

# **Decolonizing the Wakarusa Museum: The Role of Public Education and Forced Displacement Within the Settler Colonial Structure**

**By Claire Cox**

On a sunny afternoon in May of 2022, I arrived for my first day as an intern at the Wakarusa River Valley Heritage Museum. The President of the Clinton Lake Historical Society, Marin Massa, provided a grand tour as she explained in detail the current display exhibits, future exhibition plans, and the museum's dense collection of family histories, photographs, and other related artifacts. Together, these collections brought to life the memory of ten interconnected rural communities located throughout the Wakarusa River Valley. Today, only four of these communities still exist. The others were either demolished, flooded, or abandoned when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers built Clinton Lake. The Wakarusa River Valley Heritage Museum, or Wakarusa Museum, was established in 1983 as a direct response to the construction of Clinton Lake, which began in 1972 and ended in 1982.

The long and complex history of the Wakarusa River Valley spoke to the region's rural settlements, which were as old, if not slightly older, than the state of Kansas itself. The majority of the Wakarusa Museum's documented history takes place during the Civil War era and the violent age known popularly as Bleeding Kansas.<sup>1</sup> In this period, the Wakarusa River Valley was a battleground between abolitionists and pro-slavery settlers. Overall, the historic events and heroic characters of the Wakarusa River Valley are preserved with great pride in the Wakarusa Museum. Throughout the tour, I was fascinated with the region's deep history and the meticulous care with which it had been preserved and displayed. However, I was concerned with the startling absence of Indigenous voices and omission of Native history, which, in addition to Clinton Lake itself, further entrenched the idea that Native Americans would never regain ownership of this land. The Wakarusa Museum itself is based on a book, written by the founder of the museum Martha Parker and her colleague Betty Laird, entitled *Soil of Our Soils*. In this book, the introduction, written by Parker, begins with, "The Indian history and prehistory are

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<sup>1</sup> For further research, see: Brie Swenson Arnold, *Bleeding Kansas, Bleeding Missouri: The Long Civil War on the Border*, ed. Jonathan Halperin Earle and Diane Mutti Burke (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2013).

infinitely deserving of attention; however, only students of Indian culture are qualified to write on the subject.”<sup>2</sup> Parker dismissed her ability to include Native American history in both the book and the museum and justified this dismissal by citing her personal lack of expertise on the topic. However, the omission of Native history in the Wakarusa Museum is better explained using the inherent characteristics of settler colonialism.

Museums are communal institutions designed to preserve and share collective history. Brandie Macdonald, a citizen of the Chickasaw Nation and director of Decolonizing Initiatives at the Museum of Us in San Diego, California layers this definition with concepts of decolonization. According to Macdonald, museums are informal educational resources that hold a unique colonial position.<sup>3</sup> The Wakarusa Museum’s website claims the museum is dedicated to, “the communities and the founding settlers for their perseverance of defending their staunch beliefs in difficult times.”<sup>4</sup> Based on the Wakarusa Museum’s historic and contemporary collections and exhibits, the museum has only preserved the history of the rural communities affected by the construction of Clinton Lake. While this history is valuable and worth preservation, it ignores the complex history of the Native Americans who lived in the valley long before white settlers. The current information displayed in the museum implies that the region’s history began in the 1850s with Euro-American settlement. Not only does this undermine the museum’s purpose, but it also makes the Wakarusa Museum an institution of colonization.<sup>5</sup> To this day, the Wakarusa Museum fails to publicly acknowledge the Native American history that was submerged beneath Clinton Lake. Using Macdonald’s analysis, the Wakarusa Museum “replicates colonial erasure and violence” through current exhibitions and collections.<sup>6</sup> The Wakarusa Museum memorializes the settler colonial expansion of rural farmers rather than representing the history of Native Americans.

My research explores the reasons why the Wakarusa Museum has operated for nearly forty years without an appropriate or permanent exhibit that values Indigenous voices and honors

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<sup>2</sup> Martha Parker, *Soil of Our Soils* (Overbrook, Kan.: Freedom Publishing Company, 1976). 11.

