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For Immediate Release

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MEDIA RELEASE

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Wyandot Nation of Kansas & Monumenta

Announce the Public Art Work

Trespassers Beware! Fort Conley and Wyandot Women Warriors

& the National Endowment for the Arts - ArtsHERE Award

Fall 2025

A newly commissioned “mobile monument” commemorating the iconic story of the Wyandot sisters who saved their cemetery will debut in fall 2025.

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Kansas City, MO – The Wyandot Nation of Kansas and Monumenta announce the commemorative public art project, ***Trespassers Beware! Fort Conley and Wyandot Women Warriors*** - set to debut in fall 2025. *Trespassers* will illuminate the story of the [Wyandot Conley sisters](#) who occupied the historic Wyandot National Burying Ground in Kansas City, Kansas, saving it from urban development and erasure. The 2-acre cemetery exists today because of their decades-long activism and legal arguments to defend and protect their family’s sacred land. Photos, headshots, renderings and more can be found at [Trespassers Beware!](#)

National Endowment for the Arts - ArtsHERE

The Wyandot Nation of Kansas and Monumenta also celebrate being awarded the National Endowment for the Arts - ArtsHERE grant to support this project.

Wyandot Nation of Kansas is one of 112 organizations nationwide selected to receive an ArtsHERE grant of \$130,000 as part of a new pilot program from the National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with South Arts and in collaboration with the other five U.S. Regional Arts Organizations. These grants support specific projects that will strengthen the organizations’ capacity to sustain meaningful community engagement and increase arts participation for underserved groups and communities.

“The National Endowment for the Arts is thrilled to provide resources to a group of exceptional organizations through ArtsHERE, a program to help deepen meaningful and lasting arts engagement in underserved communities,” said Maria Rosario Jackson, PhD, chair of the National Endowment for the Arts. “Everyone should be able to live an artful life, and ArtsHERE is an important step in ensuring we are strengthening our nation’s arts ecosystem to make this a reality.”

Trespassers Beware! Fort Conley and Wyandot Women Warriors

The Wyandots arrived in present-day Kansas City in 1843 after forced removal from the Great Lakes region, and immediately established a cemetery in what is now downtown Kansas City, Kansas. As the cemetery land gained value in the early 20th century, orders were given to excavate the bodies and sell the land.



The family of Lyda, Ida and Helena Conley was buried there, and the sisters courageously jumped into action to defend the land, armed themselves, built “Fort Conley,” and hung a

Photos of Fort Conley, ca. 1906. Courtesy of Kansas Room Special Collections, Kansas City, Kansas Public Library

sign on the cemetery gates reading: “Trespassers Beware.” During a 4-year battle of which the Conleys lived in The Fort to guard the cemetery, Lyda Conley earned a law degree and prepared a case stating that selling the cemetery violated prior treaties. By 1910 her case advanced to the nation’s top court and Conley became the first Indigenous woman to argue a case before the U.S. Supreme Court.



She lost the case, but the sisters remained determined, garnered national support and attracted powerful allies, ultimately succeeding in saving the cemetery.

Newspaper clipping from The Kansas City Globe (KCK), 1910. Courtesy of Wyandot Nation of Kansas Archives.

The actions and legal arguments of the Conley sisters reverberated far beyond the cemetery gates, contributing to preservation and tribal sovereignty movements nationwide, and elevating the role of women in law.

Trespassers Beware! is a multi-site, multidisciplinary and community-embedded public art work that re-imagines Fort Conley as a “mobile monument.” The installation will travel to multiple communities, beginning in the Kansas City metro with the following project

partners: Wyandotte County Historical Museum (fall 2025), Johnson County Community College's Kansas Studies Institute and Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art (spring 2026), and Kansas City, Kansas Public Library (summer 2026). The artists will be announced in November 2024. Photos, artwork and more will be announced in the Monumenta [newsletter](#) and posted at Monumentaart.org

This project is co-led by The Wyandot Nation of Kansas and Monumenta, and in partnership with Kansas City Repertory Theatre.

