

Thinking About How to Think About Renaming Stapleton



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by Jacqueline St. Joan*

I have an opinion on the renaming issue, one I formed more than twenty years ago when I lived in the adjoining neighborhood of East Colfax. That opinion has only been reinforced by time. I believe it is in the best interests of both the neighborhood as well as Denver to rename Stapleton. I feel this in my gut; yet the lawyer, judge and law professor in me insist that I think through this problem critically, in a rational, well-informed, compassionate way. That effort is what I offer here.

Diverse, overlapping views

To some, the name Stapleton does not signify the Ku Klux Klan or Mayor Benjamin Stapleton. It does not mean anything other than the name of the place where they live or work. These people tend to feel that others should stop bringing up this unpleasant problem that reflects poorly on our City and its reputation for being socially and politically liberal. To some it means the name of an airport they remember fondly. They have heard that Benjamin Stapleton may have been a Klansman, but didn't he denounce the KKK eventually, and thus redeem himself?

To others the Stapleton name is an insult to those who fought the KKK and suffered under its rule—whether in 1920s Denver or in other places and times.¹ To them, retaining the name signifies indifference to the suffering of Jewish, Catholic, and African American ancestors and those traces of bigotry that remain today. The name becomes another burden to carry—a symbol that they are forced to face every day outside their front door—a reminder of all the places where their people were made to feel that they did not belong. How do we explain to our children, they ask, who Stapleton was and why a community is known by his name. How can the aspirations of diversity and inclusivity expressed in *The Green Book*² be reconciled with the aspirations of Benjamin Stapleton? What does it say about us if we retain such a community name?.

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¹ Denver's Klan Era occurred during the "second coming of the KKK," before America's entrance into World War I and continued through the 1920s, when immigrants, Catholics, and Jews were primary targets. However, we must recognize that symbols of the KKK are especially repugnant (frightening even) to African Americans whose ancestors experienced the terrorism of the "first coming of the KKK" following the Civil War and associate it with lynching, re-enslavement, and Jim Crow laws.

² *The Green Book* (1995) was a blueprint for the transformation of the land where the airport had once stood. For five years many individuals and community organizations worked together to plan the re-development. They recorded those aspirations in *The Green Book*.
<http://www.stapletondenver.com/wp-content/uploads/greenbook.pdf>.

And there are those who are unaware of the controversy, those who are aware but do not care, and those who are concerned with hypothetical and ethical questions, or believe we should move more slowly. How will businesses deal with a name change? And will changing the name re-write history? How poor a mayor could Stapleton have been if he was re-elected so many times? And what about the slippery slope? If we rename Stapleton, then shouldn't we also rename Thomas Jefferson and George Washington High Schools—which honor slaveholders? Many ask how this community naming was ever allowed to happen in the first place, expressing the feeling that they might not have bought their houses if they had known the development was named for a KKK mayor.³

Analysis and decision-making

Given the many complex questions, and to respect others' points of view, we have to ask exactly which issues are most important here and what weight we give to them. How do we develop principles for how the renaming question should be resolved? It is helpful to look at what others have done with renaming controversies elsewhere and see if the principles used in those cases can be adapted for our use.

I am borrowing ideas and language used in two reports. In 2017 a committee was established at Yale University to develop principles for deciding whether or not to rename Calhoun College, whose namesake was actively pro-slavery. In 1987 Colorado historian Patricia Limerick authored a report on the renaming of Nichols Hall, a University of Colorado residence hall named for a captain who led his company in the infamous 1864 Sand Creek Massacre of Arapahoe and Cheyenne people. Both reports acknowledge that historical figures were morally complex individuals and we should judge them carefully, especially if the place in question has been named for someone who made major contributions to the place itself. The Yale University report notes that historical names create continuity in the symbols around which people in a community bond through generations and with a place, and thus should not be replaced lightly. On the other hand, the Limerick report notes, sometimes renaming on the basis of values is warranted.

The University of Colorado report provides guidance⁴ to decision-making about an historical figure:

- Judging a person by the mores of a past era can be balanced with the ongoing criticism of history as seen from the present perspective.

³ A continuum of views was expressed by more than 180 people at the two "listening sessions" held at Stapleton in December 2017, summarized in a report and analysis by The Equity Project. The word cloud on the cover of this essay highlights the most prominent words expressed during the listening sessions. Read the report: <http://renameforall.com/review-analysis-listening-sessions/>

⁴ I have paraphrased these principles.

- It would be inappropriate to name a community in honor of a person if his primary legacy is fundamentally in conflict with the mission and purpose of the community.
- If renaming will have the effect, in a meaningful way, of “erasing history,” then there is a responsibility to address that erasure.

