

March 18, 2021

New Orleans City Council
1300 Perdido St., Second Floor West
New Orleans, LA 70112

Dear Council Members:

The American Historical Association (AHA)—the largest professional association of historians in the world—enthusiastically supports the work of the New Orleans City Council Street Renaming Commission.

Nearly four years ago, in the midst of a national debate over Confederate monuments, the AHA stated its opposition to memorials honoring Americans who committed treason on behalf of the claimed right of some humans to own, buy, and sell other humans. More broadly we have emphasized the imperative of integrating democracy and expertise in decision-making: “Naming, like monuments, articulates community values, identifying people whom a community has chosen to honor for their accomplishments.” At the same time, “these decisions require not only attention to historical facts, including the circumstances under which monuments were built and spaces named, but also an understanding of what history is and why it matters to public culture.” New Orleans offers an example of how these principles can be implemented through a thoughtful and inclusive process, informed by deep and careful historical research.

The ordinance that established the Renaming Commission specified criteria for street and place name removal that pointed first and foremost to the relationship between treason and the defense of slavery. Commission members then consulted with historians who have a “demonstrable record of scholarship, formal or informal, regarding the history and geography of the City of New Orleans, especially in relation to traditionally underrepresented communities.” These scholars, including many members of the AHA, conducted research in order to identify streets and places that fit the ordinance’s criteria for removal, and remained open to considering new and conflicting sources as those sources were identified.

The final report issued by those scholars—which apparently greatly informed the commission’s discussions and decisions—is a remarkable document of collaborative historical research. In addition to identifying streets and places that fit the ordinance criteria for removal, the historians put forward a wide array of possibilities for official New Orleans place names—women and men deeply connected to the city’s history, and reflecting the relationship between history, place naming, and community values.

For many years, historians have explored the roles and contributions of ordinary people in the history of the city of New Orleans. Indeed, the history of New Orleans, like that of other places, cannot be reduced to the actions of a few politicians or military officers. For example, historians have placed fugitives from slavery, public health leaders, local labor officials, African American soldiers, cultural innovators, and

everyday civil rights activists at the heart of the city’s historical narrative. This research—broadly accepted and valued within the discipline—clearly informed the choices made by the historians and scholars who donated their time and expertise to this process. In transforming these names, the city of New Orleans will align its official commemoration with cutting-edge scholarship, the expertise of professional historians, and democratic processes. Moreover, the commission’s report itself constitutes a historical document, open to review and scrutiny of future historians and citizens of New Orleans, an example of democratic transparency in decision-making processes often not afforded to previous generations.

In New Orleans—like countless cities across the South—street and place names honored Confederate leaders as part of a broad and anti-democratic effort to deny African Americans their rights as US citizens and their place in the city’s history. The more inclusive procedures undertaken in New Orleans are all the more remarkable considering the challenges presented by the pandemic. We urge all localities undertaking this kind of process to recognize that it is indeed possible to listen to a broad spectrum of voices, and not just the loudest, angriest, or most powerful. And, as the commission’s report observes, to recognize that historical questions do not have “definitive answers.”

Members of the American Historical Association plan to gather in New Orleans for our annual meeting in January 2022. We look forward to walking city streets bearing names that result from a democratic process driven by historical scholarship.

Sincerely,



James Grossman
Executive Director



Jacqueline Jones
President, 2021