

FEATURE STORY

A young Rondo resident  
watches construction vehicles  
lay the foundation for I-94.  
*Credit: Mr. Marvin Anderson*



**RECONNECTING**

**RONDO**

Nearly 70 years ago, a highway tore the heart out of a vibrant African American community in St. Paul. Activist Marvin Roger Anderson has a vision for healing it.

From the early 1900s until the bulldozers arrived to demolish it in the mid-1950s, St. Paul's Rondo neighborhood was a thriving African American community. Along a 20-block span now bisected by Interstate 94, the descendants of slaves and sharecroppers built prosperous businesses, worshipped in packed churches, excelled in schools, performed in playhouses, and celebrated life through dance, poetry, and song.

"Rondo was a special place. When people moved there, they were coming to a location that for all practical purposes would be their home, their children's home, and their grandchildren's home," said Marvin Anderson, an 83-year-old retired attorney who was born in Rondo and now leads an effort to revitalize it. "You could worship your God in the way you chose. You could dance to the music that you enjoyed, and no one would call the police saying you're being too loud. No one would say 'you're going to lower the property values of our home.' No one was going to judge you. Black, white, and Mexican families lived in harmony. That's the Rondo I grew up in. That's the Rondo where multiple generations lived for almost 70 years."



1947—Mr. Anderson (middle, hat—with brother to his right) boards a bus headed for Cherry Valley Farm near Red Wing, MN. Organized by his church, he and his brother spent two weeks on this farm during the summers—something their mother encouraged in order to expand their horizons. Credit: Mr. Marvin Anderson

#### Until the highway destroyed it.

Hailed as the greatest public works project in U.S. history, the Interstate Highway System carved a 46,000-mile network of corridors from coast to coast. Along the way, construction crews detonated a billion pounds of explosives, moved 42 billion yards of rock, rubble, and earth, and plowed down anything that got in the way—including whole communities, many of them African American. In 1956, the demolition teams rolled into Rondo. Over the next decade, more than 1,000 families lost their homes and 300 businesses were forced out. The community was cleaved, its vibrant heart wounded. But its resilient spirit remained strong.

"The decision to route I-94 through Rondo was not based on transportation and engineering. It was rooted in a desire to eliminate the 'slums' of Rondo." In fact, Anderson explained, planners and engineers preferred an alternative route that would put the freeway north of Rondo along the abandoned rail tracks by Pierce Butler Road.

Indeed, "slum clearance" was a stated goal of the Interstate highway project from the earliest planning stages. A 1944 report to the U.S. House Committee on Roads stated that "blighted areas in large cities" were engines of juvenile delinquency, major crimes, frequent fires, and spread of diseases. As plans to build the national highway system accelerated after World War II, "slum removal" and the "elimination of thousands of substandard houses" became key elements of road-building projects in urban areas, according to a study from the U.S. Department of Transportation published in 2000.

#### The Audacity to Believe

Among the tracts of housing identified as "substandard" in Rondo was a row of sturdy townhomes that had been built by Anderson's father and business partners in 1948.

"My father was a real estate developer. In the late 1940s he and his partners were able to get the largest loan ever given to African Americans in the Upper Midwest. \$247,000—that's \$2 million in today's money—and built 12 townhomes as rental units," Anderson said. "The partners were long-time employees of the major railroads and most had been working full-time since their late teenage years. There was no time for a college education. Despite not having done a real estate development before, my father and his partners had the audacity to believe they could lead a development and deliver it on time. They had a plan, they got the land, and they built it. And in the 12 years of their ownership of those townhomes, they never had a vacancy."



(Above) The 12 townhomes developed by Mr. Anderson's father, pictured shortly after completion of construction. (Below) The townhomes where they stand today. Credit: Mr. Marvin Anderson

Yet as the highway began boring through Rondo, appraisers identified the units as "inferiorly constructed" before condemning and vacating them in 1960 under eminent domain laws. Anderson's father and partners were compensated with a fraction of the buildings' actual value.

