

# Report on Renaming Listening Sessions at Hollins

by the Hollins University Working Group on Slavery and its Contemporary Legacies  
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## INTRODUCTION

During January and the Spring semester of 2021, the Hollins Working Group on Slavery and its Contemporary Legacies held a series of listening sessions with the Hollins University community on the topic of renaming campus buildings. This topic had emerged as a significant theme in President Mary Dana Hinton's conversations on inclusion, diversity and justice at Hollins in July 2020. In answer to President Hinton's request that the Working Group explore potential renaming processes, it was determined that the first step should be dialogue with students, alumnae, faculty, and staff.

Hollins' commitment to diversity, equity and justice demands clear and open communication. Best practices emerging from the renaming process at other institutions clearly show the value of sustained community engagement. The listening sessions offered information about the complex issue of renaming, along with the opportunity for participants to engage with a series of questions.

The questions are:

- 1. What comes to mind, when walking around our campus buildings and rooms, about the history of our campus? How do you feel in these spaces?*
- 2. What are some questions you have about the renaming process?*
- 3. What are some criteria that we should consider when discussing which spaces to propose renaming?*
- 4. What kinds of actions/activities would you like to see to involve members of the campus community and Hollins alumnae/i in these efforts?*

The Working Group organized 16 meetings: standalone sessions, class visits, and conversation with faculty division and student club groups. A survey on the group's website provided an alternate option for written and anonymous feedback. In meetings and the online survey combined, approximately 180 students, faculty, staff and alumnae participated in the discussions.

This report shares the community's reflections, concerns, and questions. As our community moves forward into the next phase of a formal renaming process, what we learn from these and future conversations will guide that process.

## BACKGROUND: ENSLAVED PEOPLE AT HOLLINS

Hollins University's history began with the Roanoke Female Seminary in 1839. Many institutions of higher education founded before the U.S. Civil War have a history of using the forced labor of enslaved Black people on their campuses. This history also exists at Hollins, in the stories of those who were either enslaved in the household of Hollins President Charles Lewis Cocke and others on the campus, or were leased to the school as workers by slaveholders nearby.

Schools of the period also have histories of governance and support by people whose resources derived from enslaved labor. One such person in Hollins' history is George Plater Tayloe, whose family wealth enabled him to become the largest slaveholder in the Roanoke area. President of the Hollins Board of Trustees and a regular donor to the school for five decades, Tayloe owned the Cloverdale Ironworks, lands on the banks of the Roanoke River, cotton plantations in Alabama and the dozens of enslaved people who labored in these places. When looking at George Tayloe's legacy of slavery, one key moment is the winter of 1843. Iron had fallen in value; Tayloe's business shifted to the large scale farming of cotton. Using Roanoke as the departure point he and several of his brothers gathered their enslaved "hands" here in December, after which the hands walked to Alabama. Common practice at the time, this forced march is an example of both the scale and the inhuman practices of American slavery. Tayloe died in 1897; his wealth and influence on Hollins were literally inscribed onto the campus in 1924, when the newly completed gymnasium was named in his honor.

The stories of the enslaved and slaveholders have only recently become a topic of open discussion in the classroom and around the Hollins campus. Through the work of key faculty and staff, including those who in 2016 joined the Working Group (originally known as the Heritage Committee), the history of Hollins' ties to slavery became more widely known. Students became involved, joining discussions, doing research, starting projects, organizing protests. A change.org petition launched in June 2020 by Shardei Sudler ('21) urged Hollins to rename the Tayloe Gymnasium. It garnered almost 1,700 signatures from people at Hollins and beyond, while creating another opportunity for reflection and conversation. When President Hinton invited the community to discuss issues around inclusion, one topic that emerged frequently was the need to rename Tayloe Gymnasium and other campus buildings.

Other buildings regularly mentioned in discussion include the Cocke administration building, named after the aforementioned President Charles Lewis Cocke. Another is Carvin House, which like the nearby Carvins Cove is named after William Carvin, whose 18<sup>th</sup>-century settler reputation includes the title of "Indian Fighter." Note that to this date, no comprehensive history exists of the names of Hollins buildings. Some of this information can be found in published sources, while more is available via research in the University Archives. Thorough research will be needed to ensure the community can make informed decisions; this is one of the challenges of the renaming process.

