

MEMORANDUM

April 22, 2020

To: The University of Virginia Committee on Names

From: Barbara J. Fried, Member of the Board of Visitors
John C. Jeffries, Jr., David and Mary Harrison Distinguished Professor of Law
and Senior Vice President for Advancement
Claudrena N. Harold, Professor of African American and African Studies and
Professor of History
Mary Elizabeth Magill, Executive Vice President and Provost of the University
Elizabeth R. Varon, Langbourne M. Williams Professor of American History
Derrick Wang, Student Member of the Board of Visitors

Cc: James E. Ryan, President of the University
Jasmine Yoon, Office of the General Counsel
Gary W. Gallagher, John L. Nau III Professor in the History of the American
Civil War Emeritus

Re: Submission of the Curry School

The Curry School of Education and Human Development submitted a request to the Committee on Names and through them to the President asking (1) that the name of J. L. M. Curry be dropped from the school, (2) that the name of William Henry Ruffner be dropped from Ruffner Hall, and (3) that the latter be renamed to honor Walter Nathaniel Ridley, the first African-American to receive a doctoral degree from the University.

The Committee on Names exists chiefly to oversee donor recognition, which is largely an administrative responsibility. Because the request from the Curry School raises broader concerns, the President appointed a subcommittee of five, augmented by Claudrena Harold, co-chair of the Committee on the Future of the Historic Landscape, to consider the Curry School's submission. Additionally, he asked the subcommittee to articulate principles to guide consideration of such requests in the future.*

* In discharging this responsibility we have averted to, and acted in accordance with, the existing University policy, EXT-004: Naming Policies for the University of Virginia (revised 12/12/2018), which can be found at

Guiding Principles

We submit the following general principles to guide consideration of renaming requests.

First, there should be a presumption against renaming. Once a building is named, the matter should ordinarily be considered settled. Renaming should be exceptional. Whether a name bestowed years ago should be *retained* is not the same question as whether that name would be *awarded* today. Respect for stability and continuity counsels against a quick trigger on renaming requests.

Second, it follows that renaming requests require due diligence. Proponents of renaming must have done the necessary research to allow full and fair evaluation of the merits of the request. That research should be part of the public record so that students, faculty, and alumni can see the basis for any action taken or declined.

Third, renaming must consider both the past and the present. The achievements and values of the individual after whom something is named must be considered *both* in the context of his or her time and place *and* as a legacy for the present day. Neither perspective can exclude the other. The past cannot preclude reconsideration in light of current sensibilities, and the present cannot undo the past. Respect for both is required.

Fourth, major consideration should be given to an individual's contribution or connection to the University of Virginia. Naming decisions at the University do not reflect global assessments of merit. They reflect, first and foremost, contributions to the University. In many cases, naming decisions honor donors who have made buildings or programs possible. In other cases, naming decisions honor University leaders or University graduates of special note. In all cases, contribution to the University of Virginia should be key.

Fifth, ultimately naming decisions should reflect the mission of the University. A mission statement adopted by the Faculty Senate, refined by the Board of Visitors, and approved by the State Council of Higher Education begins by noting that we are “guided by a founding vision of discovery, innovation, and development of the full potential of talented students from all walks of life.” It goes on to say:

We are defined by:

uvapolicy.virginia.edu/policy/EXT-004, and with the Report on the Advisory Committee on the Future of the Historic Landscape at the University of Virginia, which can be found at <https://response.virginia.edu/system/files/public/historic-committee-report-april-2018.pdf>. Our recommendations differ only in that they are more specifically directed to questions of renaming.

- Our enduring commitment to a vibrant and unique residential learning environment marked by the free and collegial exchange of ideas;
- Our unwavering support of a collaborative, diverse community bound together by distinctive foundational values of honor, integrity, trust, and respect;
- Our universal dedication to excellence and affordable access.

In addition to these affirmative statements of guiding principles, we offer one negative statement. A decision to name or rename reflects the University's values, but it does not imply suppression of competing views. This point was well expressed in Yale University's Report of the Committee to Establish Principles on Renaming (November 21, 2016), which noted that the names on University buildings "do not mark the boundaries of permissible speech":

The decision to change a building name is emphatically not a decision to remove a book from a library, change the contents of a syllabus, strike an idea from a course discussion, or rule out a dining hall conversation. In its building names and its campus symbols, the University communicates values, confers honor, and expresses gratitude to those who have contributed to its mission. In other words, the University itself speaks through its building names.

When the University speaks, it chooses its messages in light of its mission and values. But it remains committed to protecting the freedom of those who disagree.

J. L. M. Curry and William Henry Ruffner

The Curry School has submitted a request to remove the names of Jabez Lamar Monroe Curry and William Henry Ruffner from the school and an associated building. Foreseeing that these requests would be controversial, the Curry School prepared elaborate supporting materials. These include an account of the dissatisfactions among Curry faculty and students that gave rise to this request, a summary of the historical record of Curry and Ruffner, and argument in support of the recommendation. All this is recounted in the Executive Summary, a copy of which is attached to this memorandum, with much additional detail available in appendices.

In anticipation of this request, the subcommittee engaged Gary W. Gallagher, John L. Nau III Professor in the History of the American Civil War Emeritus and a distinguished historian of mid-19th Century America, to provide an independent historical assessment of Curry and Ruffner. A copy of his report is also attached to this memorandum. Our decision to engage Professor Gallagher did not reflect lack of confidence in the Curry School's research or presentation, but rather a desire to be doubly sure of having a full, complete, independent, and fair-minded account of the lives, achievements, and values of Curry and Ruffner. Together, the

researches of the Curry School and of Professor Gallagher amply fulfil the requirement of due diligence. The record before the committee is as complete and balanced as could be devised.

