

statement on Town Hall name

Mayor John Compton
Washington Grove Town Councilors
McCathran Hall
Washington Grove, MD 20880

Dear Mr. Mayor Compton and Washington Grove Town Councilors:

It's very important to me that folks know that for me this measure is arising out of my love for this community and hope for a better future. After the murder of George Floyd, I became involved in some community groups, and was surprised to learn that WG had a reputation for not being a welcoming place. At the same time we were learning from Charlie about the 100+ racial covenants still on our properties. I didn't even know what a racial covenant was, but learned that it was a way of saying to some of our brothers and sisters, that you, or people that look like you, cannot now or ever buy this home. Then I learned about the minstrel shows, including that my daughter, greatly disappointed, sent me a copy of a book published by our woman's club in 1975 that decided to use a 'blackface' picture for our first mayor, as if that were ok or funny. The more I learned about our racial history the more distressing it was for me.

The names of buildings express the values of a community. They both look backward, to the past they honor, and forward, to the ideals they elevate for the community. I believe we wish to be an inclusive community. We don't want to be saying to some of our residents, future residents, and guests to our gathering place, 'the achievements of incorporation as a municipality, and all the work done to make this a good community, outweigh the fact that people like you were not allowed to purchase property here, and also that on an annual basis we put on shows that promoted both inside and widely outside WG, harmful stereotypes of people that look like you.' That, to me, is not a judgement call that speaks of a community trying to turn a new page on a painful past and forge a new future. Especially in this frightful present time, where the ideas of racism are finding new prominence and acceptability and appeasement of racism for other perceived values is so common. Where do we stand? For me, this is about the future, where our gathering place is by its name welcoming and not tethered to and lifting up this one period in history.

To make a change like this, and it is a big change, some folks want evidence, so the [powerpoint slides in the proposal](#) present some of the evidence as to why renaming is needed. For some, going through the evidence stirs in the heart a need for action that is stronger than would result from a summary. For others, it comes across as 'accusations.' I wish we could just quietly rename the building WG Town Hall and move on. Ideas on how to make this process less fraught would be great. But yes, the first mayor was on the committee that ~~specified the placement of racial covenants~~ (see P. Edwards, Washington Grove 1873-1937 p.337-338 and surrounding pages as well, -this reference was intended to be added to the slides, but was on the [reference document for the resolution which passed](#)

[last June](#) (see #10) on over 120 properties transferred from the Association and then Town to individuals, a process that continued throughout his years of service (and it is a red herring about his own property which was not transferred during his lifetime, after which covenants had no legal bearing. Also note that covenants were not universal in this area, in lower Montgomery County roughly 1/2 subdivisions had no racial covenants.) Yes, the man who became our first mayor was, (in the years 1909-1932 prior to his being mayor, when he served as Association President and had other leadership roles) organizer, director, lead entertainer on the stage doing comedy between songs, and performer of songs which included racial stereotypes. We have details of the songs sung, and show info from newspapers of the day and a concert program. For example, there is a powerpoint slide covering the song "Ephraim Johnson" which, very disturbing to me, performed by the future mayor, mocks as trivial and childish the religious faith of an African American. These stereotypes (childish, lazy, sexualized, etc) contributed to justifications for economic exploitation, restrictions on voting rights, poorer schooling opportunities, separate facilities, racial restrictions on relationships, and the list goes on. These shows were a big deal, 30 men in blackface, rehearsed during the summer for the fall performance. The shows brought in audiences from throughout Montgomery County and DC, filling the auditorium to its capacity of 1400. And yes, by 1949, Jim Crow had gotten to the point in WG, that our Town Council in reference to defining policy for the auditorium, declared the "established exclusion policy of the town."

The first mayor alone was not the only person that contributed to aspects of the town which we love, it was a community that worked to hash things out in those early years. And it was a community that participated in the Jim Crow that was established here (and even the expression "Jim Crow" comes from blackface minstrelsy). But one name is on the building, calling attention to a particular time, and for me the negatives of non-inclusivity and harm associated with that time mean that it is not a good name for the building.

I know various thoughts have been raised, "why do we have to think about the past, the future is all that matters", "everybody was doing it then", "using today's standards to judge the past", "black people participated in some minstrel shows", "this is erasing history", "my person of color friend says it's not important to rename buildings", 'renaming buildings is not doing anything' or 'where does it stop, are we going to rename Washington DC because he had slaves?' Maybe there are some conversations that we have to go through as part of our growing pains. We can learn about other communities that are going through renaming processes for landmarks, schools, buildings, roads. I don't think that if in our hearts we are truly able to get past these arguments and approach this problem with hearts that are not defensive, but full of humility and love, that we will be ready to be in full engagement with all of our brothers and sisters.

Richard Cavicchi

P.S. I'm from Cleveland, a lifelong "Indians" fan. I'm glad finally we renamed our baseball team the Guardians.

"Renaming these landmarks is not erasing history; it's actually unearthing history that has been buried under the myth of white supremacy."— Ibram X. Kendi, "Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America"