

Dear Mayor, Town Council, and Residents,

In my opinion, many buildings are named after public officials in DC, even those who did not front the money out of their own funds to build them. Yet, town halls are usually named after the town itself. Our two neighbors, Rockville and Germantown, are named after their town to identify them as where people go for such matters. The Presidential Residence of the US is named after the color of the coating it has, and the National Capital Building and the Supreme Court building have no name of a famous person attached to them. For example, the Supreme Court building is not named after Justice Marshall. The President does not live in the George Washington Building.

When you attach names of people to buildings, generally, everyone agrees they are exemplars of the practice of the building's function. That person's name is not usually attached when such matters are politically disputed. In the case of town halls, usually, only the town's name is attached, as mentioned earlier.

The town is in the process of clearing its name to reconcile itself to its past. It is now disputed whether a person's name should be attached to its primary government building. While it can be argued to be based on politics or some other disputed set of discourses, it would further the town's image to follow precedent and remove any such name from its town hall. This is the most objective and reasonable action to end this dispute. It is a municipal building. Such buildings should not have anyone's name on them.

Removing any name, whatever it happens to be, from the municipal building would definitively finish the dispute. The choice to place the name there was political, yet our town government does not have political parties. We have parks named after people. The building where government business occurs has no point of being named after anyone. If you study how history is written, you can see irreconcilable perspectives in history. To place the center of the town's government under the single name of any one of us, however meritorious or not meritorious, fixes what political discourse we have around a single figure. No one wants to slander or damage any of the descendants, but a statement saying what was or what was not done will be equally historical writing, hence fixing and generating a perspective and its flaws, its datedness, and would be defined in opposition to other perspectives.

Democracy exists because of its logic and objectivity. That's the whole project: equality of all under the law. Placing the name of the town's central governmental building under a single individual confers a historical weight on that name and raises questions about his exemplars. We will never agree on whether the person the hall is named after was meritorious. Numerous other names could be proposed, for example.

Removal of the name need not be a judgment of that person. It is simply a recognition of the collective democracy of the town and the fairness and objectivity of its institutions. It follows consistently with what most other neighboring municipalities have (depending on

how wide you draw your circle). The failure to remove the name from the Town Hall implies that actions conducted there will always have that person's mark, and in doing so, you generate a perspective where the interpretation of the name, not the family name, will signify the perception of municipal governance. There would remain no commonly agreed-upon interpretation of the name itself.

Even with some "balanced" explanation, you will find that facts in that explanation will always remain disputed. Wording will not be agreed upon by all to have any significance to either group or groups. By naming a governmental building after its function, you maintain confidence in it with the functional name as long as it continues to serve that purpose. Voices define the rough outlines of democracy, embodied in voting, but specialists and delegated authorities by the people figure out ways to implement what is being asked. In all of this, the names of leaders are generally eponyms of their period of visibility in this role, and the perception of their "rule," or whatever you want to call it, depends on their ability to marshal intellectual and financial resources to the advantage of those voices.

Almost certainly, people will continue to call the town hall "McCathram Hall" in some circles, just as how many people name houses after this or that, or for how long. It is best to follow common etiquette, which is the most standard. It provides less risk to the community, considering all the restrictive covenants were written under his tenure, should we retain his name on the building.

Having aired this opinion on the Washington Grove listserv, I encountered a wide range of responses, which I used to modify this opinion. These responses took various forms. In one, I was told by members of the family that he really wasn't that way, so why punish him in his grave? In another, I was subjected by one or two people who used a series of reductio ad absurdum arguments to dispute it, such as Gaithersburg being named after a slaveholder or George Washington being a slaveholder, so why name the town after him? The final argument I saw made was that the building itself was multipurpose and not government. These arguments are beside the point and designed to keep the name on the town hall. They ignore the core argument advanced here. That argument is that a space from which the town is governed, its central administrative building, should be named after no one because we live in a democracy, and such spaces belong to all of the people and should not have someone's name on them.

Sincerely,

Kirk Greenway, 410 4th Avenue