

# What's In A Name?

Across the country, businesses, schools, governments, and institutions of all kinds are reckoning with the deep roots of racial injustice in America. This is a driving factor behind renewed efforts to rename buildings on the campuses of America's colleges and universities.

To cite one example, this past July the Commission on History, Race and a Way Forward at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill recommended the removal of five names from buildings ranging from residence halls to student centers.<sup>1</sup> Four of these individuals were said to occupy "high positions of influence and public trust," and the historical record reveals degrading and racist rhetoric and decisive action in support of white supremacist violence and subordination. One of those individuals, a chief justice of the North Carolina supreme court, is said by one legal scholar to have presided over "the coldest and starkest defense of the physical violence inherent in slavery that ever appeared in an American judicial opinion" in the case of *State v. Mann* (1829).<sup>2</sup> Other individuals named actively worked to disenfranchise black voters and to uphold the regime of Jim Crow segregation.

Some say that these men were products of their racist times. They played a prominent role in advancing racist and unjust systems, but the difference between them and their contemporaries was a difference in degree not a difference in kind. The Commission at UNC thinks otherwise, claiming that these men "were not simply men of their times...they wielded power, wealth, and influence to define the historical moments in which they lived."

The presence of these names on college campuses presents many difficulties. Some have said that the very sight of racist names on campus buildings is demoralizing, dehumanizing, and psychologically burdensome for members of marginalized groups.<sup>3</sup> Building names might also express positive endorsement and valorization of their namesakes and the ideals they espoused, or a willingness to overlook serious wrongdoing for college benefactors or alumni.

But there are some who wonder whether we can meaningfully distinguish between good and bad actors in history in this way. Does the removal of some names rather than others imply that the names of those who remain are free from moral impunity? If it were the case that we should remove the names of all those who faltered morally, then it would be best to avoid human namesakes altogether. It is also striking how quickly our verdicts about past actors change over time. If our moral standards a decade ago differ so much from our standards today, is there any hope for making lasting decisions about building names?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. As task forces across the country continue to deliberate about the best way forward, what principles should guide their decisions to remove names?
2. What is the moral significance of building naming and renaming? Does it matter whether the buildings are publicly or privately owned? Does it matter what sort of institution to which the name is attached?
3. Are building names analogous to public monuments and memorials? How about other 'named' features of the academic world, such as labs, fellowships, prizes, endowed chairs, and so on?

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<sup>1</sup> UNC Commission on History, Race, and a Way Forward, "Resolution 001"

<sup>2</sup> Carolina Alumni Review, "History Commission's Research of the Names Behind Aycock, Carr, Daniels and Ruffin"

<sup>3</sup> WRAL, "UNC-Chapel Hill moves toward scrubbing buildings of racist links"