<sup>3</sup> Brandie Macdonald, “Pausing, Reflection, and Action: Decolonizing Museum Practices.” *Journal of Museum Education* 47, no. 1 (2022): 8.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.wakarusamuseum.org>. Accessed August 25, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (Chapel Hill, N.C.; London: University Of North Carolina Press, 2012). 19-42.

<sup>6</sup> Macdonald, “Pausing, Reflection, and Action: Decolonizing Museum Practices.” 8.

Native contributions to the history of the region. In order to understand why colonial institutions are established and maintained, it is important to understand the circumstances that influenced Parker to exclude information about Native Americans and perpetuate their erasure from a public institution dedicated to regional history. This erasure is an ongoing force of colonization. Using Parker and the Wakarusa Museum as a case study, I hope to discover how patterns of omission promote colonial spaces, and subsequently, how this promotion reinforces a wider general acceptance of exclusion and misrepresentation of Native American history. I will explain this phenomenon by using two pillars of settler colonialism, forced displacement and public education. Additionally, I will uncover and explain how these ongoing settler colonial forces created parallel narratives of history.<sup>7</sup> By revealing this parallel, I hope to encourage future conversations regarding a potential resolution to the cycle of colonialism. This paper is divided into four main parts. The first section provides a brief introduction to settler colonialism. The second and third sections will outline the individual pillars of settler colonialism, forced displacement and public education, respectively. And finally, the fourth section will explain the process of decolonization as a proposed solution to the research question. Each section will critically analyze Parker and Wakarusa Museum through the lens of settler colonial studies as well as museum theory.

### **The Settler Colonial Structure**

Patrick Wolfe, a groundbreaking scholar in the field of settler colonial studies, defines settler colonialism as a structure upon which a settler colonial society is built using land emptied of Indigenous peoples.<sup>8</sup> According to Wolfe, access to territory is the primary objective of settler colonialism.<sup>9</sup> Settler colonialism relies on the logic of elimination to remove, assimilate, or kill Indigenous populations in order to provide land for white settlers. Wolfe claims that “settler colonialism destroys to replace.”<sup>10</sup> Using the logic of elimination, Native society is replaced with a settler colonial society. As a result, rather than a singular historical event, settler colonialism embeds a structure into settler colonial society that continuously erases Native peoples in order

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<sup>7</sup> Although I focus on these two specific pillars, I believe there are many more to be unearthed. However, that investigation remained outside the scope of this project.

<sup>8</sup> Patrick Wolfe. “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native.” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 388.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

to construct the foundation for an empire.<sup>11</sup> From this foundation, central pillars are constructed to support the empire, and without such pillars, the empire would collapse. Public education is a key pillar of the settler colonial structure. Displacement in the name of modern progress, or, as Wolfe argues, elimination of the Native, establishes another pillar. These pillars require maintenance and protection to ensure their permanence. Maintenance for settler colonial pillars comes in the form of a cyclical process. During this process, public systems, like education, and federal organizations, like the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, utilize settler colonial values to perpetuate objectives of empire and yield products suited to participate in and contribute to a settler colonial society. Martha Parker and the Wakarusa Museum exemplify this cycle. In order to effectively decolonize institutions and break the cycle of American colonialism, it is important to understand the factors that informed their initial creation. The Wakarusa Museum offers a pertinent example of this process as it is one of 35,000 museums across the United States. Furthermore, in examining the Wakarusa Museum, I seek to understand how the pillars of settler colonialism act upon both individuals and communities.

As an empire, America seeks to exert control over both external and internal factors. Public education and forced displacement are used as means for controlling the American populace through omission of truthful history and removal of colonial threats. As a nation, we are products of these colonial systems. This is an uncomfortable realization for many, who may react by turning away from museums and rejecting the idea of dismantling colonial institutions altogether. Nevertheless, in the face of such an understanding, we must move beyond awareness and begin to take action. The problems addressed throughout this essay do not affect Native Americans alone and should concern every American – we have all been colonized. The Wakarusa Museum offers just one example of a much bigger, nation-wide problem. Using the Wakarusa Museum as a model, this research offers an intervention to shift academic conversations toward recognizing cycles of colonialism and initiating a collective process toward decolonization.

