

## Kaw Nation asks for return of sacred prayer rock that was taken and converted into monument to settlers



photo by: Kim Callahan/Journal-World

The Shunganunga boulder, pictured Wednesday, Dec. 9, 2020, is a 23-ton red quartzite rock that sits in Robinson Park in downtown Lawrence across from City Hall. In 1929, a group of Lawrence officials arranged to take the boulder from the Shunganunga Creek near Tecumseh, where the creek joins with the Kansas River — a site that was sacred to the Kanza tribe.

The Kaw Nation has asked the city of Lawrence to return a sacred prayer rock that was removed from the tribe's homelands and made into a monument honoring settlers.

A letter from the Kaw Nation to the city states that Kaw citizens overwhelmingly voted in favor of returning *In 'zhúje 'waxóbe*, or the "Big Red Rock," to the tribe at the Kaw Nation General Council meeting in October. The letter, signed by Kaw Nation Chairwoman Lynn Williams, says that the tribe's stewardship of the rock and its significance as a spiritual item of prayer is well documented.

"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 says.

The letter notes that after the Kaw people, also known as the Kanza, were removed from Kansas to what is now Oklahoma in 1873, they no longer had access to the rock at its original location near the confluence of the Kansas River and Shunganunga Creek. The letter states white settlers understood the ceremonial significance and sacred nature of the rock to the Kaw people, and ignoring that, descendants of those settlers appropriated the rock and rededicated it.

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The letter designates Kaw Nation Vice Chairman James Pepper Henry and Kaw Nation citizens Pauline Sharp and Curtis Kekahbah as official representatives of the Kaw Nation regarding the claim and its process. Henry told the Journal-World that the Kanza have become virtually invisible as a people in the state that takes its name, and the tribe feels strongly that it needs to reclaim its presence.

"We still consider what is called Kansas as our homeland — this is where all of our ancestors lived and are buried, and the spirit of our ancestors is still in Kansas," Henry said. "We feel we have a responsibility to reclaim and to be good stewards of these sacred places and sacred things that are still in Kansas, and one of those things is the Big Red Rock."

In 1929, a group of Lawrence officials arranged to take the 23-ton red quartzite boulder from its longtime resting place along the creek with the help of a borrowed crane and the Santa Fe Railroad, according to newspaper archives

reviewed by the Journal-World. The unusual heist headed off a competing campaign by a Topeka man to bring the boulder, due in part to its spiritual importance to the Kanza, to the lawn of the Statehouse.

The Lawrence officials coordinated the boulder's removal from the creek and transport to Lawrence by railcar so that the boulder could be made into a monument honoring Kansas settlers for the city's 75th anniversary celebration. The boulder was fitted with a plaque listing the city's founders — abolitionist settlers that departed from Massachusetts — and placed in Robinson Park, at the intersection of Sixth and Massachusetts streets.

Henry said the rock served as a place for prayer, similar to a church altar, and was the location of ceremonies and gatherings of the tribe. He said the western view sees the rock as a piece of property, but he said the Kaw feel the tribe belongs to the rock and has a responsibility for stewardship to the rock.

The letter states that the intent is to bring the rock to Allegawaho Memorial Heritage Park in Council Grove as part of a long-range goal to develop the site into an educational resource for all Kansans and visitors to learn about the state's original inhabitants. The park is owned and maintained by the Kaw Nation and is open to the public, and the rock will join other monuments of historical significance to the Kaw people and the citizens of Kansas.

*As the Journal-World previously reported*, a project started at the beginning of this year, *Between the Rock and a Hard Place*, aimed to increase interest in the park and the monument and tell a more complete story about its past. Sharp, whose grandmother Lucy Tayiah Eads was chief of the tribe at the time the Big Red Rock was taken from the creek, co-leads the group with Lawrence artist Dave Loewenstein. The group held community meetings at the beginning of the year and hosted a paddle trip down the Kansas River to visit the original site of the rock. Sharp said that project is still ongoing, but that the input from Lawrence residents was that the tribe should decide what should be done with the rock.

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The rock is a city monument but sits on Douglas County property, making it unclear which entity technically is in charge of the rock. Vice Mayor Courtney Shipley brought up the letter from the Kaw Nation at the commission's meeting Tuesday evening, and said it's an important topic and she was glad to see the

request to return the rock. She said that in her opinion the rock does not belong to the city or the county and should be in the care of the tribe.

“To me the real question isn’t who the park belongs to or who the rock belongs to, but how we are going to raise the funds to move it safely,” Shipley said.

Other commissioners agreed with Shipley that it was an important conversation, and that it should be placed on a future City Commission agenda. Mayor Brad Finkeldei said he had a meeting with two representatives from the project on Thursday, and that he was looking forward to the broader discussion.

“It’s going to be a great conversation and an important conversation,” Finkeldei said.

Henry said he thinks the appropriation of the rock as a city monument was part of the systematic erasure of the Kaw people from Kansas. However, he said he thinks there are different attitudes now, and people are rethinking history and want to be more truthful about the way things have happened. He said he sees the upcoming discussion with city and county leaders as an opportunity to strengthen the tribe’s relationship with the people who live on the Kaw’s traditional lands and to reenter the local consciousness.

“I think people realize that there is more to the story, but this is also about relationships and we certainly are approaching this with an open mind and want to see where this will go,” Henry said. “I think it’s an opportunity for all of us involved to make something positive come out of this.”