


ARTICLE

A Sustainable Shared Authority: The Future of Rondo's Past

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Abstract

In the late 1950s, the Minnesota Department of Transportation used eminent domain to clear the path for I-94, displacing over 700 families and 300 businesses in Rondo, a predominantly African-American neighborhood. In the 2010s, Rondo residents and faculty at Macalester College teamed up to create *Remembering Rondo*, a digital public history project that included (among other things) a community-based archive and map of the neighborhood's historic businesses from 1920 to 1960. Rondo Avenue, Inc., the neighborhood's community council, asked to host the project themselves. Then in 2020, they forgot to renew the domain. The site went dark. This essay explores where we went wrong and what we can do about it, and raises questions about how we can reimagine digital sustainability through the lens of a shared authority.

Keywords: a shared authority; African-American history; digital public history; sustainability; urban renewal

This is a tale about Rondo, an African-American community in St. Paul, Minnesota, and our digital project called *Remembering Rondo*.

Our story has two main characters. The first is Marvin R. Anderson, a man who has traveled all around the world and cannot imagine a better place than Rondo. In 1982, he and his best friend co-founded Rondo Avenue, Inc. (RAI).

I'm sure Mr. Anderson could tell you a more accurate version of RAI's founding, but mine goes like this: Mr. Anderson was at a celebration in a different neighborhood called "Grand Ole Days." This overly jubilant white guy (I always imagine he was inebriated, and every time I tell the story he gets drunker and drunker) walks – or staggers – past Mr. Anderson, probably sloshing a beer, and proclaimed, "Grand Avenue is the best neighborhood in St. Paul!"

Mr. Anderson thought, "No it's not," and then he established RAI to preserve and celebrate the history of Rondo, the heart of St. Paul's African-American community. He organized the

first annual Rondo Days in 1983 to rival Grand Ole Days, which should tell you something about the man's character: he is determined.

Rondo is the other main character in this story. In the 1950s, the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) began construction on a stretch of interstate that would connect the downtowns of Minneapolis and St. Paul. Black and Brown neighborhoods were disproportionately affected, with an estimated 1,600 neighborhoods destroyed by highway construction in the 1950s and 1960s.¹

Mindy Fullilove, an urban psychologist, describes the resulting diaspora as “root shock” – or a “traumatic stress reaction related to the destruction of one's emotional ecosystem.”² The emotional trauma lasts for generations, but so too do the economic, social, and political ramifications. Minority communities around the nation faced similar destruction and robbery at the hands of highwaymen.

Rondo is one of these neighborhoods, sacrificed to the asphalt as city after city weaponized their arteries by building “white roads through Black bedrooms.”³

As for me, I am your narrator. Academics who partner with community groups have access to different platforms (like this one) to talk about our work. Some community partners are not comfortable with academic writing or public speaking; others don't have time.

And yet, projects like *Remembering Rondo* – which includes an archive of residents' heirlooms and a map of Rondo's historic business district – only exist because community members participate in the production of their history.

Due to structural reasons, from funding to scholarly publishing, academic voices are often overrepresented in conferences and journals. Mr. Anderson has given countless presentations in non-academic contexts over the past forty years. (In fact, the last time I visited Rondo, Mr. Anderson was hobbling around the Rondo Commemorative Plaza following a knee replacement, giving a tour of the Rondo Center of Diverse Expression [RCODE], to the Canadian consulate!) I have presented about Rondo in academic contexts 40 times. Only two of those were *with* Mr. Anderson, and only one was *to* Mr. Anderson.

The omission of community partners by default of academic systems continues to marginalize and silence their voices, even as we ironically seek to amplify them.

This article is an adaptation of a keynote address Mr. Anderson and I delivered for the International Federation for Public History in September 2024.⁴ As Mr. Anderson explained to the audience, “[If someone told me] that a young man, or an old man like I am now, would wind up in Luxembourg before some historians, [I would have] said, *Are you out of your mind?* And I'm here!”⁵

Our story is about a friendship, a partnership, and project. It has high points where it seemed like we could do no wrong. And it has low points, where we lost it all. But like any good tall tale, there is a lesson or two to take back home with you.

¹ Fullilove 2016.

² Fullilove 2016.

³ Ayres 1967.

⁴ Anderson and Wingo 2024.

⁵ Many thanks to the University of Cincinnati's Taft Research Center for funding Mr. Anderson's trip.

1. How it started

I met Mr. Anderson in a small coffee shop near Macalester College where I was hired as a postdoc in Digital Liberal Arts to start a program that did not yet exist. I needed to develop a class that could demonstrate the power of digital scholarship while also generating a large campus impact. (No pressure.)

