

15 February 2019

Dear College Council of the State University of New York at New Paltz:

We, the Department of History, write to you concerning the recent discussion regarding the renaming of several campus buildings. As historians we are particularly invested in this debate; our discipline and training demands that we study, understand, and educate others about the past. Simultaneously we understand that the past is not static, but dynamic—it is always in conversation with the present. Three of our department colleagues participated in a panel in the Spring 2018 term that discussed the power of historical memory as manifested, for instance, by the creation of monuments and how this changes over time. Such changes do not "erase history," as is sometimes claimed, but rather reflect evolving social and cultural sensibilities; in the case under consideration here, our increasing awareness of the painful legacies generated by the practice of race-based slavery in the United States and our desire to address these legacies.

History is not the same as public memory. Public Historians recognize that their work on memory is collaborative, involving working with community partners, and political in that it is an exercise in power and control over publicly-presented historical identity. The SUNY New Paltz community has done the collaborative work to discover what memories and identities the community here wishes to memorialize. The Diversity and Inclusion Council has recommended that we change the names of the Hasbrouck complex, and these recommendations have been supported by the student body, Faculty Senate, and President Christian, yet only the College Council retains the power to affirm this collective decision.

Changing the name of buildings does not "erase the past," but rather continues the practice of memorializing the past in conversation with the present. Through discussions over the past year, students, faculty, staff, and administration have learned a deeper history of our campus. We have engaged in extensive research, knowledge sharing, and thoughtful community reflection, and have determined that a name change has the potential to reflect more accurately the mores, values, and wisdom of the present. Clearly the historic figures after whom our buildings were named were whole people far greater than their participation in a slave system. However, they also cannot be disentangled from that violent reality. Not changing the names of the buildings would therefore "erase" the work of history currently being pursued on this campus. At this particular moment in time, the vast majority of our community does not wish to memorialize slavery.

As historians, we know changing the names of campus buildings would be true to the spirit of our discipline, as our professional organization has made clear: <https://www.historians.org/news-and-advocacy/statements-and-resolutions-of-support-and-protest/aha-statement-on-confederate-monuments>. As educators, most important to us is the impact that this issue has on our students. As our campus statement on diversity and inclusion makes clear, we are committed to "integrat[ing] and sustain[ing] inclusiveness and community building into the life of the institution." Requiring students—some of whom are the descendants of slaves—to live, sleep, and eat in buildings that commemorate slave owners is in stark contrast with these objectives.

We thank you for considering our position and our recommendations as you weigh your final decision on this matter.

Sincerely,

The SUNY New Paltz Department of History