In light of the availability of those extensive researches, we provide here only a brief summary.

Jabez Lamar Monroe Curry was born to a slaveholding family in Georgia in 1825. After earning undergraduate and law degrees, he entered politics, first in the United States House of Representatives, then in the Confederate House of Representatives. After the Civil War, he became a minister and began a succession of academic appointments. His longest appointment was at Richmond College (now the University of Richmond) from 1868 to 1881. In that year, he left Richmond to become general agent of the Peabody Education Fund, a philanthropic institution supporting education in the South. He also worked for the John F. Slater Fund for the Education of Freedmen and helped establish the General Education Board, funded by John D. Rockefeller. When Rockefeller gave money to the University of Virginia for a school of education, he asked that it be named for Curry.

Curry served the Confederacy and praised the Confederate war effort. After the war, he advocated a pragmatic course of sectional reconciliation, not from any perception that the Confederacy was in error but only in recognition that it had been soundly defeated. He did eventually approve the end of slavery.

Curry's reputation rests on his post-war career as an educator. He was one of the most active and influential educational reformers in the South in the nineteenth century. He supported free – that is, public – education for blacks and whites, boys and girls. In the context of his time and place, this commitment was distinctly progressive. Many white Southerners disparaged public education of African Americans and women and preferred to rely on private education, which would benefit chiefly those with means.

But Curry's commitment to educating African Americans had limitations. He had no thought of challenging segregation, nor of suggesting that the separate schools should in fact be equal. He wanted schools to prepare African Americans for their roles as agricultural and mechanical laborers. His support for industrial and agricultural training for African American children aligned him with Booker T. Washington, who likely viewed such steps as merely transitional but who nonetheless endorsed and appreciated the contribution of J. L. M. Curry. To reduce a complex history to a single sentence, Curry showed real vision in advocating free public education for the South's black children but an overclouding blindness in refusing to recognize African Americans as having the same potentialities and capacities as whites.

William Henry Ruffner was a native Virginian and ordained minister before the Civil War. After the war, he took an active role in Virginia education, especially in helping to create a statewide public-school system. As superintendent of the Commonwealth's schools in 1870, he implemented a plan of racially segregated schools largely under state supervision. He resigned

that position in 1872 (in a dispute over state funding) and became the first president of the State Female Normal School at Farmville (now Longwood University).

Ruffner was no fan of slavery, but he hated abolitionists and disparaged any notion of equality for African Americans. He supported African colonization because he thought it would secure a desirable separation of the races while reducing what he regarded as inevitable racial conflict. Like Curry, Ruffner supported free public education for all children on a strictly segregated basis. Strick segregation came naturally to him, as he thought – and said publicly – that African Americans existed on a lower intellectual and moral plane than whites. For him, educating black children was in part a means of social control, making them “‘more intelligent, more moral, more industrious’ and less inclined toward ‘that contemptible ambition to associate with white people.’”*

Connection to the University of Virginia: Neither Curry nor Ruffner had any connection to the University of Virginia. Neither was a graduate or a member of the faculty, and neither made any specific contribution to the University.

Recommendation

The subcommittee recommends approval of both requests for removing names. Curry presents the harder choice. Judged in the context of his time and place, J. L. M. Curry’s contributions to free public education for all children, even on a segregated and unequal basis, may well be thought to deserve recognition. But his legacy directly conflicts with the values and commitments of the School of Education. The submission provides ample evidence of the disquiet and concern caused by the school’s association with views that today are rightly thought odious. That concern is most evident among, but by no means confined to, African Americans. We believe that the burden imposed in the twenty-first century by association with the nineteenth-century prejudices of Curry and Ruffner justify removing their names.

We are confirmed in this view by the fact that neither man had any connection with the University of Virginia. Outdated and objectionable views by someone who made a major contribution to the University would present a more difficult question, which we do not here address.

Walter Nathaniel Ridley

A secondary feature of the Curry School proposal is that Ruffner Hall be renamed for Walter Nathaniel Ridley. Ridley was the first African American to receive a doctoral degree from the University of Virginia – or indeed, so far as we know, from any traditionally white southern school. Ridley was born in 1910 in Newport News, educated in the public schools there, and earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Howard University. In 1936 he began his academic career at Virginia State College in Petersburg.

* Joseph W. Newman, “Ruffner, William Henry,” in Carraty and Carnes, eds., *American National Biography* 19:48.

To advance his career, Ridley sought a doctorate, but the University of Virginia was the only state institution that granted such degrees, and we refused to admit him. He was paid by the state to study instead at the University of Minnesota (1939-40) and Ohio State University (1941). At the invitation of Dean Lindley Stiles of the Curry School of Education, Ridley applied again and was accepted in 1951. Two years later, he was awarded a Doctor of Education degree from the University of Virginia, with high honors.

Dr. Ridley returned to Virginia State, then became academic dean at St. Paul's Polytechnic Institute (subsequently St. Paul's College) in Lawrenceville, Virginia, and in 1958 became president of Elizabeth City State Teachers College in North Carolina. His service as the head of that institution was by any measure distinguished. He expanded the number of academic majors from one to thirteen and more than doubled the number of students. He was a tireless and eloquent advocate for state resources for African American education, and he also took care to make sure that his traditionally black college admitted white students. The summation of the Curry School report is fitting and apt:

It is abundantly clear from the historical record that Walter Ridley was a pioneering leader in education; an open promoter of education for all individuals, regardless of race or ability; and a contributor to the strengthening of numerous institutions that served educational and academic causes. Mr. Ridley, and his career, exemplify the mission and aspirations of a school of education.

The subcommittee endorses that conclusion and recommends approval of the request that Ruffner Hall be renamed in honor of Walter Nathaniel Ridley.