ten years. One of the Wyandot scouting parties had visited the Missouri borderlands around the time of the Mormon War, shortly before the removal. Trade with Santa Fe was booming, which would play a part in another military venture that was to affect the Wyandots. In 1846, the Mexican War began. We tend to forget that one of the reasons that the southern states were so supportive of this war was the potential to connect east to west with a band of states supporting, or at least accepting, slavery. In the east and north, the war was much less popular. The Wyandots provided some volunteers, but fewer than the Shawnees or Delawares. When gold was discovered in California in 1848, the Wyandot lands were a natural gateway, and a band of Wyandots even went west in search of gold.

By 1850, the Wyandots were still waiting for their payout from Ohio. The U.S. Army had allocated $20,000 to pay for land and improvements there. Independent appraisers came back with a figure of more than $127,000. All the improvements on the land, including stone, frame, and brick dwellings, a grist mill, a stone church, planted and fenced crops, barns, and sheds, caused the military major irritation and confusion, as they questioned how Indians could have made so many improvements. Besides, they reasoned, where would the extra money come from? The final installments on that debt would come more than 140 years later. Meanwhile, debts were incurred, and the promised payments were not made. At this point, a movement began within part of the tribe to obtain land in fee simple title, which, simply put, allows an individual to sell and receive payment for his or her own land. Indian land, however, required approval from the president or Congress to be bought and sold. A treaty was proposed to allow fee simple title, and the Indian agent pointed out that of 120 heads of families, only 83 voted. The count stood at 63 votes for and 20 against, with the remainder not voting.

13. Interview, Chief Janith English of the Wyandot Nation of Kansas.
Leaders of the movement for fee simple title included families such as the Walker brothers and others of mixed ancestry. At the time of removal, the tribal membership included attorneys, merchants, a banker, and a midshipman at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. After having been pushed from site to site since the creation of the United States and never receiving the full value of their lands, it is easy to see why some tribal members were desperate to find a way to stay in one place without the threat of removal. This group approached the federal government and asked how it could get the right to do so. The simple answer from the government was that they needed to become citizens. When that option was explored, the Wyandots were advised that since land was held by the tribe and they were in the “Indian country” rather than an organized territory or state, citizenship would not help. Since the lands would be in Indian country, citizens would not be able to occupy them.\textsuperscript{15}

Assimilationists within the tribe saw this as simply another obstacle to be worked through. It would become the first step toward the split between the Wyandot Nation of Kansas and the Wyandotte Nation of Oklahoma. The change in terminology is significant. Until that point, the group had favored acculturation, implying that it was accepting elements of the Euro-American culture. Those favoring acculturation began the shift to assimilationism to fully integrate with the Euro-American way of life and

values. This shift did not happen overnight and stemmed from a number of factors. Individual self-determination played a large role along with the financial issues faced by the tribe at large as well as the individuals within the tribe. Without the promised funds and supplies, families found it difficult simply to survive.

A second factor developed in 1844 with the “Great Awakening” and the splits that developed within Protestant denominations, including the Methodists. The Mission Conference of the Methodist Church, as in many denominations, went to the southern branch of the church. The southern churches at least tolerated slavery, if they did not outright support it. Reverend Thomas Johnson, founder of the Shawnee Methodist Mission School in present-day Johnson County, was a missionary who owned slaves and used them to assist with the labor involved in operating and maintaining the school. This religious split led to a struggle between branches of the tribe, with some favoring the northern and others the southern branches. Charges and countercharges of corruption and troublemaking were levied. Eventually the southern church stayed in Wyandot, and the northern church removed to the area of Thirty-Eighth and Parallel in present-day Kansas City, Kansas.16 The northern church cemetery at that location marks where the church stood. In 1852, the assimilationists, under the leadership of William Walker, staged an election to establish the Territory of Nebraska with a provisional government. Walker had developed ties to several prominent Missourians since reaching the area. One of these was Senator David Rice Atchison, who would play a role in negating the Missouri Compromise, clearing the path for the expansion of slavery in the west. It may be worth noting that both Walker and Atchison belonged to an ancient fraternity

