

# Naming and Re-naming Architecture: A Case Study

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What follows is a description of the process that Oregon State University made use of last year to decide whether to rename several campus buildings. The review was initiated because several students, faculty, and staff believed that several building namesakes acted on or held racist views, or promoted racist policies. The previous year saw several campus protests airing this concern. The buildings were:

- Avery Lodge (named for Joseph C. Avery, a prominent figure in the early history of Corvallis, where OSU is located. Corvallis had recently declined to name a new middle school for him considering these concerns),
- Arnold Dining Hall (named for Benjamin Arnold, the second OSU president),
- Benton Hall and Benton Annex, a smaller building nearby (both commonly thought to be named for Thomas Hart Benton, a proponent of western expansion by the US), and
- Gill Coliseum, a sports arena named for an iconic OSU basketball coach, Amory T. Gill, who coached from 1928-1964.

Recently, OSU chose names for newly constructed buildings to reflect its efforts to be inclusive. For example, it named new residence halls for Carrie Halsell, the first African-American to graduate from OSU (she earned a BS in Commerce in 1926) and for William Tebeau, the first African-American man to graduate from OSU (1948, Chemical Engineering) and who, upon entering in 1943, was denied a dorm room because he was black. Workgroups were commissioned under the auspices of the Architectural Naming Committee and the Office of Institutional Diversity to devise a name-review process (one workgroup) and to conduct a review for each of those building names (another workgroup), culminating in a recommendation for each of the five buildings in question.

I am writing this report because I found the principles and procedures followed in the review to be models of reasonableness and admirable examples of how a university community might conduct itself in this situation. The overall process was “informed by historical inquiry and guided by a commitment to build community through reconciliation and learning from difficult parts of OSU history.”<sup>iii</sup>

The aim was not to “ignore history” as a familiar but inaccurate slogan has it, but to discover, examine, discuss, and make use of history. It was thus a demonstration of the value of humanities research as a campus and community resource. The process assumed that its intended participants would be of goodwill and that they valued the ideals of evidence, inclusiveness, and inquiry, even if they did not agree with one another about what inclusiveness looks like or about what actions might be suggested by the results of an inquiry. So, while this review might not have been possible had the interested parties become too polarized for productive discussions to take place, it was not naïve; it was meant as a step to keep things from getting to that point. To put it another way, the organizers’ hoped to create an environment of trust and comity around the issues, even absent mutual comprehension. Would the hoped-for climate would emerge, whatever the decisions about renaming? That was the experiment here.

## Sidebar 1

1. What do you think the difference is between remembering history and revering history?
2. What does “reconciliation” mean to you? What does reconciling the past with the present mean to you?
3. Consider this quote from President Bush at the 2016 opening of the African-American Museum in Washington DC: “A great nation does not hide its history. It faces its flaws and corrects them.”
4. What are your reactions to this statement? How do you think this statement connects to evaluating the names of buildings at OSU?
5. What does or could it feel like to walk into a place named after a person who stands for something at odds with your values, or the values of the university?

6. At this point in history, what story do you want OSU to tell through the names of its buildings?

Corvallis is not alone in being a college town in a state whose history reflects the legacies of slavery and the Civil War (the Oregon Constitution at statehood forbade blacks from settling in the state, from owning property, and making contracts) and it isn't alone in fitting the following newspaper description of Charlottesville, Va: "despite its self-image as liberal and racially tolerant, few black faces can be spotted in the expensive restaurants or luxury condos downtown, even among the employees."<sup>iii</sup> Nor is OSU not alone among universities in having place names, building namesakes, or histories whose consistency with today's ideal of campus inclusiveness has been questioned by students. For these reasons, this episode from the upper-left-coast may be illuminating for readers of this newsletter.

The review process addressed only whether to change the name of each of the three buildings; new namesakes would be considered in a separate process, and only if the process recommended changing that building's name. Whatever the outcome, an informational display would be created about the building's history, its previous name (if applicable), and the review panel's verdict and reasoning (e.g., signage would be placed at the building entry or a section featured on its homepage). There would be a definite outcome on a compact timeline.