Chief Judith Manthe of the Wyandot Nation of Kansas stated, Eliza Burton “Lyda” Conley and her sisters Helena and Ida grew up with the mindset of all women of the Wyandots, a matriarchal and matrilineal society known for their proud, disobedient and ill-tempered women. They held deep reverence for the burial of their dead; the graves of their loved ones were their only monuments, and so tradition was their only history. When the sisters built and moved into the 6 x 8 ft structure known as Fort Conley, they positioned it to see all parts of the cemetery, and for years they guarded their ancestors' graves and held the bluff of an army. The tenacity of these women - my first cousins three times removed - saved the cemetery. I am honored to tell their stories.”

Monumenta Founder and Artistic Director Neysa Page-Lieberman shared, “The Conley sisters' epic battle to save their sacred land is a story that commands a monumental place in history and in cultural representation. The Conley's physical and legal battles influenced major movements in this country including tribal sovereignty, women's rights, preservation acts, and how we participate in democracy. It is only through the Wyandot's tireless efforts to preserve and honor their legacy that we now have this opportunity to commission a large-scale art installation. I am honored to partner with Chief Judith Manthe and the Wyandots/Wyandottes to celebrate and center this extraordinary story in our commemorative public art landscape.”

Tai Edwards, director of the Kansas Studies Institute says: “The Institute, the Nerman Museum and our colleagues at Johnson County Community College are thrilled to serve as partners with the Wyandot Nation of Kansas and Monumenta to bring more attention to the story of the Conley Sisters. This installation, created by Indigenous artists, is a wonderful and unique educational opportunity for students, colleagues, and the community to learn about the courage and resilience of the Wyandot Nation, past and present, while demonstrating the power of art in elevating and interpreting our region's history.”

Amanda Martin, Director of Wyandotte County Historical Museum stated, “The history of the Wyandot Nation of Kansas exemplifies the complexity and significance of Native American history in Kansas and the U.S. It is a privilege to be the opening venue for *Trespassers Beware! Wyandot Women Warriors*, an extraordinary opportunity for the Wyandotte County Historical Museum to explore, reflect and build on Wyandot history with our community through engagement with the museum collection.”



Helena Conley, Lyda Conley, Cousin Nina Craig, ca. 1935.
Courtesy of the Wyandot Nation of Kansas Archives

About the National Endowment for the Arts

Established by Congress in 1965, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) is an independent federal agency that is the largest funder of the arts and arts education in communities nationwide and a catalyst of public and private support for the arts. By advancing equitable opportunities for arts participation and practice, the NEA fosters and sustains an environment in which the arts benefit everyone in the United States.

PRODUCING ORGANIZATIONS

The Wyandot Nation of Kansas

The Wyandot Nation of Kansas is dedicated to the preservation of Wyandot history and culture and the protection, restoration and maintenance of the Wyandot National Burying Ground in Kansas City, KS. The Wyandot Nation of Kansas descends from their ancestral homeland of Georgian Bay, an inlet of Lake Huron. They were displaced multiple times, resulting in four bands of the Wendat Confederacy: Wyandot Nation of Kansas, Wyandotte Nation of Oklahoma, Wyandot Nation of Anderdon and Huron Wendat of Wendake. The Wyandots arrived in the Kansas City area in 1843 and founded the towns of Wyandot and Quindaro, which became Kansas City, KS. They incorporated in the State of Kansas in 1959 and attained 501(c)(3) status in 2020. More here: wyandot.org

Monumenta

Monumenta is a public art initiative that monumentalizes our collective actions and stories. Launched in 2023 in Kansas City by curator, writer and strategist, Neysa Page-Lieberman, Monumenta produces projects locally, nationally and internationally. In close collaboration with artists and community partners, Monumenta envisions, incubates, develops, advocates, connects and visibly presents their stories as monuments. Projects are co-designed to be inclusive, centered in feminist practice, and oriented towards justice and equity in our shared public spaces. More here: <https://www.monumentaart.org/>

OUR FUNDERS

Trespassers Beware! is generously funded, in part, by the National Endowment for the Arts / ArtsHERE, in partnership with Mid-America Arts Alliance, Humanities Kansas, Kansas Arts Commission and individual donors.



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Due to the nature of outdoor public art and traveling installations, the tour schedule is subject to change.

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