

February 20, 2025

Dear Legislator:

I am writing to encourage you to vote against House Bill 2384. The bill asks the legislature to transfer publicly-held land in Kansas to an outside entity which would erase the historical legacies of the many people who have occupied this land throughout the past and the legacies of many different constituencies whose lives have been shaped by this historical and cultural landscape. Indeed, a vast array of events have unfolded on the twelve-acre parcel of land popularly known as the “Shawnee Indian Mission Historic Site.” The land represents many people and interests throughout Kansas, the Kansas City metropolitan area, and throughout the American West over hundreds of years. Certainly, the histories of the people who lived on its premises for approximately twenty years when it functioned as a boarding school are part of that legacy but so too are the manifold other people and events related to Kansas Statehood, the tensions leading up to the Civil War known as “bleeding Kansas,” and the three trails that converged there as a site where people loaded conestoga wagons and headed west for Santa Fe, Oregon, and California. Many of the structures bear the imprint of the Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.), the New Deal agency that re-shaped much of the nation as workers built, patched, and preserved sites during the Great Depression.

I was recently asked to serve on the board of the Shawnee Indian Mission Foundation and happily agreed because I see the site as a unique laboratory to educate students, residents and visitors about the significant role of this public space to the surrounding area. I am a history professor at a nearby university where I teach, research and publish history on the topics of the American West and environmental history. I have been in this profession for nearly three decades and can relate that scholars in my chosen field have established the principle that much of human history functions as a contested arena to which many people lay claim. Thus, the notion of transferring ownership of an historical parcel of land that represents so much of Kansas’ past to a single, out-of-state entity threatens to wipe away the historical record of many people whose lives have invested the site with meaning and significance.

Fortunately a key piece of evidence exists that advocates for uncovering much of this history, work that has yet to be performed but would demonstrate the multiple stakeholders who lay claim to the locale. That evidence is an architectural report that was commissioned by the very outside entity attempting to

claim the property. The report outlines a number of steps to be taken, none of which have occurred: 1) The first recommendation is for an Historic Structure Report to be generated that would document the “historic significance” of buildings and explain their “chronology or changes over time.” Such a document would help to identify the multiple constituencies involved at the site and how their culture and lives intersected with the built environment. 2) The report also recommends a Cultural Landscape Report (CLR) which is a separate document and provides a “thorough cultural landscape” analysis that “assesses the historic relationship between the landscape and the buildings, the historic use of the property and other topics.” Without this report, we cannot comprehend the intentions and choices people made in the past to alter their physical surroundings. Deep archivally-based research performed by trained historians will help us better understand and preserve the site into the future. 3) The next study called for in the report is a Master Plan to be conducted by experts in “historic preservation,” as this document would identify the “goals for the use of the cultural resource” into the future. Again, this key document would help to inventory the site’s historic legacies and serve as a planning document for preservation and education, an aid for future visitors to understand the significance of the cultural and natural landscape to the many facets of Kansas’ past. 4) Finally, the architectural report calls for an Interpretive Plan which is a document that outlines historical ideas and themes, goals, and methods for communicating an historic site’s meaning and significance to the broader public.

Without any of this work performed by trained historians, the call for the Kansas legislature to relinquish what is conceivably the most important historical site in the state constitutes a rash act that would deprive residents, taxpayers, and voters access to the history that shaped their ancestors’ lives and their own. The historical information outlined above represents standard practice for communities to identify, understand, and preserve their historical and cultural heritage. Conducting this work requires considerable time and effort, and as a board member of the Shawnee Mission Heritage Foundation I will advocate that this work take priority above all else. However, if the state relinquishes title to the property, this history will be lost to Kansans forever.

Please feel free to reach-out if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Brian Frehner, Ph.D.