I wanted to follow the History Harvest model.⁶ The History Harvest is a community-based digital archive built upon Michael Frisch's gift to the public history world: "a shared authority." A shared authority occurs when historians invite citizen scholars – the public – to co-create history.⁷

The History Harvest invites community members to tell their own stories through their heirlooms and keepsakes. The objects we keep tell the story of not just who we were, but also who we are, and who we hope to become.

So, there I was at this coffeeshop where a colleague had arranged a meet-cute with Mr. Anderson. I pitched the idea of a one-semester pilot of the archive. There would be no financial cost other than his time. He agreed, and *Remembering Rondo* was a go.

As a scholar of Indigenous history and the American West, the first thing I needed to do was to learn. There is one moment that seems to define Rondo: the construction of I-94. I did not know that the Federal Highway Act of 1956 wreaked havoc on communities of color around the nation. I did not know that the history of highways was steeped in racism and redlining. I did not know that despite a perfectly good northern route along abandoned railroad tracks, MnDOT chose to build along Rondo Avenue, the heart of the neighborhood's business district. I did not know that MnDOT used eminent domain to displace over 700 families and 300 businesses, completely undercutting Rondo's economic ecosystem and giving little back in return.

I did not know *yet* that none of that defines Rondo at all.

Luckily, you don't have to read about all the things I do not know. (It's a long list.) Instead, Mr. Anderson will tell you the history of Rondo through one of the objects he brought to our first History Harvest in 2016.

2. Remembering Rondo

My contribution to the History Harvest was a story that had not been told before. It was a story about a group of four men who formed the Twin Cities Negroes Development Company (Figure 1). One is my father, one is my godfather, and the other two are people I have known all my life. None of them went to college. All of them had worked for the railroad either as a Pullman Porter, waiter, cook, or a Red Cap.

They had the audacity to believe that they could build homes in Rondo where people could live and raise their children. The units were furnished in the event that someone had just moved to St. Paul. For 10 years, these apartment homes were always filled: filled with joy, filled with laughter, and filled with serious business.

And then one day a freeway roared through their homes and took them away.

⁶ Thomas and Jones 2024.

⁷ Frisch 1990.

The new development is situated in the center of large grounds beautifully landscaped.

The Twin City Negro Development Co., Inc.

invites the public to inspect their first cooperative housing project at 989-995 Rondo St. at Chatsworth. It will be open for inspection today starting at 2:00 P. M.

This unusual modern group of buildings was constructed by the Twin City Negro Development Company, Inc. They are now ready for occupancy and are available to anyone regardless of race, color or creed. The officers of the organization are Ira Rawls, Miles Newlen, Clyde Gillmore, L. A. Anderson, B. M. Henderson. It is the first of several projects to provide needed housing. Later, business and hotel facilities will be provided on other property.

The individual housing units consist of 5 rooms and a full basement. On the first floor is the living room, dinette and kitchen. The floors are of oak, except the kitchen, which is provided with a cream colored linoleum. The design is simple and modern with horizontal window lines. Woodwork is finished in a light tone. The second floor has two amply sized bedrooms with large closets, a linen closet and complete bathroom. Each building is equipped with a fully automatic forced air, oil burning heating system thermostatically controlled and an automatic domestic hot water system. A full laundry has been provided in the basement.

The development will be open for inspection today and all are invited to see the model apartment that is completely furnished and equipped with the newest in household furnishings and appliances.

Ira Rawls
President

Miles Newlen
1st Vice President

L. A. Anderson
Secretary

Clyde C. Gillmore
Treasurer

The living room is large and well planned with ample wall space. Large corner windows are provided in each living unit.

Below—The second floor of each apartment contains two bedrooms and bath. This is the master bedroom.

The dinette off the living room provides plenty of space for furnishings and is conveniently adjacent to the kitchen.

Bottom Right—Kitchens are equipped with commodious built-in cabinets with under window double sink.

We thank the following firms for their cooperation, fine workmanship and materials which made possible this attractive housing development for St. Paul

Adams Construction Co. General Contractors 2837 Girard Ave. South, Minneapolis	Walter Butler Co., Inc. Ray R. Casper, Registered Architect 1300 Minnesota Bldg.	St. Paul Linoleum & Carpet Co. Linoleum 1441 University Ave.
McQuillan Bros. Plumbing & Heating 415 Selby Ave.	Modern Engineering Co. Heating 459 Cleveland Ave. North	Minuti Bros. Lathing, Plastering 908 University Ave.
Corsing-Donohue, Inc. Building Material 624 Endicott On 4th	M. H. Sime Decorating Co. Decorating 285 W. Kellogg Blvd.	Helm & Olson Park Nurseries Landscaping 20 West Fifth St.
ABC Heating Co., Inc. Duct Work & Installation 101 So. Wabasha	Roland Millwork Co. Millwork 1047 Central Ave., Minneapolis	Kerwin's Furnishings Sisal & Cedar
	M. Charlebois Sheet Metal Wks. Sheet Metal Work 241 N. Concord, South St. Paul	

Figure 1. A 1948 advertisement for Rangh Court from the Saint Paul Sun. Marvin R. Anderson, Remembering Rondo, March 5, 2016.

