



THE ANTI-POVERTY SOLDIER



Community Action

By Clarence Hightower, Ph.D.

Overcoming the injustices of the past: *The history of Rondo and the future of the I-94 corridor*

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In the 1930s and the 1940s Rondo Avenue was at the heart of St. Paul's largest black neighborhood. African Americans whose families had lived in Minnesota for decades and others who were just arriving from the South made up a vibrant, vital community that was in many ways independent of the white society around it.

- Minnesota Historical Society

Because it was often written into home deeds that owners could not sell to African Americans, the Rondo neighborhood proved that African Americans like all others, with pride in their neighborhoods, could better themselves and their surroundings by pride in ownership and community.

- Aurora/St. Anthony Neighborhood Development Corporation

During the life of this column, I have focused on the subjects of gentrification and community development at least a half dozen times. In those pieces I have made mention of the construction of Interstate 94 through the heart of the Twin Cities. Of course, the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 was not so much about gentrification, but rather the largest act of eminent domain in America's history and how it affected urban neighborhoods across the country.

Here, on the west side of St. Paul, the construction of Interstate 94 effectively destroyed Rondo, the city's historic African American neighborhood. St. Paul author and educator, the late Evelyn Fairbank's 1990 memoir *Days of Rondo* and the Annual Rondo Day's Celebration have kept alive the history and legacy of the remarkable community. But, alas, the sorrow and the anger that resulted from the obliteration of the Rondo neighborhood, has remained difficult for its "daughters" and "sons" to overcome.

Nearly 50 years after the 13-mile stretch of Interstate 94 that links downtown St. Paul to downtown Minneapolis was completed, three recent ventures have explored how that project tragically displaced hundreds of African American families, wiped-out family businesses, paved over community gathering spaces, and attempted to cast Rondo aside to the annals of history.

One of these enterprises is called *Remembering Rondo: A History Harvest*. This project, undertaken by students and faculty of Macalester College, has collected an expansive digital archive featuring photographs, memorabilia, important documents, and other artifacts that highlight the values, history, and achievements of the Rondo neighborhood and its residents.

Another endeavor is a play known as *The Highwaymen*, which recently ran at St. Paul's History Theatre this past February. Written by Josh Wilder and directed by Jamil Jude, *The Highwaymen* takes a powerful, in-depth look at the "price" of progress and

a decision that “shattered the lives of thousands” and “changed the face of St. Paul forever.”

The other project, is the first of a two-part documentary titled *Interstate 94: Its History and Impact*, co-produced by the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) and Twin Cities Public Television (TPT) and currently airing on TPT. This documentary shares the stories of several sons and daughters of Rondo that were either young children or teens as Interstate 94 was being constructed in the late 1950s and 1960s. In stark contrast to the Rondo neighborhood, the film also features residents of Prospect Park Minneapolis. The original plans would have also significantly affected much of this community, however many of its residents successfully exercised their political influence and construction of Interstate 94 was re-routed to minimize its impact on the Prospect Park neighborhood.

At the conclusion of *Interstate 94: Its History and Impact*, the filmmakers highlight a public event memorializing Rondo, which included remarks from U.S. Congresswoman Betty McCollum, St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman, and other officials and community leaders. This gathering also included a public apology from Minnesota Commissioner of Transportation

Charles A. Zelle, which was greeted with applause from the community.

Part of Zelle’s comments also referenced MnDOT’s new study *Rethinking I-94*. As the metropolitan area grows and the need to refurbish and potentially redesign parts of the interstate, the *Rethinking I-94* study is designed to help avoid some of the pitfalls of the past. As MnDOT explains, they “will work with neighborhoods, community groups, district councils, local governments, and others interested in the future of I-94 between St. Paul and Minneapolis.”

And, finally, this past December, the United States Department of Transportation released the final report of its Every Place Counts Design challenge, of which the Twin Cities was one of four metro areas studied. All of this sounds like progress. Let’s hope that these good intentions are kept and that the voices of historically disenfranchised communities are heard.

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