To resolve the renaming question, we can apply these principles to facts as we can best discern them. There are three relevant historical periods to consider:

- The KKK Era of 1920-1925, during which time Mayor Benjamin Stapleton, first elected in 1923, was a member of and supported by the KKK.⁵
- The Stapleton Development Era (1995-2001) when the developer, Forest City, adopted Stapleton as the “initial name of the community,” and inserted the name Stapleton in the official company logo.⁶
- The present (2014-2018) when activists began organizing to rename Stapleton in light of heightened political awareness and racial dissension nationally and locally.⁷

Principle 1: Judging a person by the mores of a past era can be balanced with the ongoing criticism of history as seen from the present perspective.

One might argue that it is unfair to judge Benjamin Stapleton according to today’s social values, yet there are certain dynamics in history toward which we should not adopt an uncritical point of view. One of those dynamics is an ingrained nativist populism that rises from time to time in U.S. history, which attempts to define certain classes as not “real Americans,” or as unworthy of protection and place.

In his own day Stapleton was controversial precisely because of his KKK connections and his doubletalk about them. During his successful 1923 campaign,

⁵ Stapleton was mayor of Denver during two periods: 1923-1931 and 1935-1947. I am largely excluding his second tenure because it is not directly relevant to the objections raised about KKK connections. However, it was during his second tenure that important construction projects were accomplished and the Denver Municipal Airport was named Stapleton International Airport.

⁶ One could infer from this language in the governing document that it was anticipated that the name of the community could be changed. An early provision allowed for doing so.[Sec 1.4 of First Amended and Restated Community Declaration dated May 9, 2002] Around the same time Stapleton Development Corporation developed a policy in 2001 that limited use of the name Stapleton “as a location for marketing purposes” only. See SDC Resolution Approving Naming Policy, Feb. 2001.

⁷ Ferguson, MO, Charleston, SC, Cleveland, OH, Staten Island, NY, Falcon Heights, MN. Locally, controversies arose around law enforcement treatment in cases involving Jessica Hernandez, Clarence Moses-El, Michael Marshall, and others and continue to this day. See Denver Justice Project <http://www.denverjusticeproject.org/media/>

he denounced racial prejudice⁸ while at the same time he relied on the Klan's financial and political support. In 1923 when critics learned he was a KKK member, a recall election occurred. Then Stapleton went public with his support of the Klan, promising at a rally on Table Mountain: "I will work with the Klan and for the Klan in the coming election, heart and soul. And if I am re-elected, I shall give the Klan the kind of administration it wants." With Klan financial backing and its grass-roots political support, Stapleton survived recall and appointed Klansmen to significant city positions. However, the next year he balked under the strict control of the Grand Dragon, John Galen Locke. Later when Locke was investigated for tax evasion and jailed, the Klan split. Then Stapleton turned on the police department and fired its KKK chief. As a result, the Klan ousted the mayor —not the other way around.⁹

Did Stapleton renounce the Klan? He never did.¹⁰ Did he redeem himself? If redemption means acknowledging one's wrongdoing, apologizing to those harmed and compensating for the wrong, then no, he did not. As human beings who make mistakes, we know that forgiveness can strengthen both the forgiver and the forgiven. But reconciliation begins with truth, and the truth is that Stapleton never asked history to forgive him. However, in our analysis we must go beyond assessing personal blame or examining his bigotry or lack of it. It was Stapleton's use of his significant public political power that is most important. According to historian Robert A. Goldberg, "the issue is that his administration was Klan-ridden. The police force and justice system was Klan-led and used to further Klan ends. He is responsible, not simply for his personal statement or membership, but the use of his administration by the Klan to terrorize the community without fear of retribution. This was under his watch. Collaboration is too soft a term to use. His silence encouraged the predators. He had choices. Only his ambition kept him in check."¹¹

⁸ As a candidate he signed a proclamation: "As Mayor, I will assume the responsibility of enforcing the law. No private agencies will be permitted to use armed forces or take the enforcement of law into their own hands. Any attempt by secret organizations or groups of individuals to assume this prerogative will be sternly repressed. True Americanism needs no mask or disguise. Any attempt to stir up racial prejudices or religious intolerance is contrary to our constitution and is therefore un-American." According to historian Robert A. Goldberg, Stapleton did so "to appease his Jewish and Catholic supporters." *The Invisible Empire in the West: Toward a New Historical Appraisal of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s*, edited by Shawn Lay, p. 48. According to historian Phil Goodstein, "Stapleton refused, however, to denounce the Klan by name signed the statement under duress. According to historian Robert A. Goldberg, it was standard Klan practice for a member to deny membership and offer such self-serving statements.