In the United States, the government has the right to take your property for a public purpose under something called “eminent domain,” but they have to pay you “just compensation.” You have a right as a homeowner to state the value of the property taken from you. These gentlemen said the value of Rango Court was \$12,000 per unit. The government responded and said their homes were worth about \$2,800.

They just fell apart.

Under eminent domain, homeowners have a right to challenge the government’s valuation. These men challenged it against the supervisor; they lost. They went to the head of the department; they lost. They went to the head of the division; they lost. They made one final effort, and the government raised the price to \$3,500 per unit. In one of the government reports, it said if the buildings were more thoroughly constructed, they would have given them more.

Those properties stood vacant for 10 years, because another legal thing in America is that after 10 years, you lose your right to re-sue. It’s called the “statute of limitations.” After the statute of limitations passes, you have no further rights. By that time, my father’s development company ran out of money. They decided that they fought the good fight, and they signed over ownership of their property to the State of Minnesota. That was in 1958, the year I went away to college.

So what happened after those 10 years? The city sawed these buildings (that were so inferiorly constructed) into twos and threes, loaded them on flatbeds, and moved them around St. Paul where 70 years later, they still stand to this day. Those units are now valued at well over \$300,000 each. That’s the inheritance that my father and my godfather believed I could build my life on.

That was my story at the History Harvest. There were more like that every day.

The History Harvest is basically an object-based oral history project disguised as an archive. As Mr. Anderson demonstrated, the individual stories are meaningful. Collectively, they are powerful.

Joyce Williams brought her grandmother’s soup tureen and her great-grandmother’s cookbook with the recipe her family still uses for sweet potato pie (Figure 2). In her interview, Mrs. Williams transitioned seamlessly into a story about her favorite hill. The neighborhood kids would climb to the top after a good snow, sit on pieces of cardboard, and fly downhill. She told one of my students, “I just love that hill because it brings back so many memories.”

Margaret Lovejoy’s parents owned a house on Rondo Avenue, torn down in 1973 to make way for an exit ramp that never even crossed the property. MnDOT put it up for sale in 1975, and Mrs. Lovejoy bought it back. She bought back land that should have been her inheritance. Mr. Anderson and his team estimate that the wealth gap resulting from lost home equity is \$157 million.⁸ In the process of rebuilding, Mrs. Lovejoy found some of the old siding (Figure 3). She has saved it for over fifty years.

Our first History Harvest was a success, but it was a test – of me, the idea, the potential for a longer partnership. Many academic-community projects start this way, with defined parameters that allow either partner to hit the eject button if it doesn’t work out. These partnerships deepen trust as they build out the project.

⁸ Reconnect Rondo 2020.



Figure 2. The Williams family soup tureen. Joyce P. Williams, *Remembering Rondo*, March 5, 2016.

Remembering Rondo expanded to include three years of the History Harvest, oral histories, a historic business map from 1910 to 1960, and panel text for the Rondo Plaza. But RAI worried about losing control over their digital content. Through consultations with Macalester's archivist and digital scholarship librarians, we ultimately transferred everything to RAI's domain.

Remembering Rondo is a project with legs. Bits and pieces have appeared nationally on NPR, PolitiFact, and Bloomberg. Using *Remembering Rondo* as our gold standard, I invited two friends to co-edit a volume expanding on a concept we call "digital community engagement." We invited nine teams to "lift the hood" on their projects and partnerships, including a chapter coauthored with Mr. Anderson. Our volume of the same name won the 2021 Book Award from the National Council on Public History.⁹

Over time, Mr. Anderson and I lost touch. I accepted a job in Cincinnati and got busy learning about my new city. In May 2020, a university asked me to present about *Remembering Rondo*. When I visited our site, it was down. RAI forgot to renew the domain.

I called Mr. Anderson, who peppered me with questions about my life in Cincinnati. Then I came to find out that he just had heart surgery. Literally – he had been awake for an hour. I told him to rest up and that I would circle back.