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<sup>11</sup> Wolfe's definition of settler colonialism has not been accepted without issue. For further study on this argument, see: Lorenzo Veracini, "Patrick Wolfe's Dialectics," *Aboriginal History* 40, no. 40 (2016): 249–60.

## The Pillar of Forced Displacement

In times of loss, which are often accompanied by feelings of anxiety, fear, strangeness, and vulnerability, communities seek to understand their situation by relying on what they believe to be true about the world. To understand an unprecedented situation, people use their own personal knowledge as the foundation for creating reasonable explanations and potential solutions. For individuals like Martha Parker and her fellow community members, their basis for knowledge came from standardized public education. The construction of Clinton Lake, which guaranteed the displacement of residents and the destruction of rural communities, presented itself as a time of crisis for residents of the Wakarusa River Valley. As a form of damage control, the collection and preservation of the Wakarusa River Valley's history offered a solution to the dislocation caused by Clinton Lake.

On the dedication page of *Soil of Our Souls*, Parker writes, "The history recounted within the pages of this book is my heritage. I hope to preserve it for those who have lived its most recent chapter with me and to share it for those who have not."<sup>12</sup> In historian David Lowenthal's book entitled *Possessed by the Past*, he defines the concept of heritage tourism. According to Lowenthal, "in recoiling from grievous loss or fending off a fearsome future, people of the world often revert to ancestral legacies."<sup>13</sup> Lowenthal's conclusion perfectly describes the process employed by Parker and her fellow community members throughout their development of the Wakarusa Museum. These founders faced the terrifying loss of their land, which held deep ties to their own rural identity. What would happen to their communities after the construction of Clinton Lake? In this state of panic, the Wakarusa River Valley *Heritage* Museum was established in an attempt to preserve the region's history and cultivate comfort through a shared ancestral legacy. The Wakarusa Museum provided local white residents with some degree of consolation in the face of loss due to an inevitable Clinton Lake project. Finally, the Wakarusa Museum transformed the Wakarusa River Valley settlers into heroes, defined in *Soil of Our Souls* as individuals "who through courage and steadfast determination fought for, won, and retained the freedoms which those in the Wakarusa basin still cherish..."<sup>14</sup> But, as Lowenthal states,

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<sup>12</sup> Parker, *Soil of Our Soils*, Dedication.

<sup>13</sup> David Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (New York: Free Press, 1996). ix.

<sup>14</sup> Parker, *Soil of Our Soils*, Dedication.

heritage is never truthful history but rather a celebration of the past.<sup>15</sup> The Wakarusa Museum celebrates the region's past by focusing exclusively on the experiences of rural settlers, therefore omitting all Indigenous history. As a result, the museum offers a display of heritage rather than history. The promotion of heritage and settler colonial history within the Wakarusa Museum results in a wider general acceptance of exclusion and misrepresentation of Native American history and peoples. This fuels the machine of American colonialism.

Furthermore, in telling her own story of displacement and loss through the preservation of the Wakarusa River Valley's rural communities, Parker failed to recognize a parallel history that took place almost 100 years prior to white settlement. Beginning in 1830s, Native American nations located within the Wakarusa River Valley, such as the Kaw and Osage, along with relocated Tribes from the East, namely the Shawnee and Delaware, were removed from their homelands in the name of the Manifest Destiny; a term coined by journalist John O'Sullivan in 1845 to represent the narrative constructed around white progress and land improvement.<sup>16</sup> Historian John P. Bowes summarizes the process of Native removal by stating that, "driven by the desire to 'settle and improve' lands they viewed as untamed wilderness, both the U.S. state and its citizens often failed to acknowledge the full measure of the relationships and communities they swept aside in the process."<sup>17</sup> This pattern of complete disregard for existing communities, justified by reports of progress and improvement, was carried well into the twentieth century and written into environmental policies throughout the 1960s and 70s. This time, methods of settler colonialism were turned upon white, rural towns in order to create a parallel narrative of history.