⁹ *The Denverite*, Dec. 11, 2017, referencing Phil Goodstein, *In the Shadow of the Klan*. Another historian, Robert A. Goldberg, notes that Locke, not the National Klan organization, ousted Stapleton. Very shortly afterward, Locke himself was ousted from the KKK. Stapleton, would have been welcome back in good standing, but he allowed his KKK membership to lapse.

¹⁰ See footnote 10 above. It is true that in 1925 the NAACP held its national convention in Denver and Stapleton officially welcomed the organization to town. That welcome was part of the mayor's official duties, a courtesy, not an act of redemption.

¹¹ Email communication to the author, March 30, 2018.

Principle 2: It would be inappropriate to name a community in honor of a person if his primary legacy is fundamentally in conflict with the mission and purpose of the community.

A “primary legacy” is one that has “lasting effects” that cause Stapleton to be remembered--by historians, by citizens today, and in his own time. Stapleton became a popular mayor, as evidenced by his many re-elections after he was ousted from the Klan, but he also had significant opposition.¹² Stapleton was admired as “Ben the Builder,” because during his tenure significant public facilities were constructed.¹³ Some historians might say these places are his primary legacy, but unfortunately, that legacy is tarnished by the effect of his KKK years. That is the legacy Stapleton is best remembered for now.¹⁴ Is that legacy fundamentally in conflict with the mission and purpose of the Stapleton community today? *The Green Book* authors aspired to have... *communities that promote diversity . . . Stapleton will be a place of economic, social and environmental innovation that will provide a new development model for the region . . . the Plan seeks to reunite the Stapleton site with adjacent neighborhoods in Denver, Aurora and Commerce City.* Having a community name around which people can unite in pride and confidence fosters community, a task made more difficult where a namesake’s principal legacy (collaboration with KKK) clashes with the community’s mission (tolerance and diversity). For children, the name requires them to form their childhood ties and memories around a name that they had no part in creating and whose legacy offends.

Stapleton was mayor when the federal government expanded the Denver Municipal Airport into an international airport during World War II. It is almost by happenstance that his name is associated with the current community. The only connection is that the development is on the site where Stapleton Airport once stood. The naming of the airport was intended to honor Stapleton; the naming of the development was not. The developer declared Stapleton as “the initial name,” and created a process for making such a name change. ¹² These provisions support the view that the name was never intended to be permanent.

The Yale report recognized that there are different kinds of public spaces, and residential ones are most distinctive because where people call home has special meaning, especially for children. They use the Stapleton name every day and it

¹² During the Klan years various institutions and community leaders opposed Stapleton, including *The Denver Catholic Register*, Regis University, *Colorado Statesman*, *Denver Express*, and *The Denver Post*, as well as District Attorney Philip Van Cise, Judge Benjamin Lindsey, Charles Ginsberg, Philip Hornbein, George Gross of the NAACP, Councilmen James T. Smith, and John O’Malley, and others. One hundred Republicans formed the Visible Government League to oppose the Klan.

¹³ The City and County Building, Greek Amphitheatre, mountain parks, and many others.

¹⁴ A quick online search of his name makes this point clear. Stapleton is rarely mentioned without a reference to his membership in and support of the KKK in his early years as mayor.

¹² Master Community Association Governing Documents, signed by Forest City Stapleton President, John S. Lehigh in 2002, Section 1.4 of The First Amended and Restated Community Declaration for the Project Area Within the Former Stapleton International Airport.
<http://www.stapletoncommunity.com/mca-info/governing-documents>

becomes a part of their lexicon: the Stapleton team, the Stapleton school, and the Stapleton whatever. Another factor is that the offense given by the name Stapleton is not evenly distributed across the community, and thus a namesake whose legacy is connected to , anti-Semitism, anti-Catholic, and anti-immigrant bigotry, and white supremacy burdens some neighbors more than others. This is an unfair, if unintended, consequence of the name, acknowledged even by some who do not feel burdened by the name, but who are concerned that their neighbors might be.

Principle 3: If renaming will have the effect, in a meaningful way, of “erasing history,” then there is a responsibility to address that erasure.

Changing the name of the Stapleton community does not erase the memory of Benjamin Stapleton in Denver’s history—quite the contrary. The name change actually unearths the complex history of the man, the city, and the place currently known as Stapleton. However, to the extent that some feel that changing the name “erases” Stapleton’s place in history, then a commemorative plaque could be installed in an appropriate place describing the quandary around evaluating Stapleton’s legacy—his connection to the KKK along with the credit he deserves in developing certain city facilities, parks and airport. Such a display could be coupled with periodic events to raise and maintain awareness.

