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OPINION

A boulder's journey: Lawrence monolith will be returned to the Kaw in thoughtful process

DAVE KENDALL

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📷 The massive "Shunganunga Boulder" can be found in a tiny park in downtown Lawrence. It has a history with the Kaw Nation tribe that predates that placement, however. (Clay Wirestone/Kansas Reflector)

Kansas Reflector welcomes opinion pieces from writers who share our goal of widening the conversation about how public policies affect the day-to-day lives of people throughout our state. Dave Kendall served as producer and host of the "Sunflower Journeys" series on public television for its first 27 seasons and continues to produce documentary videos through his own company, Prairie Hollow Productions.

At a time when [Confederate monuments across the nation have come down](#), generating a degree of consternation in many cases, the upcoming dismantling of a Kansas monument dedicated to abolitionists provides a good example of how a collaborative approach can foster constructive dialogue and civic engagement.

It revolves around a large monolith composed of [Sioux Quartzite](#), which originated in the vicinity of southwestern Minnesota about 1.6 billion years ago, during the geologic era known as the Proterozoic.

The massive, dark pink boulder was shoved and carried along for hundreds of miles by an expanding mass of ice moving south during a period of glaciation. Covered by as much as 500 feet of ice when it reached the Kansas River Valley, it was left there several hundred thousand years ago when the atmosphere warmed and the ice retreated.

The rock remained at the juncture of the Kansas River and Shunganunga Creek until it was picked up by a large crane, loaded on a rail car and transported about 20 miles east to Lawrence. This was [reportedly done in "the dark of night"](#) before another interested party could act on plans to relocate it to the grounds of the state capitol in Topeka.

In Lawrence, it was placed on a foundation of smaller [glacial erratics](#) and a large, bronze plaque was attached to its side, making it the feature attraction at a small park near the edge of the Kansas River.

The massive "Shunganunga Boulder," with its new appendage, was unveiled to the public on Oct. 11, 1929, during the 75th anniversary of territorial Kansas and the founding of the city of Lawrence, gaining a new identity as "Founders' Rock."

As the inscription on the plaque declared, it was dedicated: "To the pioneers of Kansas who in devotion to human freedom came into a wilderness, suffered hardships and faced dangers and death to found this state in righteousness."

”

We would not pray *to* the rock. We would pray *at* the rock ... as if it were a church or an altar.

- James Pepper Henry

As the nation teetered on the brink of [a historic financial crash](#) and the onset of the Great Depression, those who came to dedicate the new monument did not know that their world was about to be rocked in a monumental way.

Were they also unaware of the history associated with the big, red rock they had moved here? Did they have any clue about the relationship that the indigenous inhabitants of the “wilderness” had established with it?

James Pepper Henry, CEO of the [First Americans Museum](#) in Oklahoma City, believes the stone was well known to all of the tribes that passed by on their journeys through the area. It was especially important to the Kanza (Kaw), for whom our state is named.

Pepper Henry, who is also vice-chairman of the Kaw Nation, notes that the stone had served an important function for the Kaw for hundreds of years. They conducted ceremonies at the rock, singing and praying beside it.

“We would not pray *to* the rock,” he says. “We would pray *at* the rock ... as if it were a church or an altar.”

[Curtis Kekahbah](#), a tribal elder who recently passed on, also spoke of this relationship with In ‘zhúje ‘waxóbe (pronounced “in ZHOO-jay wah-HO-bay”) – the reverential name given to the prayer rock by the Kaw.

In [a recorded presentation to Kaw youths](#), Kekahbah spoke of the long journey the rock made as it was carried along by glacial ice.

“The Kanza knew of this journey and the characteristics it took to complete this journey,” he says. “And in their prayers, they asked for the attributes that the stone had – the toughness, the hardness and durability.”

Pepper Henry says he believes that early settlers who came into the area knew how important this boulder was to the Kaw, but that as time went on, especially after the tribe was forcibly relocated to Indian Territory (now Oklahoma) in 1873, that awareness waned.

After he became the historic preservation officer for the Kaw Nation in the 1990s, he paid a visit to the prayer rock at the park in Lawrence.

“I made a vow then,” he recalls, “that someday the tribe would pursue having this stone returned to us as the rightful stewards.”



Known as the In 'zhúje 'waxóbe prayer rock to the Kaw, this boulder was dedicated as a monument to the pioneers who came to Lawrence on Oct. 11, 1929 at Robinson Park. (Kansas Historical Society.)

In 2015, Lawrence artist Dave Lowenstein connected with the stone as he developed the [Kansas People's History project](#). Posters spotlighted people who had been overlooked or misrepresented.

He noted that the park it was sitting in was named for the first governor of Kansas ([Charles Robinson](#)), with the attached plaque listing all the members of the [New England Emigrant Aid Company](#) who arrived in 1854, intending to ensure that Kansas would enter the union as a free state.

He also noted that there was no mention at all of the indigenous people who once revered it.

He decided to get in touch with Pauline Sharp, whose grandmother – [Lucy Tayiah Eads](#) – had been principal chief of the Kaw in 1929, when the boulder was relocated to Lawrence. Together, they developed a grant proposal and assembled a team to assist with the poster project.

The effort stimulated community interest and involvement when the public was invited to participate in imagining how to proceed as they navigated [“Between the Rock and a Hard Place.”](#)

Members of the Kaw Nation were pleased to hear of the activities taking place in Lawrence. After Sharp provided an update to a general council meeting, members voted to submit a formal request for the return of their “Big Red Rock.”

