

Written Testimony on H.R. 8276

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Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Deryl W. Wynn. I am a veteran. As a Captain, I served as the Chief of Military Justice for the U.S. Army Transportation Headquarters, Fort Eustis, Fort Story, Virginia. Today, I serve as Chief Policy Analyst and Executive Advisor in the Office of Mayor Christal E. Watson. I appear on behalf of the Unified Government of Wyandotte County and Kansas City, Kansas, in strong support of H.R. 8276, the Quindaro Townsite National Historic Landmark Act.

But I want to begin today not with a bill, and not even with a ruin.

I want to begin with a question:

What happens when people who come from different places, speak different languages, worship in different ways, and carry different histories decide that they share a common future?

In Kansas, the answer is part of the ground beneath what has come to be known as the Quindaro Townsite or Quindaro Ruins.

Quindaro is not simply the remains of an abandoned town.

Quindaro is evidence.

Evidence of courage.

Evidence of conflict. Evidence of cooperation. And, most importantly, evidence that the struggle for freedom was never the work of one people alone.

In 1857, Quindaro emerged on the Missouri River in what is now Kansas City, Kansas, as a Free-State port of entry into Kansas Territory. Its name came from Nancy Quindaro Brown Guthrie, a member of the Wyandot Nation. The land itself carried the history of the Wyandot people, whose presence in this region predates the town by generations.

Around that foundation came people from different parts of the country and different ethnic backgrounds. Northerners and immigrants came to build businesses and communities. Abolitionists came because they believed Kansas should be free. Black Americans came seeking freedom and opportunity. And people of different backgrounds found themselves bound together by a struggle that was larger than any one of them.

That is the first lesson of Quindaro:

Kansas was not built by one group standing alone. Kansas was built through people coming together around the idea that freedom was worth fighting for.

Quindaro became a port of entry for the Free-State movement and a station in the Underground Railroad. People fleeing slavery could find a pathway toward freedom here.

The town rose quickly, and then history demanded something more.

By 1863, the Civil War had transformed the meaning of freedom across America. Kansas had already entered the Union as a free state, but freedom was not merely an idea written into a constitution. It had to be defended, And the people from Wyandotte County answered that call.

Black Kansans joined the Union cause. Men from the Wyandotte and Quindaro communities helped fill the ranks of the United States Colored Troops. At Fort Leavenworth, the Independent Battery of U.S. Colored Light Artillery was organized in 1864, with more than 160 of its 208 enlisted men recruited from Leavenworth, Fort Scott, and the Wyandotte and Quindaro communities.

Think about what that means.

There are stories of runaway slaves sledding across the frozen river from Missouri to Wyandotte.

The people who had once needed others to open a door to freedom were now putting on a uniform and helping defend the nation that freedom was supposed to create. They were not waiting for America to become free. They were fighting to make America free. And when the war ended, the work did not end. It changed.

By 1865, hundreds of African Americans were living around the Quindaro townsite. The community recognized that freedom without education would remain incomplete. A school was established for formerly enslaved people, eventually becoming Freedmen's University and, later, Western University.

That institution became one of the great educational stories in Kansas.

Western University-trained generations of African Americans in education, agriculture, business, mechanics, printing, music, nursing, and other trades. Under leaders such as William T. Vernon, the institution demonstrated that education was not simply about earning a living.

Education was about building people. It was about building institutions. It was about building self-determination, and it was about preparing the next generation to carry freedom farther than the generation before it, then came another chapter.

In the 1870s, thousands of African Americans left the South in what became known as the Exoduster movement. Kansas became a destination because people believed that here, they could acquire land, establish communities, educate their children, worship freely, and govern themselves.

In 1877, Black settlers established Nicodemus in western Kansas.

But here in Wyandotte County, we saw that migration arrive at our own doorstep.

In 1879, nearly a thousand Black migrants came through Wyandotte in a matter of weeks. Local Black churches opened their doors. The Freedmen's University at Quindaro sheltered newcomers.

The story is complicated, because history always is. Some welcomed the migrants. Others feared them. Some saw opportunity. Others saw a threat.

But that is also part of the Kansas story, Freedom did not mean that prejudice disappeared. It meant that people had to continue fighting it, and they did.

Across Kansas, Black Kansans built churches, schools, businesses, farms, newspapers, political organizations, and civic institutions. They built communities not simply to survive discrimination, but to create opportunities for their children.

In Kansas City, Kansas, that determination produced another landmark institution: Sumner High School.

When Kansas law permitted Kansas City, Kansas, to segregate its public high school in 1905, the Black community responded not by surrendering its children's future, but by demanding excellence.

