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# A Name Change May Be a Start, but It Is Not Enough

Leah D. Williams\*

Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia is currently among the long list of institutions being pressured to remove the names of Confederate collaborators and slave owners from campus buildings or in this case from the very name of the university itself.<sup>1</sup> Though I am not affiliated with Washington and Lee University, nor have I ever stepped foot on its campus, our history together goes back almost two hundred years to 1826 when fourteen of my ancestors became the property of then Washington College.

Since the broadcast killing of George Floyd by four Minneapolis police officers on May 25, all levels of government, and institutions of every kind, have scrambled with breakneck speed to confront their own ties to America's most deeply entrenched demons: White supremacy and systematic racism.<sup>2</sup>

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1. See Greta Anderson, *Campuses Reckon with Racist Past*, INSIDE HIGHER EDUC. (July 6, 2020), <https://perma.cc/33NV-HYRM> (describing the reinvigorated debate surrounding monuments and buildings named after controversial figures following the widespread George Floyd protests); Elizabeth Bell, *Washington and Lee University Faculty Request Removal of All References to the Confederacy, Including Robert E. Lee's Name*, ROANOKE TIMES (June 25, 2020), <https://perma.cc/FR7T-BUAS> (discussing demands to change the Washington and Lee University's name and petitions for accountability following the university's response to the protests after the killing of George Floyd).

2. See Amy Harmon, Apoorva Mandavilli, Sapna Maheshwari, & Jodi Kantor, *From Cosmetics to NASCAR, Calls for Racial Justice Are Spreading*, N.Y. TIMES (June 13, 2020), <https://perma.cc/G3GR-4F95> ("In just under three weeks since the killing of George Floyd set off widespread protests, what started as a renewed demand for police reform has now roiled seemingly every

Washington and Lee has certainly not been exempt from this reckoning. A majority of its faculty and student body have already passed resolutions calling for the removal of Robert E. Lee's name from the university.<sup>3</sup> As a direct descendent of those enslaved by the school, I commend these resolutions; yet, I strongly offer that a name change may be a start, but it is not enough to reconcile the sins of the past.

This position would seem to be premature given that the university's board of trustees has not even rendered a decision on removing Lee's name. But it needs to be said now as the university and other entities like it, including our own government, grapple with the racially motivated violence of the past and present while attempting to mark out a pathway forward for the future. It should go without saying that any symbol of genocide or White supremacist hate has no place in our modern pluralistic society. Therefore, gestures like renaming brands and institutions or the removal of Confederate statues should only be seen as the first step in an ongoing process of healing that at some point must involve paying reparations to the living descendants of slaves and transforming decision-making spaces to reflect the diversity of our nation's citizens.

I recognize that financial reparations for slavery is a particularly controversial subject.<sup>4</sup> The idea has been scoffed at and rejected for years despite the documented fact that that some slave owners received government reparations for their

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sphere of American life, prompting institutions and individuals around the country to confront enduring forms of racial discrimination.”).

3. See Susan Svrluga, *Students and Faculty Ask Washington and Lee to Change Its Name*, WASH. POST (July 2, 2020), <https://perma.cc/3DNA-N8AE> (describing separate petitions passed by the majority of the faculty and the majority of the student governing body respectively to change the university's name).

4. See generally DAVID HOROWITZ, *UNCIVIL WARS: THE CONTROVERSY OVER REPARATIONS FOR SLAVERY* (2003) (detailing the debates surrounding reparations). Compare Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Case for Reparations*, ATLANTIC (June 2014), <https://perma.cc/89TG-QWDH> (arguing for reparations) with David Frum, *The Impossibility of Reparations*, ATLANTIC (June 2014), <https://perma.cc/P9RZ-LQMN> (responding to Ta-Nehisi Coates' argument).

lost human property.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, there is also the issue of other non-Black ethnic groups receiving reparations for state-sanctioned violence committed against them by the U.S. government.<sup>6</sup> What then makes the state-sanctioned violence committed against enslaved Blacks any different? America sanctioned slavery, and America sanctioned systematic racism to cement its creation of a permanent lower class of Black citizens. Why? Because White privilege requires a stepstool to step up.

