

Criteria for Evaluating Existing Campus Space Names at Hollins University

Reconciliation: Campus Spaces Task Force, January 2022.

This document was created to provide guidance for decision-making with regard to renaming requests for buildings on the Hollins campus. For those requesting renaming, as well as those charged with making a decision, we propose the areas of consideration and criteria outlined below.

In preparing this document the *Reconciliation: Campus Spaces Task Force* considered best practices as developed and implemented at other universities. While renaming is a relatively new area of interest in the higher education community, in the past decade, several influential reports have come out: we would especially like to acknowledge work done at the University of Virginia, Yale University, the University of Cincinnati and Stanford University (for links to these documents see pg. 12).

From these examples we learn the primary question guiding reconsideration of a building name: does honoring the namesake's legacy impede the university's ability to pursue its mission going forward?

History and role of the task force

During the Spring 2021 semester, the topic of renaming buildings was discussed in listening sessions facilitated by the Hollins Working Group on Slavery and its Contemporary Legacies. In 16 meetings with over 180 students, faculty, staff, and alumnae/i, the community shared their reflections, concerns, and questions. Results were detailed in [a report](#) issued by the Working Group in August 2021.

The *Reconciliation: Campus Spaces Task Force* was formed by President Mary Dana Hinton in September 2021, with a membership of students, faculty, staff, and alumnae/i. The task force charges are twofold: first, the group should work from established best practices to determine criteria for evaluating existing campus space names. Second, we should then apply those criteria to make a recommendation regarding Tayloe Gymnasium to the Board of Trustees and the President. The task force will work with the campus and alumnae/i communities to facilitate discussion of this draft, in preparation for approval by the university administration.

Meetings of the task force began with a review of the listening sessions, as well as information gathered by the Working Group in interviews with members of the international *Universities Studying Slavery* (USS) consortium. Since joining USS in 2016, Hollins students, staff, and faculty have had significant opportunities to learn from others in our efforts to reckon with Hollins' legacy of slavery. While preparing materials to support the work of the task force, in summer 2021, several Working Group members interviewed faculty and staff from William & Mary, Furman University, the University of South Carolina, Georgetown University, Queens University of Charlotte, Appalachian State University, and the University of Virginia, to learn more about their naming and renaming processes. In addition to the interviews, we also read news, reports, and notes from these and other schools. Finally, we reviewed building naming practices at Hollins, including recent naming associated with major philanthropic gifts to the university.

In the interest of transparency and communication, notes from task force meetings are posted [on the Hollins web site](#) and are available to everyone with a current university login. The goal of the task force is to conduct a thoughtful and inclusive process, guided by the university's current responsibilities, priorities, and mission.

Introduction: The Hollins University Mission

Hollins is an independent liberal arts university dedicated to academic excellence and humane values. Hollins University offers undergraduate liberal arts education for women, selected graduate programs for men and women, and community outreach initiatives. The Hollins curriculum and cocurricular programs prepare students for lives of active learning, fulfilling work, personal growth, achievement, and service to society.

The Hollins community sustains talented students engaged in challenging study, and productive scholars and artists devoted to teaching and to the advancement of knowledge. Experiential learning, study abroad, and internships enhance the academic program. The hallmarks of a Hollins education are creativity and effective self-expression, problem solving and

critical thinking skills, and independent inquiry and the free exchange of ideas.

Hollins nurtures civility, integrity, and concern for others, encourages and values diversity and social justice, and affirms the equal worth of women and men. Our university motto, Levavi Oculos, calls us to leadership and service in accord with the Hollins values and traditions.

The Hollins University mission statement begins with a dedication to academic excellence and humane values. After a dedication to deliver excellent education and pursue a course of empathy and respect, this core is then expanded with commitments to civility, integrity, and concern for others; diversity and social justice; and affirmation of the equal worth of women and men. While diversity and social justice are included in the overall mission, recently the university has dedicated itself explicitly to pursuing a strong focus on the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

A university's mission is expressed in strategic action, from the direction of its academic programs, to the enrollment of students, and the hiring of faculty and staff. It is also expressed in the built environment: campus spaces are the expression of the university's values and priorities, past and present.

The wellbeing of the campus community and its relationship to the built environment

History and tradition are often positive and valuable aspects of campus life at Hollins. They contribute to a sense of belonging, they build community, and sustain strong ties that can persist long after graduation. Such connections support the work of the university in many ways.

However, over recent years, protests and other appeals have made clear that the unexamined celebration of history and tradition has also caused harm to the university community and to the reputation of the school. Like many universities around the United States, Hollins has seen public calls for recognition and discussion of the history of slavery and its legacy on our campus.