In the first step, Historical Research Teams drawing from History and other faculty and university archivists documented and summarized available historical information about each of the namesakes and their reports were made available to the public on a dedicated website prominently linked to the university homepage. Their charge was not to recommend for or against renaming—this would be the job of the community meetings and the workgroup receiving their input. The history committee's charge was to "to explore, reveal, and contextualize the lives and viewpoints of the namesakes, and the histories of the buildings" by gathering and analyzing documentation."<sup>iv</sup>

The workgroup had been charged further with discovering how the present OSU community engaged with the historical information in the reports. So, a series of facilitated public meetings were held for the campus and area residents to discuss the findings together. The meetings resembled what city planners call charrettes. Tables were set up seating about eight participants, a facilitator, and a notetaker, with a set of questions. Two of these meetings involved general or contextualizing discussion questions (sidebar 1), the others began with a presentation of the associated historical report and the discussion questions directly addressed the building name (sidebar 2). The table conversations were not votes, but rather venues where attendees were invited to air their individual and, it was assumed, varying responses so that their range could be recorded for the ANC's deliberations. Comments addressing these same questions could be submitted by email and through a comment form online.

When all the meetings were completed, online comments and table notes from each of the meetings were forwarded to the workgroup, and later made available to the public. A qualitative summary of the responses was compiled by question along with a quantitative summary of participant demographics (e.g., alumni, current students, Corvallis residents) and considered by the workgroup and by the Architectural Naming Committee. The workgroup and the Architectural Naming Committee met several times, once with the university president, and twice thereafter to finalize their recommendations. These were forwarded to the president, with whom the final decisions rested. According to the report, 343 people participated in the public portions including 63 people who responded online. About half the online sample were alumni, and most of the meeting attendees were current students, faculty, and staff. Meetings ranged from 31-70 attendees; unsurprisingly, the online responses most often addressed Gill Coliseum and its meeting had the highest attendance in total and by alumni—and, curiously, the lowest attendance by faculty and staff.

Four weeks after the public meetings, President Ray announced his decisions: the names of Gill Coliseum and Arnold Dining Hall would be retained, and new names would be sought for Benton Hall, Benton Annex, and Avery Lodge. The decision about Benton Hall reflected the fact that it had been named for the residents of Benton County, who in 1887 raised funds for the construction of this first OSU building. So while the name was to be changed, it wasn't for the reason suggested initially. A new name would be sought for Benton Annex, which better reflected its current function as the campus Women's Center. A new name would be sought for Avery Lodge in light of Joseph Avery's political activities to advance the cause of slavery.

#### Sidebar 2

Based on what we know, how does this criterion apply to [namesake]?

1. Actions taken by an individual vs. viewpoints held by an individual
2. The individual's public vs. private persona.

3. The progression of an individual's viewpoints and life as a whole?
4. Whether and how an individual's actions and viewpoints corresponded to OSU's mission and values at the time.
5. How the current OSU community engages with the context of an individual's life.

The historical report explained that Coach Gill had tried to recruit African-American student athletes; the president, like many participants, was impressed by that fact. The decision to retain Arnold Hall's name acknowledged that Benjamin Arnold was born to a Virginia family that held slaves, that he enrolled in a college course at Randolph Macon College on the economics of slavery and served in the Confederate army. (Lest those of us at other colleges become too sanguine, it was also reported that the author of the textbook used in the slavery course, William A. Smith, was a Professor of Moral and Intellectual Philosophy!) Yet the historical report found that Arnold did not hold slaves himself, that Corvallis College (as OSU was then known) admitted Native American and women students while he was its president, and that he protected its status as a public land-grant university under the Morrill Act in the face of financial hurdles.

What of the new names? A similar process was used including public meetings whose discussions were communicated to the Architectural Naming Committee, and a final decision to be made by the university president. At the meetings for which I was present, participants found it easy to suggest namesakes for the women's center/Benton Annex. Its new name is the Hattie Redmond Women and Gender Center (Hattie Redmond campaigned for racial equality and for women's suffrage in Oregon). Avery Lodge was renamed Chepenefu Hall, a reference to elderberries in the language of the Kalapuyas, whose ancestral land includes Corvallis. Benton Hall seemed to present the biggest challenge, for while participants were delighted that the new name was to commemorate an early form of crowdfunding, it was difficult to find a concise and informative yet euphonious way to signify this fact. Its new name is, aptly enough, Community Hall.

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<sup>1</sup> "Process," <https://leadership.oregonstate.edu/building-and-place-names>, accessed on July 20, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Farah Stockman, "Year After White Nationalist Rally, Charlottesville is in a Tug of War Over Its Soul," <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/21/us/white-nationalist-rally-charlottesville-mayor.html>, accessed July 28, 2018

<sup>3</sup> Stacey Smith, Introduction to "Historical Reports on OSU Building Names", Building Names Under Consideration, <https://leadership.oregonstate.edu/building-and-place-names>