

Schools, History, and the Challenges of Commemoration

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The American Historical Association expresses alarm at the process by which the San Francisco School Names Advisory Committee proposed changing the names of 44 public schools, and the ready acceptance of these recommendations by the city's Board of Education. The committee showed little interest in consulting professional historians, relying instead on Wikipedia articles and cursory glances at other online sources. The rationales behind many of the recommendations for changing names reflected this approach to research, many of them misguided or riddled with errors of historical fact.

The AHA urges the San Francisco School Board to begin this process anew, inviting broader public participation, enlisting the expertise of professional historians, and encouraging a robust debate about the way historical figures and events should or should not be memorialized via school naming practices.

Eschewing a serious research effort, members of the committee seemed determined to look for any evidence of objectionable behavior on the part of a historical figure after which a school was named. To suggest that this method produced uneven conclusions is an understatement. For example, Clarendon Elementary School had been named for the street where it was located, but the committee decided that the street itself bore the name of a county in South Carolina named for a member of the House of Commons who was impeached in the 18th century. Abraham Lincoln stands indicted for his role in homestead and transcontinental policies—as well as military actions resulting in the deaths of Indigenous peoples—without consideration for the larger context of his life and accomplishments. This seems to have been part of a broader pattern whereby complex biographies were boiled down to singularities (for a particularly egregious example, see James Russell Lowell).

These are difficult decisions. Naming, like monuments, articulates community values, identifying people whom a community has chosen to honor for their accomplishments, recognizing that few (if any) individuals can meet a standard of perfection. The San Francisco School Board wisely instructed the advisory committee to “engage the larger San Francisco community in a sustained discussion” of proposed changes. Had such conversation taken place, perhaps a broader range of perspectives and values might have emerged.

The AHA is on record drawing a line that opposes honoring Americans who committed treason on behalf of the right of some humans to own, buy, and sell other humans. But we are not advising the people of San Francisco on the *substance* of their decisions. Instead we believe that such decisions would benefit from consultation with professional historians, who can provide essential facts and context. Unfortunately, the chair of this advisory committee has made clear his contempt for historians and disregard for historical work itself:

What would be the point? History is written and documented pretty well across the board. And so, we don't need to belabor history in that regard. We're not debating that. There's no point in debating history in that regard. Either it happened or it didn't, as historians have referenced in their own histories. So, I don't think there's a discussion about that. And so, based on our criteria, it's a very straightforward conversation. And so, no need to bring historians forward to say—they either pontificate and list a bunch of reasons why, or [say] they had great qualities. Neither are necessary in this discussion.

On the contrary, this is exactly what is necessary. "Great qualities" should be considered in relation to flaws, great and small. "If you can only name schools after people who were perfect," observes former AHA president Eric Foner, "you will have a lot of unnamed schools."