For example, in 2016 Hollins students objected to a sign celebrating Hollins founder Charles Lewis Cocke's accomplishments, by pointing out that Cocke's legacy as a slaveholder had been omitted. In 2020, a Hollins student posted a petition on *Change.org*, publishing a request made previously by other students, faculty, and staff:

Tayloe Gymnasium should be renamed. [This petition](#) has been signed by over 1,700 people. The gym's namesake, a local businessman and longtime president of the Hollins Board of Trustees, was also the most prominent slaveholder in the Roanoke Valley. The source of Tayloe's wealth was the forced labor of enslaved people at his ironworks in Virginia, his plantations in Alabama, and his homes in Richmond and Roanoke. Responses from incoming students in the 2021 listening sessions, and discussions with current students on campus, make it clear that some are aware of this issue even before arriving at Hollins.

Tayloe's name is not the only name to have been raised in protest, and the events above are not isolated incidents. There have been multiple significant efforts by Hollins faculty, staff, and students to advance the university's engagement with its history of slavery, segregation, and the continued effects of systemic racism. Courses have been offered to contextualize the lives of enslaved people on our campus; historical exhibits and community events have been designed to raise up the voices of those who were previously silenced. In 2020, President Hinton facilitated dialogues about equity and inclusion at Hollins, inviting the community to express concerns and hopes. There is more to do. It is our responsibility to not just acknowledge our history, but to pursue opportunities for reconciliation and reparation.

Commemorative building names

“In its building names and its campus symbols, the University communicates values, confers honor, and expresses gratitude to those who have contributed to its mission. In other words, the University itself speaks through its building names.” (Yale University, 2016, p. 3)

Around the United States, college and university campuses feature memorials to dark aspects of American history: buildings, academic units and even entire schools named after the political and military heroes of the confederacy, slaveholders, White supremacists, eugenicists, and participants in the oppression of Indigenous people. With increasing frequency, these names are being challenged as harmful to the population of their institutions.

Studies in the cultural geography of higher education (Brasher et al, 2017; Harwood et al, 2018; Inwood & Martin, 2008) show how the built environment of a university campus – its architecture, public art, and the names of buildings and other spaces - functions as signals to the community. Commemorative names, which honor particular individuals or families, celebrate history and express endorsement: the institution physically and symbolically aligns itself with the values expressed in the namesake's legacy. This alignment then acts upon the university communities in various ways.

These markers in our landscapes valorize the history of racism and White supremacy while leaving the stories of their effects on enslaved people and their descendants out of the narrative. At Hollins, responses in the listening sessions and on the original petition have clearly demonstrated the negative effects on African-American students, faculty, and staff. These effects extend far beyond the building to the overall campus environment: instead of a sense of belonging, there is a sense of being ignored and unwelcome. Lack of a sense of belonging, in turn, will have cascading effects on other aspects of university life: educational attainment, productivity, social relationships, and mental health. Those affected also lose trust in the institution when they perceive the lack of action as a refusal to acknowledge their needs.

A barrier of this nature, especially when experienced as such by people of a particular gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, religious or non-religious belief, national origin, or other group protected by federal law or university policy, is not only harmful to affected individuals but to the entire community: herein, it becomes a challenge to the university's ability to pursue its mission. Our institution's stated goal of academic excellence is thwarted by the imbalance of history which is told only by and about those who had the opportunity to enslave others. Our dedication to diversity and social justice is also impeded until we take action to correct the harm being done to members of the campus community.

Hollins students, staff, faculty and alumnae/i consider renaming

Before outlining a course of action, we should summarize participant views from the 2021 listening sessions. A majority spoke in support of reconsidering namings, raising the following themes:

- Building names should cultivate and sustain a safe learning environment.
- Building names should reflect the school's current values and mission. This can be achieved by naming buildings after persons whose accomplishments demonstrate these values, or other types of names which do the same.
- Building names should reflect the school's goals of diversity and equity by lifting up persons whose voices have been historically silenced.
- Building names should support the school's moving forward in a positive direction.
- The names of buildings and other spaces may accrue different meanings over time. The school's mission will also change. It is desirable to allow for the reconsideration of building names at regular intervals, to ensure that names and values continue to be in alignment.

Some participants were opposed to renaming not just at Hollins but under any circumstance. Their objections can be summarized as follows:

- Tradition is too important to the university to allow for any building names to be changed.
- Renaming is a dishonorable practice which results from the university following a temporary fad of political correctness.
- Renaming is too costly in terms of labor and time.