Before continuing farther, it must be acknowledged that these two historical events, the white settlement of Kansas and the construction of Clinton Lake, are not equivalent on the level of sheer loss, degree of dislocation, violence, and trauma experienced by Indigenous nations, but they do exemplify how displacement often accompanies myths of progress. These myths require

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<sup>15</sup> Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past*, ix-xiii.

<sup>16</sup> For further research about Native American history in Kansas, see: Ronald D. Parks, *The Darkest Period: The Kanza Indians and Their Last Homeland, 1846-1873* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014)., William E. Unrau, *Indians of Kansas: The Euro-American Invasion and Conquest of Indian Kansas* (Topeka, Kan.: Kansas State Historical Society, 1991)., David J. Wishart, *Great Plains Indians* (Lincoln; London: University of Nebraska Press, 2016).

<sup>17</sup> Bowes, *The Oxford Handbook of American Indian History*, 94.

legislation to legitimize their authority and materialize their consequences onto the landscape. Without such legislation, narratives of improvement struggle to achieve their namesake. For the Indigenous Peoples of Kansas, the Indian Removal Act of 1830 helped facilitate the legend of white settler progress through the erasure of Native peoples from shrinking reservations. For the rural communities of the Wakarusa River Valley, the Flood Control Act of 1962 authorized funding to dam the Wakarusa River and build Clinton Lake. According to a 1971 pamphlet written by the Corps of Engineers entitled *How the Government Will Acquire Land for Clinton Lake*, “The Congress of the United States, in the development and promotion of our Country’s resources, directs the construction, alteration, or improvement of our rivers, lakes, channels and harbors for flood control, navigation, conservation, power, and other related purposes.”. Despite protests from many Wakarusa River Valley citizens, the Corps of Engineers began buying land as early as 1968 and construction of the dam started in 1972. Thus, the “invasion of the Corps of Engineers” was underway.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Pillar of Public Education**

Although there are several reasons behind the exclusion of Native American history within the Wakarusa Museum, there is no doubt that public education, alongside forced displacement and Parker’s own sense of loss, also played a major role in Parker’s decision-making process. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, there are over 98,000 public schools in the United States. Within these schools, public education teaches students distorted, inaccurate, and racialized versions of history that reinforce racial hierarchies and justify white superiority. This includes the misrepresentation, and often exclusion, of Native American history. These themes of deception are often propagated in rural schools, where limited funding promotes the recycling of antiquated textbooks.

As mentioned, Native Americans were not the only ones affected by systems of colonialism. As a colonial nation, America used public education as a means for maintaining empire and controlling the American populace. Classrooms transformed into ideological factories that produced useful citizens. However, the type of education received and the role each student was taught to play within the colonial system varied between white, Indigenous, and

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<sup>18</sup> Parker, *Soil of Our Souls*, 19.

African American students.<sup>19</sup> As a means of saturating children and young adults with settler colonial values and goals, public education utilizes omittance, erasure, misrepresentation, and falsehood to fuel and maintain cycles of colonialism. Beginning in the 1960s, shortly before the Red Power movement was founded in 1968, there was an outcry for revision of the public education system, with a particular focus on how Native American history and culture was being taught in classrooms. In 1970, Jeanette Henry published *Textbooks and the American Indian* through the Indian Historian Press. In this work, Henry and her fellow colleagues, a combination of thirty-two Native scholars, historians, and students, critique and analyze over 300 textbooks from the 1950s and 60s. Overall, Henry concludes that “Not one [textbook] could be approved as a dependable source of knowledge about the history and the culture of the Indian people in America.”<sup>20</sup> Through misrepresentation, distortion, and omission, each textbook failed to communicate truthful and accurate history to elementary and high school students.<sup>21</sup>

