

SANKOFA

@Home

*Rondo
Commemorative
Plaza*



Transform Minnesota

RONDO COMMEMORATIVE PLAZA

This month, Sankofa at Home brings us to the Rondo Commemorative Plaza in St. Paul.

The plaza commemorates the history of the **Rondo** neighborhood, laments the decisions which split the neighborhood in half, and celebrates the potential future of the area.

Dedicated in 2016 and opened in 2018, the Rondo Commemorative Plaza was built on the site of a former commercial building which had served the Rondo community for decades.

The plaza features a variety of natural and man-made elements designed to be a gathering place for the community. An open space and pergola at one end of the park create a location for community events; a history wall invites visitors to learn more about Rondo's past; and a series of chimes pay homage to the 18 north-south roads that ran through Rondo.



Rondo Commemorative Plaza

820 Concordia Ave

St. Paul, MN 55104

rcodemn.org | rondoavenueinc.org



REMEMBERING RONDO

The Rondo neighborhood's namesake, Joseph Rondeau, moved to the area in the 1850s after he and his wife experienced discrimination while living close to Fort Snelling. French Canadian immigrants followed Rondeau, and were later joined by German, Russian, Irish, and Jewish immigrants.

Rondo, bordered by University Ave to the north, Selby Ave to the South, Rice St to the east, and Lexington Ave to the west, thrived during the first half of the twentieth century. Known as "[a]n exemplar of Black social entrepreneurship, academic excellence and a vibrant arts culture," the neighborhood slowly became the center of St. Paul's Black community. More than 50% of the city's Black population was living in Rondo by the 1930s, and 85% by the 1950s.

Numerous institutions allowed the community to gather, interact, and find belonging across class and life experience, including the **Hallie Q. Brown community center**. The **St. Paul chapter of the NAACP** was also founded in Rondo in 1913, and Rondo resident **Roy Wilkins** led the national organization from the 1950s to the 1970s.

Since the 1980s, **Rondo Avenue Inc.** has led the way in remembering and honoring the neighborhood, including oversight of events like the Rondo Days festival, leading the creation of the Commemorative Plaza, and continuing to share the contributions and stories of the Rondo community.



CONSTRUCTION AND DESTRUCTION

Construction of I-94 through St. Paul serves as a prominent local example of the displacement that occurred around the country due to the interstate highway system.

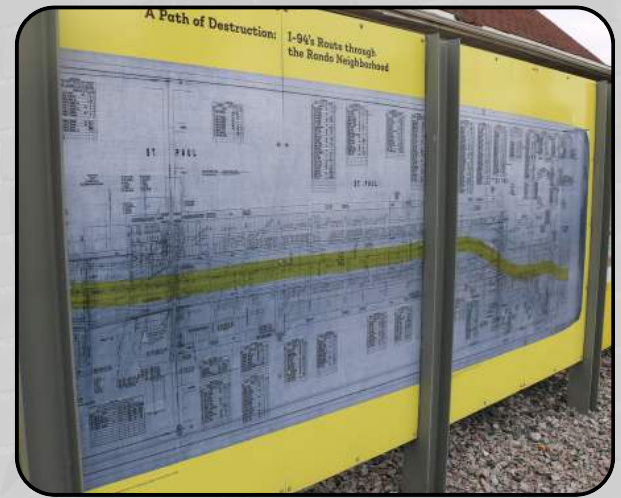
Calls for a connection between downtown Minneapolis and St. Paul had come as early as the 1930s, and funding for what is now I-94 became available through the **Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956**.

Officials opted against a less intrusive northern route through St. Paul near Pierce Butler Road, instead selecting an option right through the heart of Rondo. The likelihood that this route was chosen because there would be less public and political pushback is high, and the damage that came from this decision was costly for the community.

1 in 8 Black people living in St. Paul at the time lost a home to I-94 as hundreds of houses were demolished in Rondo. Hundreds of businesses were also destroyed to make way for the highway.



I-94 looking east at the Dale St bridge in the heart of Old Rondo



I-94's path through the Rondo neighborhood, as depicted at the commemorative plaza

In 2015 a formal apology was given by then Minnesota Department of Transportation (MNDOT) Commissioner **Charlie Zelle** and then St. Paul Mayor **Chris Coleman** "for the acts and decisions that destroyed this once vibrant community."

BRIDGING THE GAP

Numerous entities are considering ways to re-shape I-94 in St. Paul with community input and involvement that would help revitalize and restore the area.