While these latter arguments should never impair the university's ability to freely name, or rename its spaces, we do agree that a thorough process should include considering the value of tradition. It should also proceed thoughtfully and without undue haste, so decision-making is based on facts rather than on politics. Finally, because of the significant time and effort involved, the process should only be undertaken if the building namesake's legacy raises strong enough concerns to warrant marshaling the university's resources.

What course of action is being recommended?

“When our inherited buildings and their names are in direct conflict with our current mission and values, the University is obligated to respond.”(University of Virginia, 2020, p. 2)

There are several potential responses to a request to reconsider a building's name. One is removal of the name. In several recent examples (University of North Carolina, James Madison University) the decision was made to replace a building name with a placeholder name, to allow for a process in which the university administration works with community input to select a new name.

If there are strong objections to removal, it is sometimes possible to recontextualize a name. This is usually achieved through the permanent installation of information which provides a full accounting of the namesake's legacy, including important aspects which have previously been omitted from the public narrative. This method is sometimes proposed by those who hold that it is preferable to retain a disputed name, in order to create a teaching opportunity.

However, it is important to keep in mind that recontextualization has significant limitations. One can install explanatory text on plaques on buildings; however, one cannot include such text every time a building is named in the university catalog, schedules, brochures, or on its web site. These instances of use of the name would continue negative associations with that name, without including any mitigating contextual information. In the case of a building which is significantly integrated into the activities of the university, full recontextualization in every instance of the use of that name may not be achievable. Such a situation makes a stronger case for removal.

Whether recommending removal, recontextualization, or no change, we should not just ask how the recommendation corrects a negative effect on the university's ability to pursue its mission. There is also the possibility of a net positive effect: if change can move the university forward in ways which positively align with the current mission, this helps strengthen the case for recommending change.

What is the building's function?

The building's current function should guide both the request to reconsider a building name, and the final decision to remove, recontextualize or retain that name.

Priority should be afforded to those buildings in which community members live, work, and pursue recreation: for example, the classroom buildings in which we gather to pursue our primary purpose of education, and the residence halls in which students live. The spaces where we build and sustain community, where we express ourselves and share experiences are also those places with which students, faculty and staff form the strongest associations. This category also includes buildings in which the general public is invited to participate in university activity.

What was the namesake's principal legacy?

"A great university will rightly decide what to commemorate and what to honor, subject always to the obligation not to efface the history that informs the world in which we live." (Yale University, 2016, p. 3)

As our examples from other institutions suggest, considering a naming starts with considering the namesake's principal legacy: "the lasting effects that cause a namesake to be remembered." (Yale University, 2016, p. 20). In the memorialization of a person, we are concerned with those actions which are seen to have enduring consequences.

Legacies are complex. While a legacy of positive effects related to the namesake's ties with the university may warrant strong consideration, all elements of a principal legacy should be considered. If a person's actions resulted in the oppression of others, this greatly strengthens the argument for removal. Actions which are beneficial to one group, may perpetuate harm towards others; offensive behavior warrants particularly strong consideration if that behavior was central to the person's effect on others, and therefore evident as an enduring consequence in their legacy. Views alone, unexpressed in action, will warrant lesser consideration.

Most important to our evaluation of legacy is the question of whether that legacy demonstrates actions and values which are incompatible with the values expressed by

our university today. As demonstrated before, the choice to honor such incompatible values is in direct conflict with the university's ability to pursue its mission.

According to Hollins' commitment to academic excellence, a process guided by scholarly inquiry means that we must examine the scholarly record for evidence and evaluation of a namesake's legacy. It should be acknowledged that this requires significant expertise; if it is decided that a naming should be reconsidered then allocating appropriate human resources will be an essential component to a comprehensive and effective process.

We should also be mindful that the system of scholarly publication has not been exempt from the same institutional racism present in educational institutions in the United States and elsewhere. A full consideration of the available evidence must also look to oral history and other sources, to reclaim and include those voices which have traditionally been excluded from the scholarly record.

It is also important to consider a namesake's principal legacy within the framework of the historical time and place. For a full evaluation of the values and intent behind a person's actions, we should endeavor to understand how those actions would have been received by the person's contemporaries.

Note that this requires an assessment of all values, not just those of the dominant majority. For example, in a long-held and dominant narrative about the time of slavery in the United States, most people viewed slavery as a just institution. This narrative minimizes the influence of many voices which were speaking out against slavery: abolitionists, anti-racists, and other religious, political and intellectual leaders who believed that human bondage absolutely needed to end. At this same time, others also rejected segregation and other practices associated with White supremacy. Scholarly study will include these voices in our consideration of the historical context surrounding American slavery, and the same rigorous studies that have dismantled the falsehoods of Lost Cause mythology should guide our consideration of people's views during this period.