While the failure of these textbooks provide examples of how Native American history was taught in public schools at the time, it is impossible to know exactly how much educational information was absorbed by students like Parker. However, further research beyond the classroom into topics deemed unworthy of attention, such as Native American studies, African American studies, etc., would be the exception rather than the rule. As a product of the public education system, the history Parker learned was contaminated with the values and objectives of the settler colonial nation-state. Therefore, mirroring her education, Parker introduced patterns of omittance and erasure into the Wakarusa Museum. This methodology remained unchallenged by fellow Wakarusa River Valley residents, the Corps of Engineers, local newspapers, and organizations that supplied funding to the museum, all of whom were products of the settler colonial system themselves.

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<sup>19</sup> For more information about the type of education Native American and African American students received, see: Kim Cary Warren, *The Quest for Citizenship: African American and Native American Education in Kansas, 1880-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010). In this work, historian Kim Cary Warren argues that Indigenous and African American students “resisted and negotiated prescriptions for citizenship” placed upon them by white educators.

<sup>20</sup> Jeannette Henry. *Textbooks and the American Indian*. (San Francisco: Indian Historian Press, 1970). 11.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 11-12.



## Decolonizing the Wakarusa Museum

Meaningful change within museum spaces goes far beyond simply the type of information presented, but rather, *how* these stories are told and *who* gets to tell them. This requires a complete restructuring of power. Facilitating such systematic change necessitates a thorough understanding of how the Wakarusa Museum functions as a public, educational institution. Currently, in an effort to establish a secure sense of identity, the Wakarusa Museum operates as a site of heritage tourism and contributes to the frontier complex. As previously mentioned, historian David Lowenthal coined the term heritage tourism in order to describe museums and memorial sites that communicate heritage rather than history to visiting audiences. This is problematic for multiple reasons. As Lowenthal describes, “Heritage exaggerates and omits, candidly invents and frankly forgets, and thrives on ignorance and error.”<sup>22</sup> Unlike history, heritage flourishes on bias.<sup>23</sup> As a result, heritage has the power to transform history by excluding what is “shameful or harmful.”<sup>24</sup> In hiding the unsavory events of history, “heritage is enhanced by erasure.”<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the pillars of settler colonialism facilitate the preservation of heritage. As a proprietor of heritage tourism, the Wakarusa Museum adheres to these patterns. As a product of the settler colonial system, Parker and her colleagues omitted the uncomfortable and difficult history of the Wakarusa River Valley, which further erased Indigenous peoples from the region. In doing so, Parker’s educational background was bolstered while the consequences of displacement were soothed.

Alongside heritage tourism, the Wakarusa Museum also actively participates in the frontier complex as defined in historian Daniel Maher’s book, *Mythic Frontiers: Remembering, Forgetting, and Profiting With Cultural Heritage Tourism*. The American frontier, an imaginary border between Euro-American civilization and unknown wilderness, rested for a considerable amount of time in Kansas.<sup>26</sup> The Wakarusa Museum documents this time period with courageous stories of anti-slavery settlers of the Wakarusa River Valley fighting to defend their newly acquired land from the pro-slavery ruffians of Missouri. While this history is true, it completely

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<sup>22</sup> Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past*, 121.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 148

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>26</sup> Daniel R. Maher, *Mythic Frontiers: Remembering, Forgetting, and Profiting with Cultural Heritage Tourism*. Florida: University Press of Florida, 2016.)

ignores the consequences that colonialism, racism, manifest destiny, and the mythic frontier complex inflicted on Native Americans.<sup>27</sup> Much like heritage tourism, the frontier complex is more fiction than fact, and often relies upon the collective imagination of the white majority. Drawing upon the frontier complex allowed the Wakarusa Museum to reenact an imaginary moment in time when white settlers enjoyed supremacy on the landscape. By “minimizing the devastating consequences that imperialism, racism, and sexism have had on social minorities,” the frontier complex allows museums, memorial sites, and historical markers to “legitimize the privilege bestowed to white men past and present.”<sup>28</sup> Therefore, the omittance of Indigenous history in the Wakarusa Museum not only speaks to Parker’s settler colonial education and experience with forced displacement, but also reveals the material manifestation of the frontier complex, which encourages visitors to “live out fantasies and expectations associated with that site.”<sup>29</sup> The Wakarusa Museum allows guests to experience the Wakarusa River Valley before the construction of Clinton Lake through the lens of noble abolitionists and rural farmers. Such an idealized perspective requires the omittance of Indigenous history in favor of the imaginary frontier complex, which can only be recalled by memory.