Sumner's teachers and students built an institution whose academic accomplishments challenged the assumptions of segregation itself.

That tradition of excellence became part of the Kansas City, Kansas identity.

And the story continued, Western University educated leaders, Black churches became centers of community life.

Black physicians and nurses-built institutions to care for people who were denied equal access elsewhere, Black families-built businesses.

Black workers helped power the industrial economy.

Black citizens organized politically.

And generation after generation, they insisted that the promise of Kansas belong to them too. That history connects Quindaro to the broader history of Kansas.

It connects the freedom seeker to the soldier, The soldier to the teacher. The teacher to the student. The student to the entrepreneur. The entrepreneur to the civic leader.

And the civic leader to the elected officials and citizens who stand here today.

This is why the Quindaro Townsite matters.

Because if we look only at the ruins, we see stones.

If we look at history, we see people.

We see the Wyandot people whose presence is embedded in the name and landscape.

We see European immigrants and northern settlers who came to Kansas seeking opportunity and who became part of the Free-State struggle.

We see abolitionists who risked their lives and livelihoods.

We see African Americans who crossed rivers, borders, and the boundaries imposed upon them by slavery and racism.

We see soldiers from Wyandotte County who fought for the Union.

We see educators who believed that freedom required knowledge.

We see women who challenged the political and social limits placed upon them.

We see churches that opened their doors to people in need.

We see communities that sometimes disagreed—but continued to build.

And we see generations of Kansans who understood something fundamental:

Our differences do not have to prevent us from building a common future.

That may be the most important lesson Quindaro can teach America today.

Quindaro's story did not end when the town declined.

The townsite became part of a larger African American community. The educational legacy continued through Western University. The surrounding neighborhood continued to grow. And the memory of the place survived even when much of the physical town disappeared beneath the landscape.

Then, decades later, people began asking another question:

What if we lose the evidence? What if the physical remains disappear? What if the stories become footnotes?

What if the next generation knows the name Quindaro but never understands what happened here?

That is why preservation matters.

Archaeology matters. Historical interpretation matters. And this legislation matters.

Congress has before it an opportunity to ensure that Quindaro is not merely remembered locally but understood nationally.

H.R. 8276 does not erase local authority. It does not transfer local government. It does not prohibit lawful activities by property owners. Instead, it creates an opportunity for cooperation—cooperation among government, historians, descendants, preservationists, educators, community organizations, and the federal government.

That approach is fitting, because cooperation is part of the history we are trying to preserve.

Quindaro itself was built through cooperation across lines of race, ethnicity, geography, religion, and political affiliation. The preservation of Quindaro should be built the same way. Members of the Subcommittee, there are places in America where history is written on paper. There are places where history is written into the earth,

Quindaro is one of those places.

The ground there tells us that the fight over slavery was not some distant argument taking place somewhere else. It happened here. The fight over whether Kansas would be free happened here, The Underground Railroad passed through here.

Black soldiers came from these communities.

Freed people-built homes and institutions here, Students were educated here.

Families built lives here.

And generations later, Kansans are still fighting to make sure that history is not forgotten.

That is why this is bigger than a townsite. It is bigger than an archaeological site.

It is even bigger than Kansas City, Kansas. Quindaro is part of the American story of freedom. And when we preserve Quindaro, we are not simply preserving what happened. We are preserving what people believed was possible.

A free Kansas.

An educated people.

A community where different groups could build something together.

A nation that could move closer to the ideals it claimed to represent. The ruins of Quindaro may be quiet, but the history they hold is not.

It says that freedom has always required courage, It says that progress has always required cooperation.

It says that every generation inherits unfinished work,

And it says that when people come together—when they refuse to accept that division is stronger than unity—they can change the course of history.

Members of the Subcommittee, places do not speak for themselves.

People must decide whether the evidence they hold will be protected, studied, taught, and shared.

Congress can make that decision now.

On behalf of Mayor Christal E. Watson and the Unified Government of Wyandotte County and Kansas City, Kansas, and the generations of residents, descendants, historians, and advocates who worked to preserve Quindaro, I respectfully ask the subcommittee to advance H.R. 8276 and ask the House to enact it.

Because Quindaro helped open a door to freedom.

Let us make sure that door does not close behind us.

Let us preserve the place.

Let us preserve the evidence.

Let us preserve the story.

And, most importantly, let us preserve the lesson:

That freedom was built here by people who were different from one another—but who understood that their future was bound together.

Thank you. I welcome your questions.