"They stood empty for 10 years before the statute of limitations expired and the state took full ownership," Anderson said. "Then they sawed them into units of three, loaded them on flatbed trucks, and relocated them to various locations around St. Paul. And they stand to this day—76 years later—still providing shelter. That's how 'poorly constructed' they were."



Mr. Anderson pictured in his family's home at Christmas  
Credit: Mr. Marvin Anderson

#### Coping with Root Shock

Anderson's roots in Rondo run deep. His grandparents moved from Chicago in the early 1900s when his grandfather came to St. Paul with a group of African American Stonemasons to work on the construction of the Capitol building. Eventually, the couple settled in Rondo and started a family.

**"In Chicago, they lived in a tenement. So, being able to purchase a home in Rondo meant everything to Grandma. It was the first home they had ever owned," Anderson recalled.**

"It meant a lot to me to be able to walk down the street to my grandma's—which was only half a block away—and enjoy all the riches, the food, the smells that grandmas have. We had our roots there. Being rooted means you wake up in the morning,

put on your clothes, walk out the door, and know every physical space in your community. You know how many steps it is to grandma's house or your best friend's place. People know you, too. They say, 'Hey, there's Marvin.' Even the bus driver knows you. You can navigate your community. Wherever you need to go, you feel safe. Your roots feed and nurture you and make you who you are."

#### Freeway location

The article Jan. 18 about the location of I-94 through St. Paul did not discuss the real reasons for this location.

George Herrold was not the only one objecting to the proposed freeway's location. Long before Mr. Herrold there were many local engineers, state and federal engineers, planners and others who strongly felt the freeway should be located miles north of the capitol.

However, the downtown businessmen, Chamber of Commerce and the City Council felt that it would be good for business if the new freeway were located close as possible to the downtown area. Also,

George Shepard, then the powerful city engineer, street and highway coordinator and planner (before the days of urban renewal) wanted to clear out the "slums" along Rondo Avenue. The state Legislature wanted to remove the "slums" south of the Capitol for expansion, access to and enhancement of the Capitol grounds.

So, the downtown business interests, City Council and state Legislature successfully lobbied for the freeway location as now built. The freeway location was a political design — not an engineering one.

**CLAUDE THOMPSON**  
ST. PAUL

A newspaper clipping describing opposition and support for the proposed freeway's location. Credit: Mr. Marvin Anderson



As thousands of Rondo residents were displaced, their lives were irreparably disrupted, a phenomenon known as “root shock” set in.

“The freeway had an overwhelming physical, cultural and emotional impact on life in Rondo. I have learned later in life that in the context of Rondo, the effect of losing one’s home, a business, a job, the connections, family members, and the social comfort of a united community destroyed many personal ecosystems. Many were devastated by what occurred, and I include my family among those that suffered great loss.” Mr. Anderson said.



Mr. Anderson with a dear friend, Helen Williams, pictured standing outside of Majestic Drugs, owned by La Fayette Fields, on the corner of Rondo and Dale. Credit: Mr. Marvin Anderson

## High Expectations

When Anderson left Rondo for Atlanta in 1958 to attend Morehouse College, he was already struggling with a sense of displacement and loss. But the demanding professors at the all-male Black college instilled in him an uncompromising sense of mission and purpose.

“I found myself in a place where the highest expectations I’d ever known in my life were put on me,” Anderson said. “Every day we were asked, Who are you? How are you going to help your people? How are you going to make your community better than what it is? It’s the same message that incredible alumni like Martin Luther King Jr., Julian Bond, Spike Lee, and Maynard Jackson heard when they attended Morehouse. It stuck in my mind and completely changed me.