Historian Ari Kelman studies the “collision of history and memory” in his 2013 publication of *A Misplaced Massacre*. Using the 2007 establishment of the Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site as a case study, Kelman analyzes how historical events are remembered by different groups of people in different ways. This phenomenon often leads to contested forms of memorialization. In addition, Kelman argues that federally funded historic sites use the process of memorialization as a means to achieve future unity from a divisive past. As a result, we must ask ourselves: whose interest do historical sites serve if they are sponsored by federal or state institutions? According to Bryony Oniciu, a public historian, “Museums and heritage sites are places that are imbued with power and authority by the societies that build and authorize them.”<sup>30</sup> Therefore, as both Oniciu and Kelman demonstrate, much can be learned about a site of memorialization by studying its founders and funding sources. This paper has focused primarily

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 243.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 1-5.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>30</sup> Bryony Oniciu, *Museums, Heritage and Indigenous Voice: Decolonising Engagement*, Routledge Research in Museum Studies 10 (New York: Routledge, 2015).

on the museum founder; however, federal and state funding reveals a new layer of both support and compliance with the Wakarusa Museum's skewed historical narrative.

In the early years of operation, the museum relied heavily on annual funding from the Douglas County Commissioner's Office, as well as local donations, ticket sales for events, and other fundraising activities by Clinton Lake Historical Society members.<sup>31</sup> For example, the Clinton Lake Quilting Club was organized in 1979 to help raise money for the CLHS. The club's membership consisted of local women from the Wakarusa region who either experienced displacement firsthand or knew someone who had.<sup>32</sup> Using Kelman's argument, the Wakarusa Museum received power and authority from local Wakarusa River Valley residents who, much like Parker, were products of a settler colonial system that ignored Indigenous history. Today, the Wakarusa Museum continues to receive financial support from the Douglas County Commissioner's Office, which allocates funding for "heritage preservation" through the Douglas County Heritage Conservation Council, or HCC, and the Natural and Cultural Heritage Grant program each year. In addition, the museum has also received several grants from the Kansas Humanities Council, the Kansas Arts Commission, and the National Endowment for the Humanities.<sup>33</sup>

Ho-Chunk Nation historian Amy Lonetree has dedicated her career to studying the relationship between Indigenous communities and museums. In 2012, Lonetree published *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*. In this book, Lonetree reveals how representations of Native American history and culture in museums has changed over time and how Indigenous activism and new museum theory has influenced this process.. According to Lonetree, decolonization must begin with "hard truth telling," collaboration with Indigenous peoples, and prioritization of Native voices. Incorporating these methods when curating exhibits or engaging the community allows museums to transition from "sites of colonial harm into sites of healing."<sup>34</sup> In order for the Wakarusa Museum to serve all communities and effectively transform into a place of significance to Indigenous peoples, it must

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<sup>31</sup> The Clinton Lake Historical Society, "Request for Funding from Douglas County Historical and Cultural Fund 1979," Museum Records, The Wakarusa River Valley Heritage Museum; Dale A. Johnson, "Douglas County Commissioners Proposed Budget 1983," Museum Records, The Wakarusa River Valley Heritage Museum.

<sup>32</sup> "Quilt Exhibit," Exhibit Files, The Wakarusa River Valley Heritage Museum.

<sup>33</sup> "Grants," Museum Records, The Wakarusa River Valley Heritage Museum.