In a [letter addressed to the mayor of Lawrence](#), the chairwoman of the Kaw Nation, Lynn Williams, conveyed their formal claim of ownership and requested its return.

“Our intent for the return of In ‘zhúje ‘waxóbe is to reclaim our role as its original stewards and to respectfully restore and renew its significance as a sacred item of prayer for our people,” Williams wrote in the letter dated Nov. 30, 2020.

How would Lawrence and Douglas County, which owns the small park where the prayer rock sits, respond to this request? It did not take long to find out.



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– *Dave Kendall*

Not only did the city and county commissioners agree to the request, they authored and adopted (on March 16, 2021) an extensive [joint resolution](#) reviewing the history of the Kaw Nation, acknowledging the hardships they have endured, and apologizing for moving and defacing their sacred stone.

“The City and County further commit,” the resolution states, “to working to forge a new relationship with the Kaw Nation and all Native Peoples built on respect and honor.”

For the Kaw, such words help heal wounds inflicted almost 150 years ago when they were forced to leave this state and move to a new home.

“We’re very grateful and humble as a nation that the people of Lawrence recognize how important this is,” Pepper Henry observes. “This is a real opportunity to start bringing us back into the narrative again.”

With funds from [a large grant provided to the University of Kansas by the Mellon Foundation](#) through its [Monuments Project initiative](#), In ‘zhúje ‘waxóbe will be removed from its pedestal in Lawrence and transported to a new home at Allegawaho Memorial Heritage Park in Morris County.

A few miles southeast of Council Grove, [this park](#) is situated on land where the Kaw last lived before being removed from the state. They began reestablishing a presence there 20 years ago, acquiring ownership of 168 acres of tallgrass prairie and timber along a tributary of the Neosho River, naming the park for the man who was their head chief when they lived there.

A large dance arbor sits near the trees, and [a walking path loops the prairie](#) with a tall, limestone monument standing on top of a hill – the memorial to an unknown Kaw warrior, whose remains were unearthed by a local Boys Scout troop before being entombed at the base of the monument in 1925.

The Kaw have yet to determine exactly where they will place their prayer rock within the park. They have time to reflect on that because the move will not take place right away. It is, in fact, part of an ongoing process that will involve much more discussion, planning and preparation.

As one of those designated a representative of the Kaw Nation in this process, Sharp says she is looking forward to continuing the relationship with the people of Lawrence. In regard to the effect this is having on the Kaw, she references a concept developed by indigenous women to signify “Returning the Sacred to the Mother,” with the intent of restoring balance to the Earth.

“This is a long journey,” Sharp says, “a small piece of [rematriating](#) our people to the land.”



📷 This memorial to the Unknown Kaw Warrior stands in foreground, with the Kaw Dance Arbor in distance, at Allegawaho Memorial Heritage Park in Morris County. (Dave Kendall)

The Kaw are not just concerned about bringing the prayer rock to their land. They have also expressed a desire to remain connected to the two sites where it previously resided.

As Pepper Henry explains, his people believe that when anything is taken from a spot, something else must be left to fill the void. He says they intend to conduct a ceremony at the site on the Kansas River where it was deposited by ice, offering their prayers and leaving their offerings of appreciation.

They also intend to remain actively engaged in the process of revisioning and redesigning the small park in Lawrence.

“We want to continue to have a presence there,” he notes, adding that they also want to acknowledge those who came to the area later.

“We are very sensitive to the descendants of people who settled that area,” Pepper Henry says, “and we will work with the community to preserve their heritage as well.”

It will be interesting to see what takes shape in Lawrence during the Robinson Park redesign. Many of us will be looking forward to paying a visit to In ‘zhúje ‘waxóbe when that ancient boulder comes to rest at its new home in Allegawaho Park.

My ancestors settled on the opposite side of Morris County. They were among the first Euro-Americans to farm the land over which the Kaw and other tribal groups had roamed for generations. And yet, I learned little about them as I was growing up, and it seems Kansans in general have had little awareness or appreciation of their beliefs and culture.

It feels good to see the Kaw reconnecting to our state. They have proven to be as durable as their prayer rock, and we all stand to benefit from their ongoing rematriation.

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Dave Kendall served as producer and host of the “Sunflower Journeys” series on public television for its first 27 seasons. He also produced documentaries and community affairs programs for KTWU, the PBS station licensed to Washburn University in Topeka. In 2015, he left to form his own company – Prairie Hollow Productions – through which he continues to produce documentary videos. He’s currently engaged in the production of a documentary about the local impact of a changing climate.

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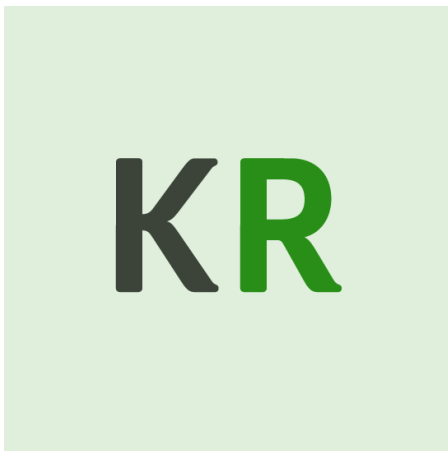
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