## RENAMING UNIVERSITY BUILDINGS

Initial research by the Working Group provides us with examples of, and best practices for, conducting a renaming process at Hollins. Reviewing renaming processes at other schools reveals some common steps, such as the creation of a task force whose membership reflects the diversity of the campus and includes representation from all affected groups. This task force, with community input, first determines criteria for assessing existing building names. Then comes the process of applying those criteria to any specific building(s) to be considered for renaming. Finally, if a building is to be renamed, the community considers potential new names and a decision is made.

After recommending this structure to President Hinton, the Working Group conducted the listening sessions to introduce the topic of renaming to the broader community, and to start the campus-wide dialogue which will inform the entire process.

For more information on renaming, you are invited to visit the Working Group's website: <https://wgscl.press.hollins.edu/renaming/>

## KEY LEARNINGS

A history of exclusion is incompatible with Hollins today.

A primary theme in many of the conversations was affection for the Hollins campus. Some talked about favorite spaces, others discussed the campus environment. Many mentioned the positive gains associated with the increasing diversity of the Hollins student body.

These same positive feelings are in stark conflict with participants' rejection of the racism of American slavery. For people of color, the building names and the history they invoke are clear markers of exclusion. This exclusion comes with a cost – participants shared that anxiety about the school's history of slavery affects their ability to feel safe, to participate in the life of the university, and to learn.

Students (current and former), faculty, and staff acknowledged the fact that legacy matters, and building names are not neutral. Positive memorialization of Hollins' ties to slavery is incompatible not just with the university's goals of diversity and equity, but with life at Hollins as they know it. Clearly, many in our community see a strong disparity between "this ugly history" and the welcoming campus they experience daily.

“The spaces don't always feel like they include me.”

“It is our campus and we want to agree with what we're representing...we need to acknowledge this history and not let it define us.”



There is a strong desire to understand the history and context of the people whose names are currently on campus buildings. It was also pointed out that any renaming process should include consideration of ways in which Hollins can preserve this history.


Even stronger is the desire to learn about Black people's contributions to Hollins, starting with the lives of those who were enslaved.

Many suggestions were made about where to have such conversations: during campus tours, in classrooms, or with alumnae/i groups. Participants envisioned experiential opportunities, historical displays, table-sitting and other events to celebrate emancipation and honor the lives of the enslaved. Finally, it was noted that information about renaming can be presented on or in the buildings themselves, following existing campus examples such as Swannanoa Hall and the Visual Arts Center.

### Transparency and participation are essential.

The need for a transparent process came up frequently, as did the desire for the opportunity to give input. Participants want to know how and by whom decisions are made. Many asked for the opportunity to suggest new names.

Participants also want to see a clear timeline, along with regular communications describing progress.



“Please, please keep offering these opportunities for us to learn and be updated.”

### The community wants to see action.

President Hinton's 2020 report described “a significant sense of urgency” around the issue of renaming certain buildings. That same urgency was expressed frequently in the listening sessions. Given information about the history of certain building names, what participants want to see next is action.

Our challenge is to balance the understandable desire for immediate change, with the time we should take to ensure a thoughtful, educational and truly participatory process.

Historical research requires the availability of trained specialists. Renaming criteria require the thoughtful consideration of a broad range of factors including the university's history and mission, as well as the needs of all various campus constituencies. Selecting new names will again require research, and the same thoughtful consideration. Communication of the process and its outcomes also takes time; finally, inviting community participation and feedback is dependent on both the academic calendar and other priorities competing for attention.

We know that one common factor among unsuccessful and contentious renaming efforts at other institutions is that they were quick, unilateral decisions in which the larger community was left uninformed and/or uninvolved. This demonstrates the need for education, transparency, and participation. While these things take time, we believe they are essential to success at Hollins.