<sup>34</sup> Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 166.

go through the process of decolonization.<sup>35</sup> Once again, we arrive at the question of power within museum spaces.

Historically, museums served as trophy cases to the “achievements of empire.”<sup>36</sup> As a result, curatorial power within the museum typically resides with those who participate in the settler colonial system. In order to break down this hierarchy of power, museums must be willing to shift away from exclusionary practices and transition toward a “relationship of shared authority.”<sup>37</sup> Conversations surrounding the process of decolonization often prioritize ideas about engagement with marginalized communities. While engagement is important, historian Bryony Onciul argues that it is not a complete solution but rather “the start of a new form of relationship between museums and communities...”<sup>38</sup> Onciul’s 2015 publication of *Museums, Heritage and Indigenous Voice: Decolonising Engagement* stresses the importance of finding a balance between Lonetree’s idea of “hard truth-telling” and maintaining sensitivity toward Indigenous culture, generational trauma, and audience receptibility.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, historian Vanessa Whittington advocates for an engagement approach that prioritizes Black and Indigenous peoples as professionals, community advisors, and audience members.<sup>40</sup> In order to effectively decolonize the Wakarusa Museum, efforts must follow both Whittington and Onciul’s principles of engagement in order to limit the amount of negative consequences and produce the best possible outcome for all communities.

In conclusion, the Wakarusa Museum is an institution which exemplifies the cycle of American settler colonialism. As a structure embedded within society, settler colonialism relies on support from foundational pillars. Together, the pillars of settler colonialism act to promote the objectives of empire and sponsor the creation of colonial institutions. In order to understand how and why the Wakarusa Museum operated nearly forty years without the inclusion of Native American history, I conducted a study of the museum’s founder, Martha Parker, and the settler colonial forces that influenced her decision-making process. Throughout this research, I focused

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Vanessa Whittington, “Decolonising the Museum? Dilemmas, Possibilities, Alternatives,” *Culture Unbound* 13, no. 2 (2022): 245–69.

<sup>37</sup> Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 19.

<sup>38</sup> Onciul, *Museums, Heritage and Indigenous Voice*, 1.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>40</sup> Whittington, “Decolonising the Museum? Dilemmas, Possibilities, Alternatives,” 252.

on the two pillars that applied directly to Parker and the Wakarusa Museum, forced displacement and public education. When confronted with the construction of Clinton Lake, the first pillar of settler colonialism, forced displacement, created feelings of extreme loss for Wakarusa River Valley citizens, including Parker. Many residents feared that displacement from their land meant the loss of both their history and identity. The establishment of the Wakarusa Museum helped combat these feelings, however, in the process, Parker excluded Native American perspectives in favor of an idealized version of regional history. Additionally, in the face of such displacement, Parker relied on her settler colonial education to preserve the heritage of the Wakarusa River Valley communities. As the second pillar of settler colonialism, public education is used as a means for controlling the American population through the distortion of history and elimination of Indigenous peoples. Mirroring her education, Parker introduced these patterns of omission and erasure into the Wakarusa Museum, creating a settler colonial institution.

Furthermore, these ongoing settler colonial forces created parallel narratives of history that Parker and her fellow colleagues failed to recognize. Much like dislocation of rural communities during the construction of Clinton Lake in the 1970s, the removal of Indigenous peoples from the Wakarusa River Valley in the 1850s produced similar feelings of crisis, trauma, and loss for Native Americans. Throughout America's history as a settler colonial empire, displacement of Indigenous peoples, communities of color, and rural populations often accompanied myths of improvement. While these groups experienced very different degrees of displacement almost a century apart from each other, the means of justification carry comparable themes of modern progress. The exclusion of Native American history and Indigenous voices in a public resource, like the Wakarusa Museum, reinforces American objectives of empire, and as a result, the cycle of settler colonialism remains unchallenged. As a colonized populace, the issues discussed throughout this research should concern every American. Breaking down the settler colonial structure and decolonizing museum spaces must become a priority for not only Native Americans and people of color, but everyone living under the American empire.

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