

Graffiti: Steps to a Cleaner Creek

Finding information about graffiti on the bridges of Ralston Creek wasn't an easy task. Yes, it was easy to find information on graffiti and on bridges, but to find information on graffiti on the bridges of Ralston Creek was not an easy task. So instead of only looking for answers in paper documents I decided to try a different approach of good ol' fashioned leg work. When trying this new technique I had much better luck, but it is important to note the lack of information available to the public about graffiti in general, but especially graffiti on the bridges of Ralston Creek. I started by looking at what graffiti is, what the different types are, and how to interpret what I was about to see.

“Graffiti is any real property that is visible to the public that has been defaced by painting, writing, etching, or carving with paint, ink, or knife or any similar method.” Graffiti clean-up in America costs more than eight billion dollars per year, but if it is removed within 24-48 hours it is the most successful prevention, so clean-up is necessary. According to the usual classification; there are four types of graffiti; tagging, hate, gang, and generic. Tagging graffiti is a stylized signature, normally done in one color. It is the simplest and most prevalent type of graffiti usually representing a signature. Hate Graffiti is showing animosity or hostility and expresses messages of hate against some members or groups within a community. Quite often, these are either expressed in symbols, or in short messages putting down someone's race, religion or ethnicity. Each gang has its own unique symbols and cryptic writing and it is used in gang

graffiti. It is sophisticated communication that publicizes the gang's power, status, marks territory, sends messages, and warns intruders. It is by far the most dangerous form of graffiti. Generic graffiti is usually innocent in nature. It is the defacing of public and private property.

Of these four groups, tagging is the largest with 80% of graffiti being tagger graffiti. Taggers are usually males between the age of 12 and 21 years old, but approximately 15 percent of graffiti artist are female. Graffiti is the most common type of vandalism. There are primary factors that motivate each person to vandalize with graffiti which include; fame, rebellion, self-expression, and power. Suburban adolescents provide 50 to 70 percent of all street-level graffiti. It is important to note that community murals are very rarely vandalized by other graffiti artists.

In Iowa City when the city receives a complaint about graffiti vandalism they will investigate it first which is done by the Police Department of the Department of Housing and Inspection Services. Then once it is confirmed to be graffiti they will notify the owner of the property that it is necessary that the graffiti is removed within seven days. Their job is done at this point unless the owner doesn't remove the graffiti. If the previous is the case the city can remove the graffiti and then charge the cost of abatement to the property owner.

Once I found out all I needed to know about graffiti, I was now ready to study and interpret the graffiti on the bridges of Ralston Creek. Since Ralston Creek runs through almost the whole town of Iowa City, there was no way I was going to make it under all of the bridges to study the graffiti. I found many bridges that ran across Ralston Creek, which are in the following locations:

- Kirkwood and Dubuque
- Prentiss and Linn
- Gilbert and Prentiss

- Burlington and Van Buren
- College and Van Buren
- Johnson and Washington
- Iowa and Dodge
- Between Gilbert and Dubuque

Ralston Creek runs under many of the bridges in Iowa City and therefore gives many graffiti artist a place to express themselves or vandalize whichever way you choose to look at it. I went under two of the bridges in Iowa City with two very different atmospheres. I chose these two bridges because of their locations, they are both close enough to downtown Iowa City that they get a lot of car and foot traffic, but they are both secluded enough that graffiti artists and others would have a place to vandalize with a low risk of getting caught. The first seemed to be a place for youth culture to hang out and express themselves through the art of graffiti whereas the other bridge was a place for homeless people to express themselves and their sorrows through graffiti.

The first site was located at Iowa and Dodge. As I went to examine the work of the graffiti artists I saw that under this bridge there was a lot of different pieces some even on top of others. There were all different kinds of graffiti under this particular bridge; including generic, hate, tagging, and gang. The first I noticed was right when going under the bridge, a picture of a King that was drawn in pencil with the words "Hallucination Recoil."(See Fig. 1) This graffiti could have been done very quickly and easily and therefore was probably not a gang member or graffiti artist. This graffiti was most likely inspired by the use of narcotics since it is talking about coming back to a hallucination. This could mean remembering a past hallucination, or starting to hallucinate again by the use of narcotics.