As the years passed, the gutting of Rondo made Anderson’s childhood home unrecognizable; a place he thought he could never return. So, he channeled his grief into study, earning his BA in Political Science at Morehouse in 1962 before moving to San Francisco where he studied at Hastings College of Law and received his J.D. in 1966. From there, he joined the Peace Corps, serving two years in Senegal. Returning to Minneapolis,

he worked for the city’s Department of Civil Rights before going back to school to earn an MA at the University of Minnesota’s School of Library Science. In 1980, he was appointed State Law Librarian, a post he held for 22 years.

## Remember the Good Stuff at Rondo Days

Despite all his achievements, the plight of Rondo remained an open wound. Commiserating with his childhood friend, Floyd George Smaller, in the early 1980s, he said he yearned to “find a way out of the malaise” that had settled over the community. Recognizing that real-world change begins by changing peoples’ minds, Anderson said: “Let’s not remember Rondo for its pain and angst, but the good stuff—the things we used to do when we were kids.”

Smaller, who was one of St. Paul’s top high school football coaches, turned to Anderson and nodded. “If I’m in, we’re in this together until the end. There’s no turning back,” he said.

“That’s all I needed to hear,” Anderson replied. Soon the two were deep in plans for what would come to be known as Rondo Days.

Launched in June 1983, Rondo Days celebrated the community that I-94 had split but never destroyed.

“The first Rondo Days was four days long. We did everything from a free community meal for elders, commissioning a play, sponsoring sport, fashion and fine arts contests, a grand parade through the streets of Rondo capped off by three nights of music, dances and balls. Anderson said. “Because of Floyd’s friendship and his ideas, we were able to create a community celebration that’s now celebrating 40 years. I am proud to have been able to contribute to preserving the legacy of Rondo and help improve this community so that it is a little better than I found it when I moved back here.”



Mr. Anderson (top row, second from left) pictured with friends at a birthday party. Credit: Mr. Marvin Anderson



Aerial and satellite photo of Rondo, 1945, from University of Minnesota John R. Borchert Map Library



Aerial and satellite image of Rondo, 2023, from Google Maps

## More Than a Bridge

Although Rondo Days has helped heal the spirit of the community, Anderson envisions a way to mend its physical wounds, too. The Reconnect Rondo Project is a proposal to build a land bridge that would cap I-94 for several blocks, reuniting the long-divided neighborhoods. The massive development would include a large park, performing arts center, homes, and retail and office space, including room for nonprofit and institutional organizations. Anderson, who serves as board chair for the project, sees it as the culmination of his life’s work.

“The land bridge just explodes with possibilities for our community,” Anderson said, his deep voice charged with excitement and anticipation. “Its impact will be psychological, physical, and environmental. What was lost will always be remembered through places like the Rondo Commemorative Plaza in the Rondo Center. Out of that cultural context, a new Rondo will emerge.”

Using a combination of federal, state, county, city, and grant funds, five planning teams are working on a comprehensive master plan for Reconnect Rondo. The master plan will be a comprehensive analysis of the major factors and decisions to be made to support the development of the cultural and economic destination area in the Rondo Corridor connected by a landbridge. All teams are hard at work on the master plan report, which is slated for release next year.

**“A couple of our committees are headed up by sons and daughters of people who lived in Rondo, so it’s all coming full circle,” Anderson observed. “It’s more than a bridge. It is a revolutionary way to bring back the joy of a multiracial community living together and working together for a better society.”**

Ultimately, Anderson wants residents of a revitalized Rondo to have an ongoing role in how the community grows and develops. Reconnect Rondo hopes to use our four “P” plan, referring to people, public, private, and philanthropic resources, which will create growth and ownership funds that will help people start businesses, purchase homes, and strengthen the community’s culture and economy.

“Rondo’s past can be the future of living together. It can be a model of development and revitalization for other struggling communities across the state. It can be a way to tear down fences and help people feel safe and secure in their homes, now and for generations. Yes, it’s much more than a bridge,” Anderson said.

For more information, please visit:

<https://rcodemn.org/>

<https://reconnectrondo.com>