and that the Walker family was granted dispensation to form a Masonic lodge. Another associate was Benjamin Stringfellow, Atchison’s strong supporter and friend. The election for the provisional government of the Territory of Nebraska was held on October 12, 1852, and William Walker was elected as governor. The extant poll books show several interesting points. First, most of the voters were those with southern sympathies. There were some exceptions, notably Abelard Guthrie, the aforementioned land agent from Ohio who had married Nancy Quindaro Brown and who was elected to represent the new territory in Washington. Another candidate—supported by the military faction at Fort Leavenworth—was Reverend Thomas Johnson, the slave-owning missionary. Both traveled to Washington, although neither was officially recognized. Second, a large number of those participating who did not fit the previous description were Natives or First Nations members. In other words, they were not recognized as citizens who were eligible to vote and organize a territory. Third, given the results of the election and all the buttonholing that went on in Washington, it was clear that the southern part of the Territory of Nebraska would be friendly to slavery and the neighboring Missourians. It is believed that these factors all played a role in Senator Stephen Douglas’s decision to support popular sovereignty as part of the Kansas–Nebraska Act that was passed in 1854. The expectation was that the territory would be divided: the northern part would become Nebraska, while the southern part would be named Kansas. Missourians were expected to move en masse to Kansas, making it a slave state. Nebraska would be settled by Iowans, who would not allow slavery. With both sides in play, the balance of power between free and slave states could be kept, thus placating both sides.

The Wyandot expectation at that point appears to have been that with the territory opening for settlement, it could begin to organize. Lands would have to be divided, but individuals could choose whether to pursue citizenship and fee simple title for their lands. Instead, several unexpected events occurred. Missourians swarmed into Kansas Territory, and when the first election was held, there were significantly more votes than residents. Owing to the obvious voter fraud, indignation throughout the north and east led to the formation of emigrant aid groups intent on making Kansas a free state, which eventually led to armed conflict. In 1855, the Wyandot Indian agent called a meeting of the council to sign yet another treaty.

This one would grant citizenship to the Wyandots but at the cost of eliminating the tribal existence. Those found “Competent” would become citizens, and the Wyandot Tribe would cease to exist. Those classed as “Incompetent, Widows, and Orphans” were to be assigned guardians to protect their interests. Given that the guardians tended to be “Competent” individuals who could sell their wards’ lands on their behalf, and based on complaints of bullying and outright fraud—with tribal members denying that they had ever agreed to relinquish their tribal rights—it is clear that additional problems were developing. This became even more clear when the Indian agent grudgingly allowed a two-hour window at a later date when members could protest. Unfortunately for most tribal members, little or no notification was given prior to the announcement.

In 1856, as the situation heated up between their free-state and proslavery white neighbors, the Wyandots again found themselves in a war zone. In one night, both Wyandot churches were burned. Wyandots opposed to slavery decided that areas outside the town of Wyandott City would be much safer, leading some to settle in the area that would become Quindaro. Wyandott City’s reputation was seen as so proslavery that John Buford would write to “His Excellency, Governor William Walker,” requesting permission to garrison up to five hundred proslavery men on the Wyandot Reserve.

Charles Robinson, who had been through the area in the 1840s and commented on the land, had come west as a representative of the NEEAC. When he began negotiating for the townsites, it seemed that he was acting on the company’s behalf. However, he had severed his ties but was “willing to offer them [the NEEAC] first chance” at the town to be developed. He partnered with Samuel N. Simpson, who also had NEEAC ties, and established connections with two people who had ties to the Wyandots. First was Abelard Guthrie, Quindaro Brown’s husband, who was antislavery. The second Wyandot, Joel Walker, has caused some confusion. Joel was the brother of William Walker, a slave-owning Wyandot and governor of the provisional Territory of Nebraska. Some scholars have assumed that Joel was an abolitionist. The reality is that he owned two slaves himself.

18. Walker, affidavit regarding Methodist Church Burning in Kansas.
19. Letter from John Buford to William Walker, Kansas City Public Library, Kansas City, KS. William E Connelly/Wyandot Collection, Kansas Room.
20. Estate inventory for Joel Walker, Wyandotte County Museum, Bonner Springs, KS.
Several elements played into the selection of Joel Walker as president of the town company. With his family and business connections, it was perceived that choosing him would discourage active attacks on the town. Since the free-state towns of Lawrence and Osawatomie had been attacked and burned that summer, this was no idle fear. The presence of a Walker in a position of authority was expected to encourage any Wyandots who were involved—but not actively partisan—to sell their claims. Oddly, most of the families whose lands were involved were antislavery, and Joel Walker never actually lived within the town. It was also believed that Walker’s status as a Wyandot would add prestige and legitimacy to a partnership between the Wyandots and what was perceived to be the NEEAC.