In a scholarly community, controversy alone should not be enough to force change; the complexity of historical research demands the allocation of both people and time. The research process must allow qualified experts time to gather and interpret the information that is needed to help the community understand the fullness of the namesake's lifetime and legacy.

What was the namesake's relationship with the university?

Names of those people whose legacy includes significant contributions to the university warrant special consideration. This includes those who rendered distinguished service, served as a critical change agent, or moved the university forward in its mission in other ways. We may even choose to include those whose contributions were made beyond the university, if it is deemed that their actions reflect values which align with the university's current mission.

In the interest of scholarly inquiry, we should preserve university history including the history of the school's leaders, change makers, and benefactors. In the interest of community cohesion, we should acknowledge the actions of those whose work significantly benefited the institution.

However, if a strong case is made that a naming has become harmful to the community, the conditions of preservation and acknowledgement can be met even as the name is removed from a building. Commemorative display is not a value mentioned in the Hollins mission, and if a decision to retain a name would cause the university to misrepresent those values which are currently expressed in the mission, this creates a strong argument for removal.

What was the original naming decision?

It is important to consider why a naming occurred, for example, whether it was merely commemorative or tied to a philanthropic gift. If the naming was included in an agreement in which the university took on a legal obligation, before any change can be proposed, the obligation must first be reviewed by those governing the university. Such a course should only be taken under extraordinary circumstances.

Reviewing information about the original naming also helps us look at whether the decision to honor the namesake was consistent with the values present in the university's mission at the time of the naming. If it was not, the conflict implicit in honoring a namesake whose legacy was in conflict with values pursued by the university at that time would further strengthen the case for reconsideration today.

Finally, looking at the reasons for the original naming is necessary because in committing ourselves to a thoughtful and deliberative process now, we should afford the same consideration to those who came before us. If we do not, we invite future generations to dismiss our decisions in turn.

How will we preserve the historical record and educate our community?

The Hollins mission's focus on education and social justice guides us in suggesting a process which is communicative and participatory. While teaching and preserving institutional history, we should also ensure that our decision-making is equitable and inclusive.

Our process started with listening sessions which were designed as forums for public access, dialogue, and input. It is important to continue such opportunities along the timeline for reconsidering a current building name. If the decision is made to rename a building, the community should once again be invited to participate.

If a name is removed or otherwise changed, the reasons for change and the process itself should be documented and communicated. Alteration without these steps is problematic because it can amount to erasure; at other schools, instances of hasty and incomplete renaming have been criticized for "sanitizing" the institutional record while also departing from a university's primary duty to educate. Communication should include the creation of permanent educational information in situ and online.

One example of publicly documenting and communicating renaming is on display in the lobby of Hollins' Richard Wetherill Visual Arts Center and Eleanor D. Wilson Museum. This building, originally the Fishburn Library, was renamed in 2004 when a large philanthropic gift enabled its redesign and rededication. The origins of the old name, the reasons for renaming, and information about the new namesakes are all available on a permanent plaque.

Other examples of such work show a wide range of opportunities from articles, videos, and historical exhibits – both physical and digital – to public events. Formal presentations, community gatherings, performances and other celebrations have all served to educate and invite university communities to participate in renaming processes.

Conclusion

As expressions of value made by the university, building names oblige us to ask whether the values expressed by the name support or hinder the university's mission. When a current name hinders the mission by negatively affecting the campus community, restorative action must be taken. Inequity must be addressed in order to keep the university moving forward, as we build and support a diverse community at Hollins.

The process of decision-making must be guided by the same principles which guide current practices in scholarly inquiry. Decisions made in the past are part of the university's history; thoughtful and careful consideration must therefore guide changes to the built environment of the campus. The process should also be transparent, and include opportunities for participation by the community. To guide the process, research must be done to explore the namesake's principal legacy, their relationship with the university, and the original naming decision. The function of the building should also be considered.

When combined with preservation of the historical record, removing a building name is consistent with the university's mission if the change is deemed necessary to the university's ability to pursue the mission. If a decision is made to rename a building, the university must also engage in a process to communicate the reasons for the change to the current and future community.

Reconciliation: Campus Spaces Task Force

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For more reports, see the website of the *Hollins University Working Group on Slavery and its Contemporary Legacies*: [Links & Articles](#).

Scholarly Articles

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