## Questions raised

Participants raised many questions which can inform the renaming process at Hollins:

- On developing criteria to remove an existing name. Shall Hollins consider:
  - People who enslaved others?
  - People involved in the displacement or murder of the indigenous?
  - People who promoted racial segregation?
- On removing building names:
  - What responsibility may Hollins have toward donors, descendants of the named person, or other entities?
- On selecting new names for campus spaces. Shall Hollins consider:
  - People who were enslaved?
  - The indigenous community on whose lands Hollins was built?
  - Black families with a generational history of working at Hollins?
  - BIPOC (Black, Indigenous & people of color) alumnae/i?
  - Underrepresented communities?

“Develop protocols for a transparent, campus-wide nomination and voting process that would allow for renaming of at least one building in honor of a historical member or members of the Hollins or Oldfield communities, instead of the biggest donor. Also, naming some buildings for something other than in honor of individuals...”

“Were that person's actions compatible with a school that says it wants to be diverse, equitable, etc.?”

“Please consider nominations from alumnae and consider marginalized people.”

- Those who have promoted women's rights?
  - Those who have had a positive impact on the school?
  - Naming buildings after values or ideas, rather than people?
- On Hollins as part of the Roanoke community:
    - Are there ways in which this process can involve or connect to the local community and strengthen our engagement?

Note that the category of choosing new names came up in every discussion. It is clear that when a building is renamed, many would welcome the opportunity to participate.

## Objections raised

Those who offered feedback in the listening sessions all spoke in favor of a buildings renaming process. We also wish to acknowledge that among those who responded anonymously to our online survey, were three alumnae who are opposed. They expressed their opposition to renaming both in general, and specifically on the Hollins campus. Our findings contradict their belief that building names cannot do harm, as well as the claim that renaming a building will erase history. However, we believe it is important to understand that some in our community will struggle with the suggestion of change.

## NEXT STEPS

President Hinton will announce the formation of a task force on reconciliation of campus spaces which will begin in the Fall 2021 semester. The first determination this group will make is what criteria Hollins University will apply when evaluating the existing name of a campus building or space. These criteria will be mission-based; they will be the foundational measures from which the reconciliation process can proceed.

Several members of the Working Group will join the task force, alongside others from across the Hollins campus, and alumnae/i. Our group will continue to offer assistance and support to further this essential process.

The work of the task force will be transparent and communicated by regular updates. Throughout the process, the community will be invited to give feedback and participate.



## CONCLUSIONS

In asking the community to do this work, we are asking you to join in as part of your commitment to a more inclusive and equitable campus. Doing this work helps make Hollins a place where we both live and express our values, creating an environment in which everyone feels welcome.

As Hollins University embarks upon a process to consider existing and new names for campus spaces, it is important to acknowledge two facts. First, many in our community have been aware for years that Hollins' historic ties to slavery intersect with the names of certain buildings, and they have advocated for change. While new to some members of our community, this topic is not new to Hollins as a whole.

However, a renaming process is a new goal for our university. As with any new endeavor, we have a responsibility to intentionally and thoughtfully engage. The steps we can take to do this are outlined above, but it is also to be expected that as the task force on reconciliation begins their work there will be increasing clarity on how the process will proceed most effectively at Hollins.

The listening sessions built shared understanding to help us all navigate a complex conversation about how history affects lives on the Hollins campus today. Despite significant pressures exerted by the Covid-19 pandemic, the Hollins community showed up to have this conversation. As the work of renaming continues, listening sessions will continue as well.

We take away many valuable lessons learned this Spring. First and foremost, building names matter. Our students, faculty, staff and alums are directly impacted by the ugly disparity between names associated with slavery, oppression and other forms of systemic racism, and the welcoming place they know Hollins to be. The solution is change inspired by our values: new names, new choices that will lift us up while affirming our best aspirations for equity, inclusion, and justice.

The community expects a thorough process, driven by education. Many suggestions were made for disseminating historical information throughout the university's life and work. Furthermore, we need to ensure that the renaming process proceeds with communication, openness, and in a timely manner.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Program

Hollins Faculty Divisions  
Hollins Student Government  
Association Roundtable  
Genevieve Hendricks and students in  
ART 365  
Ernie Zulia and students in THEA 270

The current members of the Hollins Working Group on Slavery and its Contemporary Legacies are:

Co-Chairs: Jeri Suarez, Maryke Barber. Rebecca Rosen (through June 2021).

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