In 1857, the townsite was officially incorporated, although it had already been busy with promotion to draw settlers and investment. Both Euro-Americans and Wyandots settled and began developing the townsite. Unfortunately, the Panic of 1857 began to dry up potential investment. By 1858, many of the strongest proslavery partisans had given up and left the region or decided that they could live with Kansas as a free state. Without active conflict requiring a safe port, one reason for Quindaro’s existence disappeared.

The fact that the main connecting road was never completely graded provided a second strike against the town. Events further east would provide the third strike as proslavery secessionists withdrew from their functions in the U.S. government. On the plus side, Kansas finally became a state in January 1861. On the negative side, with the firing on Fort Sumter in April 1861, the Civil War began, and Quindaro was on the frontline. Confederate flags were visible in Parkville, Missouri, just across the Missouri River, and fears increased as Confederate activity increased in the area. A request for troops led to the garrisoning of the townsite by elements of the Ninth Kansas Regiment.21 At the beginning of the Civil War, a number of regiments were composed, with infantry, cavalry and artillery companies. The Ninth would later be reorganized as part of the Second Kansas Cavalry and would have a reputation for helping escaping slaves. In Quindaro, the winter was brutal, and some accounts claimed that the surface of the Missouri River froze solidly enough to allow crossings on horseback. Complaints from those remaining in Quindaro led to the force being withdrawn, as troops had reportedly pulled out door and window frames, shutters, and doors for firewood.

With their last security withdrawn, many of the women left for safer areas, including Wyandotte City, where a larger federal garrison was posted, Ohio, and—in at least one case—New York. This strategy mirrored that of several white families in Kansas and the borderlands. Many of the men had already joined the military and left the area, partly in an effort to rescue their kinsmen—who were now in Confederate territory on the Seneca Reserve—from being robbed and attacked by other tribes as “suspect Indians.” Those Wyandots not classed as citizens found themselves without a tribe, landless, and homeless and were forced to remove further south. The Senecas, although considered part of the Iroquois League, were traditionally connected with the Wyandots and allowed these refugees to settle with them. Some on the Seneca Reserve found themselves conscripted into

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21. Orders of the day manuscript, Wyandotte County Museum, Bonner Springs, KS.

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Confederate forces, while others eventually escaped north, returning in 1862 and setting up a second, separate tribal council near Quindaro.

The intention of most families leaving Quindaro, particularly the Wyandots, was always to return. When they did, they found that the land had been sold for taxes or other expenses, and part had been procured by Rev. Eben Blatchly, a former Presbyterian minister in Quindaro, for the establishment of a Freedman’s School that would become Western University. Despite these setbacks, Wyandot family members have maintained their ties and interest in Quindaro even to the present day. At least one tribal member confided that as a youth, he and several of his friends would “visit” people sleeping outside and place rocks close by to let them know they had had visitors. This practice, which was basically a form of counting coup, proving an individual’s stealth and bravery, took place as recently as the 1950s.

There are those who argue that Quindaro was simply an economic venture with very little connection to free-state positions. Many communities founded with capital from outside investors may be viewed in the same fashion. The reality is that economic factors always play a role in the success or failure of a community. For the Wyandot Nation, Quindaro provided an opportunity for abolitionist-leaning Wyandots and Euro-Americans to coexist with freedom seekers. People tend to forget that among certain groups, a racist stigma was attached to Native ancestry and culture. In fact, Native Americans and others who had darker skins were treated as harshly as Hispanics and African Americans. Therefore, the connections that have always existed between the Wyandot Nation of Kansas and the African American community remain in place. Families have continued visiting over the generations, and the Wyandot Nation of Kansas has been involved with the Old Quindaro Museum and the Underground Railroad Museum at the Vernon Center in Quindaro. To ensure that the true story is told, we need to remember that history is written by the victors; every ethnic and cultural group has a collective story that goes beyond the mainstream lessons taught in schools. Only by studying these “hidden histories” will we come close to understanding who we are, where we are from, and what we have lost.

22. Interviews with Jesse Hope and Jan English, ca. 1999, Old Quindaro Museum, Kansas City, KS.