Started in 2017, ReConnect Rondo has led the effort to revitalize the Rondo neighborhood with a land bridge over a portion of I-94. The idea of a land bridge surfaced in 2016 as a way to reconnect the two halves of Rondo split by the highway.

The proposed land bridge would span five blocks over I-94 from Chatsworth St to Grotto St, right across the street from the commemorative plaza. Proponents of the project believe the new space could allow for the creation of affordable housing, a museum, green space, and a marketplace over the highway. In early 2023, the project received \$2 million in federal funds from the Reconnecting Communities Pilot program for initial environmental and traffic studies.

ReConnect Rondo's efforts come at the same time as a state-led initiative called Rethinking I-94, which is researching ways to re-design the I-94 corridor from Hiawatha Ave in Minneapolis to Marion St in St. Paul. While it is currently unclear whether the state would use the land bridge design, MNDOT has identified the need to incorporate a "Livability Framework" and "[d]evelop and execute a community-based approach focused on reconnecting neighborhoods, revitalizing communities, and ensuring residents have a meaningful voice in transportation decisions that affect their lives" with any future updates to I-94.

It would be a symbol or a model for the reconciliation and the rekindling that needs to happen in our greater society right now.

-Marvin Anderson, Rondo Avenue Inc., on the land bridge project

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The Days of Rondo

Evelyn Fairbanks

Evelyn Fairbanks lived along Rondo Avenue—the heart of St. Paul’s largest black community—from the 1930s through the 1950s. Her memoir tells warm and human stories recalling those years in a vibrant community that vanished with the coming of the freeways in the 1960s.

Voices of Rondo: Oral

Histories of Saint Paul’s

Historic Black Community.

As told to Kate Cavett

Real-life stories illuminate the northern urban Black experience during the first half of the twentieth century through the reflections of residents of Saint Paul’s historic Rondo community.

Justice and the Interstates:

The Racist Truth about Urban

Highways

Ed. Ryan Reft, Amanda K. Phillips de Lucas, and Rebecca C. Retzlaf

Justice and the Interstates examines the toll that the construction of the U.S. Interstate Highway System has taken on vulnerable communities over the past seven decades, details efforts to restore these often-segregated communities, and makes recommendations for moving forward.

Joey and Grandpa Johnson’s

Day in Rondo

Dr. Artika R. Tyner

Joey grew up in a historical African American neighborhood called Rondo during the 1940’s. On his weekly Saturday adventure with his grandpa, he learns about the rich cultural heritage of his community and the power of entrepreneurship.

Voices of Rondo Youth Podcast

Rondo Youth Council in collaboration with ReConnect Rondo

A new youth-driven podcast featuring Twin Cities metro area high school students in collaboration with the nonprofit **ReConnect Rondo** will explore the Rondo neighborhood’s past, present, and future through the eyes of its residents, community leaders, and local experts.

Rooted in Rondo: a youth produced audio documentary.

Sounds Powerful Productions

This audio documentary details the stories, history, and resilience of the Rondo community.



**St. Paul's Historic Black
Neighborhood Destroyed**

By Highway
Twin Cities PBS

**How I-94 ripped apart the
Rondo neighborhood and one
group's plan to help restore it**
FOX 9

**Why was I-94 built through St.
Paul's Rondo neighborhood?**
Star Tribune

Rondo Neighborhood, St. Paul
MNOpedia

Rondo Commemorative Plaza
Architecture MN

**Commemorative Plaza revives
the spirit of Rondo**
Minnesota Spokesman-Recorder

**Before the Highway: Saint Paul,
Minnesota**
AARP Livable Communities

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

As you visit the Rondo Commemorative Plaza:

- What do you feel?
- What's new to you?
- How does the history of Rondo inform the present?
- The story of Rondo is deeply intertwined with that of I-94:
 - What did the people of Rondo lose with the construction of I-94? What did the people outside of Rondo lose?
 - Who is asked to make sacrifices for public works projects? How do we decide?
- Imagine being displaced by the construction of I-94:
 - What would it be like to be forced to move from your home?
 - How would it feel to receive a payment below market value for the home?
 - How would it feel to lose your community network and connections?
- What might the future look like?
 - What might healing and repair look like?
 - What would it look like for the community to flourish?



Transform Minnesota

COMPLEX ISSUES. BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE.

This resource list is part of Transform
Minnesota's Sankofa @ Home series

Inclusion of a resource on the list does
not represent a full endorsement of
stated beliefs