Another piece under this bridge was a mural done by a talented artist depicting a man looking up to what I would assume to be heaven as an angel looks over him.(See Fig. 2) This mural, unlike the rest of the graffiti under this bridge, was not defaced by another graffiti artist. I think this is because it was a great piece of artwork that other people respected. However on the other side of this bridge were many works of graffiti with some having other graffiti over it.(See Fig. 3) Since most of the graffiti on this side is generic there was a lot of overlapping pieces because they aren't aware or aren't included in the street rule of defacing another person's work of art being disrespectful. Instead on this particular bridge this side of the bridge is used for all different kinds of people to express themselves through artwork.

Under the other bridge; located on Gilbert and Prentiss, there was a very different atmosphere. In general, this bridge was a darker place because of its location. Because of the darkness of this bridge it attracts homeless people because it is a place where they can hide from the public when they don't want to be seen. In addition to the occupants, darkness, and location of this bridge the type of graffiti added yet another scarier aspect to this bridge. This bridge has a lot of generic and hate graffiti with hardly any signs of gang or tagging graffiti. Even though gang graffiti is the most dangerous type of graffiti, hate graffiti is also dangerous and can be a frightening thing to be around.

This bridge had many saying on the walls that were biblical. I think most of the artists for this bridge are indeed the people who are living under this bridge. Something that I found to be very interesting is that there were hardly any signs of other graffiti artists. The two pieces under this bridge that were the most prevalent were both of biblical origins and read; "Vengeance is mine says the Lord," and "The Lord is alive and well." (See Fig. 4)(See Fig. 5) At this particular bridge there is a confusion of a person's home and public property. I think that

other graffiti artists are showing respect for these people's "home" because as I journeyed under this bridge I felt like I was walking into somebody's living room uninvited. Although it gives off such a feeling, it is important to remember that this is indeed public property. Which raises the question; is it right for the graffiti artist to respect this bridge because it is these people's "home," but not because it is public property?

Graffiti in a community may not seem like a huge issue to some people, but it doesn't always stop with graffiti. When graffiti is in a community there is usually a gang associated with that graffiti. Among other things, graffiti helps for a gang to flourish and grow, and with one gang comes more gangs. In Iowa City most of the gangs come from an influence of Chicago including the Gangster Disciples and the Vice Lords. The gangs in Johnson County are less than 500 members strong, but they contribute greatly to the criminal activity. By preventing future graffiti or cleaning what is already there, as a community we can stop the growth of these gangs which will lead to the decline of the growth of criminal activity in Iowa City. To show our youth culture that there is an alternative to vandalizing public property is crucial. The criminal activity and the narcotics that are associated or influenced with the graffiti make this an even more urgent public concern.

Respect seems to be a reoccurring issue for graffiti artists and their works or art, so why aren't they respecting public property? If the city doesn't reach out to the graffiti artist how do we expect the vandalizing to stop? Outreach is a necessary step in preventing the vandalizing of public property in our city. There are many ways in which graffiti or vandalizing of public property can be prevented. One example that has been done already to prevent graffiti is organized graffiti. With organized graffiti the artist have a place to express themselves through art, but aren't forced into doing it on public property. It is a good community outreach and helps

youth culture have another alternative to vandalizing public property. Also by organizing graffiti projects in the community the issue is brought to people's conscious and they become more involved in preventing future vandalizing in Iowa City.

It isn't okay for these people to deface and vandalize the sides of any public property including the bridges of Ralston Creek. Prevention needs to happen, but because a lot of people aren't aware or educated about the graffiti under the bridges of Ralston Creek they can't know that something needs to be done. When researching for this project I found little to no information of graffiti prevention on Ralston Creek or any other information on the topic of graffiti and the creek. For people to care about an issue they must first be educated about it. I believe that the first step to a cleaner Ralston Creek is educating the public on the issues.

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Illustrations

1. “King Head Graffiti,” photograph, Meggen Weeks.



2. “Heaven Mural,” photograph, Meggen Weeks



3. "Generic Graffiti," photograph, Meggen Weeks



4. "Vengeance Graffiti," photograph, Meggen Weeks



5. "The Lord is Alive Graffiti," photograph, Meggen Weeks