Two weeks later, George Floyd was murdered by police. Five miles away, Rondo is no stranger to police violence. Police murdered one of their own, Philando Castile, in 2016. Mr. Floyd's murder set off international protests in the name of racial justice. In Minneapolis

⁹ Wingo, Heppler, and Schadewald 2020.



Figure 3. Mrs. Lovejoy's childhood home with siding recovered during reconstruction. Margaret Lovejoy, *Remembering Rondo*, March 5, 2016.

– Los Angeles, St. Louis, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, Denver, Chicago, Austin, San Jose, Charlotte, New Orleans, Cincinnati, and countless other cities – protestors shut down the highways. It's more than just disruptive; it's symbolic.

All of which is to say, a website going down was hardly a pressing issue. But our flagship project was gone.

I was a little surprised – maybe naïve. We followed the rules. We modeled a shared authority. We showed that academic institutions with long histories of extraction could do the opposite. We stretched every single practice available to us from public humanities, digital humanities, and civic engagement to fit our work.

But we clearly missed something.

3. The future of Rondo's past

A friend – my counterpart at Macalester – died in September 2023. The day she died I spent hours calling my old colleagues, people I lost touch with. I got to thinking about Mr. Anderson. I called him on a whim. He answered, "Have your ears been burning? I talked about you twice this week. I want the site back."

I responded with a request: we had to figure out where our practices failed, we had to solve the problem, and we had to do it for everyone.

Mr. Anderson is a magical community partner. At least when we're in polite company, he says the same about me. However, a sustainability plan that relies on the friendship of a single community member and a single scholar is not a sustainability plan. While Mr. Anderson is *ageless*, what happens when he dies? What happens if I die?

We started with model practices for digital community engagement, but perhaps we focused too much on Community and not enough on Digital. In these projects, stakeholders and technology coexist in something we're starting to think of as "A Sustainable Shared Authority."

The site going dark is not the problem. It's a symptom of broader issues around sustainability for community-based digital projects.¹⁰ Sustainability questions are not new – platforms need maintenance, file extensions break, and different technologies sunrise and sunset. But when we have solicited the input of people who invested their time, energy, and personal history into a born-digital platform, we have a different level of responsibility.

Our slow, stepped creation process was what RAI needed to build trust, but it pushed questions about digital lifespan and administrative capacity into a retroactive instead of proactive state. We need protocols that balance relationship building with data sustainability when the activities and time frames are unknown, specifically for:

- 1) community projects independently conceived from the start;
- 2) communities who want to separate from academic institutions;
- 3) community projects housed in academic institutions.

¹⁰ Brilmyer et al. 2019; Caswell, Cifor, and Ramirez 2016; Jules 2016; Omowale 2018.

The good news is that we are not starting from scratch. The Socio-Technical Sustainability Roadmap is a series of modules designed to formulate complex sustainability plans.¹¹ This is a great baseline, but it still presumes that digital projects will maintain an academic affiliation.

Mr. Anderson, his team at RCODE, and I are working to relaunch and expand *Remembering Rondo*, and create protocols for what we're calling "A Sustainable Shared Authority."

Rondo keeps teaching. Rondo is a lesson in destructive urban practice and morally unsound policy and law. Rondo is a lesson about how a Black neighborhood built the infrastructure to thrive, and how outside powers took it upon themselves to replace that infrastructure with one of their own, one that served the city's white residents.

Remembering Rondo is also a lesson.

But Rondo is more than a lesson. It is more than the highway. And it is more than a website.

Rondo is its residents – people with complicated lives, with rich histories, with struggles, with laughter, and with generosity. They have stories to share. Ensuring that the next generation has ongoing access to those stories, where they can learn *about* and *from* their elders, is fundamental to safeguarding the future of Rondo's past.

Rebecca S. Wingo is an Associate Professor of History and the Director of Public History at the University of Cincinnati. Her books include *Homesteading the Plains: Toward a New History* (University of Nebraska Press, 2017) and *Digital Community Engagement: Partnering Communities with the Academy* (University of Cincinnati Press, 2020). In addition to *Remembering Rondo*, she is the Project Manager for the *Wyandot Removal Trail* and *Wyandotte Heritage Digital Archive*.

Marvin R. Anderson grew up in the Rondo neighborhood of St. Paul, MN. He is the founder of the Rondo Center for Diverse Expression and a co-founder of Rondo Avenue, Inc. He received his BA from Morehouse College in Atlanta, GA, and JD from Hastings College of Law in San Francisco, CA, before earning his MLS from the University of Minnesota. He spent his career as the Law Librarian for the University of Minnesota College of Law. In 1980, the Minnesota Supreme Court appointed him State Law Librarian, a position he held until his retirement in 2002.

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