Conclusion

Using this principled, evidence-based approach to decision-making, I feel confident that my instincts about changing the name are valid and will stand the test of time. People living in the same time and space as Benjamin F. Stapleton voiced the opinion that that the Klan and Stapleton were morally repugnant and they expressed their concerns about Stapleton in the light of social justice. It is not historians or “political correctness” that foist these judgments on historical figures. Rather, historians offer us lessons about the recurring danger of opportunistic politicians who pander to racist and nativist views. Furthermore, to name a community in honor of Benjamin Stapleton, whose primary legacy is seen today as his collaboration with the KKK, conflicts with the stated mission of promoting diversity in the Stapleton community. Finally, if any unwarranted erasure of Stapleton’s history occurs in the process of renaming the community, then remedial measures can be adopted along with programs to remind us of the hard lessons of political pandering.

Keeping the Stapleton name does nothing to help us learn from the past, to build community, or to face the moral complexities of that name. It merely has the effect of rendering the neighborhood inhospitable, not only to African Americans, but also for those Jews and Catholics who understand their own history of oppression by the KKK--and not only to these three groups, but the name is also offensive to their allies, extended families, their neighbors. It is not white guilt that advocates for the name change. It is caring and a sense of the injustice of continuing to honor

Benjamin F. Stapleton from generation to generation into the future. In my view, Stapleton's actions in enabling the Klan mean that he has forfeited that honor. If that was not understood back in his day, in the current era, after the struggles this country has been through and continues to face in combating race and religious bigotry, it should be understood today.

Denver Faces Our KKK History Together: a Dr. Gregory Diggs Memorial Project

Resources

Nonfiction

- Robert A. Goldberg, *Hooded Empire: The Ku Klux Klan in Colorado*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981. (pp. 40-63 overview of the KKK Era).
- Phil Goodstein, *In the Shadow of the Klan: When the Ku Klux Klan Ruled Denver, 1920-1926*, Denver: 2006. Available at Capitol Hill Books
- Robert A. Goldberg, "Denver: Queen City of the Colorado Realm," Chapter 2, *The Invisible Empire in the West*, Shawn Lay, Ed. University of Illinois Press.
- Kathleen Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (1991).

Fiction:

- *Boldfaced Lies*, by Charlene Porter. Translated into Spanish and has a study guide. Available: charlene@charleneporter.com
- *Denver* by John Dunning, (1980) Set in the West Colfax Jewish community.

Research Papers, Videos and Podcasts: (available online)

- Michael Adam Lee, The Politics of Antisemitism in Denver, Colorado, 1898-1984. http://scholar.colorado.edu/hist_gradetds. Chapter 3
- Richard Delgado and Jean Stefanic, "Home-Grown Racism: Colorado's Historic Embrace - And Denial - Of Equal Opportunity in Higher Education," https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2411625
- Nicoli Bowley, "Ten Dollars to Hate Somebody": Hispanic Communities and the Ku Klux in Klan in Colorado, 1917-1925. Center of the American West. https://scholar.colorado.edu/honr_theses/1493.
- KKK Rocky Mountain PBS <https://youtu.be/PO5PMbtF1t8> (28 mins.)
- Edward (Jed) Marrs, A Stand for Social Justice: Regis University and the Ku Klux Klan: 1920-26 (17 minute video) (marrs498@regis.edu) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1_drx1UcL8&feature=youtu.be
- Aaron "Ukulele Loki" Johnson, "Stapleton Rebranded KKKpleton," Your Neighbor Speaking," <https://youtu.be/3e6Cv6PalD4>
- Changing Denver podcast: "Stapleton's Promise, Apr 3, 2017, <http://changingdenver.com/?episode=stapletons-promise>
- Changing Denver podcast: "The Life and Times of Benjamin F. Stapleton
- <http://changingdenver.com/?episode=cdbbb-the-life-and-times-of-benjamin-f-stapleton>

Speakers and Facilitators:

Charlene Porter, author, charlene@charleneporter.com
Terry Nelson, Blair Caldwell African American Research Library
James Walsh, CU Denver—Irish and Catholic resistance to the Klan
Nicoli Bowley, Center of the American West—Hispanic communities & KKK

Jeanne Abrams, Rocky Mountain Jewish Historical Society
Michael Adam Lee—Jewish resistance-available via Skype
Bill de la Cruz, Denver Public Schools, facilitator on race and equity issues
Nita Mosby Tyler, The Equity Project, facilitator on race and equity issues
Paul Karolyi, podcaster, “Changing Denver”

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