It is easy to see this payout at Washington and Lee University through its history of owning slaves and profiting richly from the institution of slavery itself.<sup>7</sup> My ancestors were among the eighty-four human beings bequeathed to the private liberal arts school by John “Jockey” Robinson.<sup>8</sup> Their forced labor and eventual sale netted the college an amount estimated to be worth more than the stock granted to the school by its first namesake George Washington. The university website states that Washington’s donation “remains part of the institution’s endowment to this day” still contributing to operating costs.<sup>9</sup> This begs the question: If slave-holder Washington’s donation is still generating wealth for the university’s endowment, are the profits made from the exploitation of Black slaves owned by the university still generating wealth for the endowment as well? And if so, why isn’t that wealth directly benefitting the

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5. See Tera W. Hunter, *When Slaveowners Got Reparations*, N.Y. TIMES (Apr. 16, 2019), <https://perma.cc/V5E3-KU6B> (“[T]o ease slaveowners’ pain, the District of Columbia Emancipation Act paid those loyal to the Union up to \$300 for every enslaved person freed.”).

6. See Adeel Hassan & Jack Healy, *America Has Tried Reparations Before. Here Is How It Went.*, N.Y. TIMES (June 19, 2019), <https://perma.cc/8PC3-7TKN> (stating Native Americans, victims of forced sterilization, and Japanese-Americans detained in internment camps received financial reparations).

7. See *African Americans at Washington and Lee*, WASH. & LEE U., <https://perma.cc/S6EK-8BUD> (cataloging the university’s history of slave owning).

8. Kenneth P. Ruscio, *Continuing the Community Conversation: President Ruscio’s Message to the Community on July 8*, WASH. & LEE U. (July 8, 2014), <https://perma.cc/4A35-AUQB> (“In 1826, Washington College came into possession of between 70 and 80 enslaved people from the estate of “Jockey” John Robinson. Until 1852, the institution benefited from their enslaved labor and, in some cases, from their sale.”).

9. *University History*, WASH. & LEE U., <https://perma.cc/XLG6-U33B>.

descendants of those whose backs and spirits were broken to gain it?

On August 9, 1865, just five days after Lee was installed as Washington College President,<sup>10</sup> my third great-grandparents Robert and Emeline Parker signed their first labor contract as free people. Their written mark was recorded on an agreement to work on the same Mississippi plantation they were sold to by the school. That contract signifies the beginning of Robert and Emeline's long journey as former slaves to amass generational wealth for their family. This while Lee, and arguably the university, grew fat off the marrow provided by theirs and other Black bodies. To honor Lee, the university bears his name as does the chapel under which he is buried. And to my ancestors and their fellow men and women in bondage, the university has dedicated a plaque. Titled "A Difficult, Yet Undeniable History," the plaque was erected four years ago and stands near the hall previously named for their former master Robinson.<sup>11</sup> The disparity in veneration and acknowledgment speaks volumes and further rips open the unhealed wounds of slavery.

As the university's trustees continue to consider the resolutions put forth by their faculty and students, I implore them and others to put more than a name change on the table. I implore the university specifically to adopt a comprehensive anti-racist vision like that put forward by their own Assistant Professor of Law, Brandon Hasbrouck. His plan strikes at the heart of the university's track record on race and makes recommendations including the removal of both Washington and Lee from the university's name as well as increased diversity across campus at all levels and reparations for the living descendants of those enslaved by the university. Professor Hasbrouck argues that the "countless other incidents of anti-Blackness" at the university require much bolder,

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10. *Id.* ("On Aug. 4, 1865, four months after Robert E. Lee surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox, the Washington College board of trustees invited Lee to become president of the college.").

11. *See African Americans at Washington and Lee, supra* note 7 ("On April 5 [2016], the University formally introduced a historical marker, "A Difficult, Yet Undeniable, History," recognizing the enslaved men and women owned by Washington College in the 19th Century."). The Board of Trustees voted to rename Robinson Hall "in honor of John Chavis, the first African American to receive a college education in the Unites States" on October 6, 2018. *Id.*

purposeful action than the current resolutions offer, and I wholeheartedly agree.<sup>12</sup>

It should be a given that any institution that espouses itself to be a welcoming place for all people should not cling to, in name, reverence, or tribute, any persons who have committed crimes against humanity. Therefore, to remove the moniker of a brazen White supremacist known for his cruel sadistic treatment of the enslaved is to me a clear but still incredibly brave choice—if taken—given the university's history. However, to truly reconcile the past, I believe that bravery must reach farther and dig deeper into both the uncomfortable spaces within the human heart and the uncomfortable spaces within the institution where reconciliation requires a financial reckoning with slave descendants, the surrender of seats at the table, and a full-throated rejection in word and deed of Confederate ideology. Only then can institutions like Washington and Lee University truly begin to emerge from under the dark shadow of their long-held ties to White supremacy and systematic racism.

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12. Brandon Hasbrouck, *White Saviors*, 77 WASH. & LEE L. REV. ONLINE 47, 54 (2020).